

# Alexandra Quick and the World Away

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**Summary:** Expelled from Charmbridge Academy, wandless, and fated to die, Alexandra Quick is still bringing trouble wherever she goes. Before she's done, her Solemn Quest will shake the Ozarks, her feud with old rivals and new enemies will shake New Amsterdam, and discovering the World Away will shake the Confederation.

## \*Chapter 1\*: Prologue

### Author's Note:

*Alexandra Quick and the World Away* is the fifth book in the Alexandra Quick series. Although it is a complete novel, it builds upon the events of the previous four books, so if you have not read them, I would recommend starting at the beginning with *Alexandra Quick and the Thorn Circle*.

I had three beta-readers for AQATWA: **Cogito** (formerly **TealTerror**), **SwissMarg**, and **shinygobonkers**. My final draft looks very different from my first draft, thanks to them. None of my previous AQ novels went through so much rewriting; entire chapters were added and deleted, the storyline underwent significant revisions, and many scenes were rewritten, inserted, or cut. There is practically an entire alternate-universe version of this book sitting in the older files on my hard drive. If AQATWA lives up to your expectations, it's because of the patience of my betas who were always willing to read yet another rewrite of the same chapter I'd already rewritten three times. If there are still rough edges, plot holes, or bloat, it's because sometimes I was stubborn and I didn't always take their advice.

I will offer the usual fanfiction author plea here, and say that although I don't usually reply to reviews, they are always read and appreciated. Additionally, I post illustrations for every chapter on my LiveJournal (**inverarity**), some that I commissioned and some that I created myself. Feel free to comment there if you want a response from me. Finally, if you want to talk to other fans, there is an [r/AlexandraQuick](#) subreddit! I do not participate there, but I do lurk.

As my faithful readers know, there was a very long gap between books four and five. It took me seven years to complete AQATWA, including a stretch of several years where I did very little writing at all.

So here, finally, is the next volume in Alexandra's story, which I planned (all the way back in 2007) as a seven-book series, and which I hope (writing this in 2019) to still deliver. It's been a long journey, and like Alexandra, I'm not done yet.

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*Thirty years ago.*

The two little girls were everything charming and beautiful and innocently malicious at the age of six. They spent all afternoon giggling, staging masques with dancing dolls, and drawing crayon pictures on magical parchment that animated what they drew without needing a wand or an incantation, but they had grown bored with such amusements and were now trying to cast spells. It was what all young witches did as soon as they learned that magic was theirs for the calling. Livia had discovered that last year. Jezebel had just begun manifesting sparks and flames and sometimes worse when she was in a temper, and now she did so at every opportunity, eagerly and gleefully.

"Last week," Jezebel said, "I filled Papa's office with caterpillars. Oh, he was so mad!" She tittered as she flicked her fingers in the air in front of her face, trying to conjure something.

Her hair was elaborately arranged in blonde ringlets that would have taken hours to style without the help of a wand or a house-elf. One afternoon of play had already unraveled the elegant curls into something like a frizzy mop-head, a fact that she had not yet noticed but which caused her friend to cover her mouth to stifle giggles when Jezebel wasn't looking.

"Eww," Livia said, wrinkling her nose. "I don't like bugs." She was making methodical gestures with her hands, trying to imitate grown-up wand motions. Every once in a while, one of her gestures produced a magical effect, though rarely the one she intended, but today nothing was happening.

"Well, I wanted to turn them into butterflies, but Papa said that would take much more powerful magic. He said I won't be able to do that until I get my wand. Then he threatened to paddle me if I did any more sponta — spont-nious magic in his office." Jezebel stuck her tongue out and made a dismissive sound. Both girls knew Jezebel's father would sooner eat caterpillars than paddle his daughter.

Livia, who never needed paddling, thought Jezebel might be a little nicer if she did get paddled every so often. But Jezebel was fun to play with, when she wasn't being mean, and she had wonderful toys, like those dancing dolls she'd brought over.

The two girls had made a wager over who could cast a spell first. If Livia won, the dancing dolls she coveted would be hers, while Jezebel, with a sly smile, had told Livia that if she won, she got to go through Livia's closets and choose anything she liked.

While Jezebel continued wiggling her fingers, Livia abandoned her own hand gestures, closed her eyes, and murmured something. She nodded her head as she found a rhythm to her words, then repeated them in a slightly louder voice.

A big, blue, grinning head pimpled out of empty air in front of her, like a ghastly blister. Livia screamed in delight. "Look, look! I did that!"

The head swelled like a giant ghostly plum, spun around and rotated topsy-turvy, then scrunched up into a horrid wrinkly caricature of a face with balloon cheeks and an enormous forehead. It stuck out a long blue-black tongue at Jezebel. Then with a sudden "*Whoosh!*" it shot across the room, zig-zagging all around it with a flatulent sound that made Livia tumble onto her back squealing with laughter.

Jezebel's face turned thunderous and dark. She slapped her hand on the carpeted floor and said "Bother and beetlejuice!" Her eyes flashed and around her hand, tongues of fire leapt up. She jerked her hand away, trailing flames, and flicked her wrist, causing a tiny fireball to roll off her palm and shoot halfway across the room before it dissipated in a wave of heat. Her startled expression immediately transformed into the triumphant look of someone who'd meant to do that all along.

"Look! Look! That was a real spell! I win!" she shouted.

"Do not!" Livia righted herself and shook her head until her long black hair flew around her face. "I cast my spell first! You saw it! You *know* I beat you!"

"Did not! That wasn't a real spell — I heard you, that was doggerel verse! You were using *baby magic*!" Jezebel's lip curled into a well-practiced sneer that was already devastating on her pre-adolescent face.

"We didn't make a rule against doggerel verse, and a spell's a spell!"

"There's no *evidence* of your magic," Jezebel said, shifting quickly to another line of argument. "Your spell wasn't real. *That's* real!" Jezebel pointed at the smoking scorch marks her hand had made, as if burning the carpet in her host's home was reason to be proud.

"Just because I didn't burn a hole in the carpet doesn't mean my magic wasn't real, you... you... fibber!" Livia was beside herself. "Tell her, Claudia!"

The third girl in the room, sitting quietly at a fine wooden writing desk while the two younger girls played, had already pushed her chair back. During the giggling and the incantations and the noisy flight of Livia's conjured phantasm, Livia's sister had merely sighed and continued flipping through the pages of the glossy magazine in front of her. Now she looked with dismay at the burn marks on the carpet.

"You are both in so much trouble, totally," she said. "You know you totally shouldn't have been practicing spontaneous magic."

"She did it!" Livia said, pointing, while Jezebel pointed back and said, "She's a cheater! I get to choose something out of her closets."

"That's a lie!" Livia shouted. "I cast my spell first — you know I did! Tell her, Claudia! You saw it!"

"Well..." Claudia said uncertainly. She was still staring at the burned carpet, but pressed, she wavered. "Well, Livia's spell was first but you totally shouldn't have been doing it anyway and you totally shouldn't have been wagering and also you burned the carpet... so it's totally null and void."

"What?" Livia and Jezebel both said.

"Neither of you win," Claudia said, totally convinced that this was the correct and responsible judgment.

"That's *totally* unfair, and you're *totally* taking your sister's side," Jezebel said, the derision thick in her voice. "And you *totally* sound like a *Muggle*." Her contemptuous tone peaked with the word "Muggle." "You dress like one too. Is that because of all those Muggle magazines you read with those ugly Muggle boys?"

Claudia flushed. She had been experimenting with the clothing styles she found in her magazines, but like most wizards, her attempts at syncretizing Muggle fashion were a bit haphazard. She wore a denim jacket over her robes, and neon leg-warmers pulled up over her ankles.

Though she played easily with her younger sister, somehow she always felt diminished by Livia's friends when they visited. Being bigger and older and more mature never seemed to count in her favor when facing Jezebel in particular.

Sensing that she had hit a nerve, Jezebel pressed her advantage. "And what would you know about magic anyway? You can't even do magic!"

Now Claudia's face went from red to white. "That's not true," she said, in a voice leached of all conviction.

Jezebel's smile was pitiless. It was the victorious grin of a tiger that has caught the slowest zebra away from the concealing tall grass. "Everyone knows it is. That's why you read all that Muggle trash, because you're going to have to go live with them."

"Shut up," Claudia said. "You're an ugly little brat, and you totally lost the wager."

Livia did not look delighted by her sister's abrupt declaration of victory. Her eyes had gone wide at Jezebel's words, and now her lips were trembling with anger.

"*Everyone* talks about it," Jezebel said in a lilting voice. "How Abraham Thorn's daughter is a Squib!"

"Shut up, Jezebel!" Livia cried.

Claudia reeled as if she'd been slapped. Livia's face had turned an angry, ominous red to rival Jezebel at her worst, but the other girl didn't notice — she was too busy sinking in her fangs now that she'd tasted blood.

"Claudia's a Squib, Claudia's a Squib, your father is a Muggle-lover because his daughter is a Squib!" Jezebel chanted in a sing-song voice.

With a shriek of rage, Livia launched herself at Jezebel and struck her across the face hard enough to knock her off her feet. Jezebel went down on the floor in her fancy frilly robes and Livia fell upon her, pummeling her and screaming in fury. "Liar! You take that back you nasty horrible evil little —"

"Livia, stop it!" Claudia shouted. The sight of her younger sister losing her senses helped her regain control of hers. She rushed forward and grabbed Livia, pulling her off the other girl. "Stop it right now! You're going to get in trouble!"

Claudia's warning was too late. An adult voice pierced the tumult. "What in Merlin's name is going on here?"

The lady of the house entered the room, and all three girls froze in a combative tableau. Claudia had her arms around Livia, Livia's feet were thrust out in an attempt to get in another kick at Jezebel, and Jezebel was lying on the floor sniffing, with her hand pressed to the red mark on the side of her face.

Desirée Thorn née Pruett shook her head, causing glittering diamond earrings to spin and sparkle. She was a beautiful woman with pale yellow hair coiled atop her head in a perfect coil, draped in robes as fine as any at a formal ball, though she was merely at leisure in her own home.

"Do my eyes deceive me?" she asked. "Do I find three little girls rolling on the floor brawling and using uncouth language like pagans?"

"Mommy, Jezebel called Claudia a... a Squib!" Livia said. Behind her, Claudia flinched. "Tell her that's not true! Claudia's a witch just like us — tell her, Mommy!"

Mrs. Thorn's mouth compressed into a thin, serious line. There was something both hard and gentle in her expression as she looked from one girl to the next, sweeping her gaze across Claudia, Livia, then Jezebel, back to Claudia, and finally fixing it on Jezebel.

"I believe you should go home now, Jezebel," Mrs. Thorn said. "I'm very sorry that you and Livia and Claudia can't play nicely."

Jezebel picked herself up off the floor and wiped her nose with her sleeve.

"Mommy, she burned the floor!" said Livia. "Look!"

Livia's mother looked at the burn marks and sighed. "Yes, I see. Well, a Repair Charm will mend the carpet. I wish I had a charm to as easily mend your manners."

Jezebel scooped up her dancing dolls, giving Livia a haughty glare, and added an evil squint at Claudia. "I was going to go home now anyway," she said. "I'd rather play with *proper* witches who do *proper* magic."

Livia gasped in outrage and Claudia had to tighten her arms around her again. Mrs. Thorn said, "That *will* be enough, from both of you. I'll summon your house-elf, Jezebel." She snapped her fingers, and a tiny, wizened house-elf draped only in tattered rags appeared with a pop.

"It's time for Miss Hucksteen to leave," Mrs. Thorn said. "Do please take her home, and give my regards to her mother and father. I'll be sending an owl later," she added meaningfully. Jezebel only stuck out her lower lip.

"Yes, Mizzus Thorn," said the house-elf. It turned to Jezebel. "Is Miz Jezebel ready to go — owl!" The elf winced as Jezebel grabbed one of its long, pointy ears and held on as if it were a purse handle.

"Yes, take me home right now, Quimley," Jezebel said, as if all of this had been at her insistence in the first place.

The house-elf whimpered, then both he and the girl vanished with another pop.

Livia shook free of her sister's grasp. Claudia stood there with a sorrowful expression.

"What Jezebel said, that was a lie," Livia said. "Why didn't you tell her she's a big fat liar, Mommy? She shouldn't talk about Claudia that way."

"No, she shouldn't." Livia's mother sighed, patted her daughter on the head, and then laid a hand on Claudia's shoulder. "And you shouldn't have been fighting, or making wagers, or attempting magic unsupervised. Both of you are grounded and will not have any friends over for the next week, and you're going to clean this room without magic."

If Claudia felt she was being punished unfairly, she didn't say anything, and as she and Livia quietly went about picking up the toys and cleaning the room, Desirée Thorn watched her stepdaughter, with a calm gaze that didn't quite conceal the troubled thoughts that lay beneath it.

## \*Chapter 2\*: I'm a Witch

The house on 207 Sweetmaple Avenue was shuttered against the summer sky outside. With shades pulled and curtains drawn, only a few bright beams of sunlight penetrated around the edges and through the small glass panes above the front door.

The dim light didn't bother the two teenagers in the living room; they were close enough to need no illumination. The girl's eyes were hot and bright, flashing green in the darkness. It wasn't quite natural, but the boy with her didn't notice. His eyes were closed as he pressed his mouth over hers. They lay on the sofa in a tangle of arms and legs and dislodged cushions. They pawed at each other breathlessly with their mouths locked together, until the girl rolled on top of him. She leaned forward to continue kissing him. He didn't resist, and he raised his arms when she slid her hands under his shirt and peeled it up and over his head.

Alexandra sat up, straddling him, and let out a long breath. Brian opened his eyes, but the little sparks dancing in her eyes did not distract him from the work of unbuttoning her shirt.

His fingers drew away, though, when she reached for the button of his jeans.

"Alex."

She paused. Her fingers rested on his stomach, just above his waist, and with her other hand she brushed hair away from her forehead.

"Don't you want to?" she asked in a low voice.

Brian lay still for a long moment. His panting and her heavy breathing were the only sounds in the room.

"We really shouldn't," he said, as if his words would summon the necessary conviction.

"Why?" She laughed. "Are you afraid I'll get pregnant? I told you —"

"I know," he said. "I believe you. But shouldn't we talk about this?"

"Talk?" Alexandra laid a hand on his burning cheek. "What more is there to talk about?"

He took her hand in his and pulled it away. She looked down at him in surprise.

"Don't you think this is a big deal?" he asked. "I mean, we've been friends forever, but this is different."

"Yeah," Alexandra said. "It's different from those three years when you wouldn't even speak to me. You kissed me first, remember?"

"Okay," Brian said. "Let's talk about how I was a big fat jerk for three years. Again." He still held her hand in his. "Alex, I don't want to just do it on your parents' sofa."

"If you want to do it in my bed, I'll have to kick Charlie out of my room, and believe me, I'll hear about it later."

"It's kind of weird how you talk about that bird like it's a person."

Alexandra pulled her hand away and frowned at him. Then she shifted her weight and leaned forward, provoking a sound from Brian. Her lips hovered over his, and her straight black hair fell around both their faces. Her palms slid across his bare skin until her forearms rested on his shirtless chest while her hands grasped his shoulders.

"There's nothing to worry about," she whispered. She kissed him. Brian's hands went to her waist, and he kissed her back. A groan tried to escape his throat, and was swallowed.

Their lips and bodies were pressed together so tightly that it took them several seconds to react when a car door slammed shut outside.

Brian's eyes were wild. "What was that?"

"No way." Alexandra's eyes were wild too, but flaring with annoyance. "Must be the neighbors. Archie's at the county sheriff's office and Claudia is —"

A key rasped and clicked in the lock on the front door.

"Oh, no," Brian moaned.

Alexandra said something more colorful. The two of them rolled apart. Alexandra grabbed sofa cushions and jammed them into approximately their original arrangement. Brian grabbed his shirt and yanked it on so quickly he almost put his head through an armhole. He managed to pull it down over his body just as Claudia Green entered the front hallway, paused, and flipped on a light.

Brian and Alexandra managed to position themselves at opposite ends of the sofa in the time it took Claudia to step into the living room. She regarded the two teenagers wordlessly. Brian sat there, paralyzed, while Alexandra's lips parted as she searched for a way to explain away the scene.

The couple's faces were flushed and sweaty, their breathing heavy, their hair and clothes in disarray. They could hardly have been more *in flagrante delicto* if they'd been caught naked. So all Alexandra said was: "You're supposed to be at work."

Claudia's expression didn't change. She slid her purse off her shoulder, radiating weariness. She was still wearing her nurse's scrubs; evidently she had come directly from the hospital. She set her purse on the end table next to the sofa and said, "Brian, go home."

Brian cleared his throat. "Um..."

"It's all right, Brian," Alexandra said. "You don't have to say anything. I'll see you later." She and Claudia kept their eyes fixed on one another.

Brian stood up. He looked back and forth between Alexandra and Claudia, obviously searching for some nonchalant and disarming explanation. Finding nothing, he said, "Okay. See you later. Um, bye, Mrs. Green. Are you going to tell my mother?" The last question blurted out like some horrible imp rushing to escape his mouth. He grimaced.

"There's nothing to tell," Alexandra said.

"Good-bye, Brian," Claudia said. If a voice could physically push someone, Claudia's would have shoved Brian right out the door. He left without another word.

Claudia sat down in the chair next to the sofa and ran a hand through her mousy blonde hair, which was not much less disheveled than Alexandra's.

"You know," Claudia said, "I don't think I'm ready to become a grandmother."

"What?" Alexandra flushed more deeply. "That's not — first of all, you'd be an aunt, and anyway, I'm not going to — we didn't even have sex!"

"Not yet." Claudia gestured at Alexandra with one finger. "You missed a button."

Sullenly, Alexandra rebuttoned the front of her shirt.

Claudia said, "You're right. Aunt, of course. Because I'm not your mother, as you keep reminding me. But I'm already going to be an aunt, so one niece or nephew at a time, please?"

The formidable presence Claudia had brought into the room dwindled with each word she spoke, until all that was left sitting in the chair was a tired, haggard woman regarding her erstwhile daughter with a sort of tense expectation. Alexandra unwound slightly. Some of her defensiveness seeped away.

"I know I can't stop you from doing whatever you want to do, Alex," Claudia said. "But I'm serious about not making me a grandmother. Which is what I'd be, legally. That's the last thing we need, don't you think?"

"Claudia, I'm not going to get pregnant," Alexandra said through clenched teeth. "I'm a witch."

Claudia's expression flattened.

Alexandra dropped her hands. "Why are you home early, anyway?"

Claudia's expression turned to a silent reprimand at the attempt to change the subject, but she seemed abruptly spent. "Because I got an owl."

Alexandra blinked and sat up straighter. "An owl?"

"Yes, an owl."

"But —"

"At the hospital. It actually flew through the doors. Fortunately it found me on break." Claudia reached into her purse, and only then did her hands shake a little. She withdrew a rolled piece of paper, which she handed to Alexandra.

Alexandra opened it and read:

*"Dear Mrs. Green,*

*The Central Territory Department of Magical Education has granted your request to hear an appeal on behalf of Alexandra Octavia Quick regarding her expulsion from Charmbridge Academy.*

*The hearing will take place on Wednesday, July 4 at 1 p.m., in the Territorial Headquarters Building in Chicago, Room 112, 9 th floor. Please do not be late; the hearing will not be rescheduled.*

*Miss Quick is advised to bring any character witnesses and exculpatory evidence she feels may help her case.*

*A parent or guardian must be present.*

*Yours,*

*Samson Greenwich*

*Chief of Discipline*

*Department of Magical Education*

*Central Territory "*

"July fourth?" Alexandra said. "That's tomorrow!"

"Yes," Claudia said.

"We'll have to leave early to get to Chicago, and it's the Fourth of July, and..." Alexandra's eyes fell on the final line. "They can't think my father is going to show up."

"I doubt it," Claudia said.

"And my mother..." Alexandra's voice trailed off. "They're saying you have to come."

"It looks that way."

"But..." Alexandra looked down at the letter again, to avoid looking at Claudia. "Maybe Livia could come. She's the one who suggested I appeal my expulsion. And she —"

"She's a witch, unlike me. But she's not your guardian. This isn't an oversight, Alexandra, and the inconvenience isn't accidental. They're not going to make this easy on you."

Alexandra finally looked up to meet her sister's eyes. "You seem to know a lot about how they operate."

Claudia shrugged. "I remember a few things."

Alexandra bit her lip. "They're not going to make it easy on you, either."

Claudia looked away. She had been quiet, almost impassive, since returning home, but Alexandra realized from Claudia's clenched jaw that being summoned back to the wizarding world probably terrified her.

"We don't have to do this," Alexandra said quietly.

"Don't we?" Claudia asked. "Do you want to go to regular high school? Forget about being a witch?"

"I can keep learning magic without going to Charmbridge Academy." Alexandra wasn't sure how, but she'd find a way. She didn't want to go to regular high school, but she couldn't force Claudia to face the world that had treated her so cruelly.

Claudia didn't answer at first, lost in silent contemplation. When she spoke at last, she said, "It might be easier if Livia can make it. It won't be convenient for her, either, but — well, I don't think these shenanigans will surprise her."

Alexandra hesitated. Claudia still didn't look at her. Finally, she said, "I'd like that, if both of you could come. I wish Julia could come, too, and my friends —" She sucked in a breath. "How can they expect me to gather 'character witnesses' overnight?"

"Oh, they probably don't," Claudia said. "That's the point." She got up. "I'll call Livia. I suggest you start rehearsing what you're going to say to the appeals committee." She gave the younger sister she'd raised as a daughter another appraising look. "Maybe take a nice cold shower first, to clear your head." She picked up her purse and strode out of the living room to the master bedroom, leaving Alexandra with a red face and feeling miserable and conflicted.

## \*Chapter 3\*: The Appeal

Claudia didn't say much on the drive to Chicago. They left at six in the morning, expecting traffic to be heavy and parking impossible on the Fourth of July. Alexandra knew Claudia was right — the Department of Magical Education had deliberately scheduled the hearing during a major Muggle holiday. Why did they even bother holding a hearing if they were going to stack the deck against her so unfairly?

The appeal hadn't even been her idea. Until Livia suggested it, it hadn't occurred to Alexandra that she *could* appeal her expulsion from Charmbridge Academy.

Livia had promised to be there. Claudia had been visibly relieved at this, as they weren't at all sure that their physician/Healer sister would make the trip from Milwaukee to Chicago on such short notice, especially with a child on the way.

Claudia did not want to return to the wizarding world, even for a day. She'd left it before Alexandra was born, and she had good reasons to fear it, not just because she was a Squib. These were all things Alexandra had learned only recently, and coming amidst other revelations — like the fact that Claudia was not actually her mother, as she'd been led to believe all her life — Alexandra had been more preoccupied with the present. And herself.

Now she studied the woman who'd been "Mom" to her until the winter before she turned fifteen. Claudia had never been very emotional and she was usually quite moderate in both temper and affection. This held true now — she kept her eyes on the road with the same implacable purpose that had guided her away from Chicago when Alexandra was a toddler.

Every now and then, Claudia's knuckles turned a little white, and Alexandra wondered what memories were going through her head.

If nothing else came of this trip, Alexandra hoped she could at least get another wand at the Goblin Market. She wanted another hickory and chimaera-hair wand like the one she'd carried since she was eleven, before it was broken two months ago by John Manuelito. Since then, she had felt almost powerless. Also, she hoped either Livia or some other Healer would be able to replace the tooth John had knocked out of her mouth.

The Interstate was heavy with traffic as they approached Chicago. Alexandra wished, not for the first time, that they could have taken the Automagicka.

At last they found their way downtown, and parked in a garage not far from the "abandoned" office building where Central Territory hid its Headquarters building.

As they got out of the car, Alexandra tucked her formal robes under her arm. Claudia looked at the bundle and nodded. She wore a long skirt and blouse with a light green jacket. It was appropriate for a job interview or a court appearance, but it was what a Muggle would wear, not a witch. Alexandra doubted Claudia had worn witch's robes since she was her age, and certainly she didn't have any in her closet.

"Livia said she would meet us in the Territorial Headquarters Building," Claudia said.

Alexandra nodded, while checking her smartphone. At least without her wand, her phone worked better. Livia had not sent a text or any other form of communication, but that didn't worry Alexandra much, since Livia tended not to text a lot, and if she was already at the Territorial Headquarters Building, her own phone probably wasn't working.

Alexandra did have some texts from David Washington:

sorry tried to get folks to bring me. dads at training camp n mom says detroit to chicago is too far for one day

I said how bout plane by myself? she said noway

I said how bout broom? she said HELL noway

sucks :(

good luck

Alexandra texted him back:

its cool thx. talk later and see you at the Jubilee

She had left a message on Anna's voice mail, but Anna Chu, in her little wizarding community in San Francisco, was not able to use her cell phone every day, and probably wouldn't get the message until after the hearing was over. Not that Alexandra thought Anna would be able to get all the way from San Francisco to Chicago in a matter of hours anyway. She probably wouldn't see Anna until next month.

She sighed. "No one else can make it. Guess it'll just be you and Livia."

Claudia nodded. "Let's go, then."

As the two of them walked out of the garage and into Chicago's downtown, Alexandra asked, "Are you ready for this?"

"I doubt they'll even ask me anything. What could a Squib tell them?"

Alexandra searched for something reassuring to say. But Claudia strode ahead and didn't let her face show fear or insecurity. If she was preparing herself, it was by steeling herself for the encounter ahead, not by seeking comfort from her younger sister.

The Territorial Headquarters Building was located at the edge of the Chicago Loop, surrounded by high-rises and skyscrapers. It appeared from the outside to be a vacant office building dating from earlier in the city's history. At thirteen floors, it was probably impressive when it was built, but now it was dwarfed by the Muggle buildings around it. No doubt it suited the wizarding authorities for it to be so unremarkable. As Alexandra approached and focused her Witch's Sight on it, she recognized the Muggle-Repelling Charms that prevented anyone on the street from giving it a second glance. To anyone but a witch or a wizard, it had signs posted on all the doors so faded that one would have to stop and study them to



actually read the notices of closure, and something about the building's elderly facade discouraged the eye from resting on it long enough to do that.

"Alex?" Claudia was looking directly at the building, and yet, Alexandra realized, not seeing it. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

"It's right in front of us," Alexandra said. "That building right there." She pointed.

Claudia stared for several long moments, then said, "Oh. Of course."

She walked forward. Alexandra still wasn't sure whether Claudia quite saw it, but she went through the door that Alexandra held open for her, and the two of them entered the lobby.

Alexandra had last been here during a sixth grade field trip. The lobby looked exactly as it had four years ago: dusty and empty, only a polished tile floor between them and the elevators.

The click of heels on tiles disturbed the eerie silence. Livia Pruett emerged from the restroom and crossed the lobby floor to meet her sisters. She wore formal white and green robes, which hid her pregnancy, and she had woven her long black hair into a braid, rather than putting it up in her usual bun. Her black frame glasses gave her the appearance of a librarian rather than a physician, and made her look several years older. Next to her, Claudia looked like the younger of the two.

"I brought a set of robes for you," Livia said to her older sister. "I thought you might not have any." Hesitantly, she offered a neatly wrapped bundle to Claudia.

Claudia took it without looking at it.

"You don't have to," Alexandra said.

"Livia's right," Claudia said. "We should try to make a good impression. Let's go change."

Alexandra and Claudia walked into the restroom opposite the elevator. Alexandra changed quickly into her robes. Claudia was still examining hers when Alexandra emerged from the stall.

"Go on, Alex," Claudia said. "I'll be out in a minute."

Alexandra walked back out to join Livia.

Livia cleared her throat. "I'm only here for moral support. I doubt I can say anything on your behalf that will help you."

"I appreciate the moral support," Alexandra said.

"I meant for Claudia."

Alexandra flushed. "Right."

Livia laid a hand on her shoulder. "I'm here to help you, too, Alexandra."

"Thanks. Will you go with me to the Goblin Market after the hearing?"

"That's somewhere I haven't been to in a long time. Does Claudia want to come with us?"

Alexandra shook her head. "Not a chance. She said she'd go visit the Art Institute or something."

"You do know this is hard for her," Livia said.

Livia was the second-oldest of Abraham Thorn's children, and she had fled the wizarding world a few years after Claudia had been banished from it. Alexandra had only learned of her existence the previous year, and though they had spoken on the phone and exchanged email over the summer, Alexandra still didn't know this new older sister well. She didn't understand how Livia and Claudia, who had grown up together, could have severed all contact for over twenty years.

"I know it is," Alexandra said. "I think maybe I know better than you."

"Really?" asked Livia. "Do you know what it's like to grow up in the wizarding world and then be cast out of it? Because I don't. I walked away. That makes all the difference. Let's not either of us pretend we know what Claudia is feeling, Alexandra. And let's not keep reminding each other of how we've all failed one another in some way."

"Okay," Alexandra said.

"I don't want her hurt again."

"Me neither," Alexandra said. "I told her she didn't have to come."

Livia's expression was skeptical, but Claudia returned, wearing plain, dark robes that covered her Muggle clothing and made her look a bit like a graduating college student. "Thank you, Livia," she said. "All right. Shall we go?"

The three sisters stepped into the elevator. Claudia immediately edged back toward the door as she realized that the interior was enormous. From the outside, it appeared to be a small cage dating back to when the building was first constructed, but the interior was magically expanded. Alexandra's entire sixth grade class had once fit comfortably inside it.

"It's okay," Alexandra said, "it's —"

"A wizard-space," Claudia said. "Yes." She turned around to face the doors as they closed. "You can both stop treating me like I'm a frightened

Muggle. It's just a little disorienting, seeing these things again, is all."

"Okay." Alexandra punched the button for the ninth floor, even though she remembered that the elevator obeyed verbal instructions. They began ascending.

"Alexandra," said Livia, "I know we don't have much time for me to give you advice or a pep talk, and I've been out of the wizarding world myself for years. But don't be arrogant. I know it's hard for you, but try to show contrition. Whoever the committee members are, they hold your fate in their hands, and I'll wager they want to see that the daughter of Abraham Thorn can be humbled."

"Humble. Got it," Alexandra said.

Claudia put a hand on her shoulder. Alexandra turned to her.

"You really do want to go back to Charmbridge Academy, don't you?" Claudia asked.

"I wouldn't have asked you to bring me if I didn't. Don't worry. I'll be humble. And contrite."

The doors opened onto a long hallway lit with gas lamps. The tiles were much less polished and elegant than those in the lobby. A long line of ominous, closed wooden doors lined the hallway on either side. Brass plaques on each door reflected gaslight at them like cyclopean eyes. One door opened, and a small man in coattails and black polished shoes stepped out into the hallway carrying an armful of documents. He glanced at the three women, squinted, then scuttled three doors down and disappeared into the next room without a word. Another door opened and two witches filed through it. One wore solid black robes, the other black with red trim, but they were otherwise identical, and Alexandra gave a little start. "Ms. Grimm!"

Both witches turned to look at her.

Lilith Grimm was the Dean of Charmbridge Academy, and the one who had expelled Alexandra. Her sister, Diana Grimm, was a Special Inquisitor who interrogated Alexandra — and her other sisters — regularly.

And they were both her aunts, though she had not known that until a few months ago.

She approached the Grimms. Claudia and Livia followed her.

"Hello, Alexandra," said Lilith Grimm.

"Hello Alexandra, Claudia, Livia," said Diana Grimm.

"So," Alexandra said, "I guess you're both here for my appeal hearing." Dean Grimm's presence was not surprising; Diana Grimm's presence was. "Why does the Office of Special Inquisitions care whether or not I'm allowed back into Charmbridge Academy?"

"The Office of Special Inquisitions doesn't," Diana Grimm said. "But my presence was requested."

"Requested by who?"

"Mr. Greenwich. I believe he wants testimony concerning the events of last year."

*The events of last year.* To Alexandra, her aunt's terse summation of that episode in her life sounded like a dismissal and a judgment all in one.

"Testimony?" Livia spoke up. "She's appealing her expulsion. This isn't a criminal trial. And I'm rather surprised that the Department of Magical Education can issue summons to Special Inquisitors from the Wizard Justice Department."

Diana Grimm smiled. "Oh, they couldn't demand my presence. But I chose to come."

Her smile, Alexandra thought, was not a warm or supportive one. It was not a smile that said her aunt was on her side.

Lilith Grimm didn't smile. She just nodded to Alexandra and said to the other women: "It's good to see you again, Mrs. Green, Dr. Pruett." She walked through a large pair of double doors, the only other doors in the hallway that were open, and her triplet followed her.

Alexandra turned to her sisters. "I think I'm screwed."

Livia shook her head, while Claudia gently pushed her forward through the double doors.

The room was not quite large enough to be a courtroom, but with the large elevated table at the far end of it, facing six rows of chairs, it had the appearance of one, or an austere and ecumenical chapel. A little sunlight fell into the room through long, narrow windowpanes high on the wall just behind the raised table, but most of the light came from gas lamps. Lilith and Diana Grimm took their seats in the front row.

There were six other people in the seats a few rows back, and Alexandra came to a dead halt when she saw who else had come to her hearing.

She had last seen Larry Albo lying on the ground covered with blood after a monstrous mummified baby bit off the fingers of his left hand. Now he sat upright next to a tall man with thinning hair, a goatee, and a pencil mustache: an aging, less handsome version of Larry, without Larry's dark, curly locks. The man's cruel demeanor, more than anything else, convinced Alexandra that this was Mr. Albo.

Larry did not exhibit any of his usual cockiness, only a measured frown as he turned to regard Alexandra and her sisters. He seemed to be trying as hard as she was to reveal nothing. They stared at each other, and then Alexandra's eyes fell to the scar that ran between his lower lip and his chin. Then, unable to help it, she looked down at his hand.

Larry's expression didn't change. But wordlessly he lifted his left hand and displayed it to her. Four silver fingers gleamed in the light.

Was that defiance, or showing off, or accusation: *See what you did to me?* Alexandra couldn't tell.

Her gaze slid away from Larry to the three people seated a row back from him and his father. A man and a woman and a young girl, a handsome

family all with the same light brown skin, dark eyes, elegantly braided dreadlocks, and rich, elaborate robes.

The girl wore a black patch over one eye. Cleopatra Dupree, who had been a sixth grader last year, peered at Alexandra from her good eye. Then, to Alexandra's surprise, she lifted a hand and waved.

Alexandra waved back, but Cleopatra's mother grabbed her daughter's hand and she and her husband both sent furious daggers shooting at Alexandra with their eyes. Maybe Cleopatra wasn't angry at her for losing an eye, but it was obvious who her parents blamed.

The last person in the audience was a plain-looking young man in a shabby suit that might have been fashionable half a century ago. He wore a fedora with a small card stuck in the headband, and held a fountain pen and a notepad.

Four people sat at the table at the head of the room. One stood as Alexandra approached. He was impressively tall, and broad at the shoulders. Despite the snow-white hair clinging to his head in wisps, there was no impression of diminished strength or vigor in the old man. He had a mustache to match his hair, bushy and white, complementing his ice-blue eyes. He wore an old-fashioned white suit with wide lapels, in the style of some wizards who preferred that sort of garb to robes.

"Miss Quick, is it?" he said. "Please take a seat." He indicated the front rank of chairs on the opposite end of the row from the Grimms. His gesture was as curt as his tone, the "please" barely elevating the request above the way one might address a dog. Already he was looking away from Alexandra, gazing around the room. Then he turned back to the two witches and the one wizard seated next to him at the table. "Where is Franklin?"

One of the witches was hunched in her chair like a bag of skin folding in on itself. She was ancient beyond estimation of her age; Alexandra didn't think she'd ever seen such an aged human being before. Her eyes might have been closed or they might not; her face was so wrinkled that her eyes could have been hidden completely in the crevices and canyons around her cheeks. She didn't move or answer the wizard's inquiry. She might have been dead.

"In the lavatory, I believe," said the other woman at the table, in a whisper so loud there was hardly any point in whispering it. This woman was younger than Livia, blonde, and pretty, though with a certain severity in her strongly-set mouth and in the way her gaze lashed across Alexandra and Claudia and Livia that did not suggest any sort of sympathy.

The fourth of Alexandra's five interrogators might have been any age from forty to eighty. He had dark skin and equally dark hair trimmed close to his head; he wore what looked to Alexandra like a Dracula outfit: suit and cravat and long black cloak. He sat upright in his chair and kept his eyes fixed straight ahead, except for one brief glance at Alexandra that expressed nothing.

"I am Samson Greenwich," said the standing man, "Chief of Discipline for the Department of Magical Education. I will explain to you how this hearing will be conducted, Miss Quick. We will ask questions. You will speak when spoken to. The committee and I will then discuss your case. We do not vote: we come to a consensus, and if we cannot, I have the final authority. Is that clear?"

Alexandra stood up and cleared her throat. "Yes, sir."

The double doors swung wide. An enormously fat wizard in deep red velvet robes waddled into the room, huffing and puffing and sweating profusely. His head was the size and shape of a pumpkin, with a black beard spreading mold-like across his cheeks and down the wattles of his neck. He fixed his eyes on Alexandra and Livia and Claudia as he circled along the edge of the room toward the front table. He seemed to become more and more outraged by what he saw, or perhaps it was just the effort of walking that turned his face redder by the second. The effort of heaving himself up a step to the raised platform seemed to expend the last of his energy; he collapsed onto a chair between Mr. Greenwich and the other wizard with such force that Alexandra expected to hear wood splintering. But the chair held his weight. The fat man fixed his eyes on Alexandra once again and stared at her balefully from between folds of flesh.

"Why are we hearing this case?" he asked. "The girl was expelled. I'm sure there was a good reason. Are there no day schools?"

Mr. Greenwich said, "I granted the request for a hearing, Franklin." He looked like someone slipping a hand into a glove before handling something hot. "If you'd like to note your opinion as read, you can go and we'll continue with your good judgment taken into account."

Alexandra didn't think Mr. Greenwich liked the other man, though she doubted that was good news for her.

The fat wizard squinted at Alexandra again. It made his eyes virtually disappear. Then he said, "That's very ungracious of you, Samson. Let's hear what the witch has to say. I won't have it said I'm not fair-minded."

"Indeed." Mr. Greenwich sat down. He tapped the table, and five desk plaques leaped into the air as if knocked out of the wood, settling in front of each of the committee members with a clatter. Now Alexandra could read everyone's names: the fat wizard was 'Franklin Percival Brown, III,' which made her think of a statue she'd encountered last year at Charmbridge Academy, a talking stone bust with the same name. The wizard with the dark skin and hair was Rudolfo Viterbi, the blonde witch was Natalie Winter, and the ancient one, who had not yet stirred, or even breathed as far as Alexandra could tell, was Carmela Erdglass.

Mr. Greenwich rapped his knuckles against the wood a second time, and a quill, inkpot, and a scroll popped out of it. The quill fluttered in a circle, dipped end-first into the inkpot, then spun around. Finally it floated over the scroll where it hung suspended vertically, motionless until Mr. Greenwich spoke.

Alexandra heard the scratching of a pen. The man in the fedora held his notepad on his lap, as his fountain pen moved by itself over the pad.

"The five members of the Disciplinary Committee are all present, and we are hearing the case of Alexandra Octavia Quick, age fifteen, expelled from Charmbridge Academy at the end of her ninth grade year. Miss Quick is appealing her expulsion and requesting that the Board of Magical Education overrule the Dean of Charmbridge Academy, Lilith Grimm."

"The presumption!" squealed Mr. Brown.

"Indeed," said Mr. Greenwich. "Dean Grimm, we've read your letter explaining the reasons for Miss Quick's expulsion. Do you have anything to add?"

"No," Dean Grimm said. Alexandra noticed that she didn't call Mr. Greenwich "sir."

"I would like to know why a Special Inquisitor is here," said Mr. Viterbi. It was the first time he'd spoken.

"I asked Ms. Grimm to come," Mr. Greenwich said. "I believe her interest in Miss Quick has special bearing on this case."

"A Special Inquisitor has an interest in Miss Quick?" asked Mr. Viterbi.

"You are aware of Miss Quick's parentage?" asked Mr. Greenwich.

At this, everyone's eyes fixed on Alexandra, except those of Carmela Erdglass, who remained asleep. Or dead.

"Tell us who your father is, Miss Quick," said Mr. Greenwich.

*How is this even relevant?* Alexandra wondered. She answered: "My father is Abraham Everard Thorn."

Ms. Erdglass stirred, but that was the only response in the room.

It felt like she'd given the wrong answer, though Alexandra didn't know how. She had answered truthfully. But when she glanced at Livia and Claudia, she saw Claudia breathing out some long-remembered memory. Livia met her gaze steadily and, ever so slightly, shook her head.

Most wizards preferred not to speak Abraham Thorn's name aloud. Rumors that he could hear his name spoken on the wind and retaliated against those who spoke ill of him were surely exaggerated, but Alexandra felt grudging admiration for the dread her father inspired throughout the Confederation.

That was the problem, she realized: that was the mistake Livia was trying to belatedly warn her about. She had flung her father's name out in defiance of the fear it inspired in others, and she now had the impression that Mr. Greenwich had staged his question to elicit just such a response.

Tensely, Mr. Greenwich said, "Special Inquisitor Grimm — is it true that you have been watching Miss Quick for the first fifteen years of her life, owing to the fact that her father is the Enemy of the Confederation?"

"I've been hunting Abraham Thorn that long," said Diana Grimm, speaking his name with neither defiance nor deference. "Watching his children has been a means to getting closer to him."

*And it almost got you killed, didn't it?* Alexandra thought, recalling the duel between her father and her aunt. She was glad Diana Grimm wasn't looking at her; she was afraid the Special Inquisitor might be able to read her thoughts.

"And does this defiant sprog follow in her father's footsteps?" asked Franklin Percival Brown, III.

"Ah," said Ms. Winter, as if she found Mr. Brown's question particularly insightful.

"Excuse me, if the issue is that it's too dangerous for a child of the Enemy to attend school with other children, let's settle the matter on that basis," said Rudolfo Viterbi. "No need to hear Miss Quick's appeal."

Alexandra was wondering when they did plan to hear her appeal; so far she'd barely said a word! But Mr. Greenwich proceeded to ask Diana Grimm about how Alexandra had broken the protective wards around Charmbridge Academy and allowed a murder of crows, a deadly Nemesis Spirit, and the Dark Wizard John Manuelito to enter the grounds and cause havoc. This led to a recounting of Alexandra's other activities that year: violating the laws against Underage Use of Magic, running away to pursue John Manuelito in Dinétah, and thence to previous misdeeds from participating in the Mors Mortis Society to stealing her sister Valeria's Time-Turner to her forbidden use of portals in the basements of Charmbridge Academy.

Alexandra noted that the Special Inquisitor only mentioned the portals, but did not name the Lands Below or the Lands Beyond, and the committee members only nodded solemnly, as if they didn't know or didn't care what portals to other realms signified.

Diana Grimm simply recounted facts, neither shading them in her niece's favor nor against her as far as Alexandra could tell. Mr. Brown continued to turn various shades of mottled purple and red; Mr. Viterbi listened solemnly; Ms. Winter occasionally shook her head or *tsked*. Ms. Erdglass didn't move.

"Well, I've heard enough!" said Mr. Brown, when Diana Grimm finished. "That this ill-bred half-blooded warlock's seed has remained in school this long can only be attributed to liberality on the part of Dean Grimm and laxity on the part of the Wizard Justice Department. If it falls on us to correct such oversights, let's send the witch back home where she belongs." His voice rose as he spoke, while his massive bulk seemed to be lifted from his chair by the force of his indignation alone.

Blood pounded in Alexandra's ears. She imagined Mr. Brown inflating himself and floating away, powered by his own hot air. She clenched her jaw and steeled her expression and forced herself to look away from him. This caused her gaze to fall on her aunts. Liliith and Diana Grimm's expressions were identical. It was the first time that afternoon Alexandra had felt any kinship with them.

"Well, that is a question, isn't it?" said Mr. Greenwich mildly. "Where does she belong?"

"Quite so," said Ms. Winter.

Alexandra's eyes snapped back to the Chief of Discipline, as she felt Livia and Claudia both stiffen next to her. *What?* Her frustration and anger were pushed aside by an uneasy sense of other agendas lurking beneath the surface.

"Some of the affected second parties are present," said Mr. Greenwich, consulting a parchment in front of him with pompous deliberation. "Lawrence Orion Albo and Cleopatra Rimona Dupree."

"These two youngsters," Mr. Viterbi said, pointing his chin in the direction of the Albos and the Duprees, "are classmates of Miss Quick?"

"They are students at Charmbridge Academy," said Mr. Greenwich. "Their parents requested the right to attend this hearing. As you can see, their children were maimed as a result of Miss Quick's actions at Charmbridge. Therefore, her continued presence has a direct bearing on their safety and well-being."

"Ah," said Ms. Winter.

Alexandra considered just walking out of the room. It seemed to her that things couldn't get any worse. She sat up straighter in her chair to fight the impulse to slouch.

"Miss Dupree, do you have anything to say?" asked Mr. Greenwich, suddenly sounding kindly. "If you would feel unsafe returning to Charmbridge Academy with Miss Quick present, you can tell us."

Alexandra closed her eyes. *Why not just announce your decision and get it over with?* This "appeal" seemed to be an exercise in humiliation and guilt. So fine — she would sit here and endure it. Cleo had lost an eye, and Larry had lost his fingers. If they wanted to flog her over it, they were entitled to that much.

Cleopatra rose to her feet, with reassuring murmurs from her parents. Then the girl said, "Um, Alexandra doesn't make me feel unsafe. I think you should let her come back to school."

"Cleo!" said her mother sharply.

"But it wasn't her fault, Mom!" said Cleopatra. "And she was nice to me. And everyone blames her just like they blame me for every little thing that goes wrong when it's not my fault!"

"Sit down, Cleo," Mrs. Dupree said, and Cleopatra flounced back into her chair.

Alexandra had to try very hard not to smile. Cleopatra had been sent to the Dean's office multiple times last year — it hadn't occurred to her that the girl might sympathize with her. *Thanks, Cleo.*

"Mr. Albo?" said Mr. Greenwich, obviously not pleased by Cleopatra's defense.

Larry stood up, and Alexandra turned around in her seat. She at least wouldn't let him think she was too ashamed to face him.

"How do you feel about Miss Quick returning to Charmbridge Academy?" asked Mr. Greenwich.

Larry met Alexandra's eyes, then shrugged. "I don't care, sir. I'm not afraid of her."

Alexandra did smile then. Leave it to Larry to let his arrogance get the better of his desire to see her punished.

"She maimed my son!" exclaimed Mr. Albo. "He was almost killed! He's been telling me for years what that— that— sorceress has been up to at that school, while Dean Grimm has practically thrown open her doors to undesirables. If Charmbridge Academy weren't my alma mater..."

"Dad," Larry groaned, rolling his eyes.

"So you have previously protested Miss Quick's activities?" Mr. Viterbi asked.

Larry thrust both his hands into the pockets of his robe. He frowned. "Look, it was mostly schoolyard stuff. What you'd expect from an arrogant little brat raised by Muggles. Quick's full of herself and she thinks everybody should be afraid of her because of her father, but she's no Dark sorceress."

Alexandra laughed. "Gee, Larry, that's the nicest thing you've ever said about me."

"Miss Quick, you weren't asked to speak," said Mr. Greenwich.

"Indeed," said Ms. Winter.

"Bind and gag her!" Mr. Brown was on the verge of choking with fury. Little drops of spittle clung to his lips. Alexandra's eyes widened, and Livia and Claudia both half-rose in alarm, but Mr. Greenwich waved a hand.

"I don't think that's necessary, Franklin. Miss Quick, do you have anyone here to speak on your behalf?"

Alexandra rose to her feet. "Um, my... maternal guardian, and my sister, sir."

"Your maternal guardian. That would be Claudia Green?" Mr. Greenwich's eyes fixed intensely on her and Alexandra felt something sharp and purposeful in his question.

"Yes, sir," said Alexandra.

"And your sister, Livia Pruett." Mr. Greenwich looked at his parchment again. "Aren't you Wandless, Mrs. Pruett?"

"It's Dr. Pruett, and I just reregistered with the Confederation Census Bureau," Livia said.

"I see. May I ask why, *Doctor* Pruett, since you have been living as a Muggle for the past sixteen years?"

Livia frowned. "May I ask why this is relevant to my sister's appeal hearing?"

"Whatever we think is relevant is relevant!" said Mr. Brown. "And we can certainly see what sort of attitudes and lifestyles have been influencing Miss Quick! The daughters of the Enemy are clearly alike in their lack of respect for the social order!" He wagged a finger at Livia from across the table. "Why, I shouldn't wonder that you're to blame for this young witch's rebellious, insolent attitude!"

"She only just met me last year!" Alexandra protested.

"That's true. Alexandra was rebellious and insolent long before that," said Claudia. Alexandra and Livia both turned to her in surprise, since it was the first time Claudia had spoken. Her smile was faint, but Alexandra almost laughed.

Mr. Brown harrumphed. "We have taken precautions regarding the, er, Muggle, haven't we, Samson?"

"Precautions?" Mr. Greenwich asked, while Mr. Viterbi and Ms. Winter looked at Mr. Brown askance.

"Well, surely we don't let Muggles just wander around in wizard offices and leave without Obliviating them first?" Mr. Brown said.

Claudia jerked upright, and Alexandra leaped to her feet. Then Livia grabbed her and pulled her back down to her seat. Her grip kept Alexandra from shouting something out loud.

"As the guardian of a witch," Mr. Greenwich said, "she is entitled to be aware of proceedings concerning her ward, provided there is no evidence that she risks exposing wizarding affairs to the Muggle world."

"Entirely too much has been exposed to the Muggle world recently," Mr. Brown said. "The wizarding world is being tainted by anti-wizarding sentiment and mindless modernism! Instead of entering our world discreetly and respectfully observing Colonial traditions, the unwizardly and even some purebloods are becoming radicals who would rather tear down our society out of spite because it doesn't reflect some poppycock equalitarian delusion that exists in their own heads. Ignoring the obvious fact that Muggles and wizards are different and ever shall be! Taking such a liberal approach to Muggles right here in our formal deliberations surprises me, Samson."

Alexandra, who could barely follow what Mr. Brown was going on about, was further distracted when the doors at the rear of the room opened again. She turned to see who was entering the room now, and felt a chill that had nothing to do with the small breeze that blew in from the hallway outside.

The man was solid and compactly built, and wore black robes with a red sash similar to those worn by Aurors, but Alexandra knew it indicated some other high government function. And indeed, she knew the moment she saw the man's ruddy, bald head who it was: Mr. Raspire. A man she'd first met in Dean Grimm's office, at the right hand of Governor-General Hucksteen, and last seen two years ago, when he and Diana Grimm had interrogated her after she returned alone from the Lands Below.

Mr. Raspire nodded to the front of the room and took a seat in the back row. No one spoke to him, but Alexandra saw, when she turned around, that Mr. Greenwich had nodded meaningfully to the Governor-General's man.

Then she noticed Claudia, who had also turned to see who the newcomer was. Claudia was frozen. Her eyes had gone wide, and her fists were clenched so tightly that it looked as if her fingernails might draw blood from her palms.

Alexandra looked back and forth from Mr. Raspire to Claudia, and everything fell into place.

Last year, Alexandra's friends had discovered the document that Governor-General Hucksteen had signed, many years ago, sentencing a young Claudia Quick to be made barren, a magical curse once routinely inflicted on all Squibs in the Confederation. Claudia had never spoken of it, of course, and she didn't know that Alexandra knew about it.

Alexandra still didn't know why Governor-General Hucksteen had done that, what enmity for her father had motivated him to take it out on a fourteen-year-old girl. But now she knew who must have been one of the parties that carried out the order. Maybe Raspire hadn't actually been the one who cast the Barrenness Curse, but he'd been there. Claudia's reaction told her that.

Alexandra stared daggers at Richard Raspire, who settled back in his chair with a distant smile. Livia laid a hand on Claudia's arm. "Claudia?"

Claudia snapped out of her trance and, with a visible effort, turned her back on Raspire. She was shaken and had trouble looking at anyone.

Mr. Greenwich, who had paused in responding to Mr. Brown while everyone was distracted by the newcomer's entrance, said, "I think there's an important issue to address here regarding Miss Quick's parentage. It is true that in the Confederation Census she is registered as a half-blood, but I have information here indicating that this is not correct." He passed some documents around the table, and everyone but Ms. Erdglass leaned forward to examine them.

Alexandra stole a look at Lilith and Diana Grimm. They were both impassive and seemingly indifferent to whatever Mr. Greenwich was showing the appeals committee.

"Is this accurate?" Mr. Viterbi asked.

"Of course it's accurate!" Mr. Brown said. "It's got a Confederation seal on it." He looked at Claudia as if she had personally offended him. "You are the daughter of Abr-b-burr—" He sputtered and turned white.

"You're a Squib," Mr. Greenwich said, "not a Muggle. And you are not in fact the mother of Miss Quick, but her older sister. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Claudia said.

Alexandra sat very still. She kept her eyes on Mr. Greenwich. She didn't want to look at the fat bombastic wizard still squealing in terror and outrage, or the sycophantic blonde or the other two who barely seemed there. She didn't want to look at her aunts, and she especially didn't want to look at Larry Albo or Mr. Raspire.

"Do you have any idea how your records could have been... mislabeled, all these years?" Mr. Greenwich asked.

"No," Claudia said. "Since I haven't been a Confederation citizen since before Alexandra was born, I wouldn't know anything about the census or your records. And if you want to know about my father, I'm sure Special Inquisitor Grimm can tell you more than I can."

Alexandra was heartened by how quickly Claudia was rallying, though her face was still white and her hands shook a little.

"But it does raise the issue of who is Miss Quick's proper guardian," Mr. Greenwich said. "Indeed, this seems to be a very irregular affair all around."

"Excuse me, Mr. Greenwich," said Diana Grimm, "but with all due respect, I was asked to be here to speak on the matter of Miss Quick's expulsion from Charmbridge Academy. These other matters don't seem to be relevant, or within the purview of the Department of Magical Education."

Mr. Greenwich smiled with the sanguine assurance of someone holding a knife behind his back. "We're convened under the authority of the

Governor, Special Inquisitor Grimm. Perhaps you're more used to strict segregation of duties and authorities in the Office of Special Inquisitions, but as long as we are duly convened to hear Miss Quick's appeal, we're authorized to investigate whatever activities, infractions, and crimes have a bearing on it."

And that was it — Alexandra saw the knife. She couldn't follow all the interplay and intrigues going on here, but this wasn't about her getting expelled or readmitted to Charmbridge Academy. Somebody was playing games here. Mr. Greenwich was part of it, and so was Mr. Raspire. Probably the others were just pawns. Alexandra didn't know if the target was her or her father, or maybe her aunts, as neither of them had been open about their own relationship to her. But the immediate target had become her — and Claudia.

She stood up. "Excuse me, sir."

Mr. Greenwich raised his eyebrows, but although Mr. Brown suddenly became frantic and furious, fumbling for a pouch that might have contained his wand, the white-haired wizard simply said, "Yes?"

"Are you still authorized to ask questions and poke your noses into my business if there's no longer an appeal to hear?"

"Excuse me?" Mr. Greenwich asked.

"I want to know if we have to stay here if I drop my appeal."

The room went silent.

Claudia looked up at her. "Alex," she whispered.

Mr. Greenwich cleared his throat, but it was Mr. Viterbi who spoke: "Technically speaking, our scope is limited to the appeal."

"We're obligated to turn over our proceedings to the Deputy Head of the Department, with recommendations for further action," Mr. Greenwich said.

"But *you* have no more business with me if I drop my appeal," Alexandra said.

Mr. Greenwich frowned.

"Alex —" Claudia repeated.

"It's all right, Claudia," Alexandra said. "They were never going to let me come back. I'm sorry I dragged you and Livia both into this." She faced the committee. "I hereby drop my appeal."

"You can't," Mr. Greenwich said. "You're a minor. Your appeal was filed on your behalf by your legal guardian."

Claudia looked at Alexandra, then at Mr. Greenwich. "Then I'm dropping the appeal."

"It's not entirely clear that you are her legal guardian," Mr. Greenwich said.

"Then the appeal was invalid to begin with, wasn't it?" Claudia said.

Alexandra almost laughed. Mr. Greenwich looked as if he'd just tried to swallow one of the documents on the table in front of him.

"I do have one other thing to say," Alexandra said.

Mr. Greenwich folded his hands in front of him. "And what's that?"

Alexandra turned around slowly so she could see everyone else in the room except the committee members. Her aunts were stone-faced. Larry studied her with interest. Cleo had her mouth open, clearly confused by the proceedings. Mr. Albo and Mr. and Mrs. Dupree just glared at her. The man with the pen continued to write, and Raspire's expression hadn't changed — he regarded her with his arms folded across his chest and a slight smile playing on his lips.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry for everything that happened. It was at least partly my fault, and I didn't think about the consequences. I'm sorry about your hand, Larry, and Cleo, I'm so sorry about your eye. I wish I could take it all back. There's a lot I wish I could take back."

She stared at Raspire for a moment, then cleared her throat and turned to her aunts.

"Thanks for being on my side," she said, in a carefully neutral tone. She wasn't sure, but she thought she saw something flicker in their expressions.

Finally, she turned back to face the committee. "And since now I'm permanently expelled anyway — screw all of you. C'mon, Claudia, Livia."

To her surprise, Carmela Erdglass opened one eye, shining like a dark glass bead in the withered recesses of her face, and made a dry sound barely audible over Natalie Winter's gasp and Franklin Percival Brown's apoplectic gargling. It sounded like either a chuckle or the old lady was choking to death.

Alexandra turned around and waited just long enough for Claudia and Livia to rise from their chairs and follow her. She made sure she was just a step ahead of Claudia as they passed by Mr. Raspire, and her muscles knotted with tension. But the man didn't say anything, and none of the daughters of Abraham Thorn looked at him as they filed past and walked out into the hallway.

## **\*Chapter 4\*: Persona Non Grata**

Alexandra made it into the hallway, then sagged against the wall. She closed her eyes and didn't say anything as Claudia and Livia stood next to her.

"Are you sure that's what you wanted to do, Alexandra?" Livia asked.

Alexandra opened her eyes and turned to face her. "No, I've changed my mind. Let's go back in there so I can tell them I take it all back."

Livia pursed her lips. "Oh, are you being sarcastic? I just want to be sure before I rearrange my schedule and spend an entire day putting myself through a wizarding inquest again on your behalf."

Alexandra slumped. "I'm sorry, Livia. But they were never going to grant my appeal. It was turning into an inquisition directed at Claudia, not me. You see that, don't you? They'd probably have gone after you next. This is all about punishing the daughters of Abraham Thorn."

"She's right," Claudia said.

The doors behind them opened. Richard Raspire stepped into the hallway. His languid smile remained in place. Conversation echoed past him — Larry talking to his father, and heated eruptions from Franklin Percival Brown.

"Hello, Miss Quick," he said. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"Not long enough." Alexandra stepped between him and Claudia. She gave Livia a warning look. "This is Richard Raspire. He's the Governor-General's flunky."

"Oh, why not 'lackey' or 'toady'?" said Raspire. "Really, you're a young woman now, not a child. Too old to be saying childish things and expecting to be dealt with like a child."

"What do you want?" Alexandra asked.

"I want all three of you to return to Milwaukee and Larkin Mills and stay there," the wizard replied. "Mrs. Green, Dr. Pruett, you had already withdrawn from the wizarding world when your sister dragged you back in." He turned his cold, flat smile on Alexandra. "And you, Miss Quick, are without a wand and not enrolled in any wizarding school. Take my advice — stay Wandless. The Governor-General himself will approve the removal of your name from the Confederation Census. Go back to your life among the Muggles, and you need never again be dragged into the affairs of wizards."

Alexandra didn't want to take her eyes off the man, but she couldn't help looking over her shoulder to check on Claudia. Claudia was just glaring at him, tight-lipped. The wrinkles around the corners of her eyes made her look years older than she was, but the initial response she'd had to seeing him in the hearing room was gone. If Raspire still struck terror into her heart, she was hiding it well.

Livia was just angry and confused. She didn't know, Alexandra realized. Even if she knew what had happened to Claudia, she didn't know about Raspire's role.

"I don't see how this is any of your business, or the Governor-General's," said Livia. "Nor why he should be concerned about whether or not we choose to carry wands. But I don't appreciate your attempt to intimidate us, Mr. Raspire. And threatening a teenage girl? You ought to be ashamed."

"You've spent too long among Muggles, Dr. Pruett," said Raspire. "You've forgotten that the rules are different in the Confederation. Of course the Governor-General is concerned about enemies of the Confederation."

"We're not enemies of the Confederation," Alexandra said.

Raspire sized Alexandra up, as if measuring her for a shroud. He inched closer and spoke in a low voice that caused Alexandra to lean in before she realized she was doing it.

"Aren't you? By reentering public life you're announcing your involvement in the conflict between the Enemy and the Governor-General. The only question is which side you've taken. And that's not really much of a question, is it?"

"We aren't responsible for our father's actions," said Livia. "We aren't involved in his activities."

"So you say." Raspire's eyes never left Alexandra. "Prove it, and remain Wandless."

"I've got a right to a wand," Alexandra said. "I'm a witch. I'll be a witch whether I have a wand or not."

"Indeed." The doors opened behind him, and Raspire gave the three of them a courteous nod before turning and striding down the hallway, black cloak fluttering smartly behind him.

Lilith and Diana Grimm were the next to exit the hearing room. The Albos and the Duprees were immediately behind them, so the Grimms stepped out of the way and allowed them to pass. Larry turned his head to stare at Alexandra as he and his father marched away after Mr. Raspire. He didn't smile or nod or wave, and neither did Alexandra. Then Cleopatra Dupree and her parents went past. Cleopatra lifted her hand and waved with her fingers. "Bye, Alexandra," she said.

Alexandra raised her hand. "Bye, Cleo," she said, a little sadly.

Mrs. Dupree grabbed her daughter's hand and hauled the girl off after the Albos, who had now entered the elevator.

The committee members were either still in the room or had left by another exit. Alexandra and her sisters were alone with the Grimms for the moment.



"Well, that was unexpected," said Dean Grimm.

"What was?" Alexandra asked. "Cleo not hating me? Or the appeals committee railroading me? Or do you mean Mr. Raspire showing up?"

"I expected all of that — except perhaps Mr. Raspire." The Dean glanced at her sister, who said nothing. "I didn't expect you to recognize the futility of your efforts. Surely you knew they wouldn't overturn your expulsion, Alexandra?"

"They might, if you asked them to reconsider," said Claudia. "You're the one who expelled her."

"I really didn't have a choice, Mrs. Green."

"Yes, you did," Alexandra said. "Not about expelling me. I understand why you had to do that. But I really believed you didn't want to. I thought... I thought you were on my side." She was surprised at how hurt she felt. "But you're not, are you, Aunt Lilith? You really don't want me back at Charmbridge."

Lilith Grimm studied her niece for several long moments. Diana Grimm watched, saying nothing. Finally, Lilith said, "I do have a responsibility to other students, not just you, Alexandra."

"So, I'm too dangerous to be allowed back at school." Alexandra glanced at Claudia, who frowned and shook her head, but Alexandra continued before her sister could speak. "That's fine. I'll figure something out. I don't need you, or Charmbridge Academy. I'm a witch and you can't take my magic away. Not you, not Mr. Raspire, no one." She let the hurt on her face slide off, replaced with defiance.

"Oh, child," Lilith Grimm said. "I have always had your best interests at heart. Please believe that."

Alexandra turned to her other aunt. "Do you also have my best interests at heart, Aunt Diana?"

"What I have at heart is immaterial," said Diana Grimm. "My *duty* is to the Confederation. But I've also protected you, Alexandra, and I'll continue to do so. And please don't call me 'Aunt Diana.'"

"Okay, Diana," Alexandra said. "Good-bye, Diana, Lilith."

Her aunts' withering stares might have reduced her to a small rodent or amphibian if they had voiced incantations to match. Lilith Grimm turned on her heel and strode away down the corridor.

Diana Grimm glanced after her sister, then leaned toward Alexandra and grabbed her shoulder.

"Lilith is one of the few friends you have left," she said. "If she doesn't want you at Charmbridge Academy, believe me, it's as much for your own good as that of your classmates. You should really learn to recognize who's on your side."

"That's gotten a lot harder lately," Alexandra said.

Diana Grimm shook her head, then followed her sister down the hallway, disappearing as everyone else had into the elevator.

"Well," Livia said, "is there anyone else you'd like to antagonize, Alex?"

Alexandra turned back to her sisters, and her true feelings seeped into her voice. "What am I supposed to do, Livia? Cower, grovel, say, 'Yes, Ms. Grimm, thank you, Ms. Grimm?' While they keep reminding me of everything they can take from me?"

The realization that she wasn't going back to Charmbridge — *really* wasn't going back — hit her then. She turned away and crossed her arms, fighting her anger. "Yes sir, Mr. Greenwich. Thank you, Mr. Brown," she said, her voice still mocking. "You're right, I am a dangerous Mudblood who shouldn't even be allowed to go to school with decent people. I know this is all *for my own good*." She blinked rapidly. "What am I going to do? What am I supposed to do?"

"First," Livia said, "we're going to go shopping and get you a wand. And then, Claudia and I are going to talk about schooling for you."

"What, a day school?" Alexandra said. "Or were you planning to send me somewhere else?"

"You could always stay home, and go to Larkin Mills High School," Claudia said. "But you can't learn magic there, can you?"

Alexandra shrugged, still not looking at her sisters. "How can I go to a day school when there aren't any near Larkin Mills?"

"As I said, Claudia and I are going to talk about that," Livia said.

"I don't want to send you away, Alex," Claudia said. "So don't start pitying yourself again."

Alexandra jerked her head up at that.

"But there are options," Livia said. "Most Territories, including Central, are required to provide a magical education, even if it means busing you to day school."

Alexandra wrinkled her nose. She thought of Payton Smith, her first boyfriend, a Muggle-born who attended a day school in Roanoke Territory. She had not been impressed by how much magic he'd learned.

"There's also..." Claudia hesitated. "I told Thalia we shouldn't mention it to you until it's more than just an idea. But..."

"What?" Alexandra's eyes widened. "You've been talking to Ms. King?"

Thalia King, their sister Julia's mother, had been almost a surrogate mother to Alexandra on her trips to Croatoa. But she never imagined Claudia would initiate dialog with anyone in the wizarding world, not even Ms. King.

Claudia nodded. "She said she's going to see if she might be able to get you admitted to the Salem Witches' Institute. Not an official application,

not yet — she just thought she could talk to the... whatever they call the witches in charge there, a coven or something."

Alexandra's mouth opened. The idea was surprising, exciting, and unexpected enough to make her nervous. She didn't know how she felt about going to a whole new wizarding school across the country, and an all-girls school to boot. But she'd get to go to school with Julia! That would be something, at least. Julia was the sister closest to her in age and the one who was most fond of her, and Alexandra loved visiting the Kings at their Croatoa island estate.

"It's just an idea, Alex," Claudia said. "We don't know if it's feasible. Thalia said the Salem Witches' Institute is pretty strict about admissions —"

"My SPAWN scores are really good," Alexandra said.

"They don't usually accept transfer students," Claudia said. "And keep in mind, they'll know about your... record."

Alexandra frowned, then nodded. Yeah. Kicked out of Charmbridge for being a disciplinary problem, and worse. Still, the Salem Witches' Institute already had one daughter of the Enemy as a student; would two be so objectionable? For Julia's sake (and her own), she would be good — really, really good. She would behave herself, stay out of trouble, attend to her studies...

"As an alumna with a daughter who's a student there now, Thalia may have some influence," Claudia said. "So she says. But she warned me not to count Hippogriffs before they've hatched." Claudia snorted. "That's why I didn't want to mention it to you yet."

Alexandra nodded. "Okay, Claudia. We'll wait to hear from Ms. King." Already, she was thinking about seeing Julia again. Of course, that would mean not seeing Anna or David or Constance and Forbearance during the school year, and that made her heart ache. Still, it was better than being stuck in Larkin Mills. That thought made her feel guilty, and she quickly checked Claudia's expression as if her older sister might be reading her mind. Claudia was composed.

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves," Livia said. "Claudia, we'll walk you out, and then Alexandra and I will return to the Goblin Market."

Claudia nodded. "All right." The three of them took the elevator down to the lobby. They changed out of their robes in the bathroom, and Claudia could not hide her sigh of relief as they stepped out of the Central Territory Headquarters Building and back onto the streets of Muggle Chicago.

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Livia and Alexandra walked into Grobnowski's Old World Deli, a delicatessen that sat on the border between Muggle Chicago and the Goblin Market. The dim interior, with its smoke-stained rafters, iron stove, and ancient wooden tables covered with old-fashioned newspapers, mostly occupied by wrinkled old wizards playing wizard chess or card games Alexandra didn't recognize, had always seemed to her to be a place out of time. She imagined it predating Chicago, perhaps an establishment that had been magically transported from the Old World when the Goblin Market came into existence.

Charmbridge students always passed through the deli quickly and never stopped to buy anything. But now Livia paused in front of a case of pastries and said, "Oh, shark pie!" She fumbled in her purse.

Alexandra looked at the small, round pies. They looked like ordinary meat pies.

"Two, please," Livia said, handing an eagle to the old man behind the counter. He took the coin and wordlessly shoveled two of the pies into a paper bag and handed it along with some change back to Livia.

"Thank you, Mr. Grobnowski," Livia said. She reached into the bag and handed a pie to Alexandra. "I haven't been here in years. It's been that long since I've had shark pie."

Alexandra eyed the little pie skeptically. "Who the heck makes pie out of sharks?"

"It's something of a local specialty," Livia bit into her pie and smiled as they headed for the rear entrance.

Alexandra nibbled the crust and sniffed the inside of the pie. "Doesn't smell fishy. How can shark pie be a local specialty? I don't think Lake Michigan has sharks."

"Land sharks, silly."

Alexandra stared at her sister. "Land sharks? I've never heard of land sharks."

"They were hunted almost to extinction. I think they're farmed now," Livia finished the rest of her pie in two bites.

Cautiously, Alexandra bit into hers. The flavor was like loam and dried fish, with the consistency of shoe leather. She made a face and grabbed the empty bag in Livia's hand.

"That's disgusting," she said, after spitting the mouthful of shark pie into the bag. "I think you're putting me on about land sharks."

Livia sighed and shook her head, as they opened the door and stepped out onto the street beyond.

The Goblin Market was more lively in the summer than the winter. Usually, this was the time when Alexandra would be visiting with her fellow students from Charmbridge Academy. But the Charmbridge bus would not be picking her up in Larkin Mills to take her shopping for school supplies anymore, she thought sadly.

"Oh my," Livia said, pausing as robed witches and wizards wearing a hundred varieties of accouterments swished and jingled and trotted past on horses. "It's been so long since I was here. It seems more chaotic than I remember."

Alexandra shrugged. How could she know what the Goblin Market had been like before she was born? She did notice the presence of more Aurors than last summer. There was always at least one walking nearby, wearing a red vest beneath a black cloak, while others swept past regularly on brooms.

Livia and Alexandra walked past the central fountain plaza and directly past the Goody Pruett's, named for Livia's ancestor. As they passed the

Owl Post Office, Alexandra noticed there were no hags loitering around the alleys and shadier street corners, perhaps because there were so many Aurors about.

Two blocks from the plaza, between a brand new Tockmagi ® Clockworks shop and a dingy cafe, was a small storefront with HOARGRIM'S WANDS AND ALCHEMICAL SUPPLIES engraved in brass above the window. The window was smudged and grimy, but Alexandra could see wands lying in velvet cases on the other side of it.

She could get a new wand, at last! For the past two months she had been without one, and was barely able to cast the simplest spell. No doubt Mr. Greenwich and Mr. Brown and Raspire and all those other angry old men were pleased at the thought of her being left defenseless.

Of course, she wasn't entirely without magic. But she wasn't going to tell Livia what she'd been doing at the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse, even if Livia was the owner.

"What a day for memories," Livia said, gazing at Hoargrim's sign.

"Did you get your first wand here, too?" Alexandra asked.

"Yes. Eleven inches. Rowan, wrapped around unicorn hair." Livia smiled sadly. "I wonder what happened to it when I turned it in. They destroyed it, I suppose."

"You could get a new wand today too," Alexandra said, "instead of keeping that cheap department store wand."

"Maybe another time." Livia pushed open the door. "I've actually become rather attached to my Grundy's wand. I guess it's true what they say, the wand really does choose its owner."

Livia had been Wandless for years, and technically wasn't supposed to have had any wand at all. But Alexandra knew from experience that Livia was no less skilled a Healer despite the cheap wand she kept hidden. She shrugged and followed her sister inside.

The interior of Hoargrim's had remained unchanged in all the years Alexandra had come here for Alchemical supplies the week before school started. It was a small shop with jars and barrels full of interesting things lining the counters and filling all the shelves that packed the front of the store. A little room in the back — really no more than a carpeted alcove — held cabinets carved with tiny drawers, each one housing a wand. Alexandra was already looking in that direction when an old man with a beaked nose and stiff bristly hair thrusting out from around his ears emerged from behind the counter. He wore a black woolen suit that looked scratchy and uncomfortable.

"Hello, Mr. Finsterholz," said Livia. After all these years, she obviously still recognized the proprietor and wandsmith. "My sister needs a new wand. We'd like you to match her to one, please."

Mr. Finsterholz looked back at Livia, his lips compressed together and his face etched in lines of age and disapproval. His head barely moved as his dark, beady eyes fixed on Alexandra.

"Nein," he said.

"Excuse me?" said Livia, while Alexandra stared at him.

"Nein," he repeated. "I cannot help you."

"I don't understand," Livia said.

"What is not to understand? I am unable to match Miss Quick with a wand. I wish you luck in finding another establishment which can cater to you." He held a hand out in a curt, unmistakable gesture at the door.

"You remember me," Alexandra said, gaze still fixed on him.

"Ja, of course I remember you," Mr. Finsterholz said. "Troublesome. Knew you'd be troublesome the moment I laid eyes on you."

"But you matched me with a wand," Alexandra said. "*Carya illinoensis*, ten and a half inches, chimaera hair core."

"Ja. I remember. What happened to it? Never mind, I don't want to know. I cannot give you another wand, Miss Quick."

"Why not?" Alexandra asked.

Mr. Finsterholz's eyes slid right and left, as if looking for unseen companions who might have sneaked in with the two witches.

"You are not welcome here," he said. He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "See that sign, ja?"

Posted above the counter, between an ancient, faded poster advertising Hung's Harmonious Healing Organs and a small iron goblin hanging by a chain from an engraved plaque warning that Muggle currency was not accepted, was a sign saying: "We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone."

"But why?" Livia asked.

"Because we're daughters of Abraham Thorn," Alexandra said. Her suspicions were confirmed when Mr. Finsterholz twitched and looked everywhere but at them.

She took one step toward him, and he shuffled half a step back before stiffening and holding his nose up.

"You matched me for a wand before," she said. "I don't understand why you won't match me now. What did I ever do to you? What did my father ever do to you?"

Slowly, he leaned forward. He spoke in a low tone, his words barely escaping through his teeth.

"Your father," he said, "is not the only dangerous man in the Confederation."

They stared each other down, Mr. Finsterholz with renewed courage, Alexandra with dismay. Then Alexandra turned and walked to the door. "Come on, Livia."

"But..." Livia frowned, glared at Mr. Finsterholz, turned as if to stop Alexandra, then ended up following her out the door.

On the street outside, Alexandra breathed in and out quickly, trying to control her anger. Livia sighed. "What a horrible man. You know, there must be somewhere we can complain —"

Alexandra turned her head to look at her sister, who seven months ago had been half a head taller and now had barely two inches on her. "You really have been out of the wizarding world a long time, haven't you?"

Livia blinked slowly behind her glasses. "I remember what the wizarding world is like just fine," she said. "That's why I left it."

"So tell me where two daughters of Abraham Thorn can complain about being treated unfairly," Alexandra said. "'Cause I've got a lot of complaints."

Livia rolled her eyes. "All right, Alexandra, stop being sarcastic."

Alexandra bit back another response. An Auror rode past on an unwinged horse, giving her and Livia flat stares. Alexandra stared back.

"How about Grundy's?" Livia asked. "I know a Grundy's wand isn't like one made by Mr. Finsterholz or another wandsmith, but..."

"It's better than nothing," Alexandra said. "Sure."

The two of them walked past the Chicago Broom Megastore and Gringotts Bank, mingling with the crowds of witches and wizards out shopping. On several lampposts, Alexandra saw posters advertising the Wizarding Decathlon in New Amsterdam. Wizards gestured with their wands and spun complex animated runes across the posters. The runes became salamanders and roosters, which tried to devour each other until they all turned to stone, then bleached white until they became pillars of salt, which crumbled into dust, from which emerged large, gem-eyed spiders. As Alexandra watched each poster they passed, the patterns never repeated; it was a different sequence of images each time. Quite a complex set of charms to animate street posters. If it was to demonstrate the level of skill that would be in evidence at the Wizarding Decathlon, she was impressed.

The Junior Wizarding Decathlon would also be held in New Amsterdam, a week prior to the regular Decathlon. Once, she had dreamed of going as Charmbridge's champion. Another dream she had to put behind her. It was pointless to dwell on it.

Livia and Alexandra approached the large, dark brown brick building that was Grundy's Department Store. This was another stop on the annual Charmbridge shopping trip. Alexandra thought maybe she could talk Livia into stopping in the cafeteria after they bought a wand and a few other items she needed. She could have peppermeat sausage and Fizzy-Pop, just like she did when she went with her friends. A lump formed in her throat.

Two golden metal Clockwork golems opened the large glass doors for them. Alexandra and Livia walked in. Halfway across the entrance foyer, Alexandra ran into an invisible barrier and jumped back with a yelp, rubbing her nose. She stared at the air between her and the inner doors.

"Alexandra, what's wrong?" Livia asked.

Cautiously, Alexandra reached a hand out. It met resistance that became greater the harder she pushed, accompanied by an unpleasant sensation like pins and needles.

"I don't believe it," she said. "I've been Barred!"

In sixth grade, she'd been Barred from Grundy's after getting into a fight with Larry Albo and Benjamin and Mordecai Rash in the cafeteria. But the Bar had been lifted the following year. She hadn't done anything wrong in Grundy's since then — why was the Bar blocking her from entry again?

Livia said, "Wait here. I'll go find a manager." She left Alexandra to slouch indignantly in a corner of the foyer while other customers walked in and out.

A few minutes later, an elderly witch with steel-gray hair packed beneath a sagging witch's hat accompanied Livia back to the foyer. The older witch gave Alexandra a look that said she already knew who she was.

"I was hoping you could lift the Bar that's accidentally been reactivated," Alexandra said.

"Bars don't get 'reactivated,'" said the witch, whose name tag identified her as Permelia Parrish, Assistant Manager. "I'm sorry, Miss Quick, but you're not welcome at Grundy's Department Store."

"Why?" Alexandra asked, angered at this second rejection. "I haven't done anything to deserve being Barred! You can't just arbitrarily discriminate against me!"

They could, and she knew it. Livia looked angry as well.

Permelia Parrish said, "Grundy's has the right to refuse to —"

"Why?" Alexandra shouted. "What did I do?"

Taken aback, Ms. Parrish said, "If you don't leave, I'll have to summon a security troll."

Alexandra laughed. "A troll? For me? Oh, that's great. Grundy's will look great sending a troll to throw a teenage girl out." She narrowed her eyes at the Assistant Manager. "Aren't you afraid I'll curse you or something? Since I'm the daughter of Abraham Thorn."

Ms. Parrish blanched and backed away. She turned and pushed her way back into the store, with a fearful look over her shoulder.

"Never mind, we're leaving," Livia said. "She's just upset. We won't cause any trouble." Hurriedly, she grabbed Alexandra by the elbow and led her outside. Alexandra didn't resist.

Once they were on the street, Livia said, "That was very foolish. You can't reason with people by threatening them."

"Reason? Do you think we can reason with them?" Alexandra had been staring at the sidewalk, but when she lifted her head, revealing her miserable expression, some of the harsh lines around Livia's eyes and mouth disappeared.

"Well," Livia said. She folded her arms with her hands curled around her elbows. "If you wait here, and can manage not to get into trouble or threaten anyone else, I'll go back inside and buy that wand."

"I do hope you're not intending to buy a wand for your sister," said a familiar voice. Alexandra and Livia both turned to see Richard Raspire strolling up to them, with the smile of an iguana preparing to snatch a bug with its tongue.

"What are you doing, following us?" Alexandra asked.

Raspire ignored her. He gave Livia a stern look that did not completely wipe the smile off his face. "You've been out of the wizarding world for some years, *Doctor Pruett*," he said. "So you may not be aware of the penalties for providing wands to unregistered juveniles."

"I *am* registered," Alexandra said. "I'm in the Confederation Census, you —"

Livia held a hand up. "Alexandra will be going to school, Mr. Raspire. Surely you don't expect her to remain wandless between semesters. No other students do."

"I wish you luck finding a school that will enroll her," Raspire said. "You may have difficulty with that. I'm afraid that known associates and family members of the Enemy are persona non grata at any establishment that wishes not to be affiliated with the Enemy themselves."

"I wasn't Barred from Grundy's," Livia said.

"Yes. Well." Raspire shrugged. "I imagine since they are host to a Goody Pruett's franchise and you are still the Pruett heir, Barring you is problematic. Few other businesses here in the Goblin Market will serve you, though. As I told you back at the hearing, you'd do well to simply return to the Muggle world."

"That's not going to happen," Alexandra said, ignoring Livia's warning look.

"Nonetheless," Raspire said. "You can expect to be monitored much more closely now. And Central Territory prohibits sale or transfer of wands to unenrolled minors. So does Roanoke, and most other Territories. Just in case you thought you'd be clever." He smiled. "Until next time, Miss Quick, *Doctor Pruett*."

He walked away. Alexandra and Livia didn't say anything until he had disappeared down the street. His red sash parted the crowd before him.

"Well," Livia said, "I don't have to tell them who I'm buying the wand for at Grundy's —"

"No," Alexandra said. "Forget it."

"Alexandra, you need a wand —"

"Yeah. Don't worry, Livia, we'll get one for me once it's all legal. Don't risk getting in trouble for me."

Livia didn't seem convinced, despite Alexandra's unconcerned tone. Alexandra wondered if it even occurred to her sister that Raspire, or someone else, could be listening to them with Auror's Ears right now.

"Well," Livia said, "would you like to stop at Goody Pruett's? If they try to refuse you service there, I'll find out just how much influence the last Pruett has, and I swear I'll give them reason to fear it."

Alexandra stared at her, wondering if she meant it, but after a moment of shock at her own bold declaration, Livia tossed her head and looked down at Alexandra as if daring her to question it.

"No, thanks," Alexandra said. "But there is somewhere else I want to stop."

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The Colonial Bank of the New World hadn't Barred Alexandra. The clerk behind the counter was polite and impersonal as Alexandra checked her account. It contained a considerable sum again, despite the fact that a few months ago she'd sent most of it to Henry Tsotsie, a Navajo Auror in Dinétah, to pay for a Muggle boy's car that she'd ruined. Evidently her father had kept his promise. Even though they weren't speaking, and she had refused any further help from him, he was still replenishing the account he'd given her.

After she withdrew some of the funds and paid the fee to have it converted to Muggle currency, she walked out of the bank, past the portrait of John Constantine Dearborn, II hanging in the lobby.

Alexandra paused by the fountain in front of the back entrance to Grobnowski's Old World Deli. She reached into her pocket, found a quarter, and tossed it into the water, where it sank to the bottom and joined the pigeons piled up there.

"Muggle money!" she said aloud, in defiance to no one in particular. A couple of wizards and a teenager she didn't recognize turned their heads in her direction, but her gesture garnered little attention otherwise.

She didn't say much on the ride back to Larkin Mills. Claudia and Livia had made plans to speak again the next day on the phone to figure out what to do with her. Alexandra was torn between resentment and gratitude that her two older sisters were suddenly so concerned and involved in planning her future.

That evening, she received a call that she had been waiting for eagerly. It came from a small pay phone in a little cafe in a tiny Muggle village on the island where Julia King and her mother lived. Once a week, Julia rode one of the Kings' Granians to the woods just outside the village, tied it to

a tree, and walked into the village to use the phone in the cafe.

"Hello, Alexandra!" Julia said. "How did it go?"

Alexandra hated to deflate Julia's optimism, so she tried to hide her dejection and speak as if she were discussing an unexpected bit of rain. "Well, not really the way I hoped."

Julia wasn't fooled. She pressed for details until Alexandra had recounted the whole story. She hated how somber her sister sounded when she was done.

"Well," Julia said, "that's simply horrible."

"Yeah." There was a long pause. Alexandra cleared her throat. "Claudia told me that... well, there *might* be something your mother might be able to do..." She bit her lip.

There was a longer pause. Then Alexandra was horrified to hear Julia crying on the other end of the line.

"Julia? Julia! What's wrong?" She pictured Julia standing in the back of the cafe huddled over the phone and sobbing.

"Oh Alex," Julia said. "I'm so sorry. Mother is sorry too. They... they said no. Absolutely refused."

Alexandra closed her eyes. Disappointment welled up in her, but she said, "It's okay. I know I probably wouldn't have fit in at Salem. And I'm sure your mother did everything she could."

"Alexandra, they don't even want *me* at Salem any more," Julia said. "If this weren't going to be my last year — well, the headmistress hinted that I might find an apprenticeship or even homeschool, and Mother was angrier than I've ever seen her. So they retreated from *that*, but as frightening as Mother's wrath was, she still could not move them to admit another one of Father's daughters. I'm tempted to withdraw from Salem in protest. Fie on them! If they think either one of us isn't good enough —"

"Please don't do that, Julia," Alexandra said. "I know you want to finish your senior year. And withdrawing from school is just what *they* want."

"I don't even understand who 'they' are," Julia said. "Why now? We've mostly been left alone all these years, except for visits from that horrible Diana Grimm — oh, I'm sorry, Alexandra, she is your aunt."

"No, she's pretty horrible," Alexandra agreed. "And I don't know why Governor-General Hucksteen and his goons are suddenly trying to persecute us so much." She had assumed that the persecution was directed at *her*; now it was evident that the Confederation was trying to make all the daughters of Abraham Thorn feel like persona non grata. "But please take care of yourself, and don't worry about me."

"Hah," Julia said. "You are terrible at being noble, Alexandra."

"Yeah," Alexandra said, "I guess I am."

## **\*Chapter 5\*: You and I Are Not Going to Be Friends**

Livia and Claudia spent more time talking to each other over the next few days than they had in all the time since they'd been separated as children. Alexandra felt talked about more than talked to, but considering how the slightest mention of the wizarding world had once sent Claudia into silent withdrawal, she tried not to be resentful.

There were wizarding day schools in the Chicago area, and Claudia and Archie discussed the logistics of Alexandra living in Chicago during the week and returning on weekends. Alexandra thought this was an attractive idea, until they told her there was absolutely no way she was going to stay in an apartment by herself.

"I swear, I won't throw wild parties," Alexandra said.

"I'm more worried about you burning the place down," Archie said. "Besides, we can't afford it."

Alexandra folded her arms and gave Archie a sour look. Since learning that he was not her stepfather but her brother-in-law, their already awkward relationship had become even more undefined.

"It's probably not even legal to leave a fifteen-year-old unsupervised," Claudia said.

"But..." Alexandra imagined independence and a city to herself, and proximity to Charmbridge Academy if she could find a way to visit her friends —

"Forget it," Claudia and Archie said together.

According to Livia, there was also a small wizarding school in Sheboygan. Not a day school, but a regular boarding school like Charmbridge, though without the prestige or reputation of the Big Four. Livia didn't know much about it, despite it being located not far from Milwaukee, where she had lived for the past six years.

Livia never offered to let Alexandra stay with her while going to school. Alexandra never hinted at the idea, though she was just a little disappointed that it was never even mentioned. She could understand why Livia wouldn't embrace the idea of a younger sister she barely knew staying with her and her husband, especially when she was expecting a child of her own. Alexandra didn't even know if she would want to go to Milwaukee if invited. But since neither she nor Claudia had yet visited their sister's home, or met her husband, she couldn't help wondering if Livia were maintaining a deliberate distance, willing to help her sisters as long as it didn't bring the wizarding world too close to her personal life.

Livia's careful boundaries presented what seemed to Alexandra a barrier as firm as Claudia's denial once had been.

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A few days after Alexandra's trip to Chicago, she and Brian shared a sundae at an ice cream shop, following a movie that Brian had loved and Alexandra had found much harder to enjoy than she once would have.

Not everything in the movie had made sense to her. There were jokes she didn't get. Brian was surprised that she didn't know the star, on whom half the girls in his class had a crush.

Alexandra still mostly caught up on current events and popular celebrities and the latest memes and viral videos when she was at home, but year by year, bit by bit, she could see how she might eventually become a foreigner in Larkin Mills.

Now, she feared becoming a stranger to her friends in the wizarding world as well. Anna and David had both been crushed by the news that she really would not be returning to Charmbridge, but although they offered suggestions, encouragement, and promises to stay in touch, Alexandra knew that they, too, would have to move on with their lives, even without her.

When she told Brian, without specifics, about her problems finding a school to attend, he asked, "What's wrong with staying in Larkin Mills?"

Brian had little understanding of Alexandra's dilemma, though she knew he was trying. She had only told him a tiny fraction of everything that had happened in the past four years, and very little about the wizarding world.

She thrust her spoon into her sundae, which remained boringly butterscotch, not transforming into a new flavor with each bite like the ice cream she got from Goody Pruett's.

"I can't study magic here," she said.

"Can't you study magic in your free time?" he asked. "I mean... is it really that important, being able to cast a few more spells? It's not like you can even use magic in the real world, right?"

Alexandra gave him a slow, considering look. He'd been trying very hard, all summer, to be cool with the idea of magic. She knew it still bothered him that she was a witch: not some silly TV character or a Halloween caricature, but a real, magic-wielding witch. And she, for her part, had been cautious in talking about it, remembering how Diana Grimm had threatened to Obliviate him.

But his words only reinforced how different their worlds were now.

"The wizarding world is the 'real world,' Brian. It's just as real as this one. People live there, and they die there. It's not some fantasyland I visit for fun and then come back from by clicking my heels together."

"I didn't mean that." Brian grimaced. "I mean, I know it's real to you."

Alexandra frowned. She wondered how much of what he'd seen he'd convinced himself wasn't real. "Remember last Christmas? Bonnie? That was real. And it's not magic I can learn by studying in my free time."

Brian looked down. His younger sister still walked with a slight limp. Her doctors said her recovery, after being hit by a car and knocked into a coma, was nothing less than miraculous. Alexandra knew they were right, but the "miracle" was mostly Livia's doing.

She stood up. "C'mon. I want to show you something."

Obediently, Brian got up and followed her outside.

They crossed the street and walked several blocks until they stood at the corner of Third Street, facing the three-story Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse. To most of the inhabitants of Larkin Mills, it was an old, abandoned building, creepy and run-down and left that way for years and years. No one talked about it, and no one ever proposed tearing it down and putting something more useful on the spot. No one knew who owned it. Even vagrants and teenagers looking for trouble left it alone.

"This place?" Brian said.

"Do you trust me, Brian?" Alexandra asked.

His mouth curled uncertainly. "Yes?"

She held out her hand. "Take my hand."

He did. It didn't shake or sweat; he might be apprehensive about whatever she had in mind, but he wasn't scared — not yet.

"Now I want you to close your eyes," she said.

With a sigh, he did.

Alexandra walked forward, leading him by the hand.

"Um, how are we getting past the fence?" Brian asked, sensing they were about to walk into it.

"That's why I said close your eyes and trust me," Alexandra said.

The fence was part of a complex Muggle-Repelling Charm cast on the entire warehouse. With her Witch's Sight, Alexandra could see it for the phantasmal barrier it was. But as long as Brian believed in it, he would be unable to pass through.

He didn't feel it as they walked through it, though, and no one on the street noticed them. Alexandra stopped at the heavy metal front door and said, "You can open your eyes now."

Brian looked around, while Alexandra stared at the lock.

"How —?" he asked, seeing the unbroken fence behind them.

"Shh," Alexandra said. He fell silent.

The first few times Alexandra had tried the lock, she'd failed. It was a strong lock, possibly one with a little magic in it, not like the lock on her erstwhile parents' bedroom door which she had so easily rhymed open as a child. Since then, she had learned the magic of entrance and egress well. She had studied wards and barriers. Few locks stopped her when she had a wand. Getting into the Regal Royalty building was trivial when she could cast a proper Unlocking Charm.

Without a wand, everything was harder. So much harder.

Rhymes sometimes worked, but she was beginning to understand the limitations of doggerel verse. A rhyme rarely worked twice, unless it was carefully matched with all the other elements of a spell, and Alexandra's education in magic theory was inadequate to turn her verses into true spells. Worse, she didn't understand what she was doing when she used doggerel verse. Spells she cast according to the principles she'd learned were congruent with her intuitive feel for magic, even if she couldn't explain this in words. Spells she cast by using clever rhymes and wishing really hard were akin to finger-painting a portrait.

In other words, her teachers had been right. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

But now she had to paint portraits without brushes. Finger-painting was all she had left, at least for now.

She placed her palms on either side of the lock, muttered some ill-formed Latin, and twisted her shoulders with a flourish, as if the motion of her body were pulling at invisible levers connected to the inner workings of the lock.

It clacked, and Alexandra opened the door triumphantly.

"You did that with magic?" Brian asked. He was not particularly impressed. Magic was magic to him; he had no way of knowing that what she'd done was difficult. "Why are we breaking in?" He cleared his throat. "Um, if you're thinking of making out in there —"

"Maybe you're thinking of making out in there." Alexandra pushed him forward. "That's not what I had in mind." Though, she supposed, it wasn't such a terrible idea... No. The only place in the warehouse that was suitable, that wasn't dingy, dusty, and dark, was the third floor "studio" she had created for herself, and that wasn't for fooling around in. It would feel like she was violating her serious place of study and concentration if she turned it into a make-out spot.

It was to the third floor she led Brian, up dark, unlit stairs in which neither of them could see.

"How do you know we won't step in a hole or something?" Brian protested. "Or trip down the stairs, or — heck, Alex, who knows who could be in here?"

"We won't step in a hole. I know the way, and there's no one else in here." *No one except Goody Pruett.* Alexandra held Brian's hand and led him quickly past the second floor, hoping the portrait wouldn't raise a fuss when she heard their footsteps.

Brian's apprehension was not irrational. Creeping around in a dark, abandoned warehouse was a stupid thing to do, if you weren't a witch and you hadn't made it *your* place. Alexandra squeezed his hand, not sure how else to reassure him without embarrassing him.



They reached the third floor. Half of it was enclosed offices, dark and forbidding like the rest of the warehouse. The other half was a large open space. Whatever offices or other rooms had once occupied it had been stripped away, leaving a bare wooden floor and rows of windows on three walls, admitting light into the brightest part of the building. Here, Alexandra had brought cushions and blankets to sit on, when she wasn't perched in the throne-like chair in the middle of the room.

The same Muggle-Repelling Charms that left the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse unnoticed in plain sight made it an ideal retreat for Alexandra. It was also the one place in Larkin Mills where she could practice magic without being caught by the Trace that the Confederation put on all juveniles living among Muggles.

In the offices, she'd hidden her books, her magical backpack, her Traveler's Compass, and her other magic items, but she didn't go to retrieve any of these. Brian was looking speculatively at the austere studio, with its cushions and blankets.

"Shh," Alexandra said. "Stay there." She walked away from him, all the way to the windows at the other side of the open space, then turned to face him. His expression was harder to see from here, and she knew with the light behind her, he couldn't see hers at all.

"This is a little bit dangerous," she said.

"Uh huh," Brian said. He didn't move.

Alexandra held up her hands and closed her eyes. She'd spent weeks practicing small magics, trying to work out why it was that she couldn't do anything reliably or consistently or with significant effect without a wand. Her books explained why, of course, but wizards had done magic before wands had become the standard instrument with which to focus one's power, and she suspected that the lack of stories or historical accounts of powerful wizards without wands was the Confederation's usual practice of censoring information about anything they wanted to discourage.

"Wandless magic" existed, but usually only as something unleashed spontaneously under great distress. She knew of no way to study it formally. Alexandra no longer believed that with enough will and practice she could learn to do just as well without a wand. But she had learned that there were things she could do.

Colors danced behind her eyes, colors she could only see in her mind, that didn't exist in the real world. She reached for shapes and sensations that were equally indescribable, and called forth magic by rolling them around in her mind like a rhyme on her tongue. She struggled to hold onto mental glyphs she'd learned to visualize with Invocation Theory, and positioned her body using the forms described in a chapter on "Manifestation Staging." She had spent the last month reading well ahead of her tenth grade curriculum.

It was strange and wonderful when magical theory worked in practice, and very frustrating when it didn't.

A fireball erupted in the middle of the flat, empty space. Brian jumped. "Holy crap!"

The fire blazed red then blue, then it shrank to a flickering haze and winked out. Brian gasped again as he saw that Alexandra's hands were on fire.

Alexandra waved them, with her green eyes aglow. Fire licked around the edges of her hands, and sparks shot from her fingers. She flicked her wrist, and a wave of fire rolled off her palm and struck the floor with a splash of flames. She whipped her hands around, leaving trails of fire in the air, then she clapped and made a burst of flame which she actually felt. It singed the tip of her nose.

It took only a thought to snuff it. The scorch marks remained on the floor, but Alexandra's hands were no longer aflame. She walked back over to Brian, who did not seem thrilled by this demonstration. She held up her hands to show him they were unburned.

"Real magic, Brian," she said.

"I know that," he said, a little angrily. "I thought you're not supposed to do magic at home or you'll get in trouble. Are you going to tell me that's another rule you can break when you feel like it?"

"Only here. They don't know when I'm doing magic here." She didn't specify who "they" were. "Want to see another trick?"

"Not really," Brian said, but Alexandra looked away from him and raised an arm. She opened her hand, and cawed.

Brian started. Then he nearly jumped away from her as Charlie appeared inside the loft. The raven flapped around beating its wings violently before settling on Alexandra's outstretched wrist.

"Pretty bird," Alexandra said.

"Pretty bird," Charlie agreed.

Brian's eyes were wide. "You summoned Charlie from your house?"

"Actually, I cheated. Charlie was just outside the window over there. I knew that. Charlie's my familiar, not my pet."

"Charlie's a raven," Charlie said. Alexandra smiled, her eyes still focused on her familiar.

"Right," Brian said. "That's impressive. But why are you showing me this?"

"Because you want to believe I can just return to being an ordinary girl, that magic is making cards disappear. Or an occasional miracle when you really, really need one. I don't learn this stuff because it's cool or because I'm showing off, Brian. I'm learning it because there are people who've tried to kill me. And things that aren't even people." She finally looked at him. "Do you get it? It's what I am. It's not going away."

"Yeah," Brian said, "I get it."

He took her wrist, the one that wasn't holding Charlie, and pulled her closer to him. She didn't resist. She shooed Charlie away, afraid the raven might decide to peck Brian when he brought his face close to hers.

"You're trying to scare me," Brian said. "You want to make me run away."

"That's not it," Alexandra said.

"Yeah, it is. I freaked out a couple years ago, and you're waiting for me to do the same thing again. Are you going to keep testing me like this?"

"It wasn't a test," Alexandra said, though with a little less certainty.

"I'm sorry I said the wizarding world isn't real," Brian said. "And I won't pretend that magic doesn't weird me out. I really don't want to see all those creatures you talk about. But if you want to break up, just say so. Stop trying to scare me or see if you can make me break up with you."

"I don't want to send you away, Brian. I just don't know what the future's going to be like."

"Who does?" He encircled her with his other arm and kissed her. She kissed him back willingly enough, but when he released her wrist and reached for the bottom of her shirt, she caught his hand and shook her head.

"Okay, you're right, this isn't exactly the most romantic place," Brian said. "But we are alone..."

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie, from a perch on the back of the chair a few yards away.

"Your familiar really doesn't like me," Brian said. "What did I ever do to you, bird?"

"Charlie!" scolded Charlie.

"This is where I do magic," Alexandra said. "I don't want to mix the two. Making out and magic, I mean."

She couldn't tell what he was thinking as he considered that — certainly more than just disappointment. Possibly her demonstration of wizardry, and the way she reserved this spot — as she reserved much of her life — as a place separate from him.

"Okay," he said. "So, if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not hang out here if there's not going to be any making out."

"Troublesome!" Charlie said.

"I'm not being troubleso— why am I talking to a bird?" Brian snapped.

"Bird-brain," Charlie said, but the raven was agitated and took off, flapping around the large studio.

Alexandra felt it too. Charlie was warning her.

"Come on, Charlie." Alexandra held out an arm until Charlie landed on her outstretched wrist. She put her other arm around Brian's waist. "Be good, Charlie. Come on Brian." She tried to appear nonchalant, but her grip on Brian was tight and her mouth was dry and she kept her eyes and ears open. Every nerve tingled as they went downstairs, and Alexandra mumbled responses to Brian while wishing she could tell him to be quiet without freaking him out.

Charlie took off as soon as they exited the warehouse. Brian asked more questions before they went through the fence again, but Alexandra was impatient and told him to close his eyes. He was quieter as they walked quickly back to Sweetmaple Avenue.

In front of his house, he said, "I'm sorry, Alex. Whatever I did."

She shook her head. "It's not you. I'm just worried about a lot of things. And you're right, I shouldn't have taken you to the warehouse just to try to make a point."

"Well, you made it." He shrugged. "See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Tell Bonnie I said hi." Bonnie was grounded, and according to Brian, not taking it well. Alexandra saw Mrs. Seabury looking out the front window as she kissed him good-bye. "Tell your mom I said hi, too."

She walked to her house and kept walking. She circled the block. Charlie flew ahead of her, back toward where Alexandra was going.

Someone else was in the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse. She'd confronted intruders there without a wand before, and she wasn't going to let anyone take her place away from her.

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It was still late afternoon. The street was still busy and the sun was still high, and passersby still didn't look at anyone walking onto the warehouse's lot.

Until earlier that year, the warehouse had been occupied by a hag who stood guard over magic artifacts and other contraband transported by arcane means by the Dark Convention. Because Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections had once been owned by the Pruett family, Livia now held the deed to the property, and had sent a Curse-Breaker to inspect the warehouse and make sure it was purged of all Dark influences. Livia hadn't yet done anything else with the property, which suited Alexandra fine — she hadn't even told her sister the use she was putting it to. But that also meant nothing prevented another hag or some other creature from taking up residence in the old building.

Alexandra was armed with little more than indignation when she went up the stairs again, using the flashlight in her phone to light the way. Charlie waited on the roof.

She stopped on the second floor and opened a door that revealed only a dark hallway lined with equally dark offices. She listened.

It bothered her, the way nervous sweat broke out on her forehead. A few months ago, this darkness had been occupied by a terrible mummified baby summoned by John Manuelito. The almost indestructible Nemesis Spirit had followed her all the way to Charmbridge Academy. It was her confrontation with the thing that caused Larry Albo to lose his fingers and Alexandra to lose her scholarship and her wand.

But the Nemesis Spirit was gone, thrown through the portal into the Lands Below. There was no skittering of dry, bony feet across old, dusty floors.

"Who is that?" called a creaky old voice.

Alexandra walked down the corridor until the old woman could see her from her painted canvas. The light from Alexandra's phone flickered.

"It's me, Alexandra. Has anyone else been in here, Goody Pruett?"

The magical portrait, condemned for the past few decades to hang forgotten and alone in the warehouse, was an old woman forever imprisoned in dull brown and black and white oil paint. She never saw any light that wasn't carried into the darkened interior of the building by someone else.

"Not a soul. Not a hag, nor a ghoul nor a gnoll nor a ghost, not even a rat for all these old ears can hear. When is your sister going to restore this place to its former prosperity, child? I am waiting for her to keep her promise."

"She's working on it. She says there's a lot of paperwork, since she's only been the Pruett heir on paper for years and years." Alexandra didn't bother pointing out that Livia had not promised to restore the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse at all; there didn't seem a great likelihood of reopening a wizarding business here in Larkin Mills.

"She could work faster," Goody Pruett said.

"You've been hanging here in the dark for twenty years," Alexandra said. "You can hang a little longer."

The old woman's eyes turned to dark ice beneath her parchment-colored forehead and white mushroom bonnet.

Alexandra had tried to remove the portrait from the wall herself, thinking to at least put it up on the third floor where Goody Pruett could see the sun, but she was not a Pruett and thus the protective charms keeping the portrait affixed to the wall foiled her every attempt.

"So you haven't heard any intruders?" she continued, ignoring the portrait's glare.

"No," Goody Pruett said. "Only you and *that boy*." Her tone hinted at foul revelry and sin, as if the very sound of Alexandra and Brian's footsteps on the stairs had echoed with licentiousness.

Alexandra didn't miss the tone. She leaned forward, leering as she murmured in response, "He's a *Muggle*. And we did everything you were imagining."

She didn't know what the old crone was actually imagining, but she knew that pure-blooded bigotry had been embedded in her portrait when it was painted. It was petty to taunt a painting, but Alexandra couldn't deny feeling satisfaction at Goody Pruett's gasp of outrage. The old woman's face wrinkled up like an apple in an oven, but since Alexandra was currently the only person in the world she had to talk to, she fairly swelled with the imprecations she was holding back.

"You would tell me if you heard anyone shuffling around in the dark, or Apparating, wouldn't you?" Alexandra asked.

"Of course," Goody Pruett said tightly. Then she burst out: "I'm going to tell Livia about your illicit activities and using this place to practice magic and... and..."

"Kissing," Alexandra said. "Don't forget to tell her about the kissing."

She left Goody Pruett sputtering in fury, and headed upstairs to her "studio."

A slim, dark figure was standing at the far side of the bare half of the third floor, silhouetted by the sunlight coming from the windows behind it.

Alexandra switched off her phone. She thought she could conjure fire again, though she doubted she could throw it with any accuracy. She remained aware of Charlie sitting on the roof above, now as wary and tense as her, but this intruder didn't look like a hag who might be frightened by a raven. There was something familiar about the outline of the stranger, though —

"Ms. Grimm?" she asked.

"No." The voice was female, but younger than that of Diana Grimm. Alexandra recognized it immediately, though she'd only heard it once before. The woman walked forward until she was close enough for Alexandra to see light on her face and not just at her back. "Were you expecting her?"

"No," Alexandra said. "I wasn't expecting you, either."

The intruder was a strikingly beautiful woman with long dark hair, darker eyes, full lips, sharp brows, and a strong nose. Her complexion suggested mixed European and African or Mediterranean ancestry. She was, Alexandra guessed, in her early to mid-twenties. Her name was Medea, and Alexandra had last seen her on her father's arm, when he had visited her at Charmbridge Academy.

Medea smiled. "I hope you don't mind. I thought we should chat, Alexandra."

"About what?" Alexandra didn't think Medea was a threat, but she didn't feel welcoming. The other witch's presence was an intrusion into her space.

"About your father." Medea looked around, taking in the chair, the blankets, the cushions, and the burn marks on the floor and walls. "He's determined to respect your wishes, Alexandra, but he misses you."

"After a few months? He didn't miss me for the first twelve years of my life." Alexandra scowled. The last person she wanted to talk to about her relationship with her father was his current girlfriend.

"You're being unfair." Medea's cool gaze fell back on Alexandra. "And frankly, don't you think you've overused that line by now?"

"I'm not sure how it's any of your business," Alexandra said, upset that her father had apparently discussed this with Medea.

"You're right, it's not. But I do hate to see Abraham unhappy. Telling him you didn't want to speak to him again? That you'll have nothing to do with him and accept nothing from him? A little extreme, don't you think?"

"I'm not the only daughter he's alienated."

"No," Medea said, "but I don't think he expected such a rejection from you." She hesitated, then smiled sharply, like a severe half-moon. "I understand, this is awkward. But we don't have to be enemies, Alexandra."

"I really hope you didn't come here to tell me you're going to be my stepmother."

Medea's eyebrows angled upwards, then her lips parted and she threw her head back and laughed. Alexandra said nothing. Medea recovered, still shaking her head and chuckling. "I don't think your father is the marrying type, anymore." Sobering, she said, "I brought you a gift."

Now Alexandra's eyebrows rose. "A gift?"

"Abraham has been monitoring what's been happening to you. He hasn't interfered — as you requested — but it took all his self-restraint to stay his hand, after that kangaroo hearing they dragged you and Claudia and Livia through. And then denying you even the opportunity to obtain a new wand. That's simply unacceptable."

Alexandra was very interested in knowing what her father's source of information was, but asking Medea would have betrayed interest in his affairs, as well as giving the other witch a lever into her good graces, which she was not inclined to grant. So she merely said, "I'll get a wand somehow."

In reply, Medea reached for the clasp below her throat holding her robe closed at her collarbone. Her long fingers snatched something tied to the knot and drew forth a wand. It was long and pale, with a reddish tint. She held it out to Alexandra.

Alexandra stared at the wand. "Where did it come from?" It didn't look like a Grundy's Department Store wand.

"Better that you don't ask. It hasn't been matched to you, so it may not serve as well as one that has, but it has no current owner."

"Did my father send you?" Alexandra asked.

"No." Medea's face was catlike and inscrutable. "In fact, he'd be very unhappy if he knew I was here. That's why I waited until you entered this place, since it hinders his scrying just as it does that of the Trace Office."

Alexandra filed away this interesting fact, while staring at the wand still lying in Medea's outstretched hand.

Medea closed her fingers around it. "I won't beg you to take it. Do you want it or not?"

Slowly, Alexandra reached for the wand. "Why are you doing this? Why do you care what I think of you?"

"Oh, Alexandra, I don't." Medea smiled as Alexandra took the wand from her. "But I do care about Abraham, and he cares about you, and so we would both be distressed should something happen to you."

"Uh huh." Alexandra studied the wand, holding it lightly between her fingers and flicking it. There was a horrible cracking sound, and splinters erupted from a wooden plank that popped out of the floor behind Medea and bent almost double. Medea hardly reacted at all.

The wand felt magical, but it did not feel *right*. It was slippery and sharp and tingly, and the magic inside it didn't feel like an extension of Alexandra's will, as her chimaera-hair wand had. She didn't know much about wandlore, other than what Constance and Forbearance had told her about "turns and humors," but she suspected she would never completely master this wand. Still, it was a wand, and surely with practice she could do something with it.

"What kind of wood is this?" she asked.

"Yew," said Medea. "I couldn't tell you what's in the core."

"If I use it, my father will wonder where I got it."

"If you use it outside this warehouse, the Trace Office is likely to send someone to take it away from you. If you *have* to use it, in an emergency, then I suspect Abraham will forgive me for putting it in your hands. Hopefully you'll be able to obtain a proper wand soon enough, even if it's by enrolling in a day school. You do realize, you have but to ask — send an owl, send your raven, or whisper it on the wind — and your father will send you anywhere you like? Even overseas. There are many fine wizarding schools in Europe that would admit you. If you wish to stay in this hemisphere, you could go to Aztlán or Witness Stone. If you're feeling truly adventurous, you could go to Alexandria or Damascus or Timbuktu."

"But he didn't suggest you tell me this?" Alexandra said.

"No, Alexandra, he did not." Medea's smile sharpened. "Contrary to the old saying, looking a gift horse in the mouth is often wise. But this gift comes from me."

*All the more reason to look the horse in the mouth*, Alexandra thought, but she said, "Thank you."

"Do use the wand with care. I suggest not showing it off to your aunt the next time you see her."

*No kidding*. But Alexandra nodded. Medea turned, walked back to the window, and looked out at the street. "Good-bye, Alexandra."

"Good-bye."

Medea disappeared with a rush of air. Alexandra balanced the wand on one finger and felt it start to spin. She snatched it before it fell to the floor, just as the chair she'd conjured and transformed months ago went spinning through the air and flew through a far window. Alexandra heard it strike the ground outside amidst a shower of broken glass. From above came Charlie's alarmed caws.

"You and I," Alexandra said, gripping the wand, "are not going to be friends."

## \*Chapter 6\*: My Family's Enterprise

The yew wand did not like Alexandra.

She practiced with it every day in the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse. She cast charms and transfigurations, flung hexes and jinxes, and even tried to perform ritual magic that her research said was particularly suitable for yew. It resisted with an obstinacy that Alexandra became convinced was intentional. Every spell was like trying to swat a fly on a window pane with a heavy metal chain.

But it was still easier than casting spells without a wand.

By the end of the week, she had succeeded in levitating her chair back to the third floor, though it kept bucking her control, jerking from side to side against the stairwell, animated like an angry beast.

By the end of July, she'd repaired the broken window. No Muggles had noticed, of course. She also began erasing the burns and acid scars and broken boards. Her attempts to fix the damage were prompted by an imminent visit from Livia, who apparently had plans for the warehouse. Alexandra knew Goody Pruett would rat her out, but with less evidence of her activities, she could claim she was only studying from the magic books she'd stashed in the offices.

She hadn't yet told anyone about Medea's gift. David and Anna had both offered to acquire a wand for her. So had Julia. Alexandra had firmly refused, and worried that they would try anyway. She didn't want them to get in trouble for her, now that she knew Richard Raspire was watching her. And if the rest of the Confederation thought she was still wandless... well, maybe they'd think she was harmless and they'd leave her alone.

*Yeah, right.*

The Pritchards had not offered to procure a wand for her, only written back with consternation and dismay about the outcome of her appeal hearing.

Despite Alexandra's troubles, everyone was eagerly awaiting August, and the great Ozark Jubilee. It was a festival held once every seven years, and it was the only time the reclusive Ozarkers invited "foreigners" into their territory.

Charmbridge Academy had chartered a summer field trip to the Ozarks, taking students willing to pay for accommodations to the festival. The Confederation's cherished appreciation of its many Cultures made it an event they deemed worth busing students to experience.

Anna and David had begged permission from their parents to make the trip. Alexandra, of course, could no longer attend as a Charmbridge student, but she had an even more precious invitation: she and Julia would be guests of the Pritchards.

She was looking forward to the gathering with enormous anticipation. It would be the opportunity of a lifetime to see the Ozarks and the place where Constance and Forbearance lived, to enter a part of the wizarding world that was usually forbidden but hadn't yet been denied to her, and to introduce her friends to Julia.

Underneath the anticipation was sadness and worry: that something would happen to screw it up, and if not, that this gathering might be the last time she'd see all her friends together.

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Not far from the Interstate, but through a fence, a field, a spur of woods, and over a small hill, lay Old Larkin Pond.

The fence was gone; now there was a footpath. The fetid smell of old boots and algae still lingered, but an extensive clean-up project had cleared away the litter and debris and turned the little pond into an almost scenic spot. The town planned to build a golf course in the fields Alexandra and Brian had once roamed.

Brian and Alexandra had Bonnie with them, as they had for much of the last couple of weeks. When Alexandra wasn't at home, in the library, or at the warehouse, she had spent most of her afternoons going out with Brian, but inconveniently, Mrs. Seabury had decided that Bonnie needed to be supervised by her brother more, and so had been sending her along with them. Bonnie was sometimes a noisy busybody, sometimes sullen and resentful, and always in the way. Alexandra tried to be patient with the younger girl, but she was definitely becoming a terrible tween.

The three of them sat at the edge of the pond staring into the water, each with their separate thoughts. Alexandra was remembering a summer day much like this one, four years ago. Looking back, that day was her entry into the wizarding world. It was hard to believe she had been younger than Bonnie was now.

"So," Brian said, "do you know where you're going to school yet?"

Alexandra shook her head. She had sent applications to every wizarding school in the Confederation. Even the Sheboygan Magic Academy and the Sedona School for the Mystically Inclined. Not even the Radicalists would take her. She was stuck going to a day school, if she was going to get a magical education at all. She wondered if Governor-General Hucksteen's reach extended even to those, though supposedly they were required to accept any child with magic who could pay tuition.

"You okay?" Brian asked.

Alexandra shrugged.

Maybe she should take Medea's suggestion and go to school in another country. That's what Valeria had done. But she wasn't going to let Governor-General Hucksteen send her running, any more than she was going to take Livia's way out and go Wandless.

Brian put an arm around her. "You're awfully quiet. Are you depressed or something?"

"What? Don't be stupid."

"Maybe she should cast a spell to make you stop asking stupid questions," said Bonnie.

Alexandra frowned. Had she really been this bratty at twelve? Bonnie's tone was snarky, as it usually was lately, and Alexandra was annoyed that Bonnie kept bringing up magic, like a little provocation, even though she should know better. "Maybe I should throw you into the pond and see if there's another kappa there."

"Alex!" said Brian. He and Bonnie both turned pale, making Alexandra immediately regret her words.

"I was just kidding," she said. When she saw that Bonnie was actually trembling, she added, "I'm sorry. Really."

"I want to go home," Bonnie said, standing up.

Brian sighed and started to stand. Bonnie said, "I can go by myself. You two can stay here and make out, which was what you really wanted to do." She made an obnoxious kissy-face at them.

"No way," Brian said. "I don't trust you. If I take my eyes off you, you're going to run away to hang out with your loser friends again, and Mom will blame me... again."

Bonnie rolled her eyes in dramatic fashion. Then, transforming instantly to sweetness and light, she held up a hand, and put another hand over her heart. "I'll go straight home. Girl Scout's honor."

"You were never in Girl Scouts," Brian said.

"Swear on a stack of Bibles," Bonnie said.

Alexandra stood up and drew the wand Medea had given her. Bonnie's eyes widened.

"I've got a better idea," Alexandra said. She held out the yew wand. "I'm going to cast an Unbreakable Oath on you. Any promise you make under an Unbreakable Oath is binding unto death." She made some arcane gestures with the wand and spoke a few words of Latin. "Now swear you'll go straight home, with no detours."

Bonnie gulped. "I swear," she said in a small voice. "I will. Really. I promise. Super-promise."

Alexandra nodded, and drew another pattern in the air with her wand, then put it away. "Also, stop running your mouth about magic." She made a shooing gesture. Bonnie, now even paler, turned and hobbled off through the fields, still limping as she had since her accident last winter.

Alexandra turned back to Brian, who was shaking his head. "That, uh, that wasn't real, right?"

"Don't be — no, of course it wasn't."

"She only fell for that because you scared her talking about the kappa. That was really mean, Alex. I can't believe you'd say something like that."

"I know. I am sorry." She sat back down next to him. "But she's really been kind of a drag."

"Tell me about it." Brian sighed. "You know why our mom keeps making her tag along with us, right?"

"Yeah, it's pretty obvious." Alexandra actually half-expected Mrs. Seabury to ground Brian, or even forbid him to see her anymore, but so far all she'd done was talk to Claudia. Claudia had then extracted a promise that Alexandra would not be alone in the house with Brian. It hadn't been an Unbreakable Vow, but Claudia had made her give her word, which Alexandra took seriously.

Brian leaned into her, and they kissed. The two of them sank into the sticker grass that surrounded them. Burrs pressed into Alexandra's back. With Charlie perched nearby she wasn't worried about anyone walking up on them, but Brian didn't seem to be giving it a thought.

"Brian," she said, when they both had to take a breath, "this isn't exactly a great place for making out."

Brian's face was flushed. He sat up, reluctantly. "Compared to your living room or an abandoned warehouse?"

She laughed. "Okay, you're right. But other people do come around here. Also, these stickers aren't very comfortable." She reached behind her back to pull a few out, while they listened to the sound of cars and trucks on the Interstate, only a few hundred yards away.

Brian sighed. "Sorry. It's just been a while since we were alone, you know?"

Alexandra felt a slight puff of air, something she wouldn't have noticed if she hadn't become sensitive to just that particular sensation, accompanied by an almost subliminal "whoosh."

"Oh," said a surprised voice.

Charlie cawed an alarm as Alexandra sat up and straightened her shirt, while Brian scrambled to his feet.

Livia stood there, in a sleeveless blouse and knee-length skirt, as embarrassed as the two teenagers. She hastily thrust her wand behind her back.

"Livia!" Alexandra exclaimed. "What are you doing here?"

"Er, I was practicing..." Livia licked her lips and looked at Brian. "That is, I found you with —" She cleared her throat and tried again. "So, I hope I didn't interrupt anything? Or should I hope I did?"

Alexandra groaned and pulled her knees up to rest her forehead against them. "Brian, this is my sister, Livia."

"Sister?" Brian said, completely flummoxed.

"Remember I said there were some things I can't tell you about?"

"You couldn't tell me you have a *sister*?" Brian stared at Livia. Then he said, "Wait — I remember you."

"Oh dear," Livia said.

"You were the doctor who came to see Bonnie in the hospital, the night of her accident!"

"Brian," Alexandra said. "Please, don't ask questions right now—"

Brian asked, "Are you... what Alexandra is?"

Livia raised an eyebrow. "What is that?"

Brian took a deep breath. "Did you save my sister? With magic?"

Livia looked from him to Alexandra, who shrugged helplessly.

"How is your sister?" Livia asked.

"She wasn't going to make it," Brian said. "Then she did. The doctors said it was a miracle, and that it's a miracle she can walk now."

Alexandra rose to her feet and tugged at Brian's t-shirt, turning him around.

"Brian," she said, "I'm really sorry about this, but I need to talk to Livia."

"You just want me to go away?" Brian's eyes, bright and eager moments ago, were now cloudy and cool.

"It's not like that," Alexandra said. When he kept staring at her, she said, "All right, I guess it is. I'm sorry. I'll explain everything later."

"Really?" Brian's tone matched his expression.

Alexandra pressed her lips to his. He tried not to respond, until she slid her tongue between his teeth. He returned her kiss with less resistance then, and put his arms around her. Livia waited, with arms folded, until they broke apart.

"I guess I'll see you later," Brian said. He looked at Livia. "Nice to meet you, Alexandra's sister Livia."

"I am sorry for the timing," Livia said.

Brian mumbled something, then headed back across the field toward the underpass beneath the Interstate.

"Is that how you usually handle your boyfriend?" Livia asked.

"Excuse me, but you practically Apparated on top of us," Alexandra said. "What were you thinking?"

"That you were alone."

"It didn't occur to you that I might *not* be alone?"

"I cast a Revealing Charm before I Apparated. It only detected you."

"What, you mean *Homenum Revelio*? Where did you cast it from? Don't you know the resolution of that spell is terrible? From beyond line of sight, of course Brian and me looked like one person." Alexandra shook her head.

"All right, I'm a little rusty with Charms," Livia said, embarrassed.

"Should you be Apparating while you're pregnant?"

Livia put her hands on her hips. "Now you're an authority on Apparition and pregnancy? I don't need you to worry about me, Alexandra. That scene with Brian was unfortunate. I'm sorry about that."

"Pretty reckless," Alexandra said.

Livia's mouth opened. She stared at Alexandra in astonishment, then closed it again. "Would you like to know why I'm here?"

"Sure," Alexandra said. "I hope it's not to check up on me and my boyfriend. Did you come to collect Goody Pruett?"

"No. Take my hand."

Alexandra squinted at her. "How rusty are you at Side-Along Apparition?"

"I was always very good at Apparition. I... even continued to practice occasionally, in secret, while I was supposedly Wandless."

"Well, if I get splinched, at least there's a Healer ready." Alexandra took Livia's hand.

"Very funny," Livia said.

Charlie squawked and took off. The raven had been Apparated before, and didn't like it.

Alexandra and Livia disappeared. Alexandra felt briefly squeezed and pinched, as if between two giant hands rolling her like dough, and then the two of them stood inside the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse, on the ground floor.

The previously dark and empty space was clamorous with hammering, sawing, the scrape of wood and bricks, and the clang of metal feet tromping about on cement. Clockwork golems filled the warehouse. They seemed to be taking apart everything but the walls and the elevator.

Alexandra turned about in a slow circle, taking in the sight of the brass and copper workers. A couple of newer models gleamed brightly with

burnished steel. They stepped nimbly around Alexandra and Livia, taking no more notice of the humans than of a post or wall or doorframe.

"What's going on here?" Alexandra asked.

"I'm having the interior renovated," Livia said.

The Clockworks were tearing down the walls of the small offices that had once filled part of the first floor. Four of them were moving the huge old cast iron boiler out of the way of another group that carried a forklift-sized load of lumber and metal beams.

Alexandra watched as the four Clockworks who held the boiler retraced their steps and set it back down precisely where it had been before. "So, what, you're going to reopen Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections?"

"No," Livia turned her eyes from the Clockworks to Alexandra. There was a hint of mischief in her smile, not something Alexandra usually associated with the prim Dr. Pruett. "I'm going to open a school."

"A... what?" Alexandra was sure this was a joke, but she couldn't figure out the punchline.

"A school. A day school."

"You mean a *wizard* day school."

"Of course." Livia stopped smiling. "Claudia and I have been discussing the problem of sending you to Chicago to attend day school. With my inheritance, I could arrange for room and board for you, or even a daily wizard taxi —"

"I don't want your money," Alexandra said quickly.

"Yes, that's what Claudia said, too." Behind her glasses, Livia's eyes became sad and distant. "I pointed out to her that by rights, she should have an equal share of it. My mother was her mother. Not by blood, but in every way that mattered." Anger and bitterness crept into her voice. "Claudia accepted the house you live in from our father, for your sake, but it's the only thing she's ever taken from the wizarding world. She still won't let me share our family fortune, even though I haven't touched it for twenty years."

"Our house?" Alexandra had never thought about how Claudia purchased the house on Sweetmaple Avenue. It was just where she had grown up.

Livia sighed. "Oh dear. I probably shouldn't have told you that. Please don't mention it to Claudia. At any rate, you won't let me send you to school, and I'm sure you won't let our father send you to school. So I'm bringing a school here. I can use the Pruett fortune to do that, whether you and Claudia like it or not."

"You're going to open a day school in Larkin Mills?" The idea seemed absurd. "Who's going to come?"

"Besides you?" Livia smiled. "It seems Central Territory has a need for a school serving... problem students."

"Problem students?"

"There are also Muggle-borns who can't attend other day schools, some for reasons similar to yours. The Confederation Charter guarantees a *right* to a magical education for all wizard-born children, but leaves it to each Territory to provide for that education. Central Territory is particularly stingy. If you don't live near Minneapolis or the Great Lakes, there are few options. There are also students who've been disciplinary problems, or have special needs."

"And that's where you want me to go to school?"

"Well, you have been a disciplinary problem, and you do have special needs."

Alexandra glared at Livia, whose expression once again became prim and serious.

"Okay, seriously," Alexandra said, "can you even do that? Just open a new wizarding school in the middle of a Muggle town? I'm sure the Confederation has tons of rules about that. And how will these other students get here? And who's going to teach? You? And what if I don't want to go to school in Larkin Mills?"

"All good questions," Livia said, nodding. She was watching the Clockworks do something with the iron furnace. "The Department of Magical Education regulates day schools, and *this* school will be very closely scrutinized, for obvious reasons. But if you're willing to bribe enough people, you can make it happen. There will be all sorts of rules that the school and its students will have to follow, of course. Some students will come by wizard bus on the Automagicka, but for those in Chicago, we're going to open a connection to the Floo."

"The Floo?" Now Alexandra paid closer attention to the big iron furnace the Clockworks were welding back into place.

"You know that your house is Floo-connected?" Livia said.

"Julia and her mother came to our house two Christmases ago through the fireplace," Alexandra said. "But I thought they just used some kind of magic to do that."

"Of course they used magic. But they couldn't have used Floo magic if your house hadn't been built with it."

"Our house? How?"

"How do you think?" Livia's voice flattened and she folded her arms.

Alexandra remembered Claudia's insistence on moving back to the same address, after their house on Sweetmaple Avenue burned down when she was eleven.

"Our father," Alexandra said. "He arranged it somehow."



Livia pointed at the furnace. "Once, the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse was a major Floo nexus. I'm going to have it restored. Students will be able to come here from Chicago."

"Will it be two-way?" Alexandra asked.

"Of course. They have to get home, don't they?" Livia gave her a sharp look. "But it's not for you to Floo to Chicago whenever you feel like it."

"Assuming I stay here."

"Oh, be reasonable, Alexandra. Where else are you going to go? You do want to be able to legally carry a wand, don't you?"

Alexandra closed her mouth. It was true, she could hardly get a better deal than a day school in her home town. "You haven't said who's going to teach."

"I'm having teachers interviewed now. I expect the first class will be very small. We won't need more than one instructor for a day school."

Alexandra shook her head. "Livia... I don't even know what to say."

"Well, you could say thank you, but you don't have to. This isn't just for you."

"Then why are you doing this?"

Livia didn't answer. Instead, she began walking slowly through the hubbub and ruckus made by the Clockworks. Alexandra followed Livia to the stairs, where she turned and looked around.

"The Pruett School," she said, almost inaudibly in the clamor.

Alexandra laughed. "You just wanted to name a school after yourself?"

Livia didn't smile. "No, I'm naming a school after my mother — and my grandparents."

"Your grandparents?" Now Alexandra frowned. "You mean the pureblood bigots who wouldn't let Claudia live with you after your mother died?"

"Yes."

"And you're going to name a school for Muggle-borns after them."

"Yes." Behind the lenses of her glasses, amusement with a touch of malice gleamed in Livia's eyes. "I think it's fitting. They took me in, made me their sole heir, and left me their fortune. I'm obligated to honor their memory. But I choose to honor it this way. This will be the legacy of my family's enterprise."

Alexandra smiled slowly. "They'd have hated it."

"Yes."

"What about Goody Pruett?"

There was still a malicious twinkle in Livia's eyes. "She hates hanging here alone in the dark, and she's sad that her family's enterprise has fallen into disuse. Now she'll have company, and something to watch over again. Shall we go tell her?"

Alexandra laughed. "You're kind of mean. Heck yeah."

"One other thing." Livia reached into her blouse and pulled a wand out of the front of it.

"I still don't know how you do that," Alexandra said.

Livia handed her the wand. Alexandra took it in surprise. It was a plain light wood, stamped at one end with the Grundy's logo.

"Technically, you're not allowed to have a wand until you're registered in a wizarding school," Livia said. "So please keep it hidden and make sure you don't do anything to attract the attention of the Trace Office."

"You bought a wand for me at Grundy's after all," Alexandra said.

"They have a new 'automated matching system.' I tried to get the best match I could for you. Unfortunately, there weren't any wands of pecan wood, and certainly none with chimaera hair. That's basswood with, um, goat feathers."

"*Goat feathers?*" Alexandra examined the wand. It felt hard and uncooperative.

"From winged goats. I understand those materials are..."

"Cheaper," Alexandra said.

"It's just a temporary wand, until we can take you to a true wandsmith."

Alexandra tucked the basswood wand into her pocket, next to the yew wand. "Thank you."

"I'm serious about keeping it hidden. You remember what Mr. Raspire said."

"Whatever. Screw him," Alexandra said.

Livia's mouth tightened disapprovingly.

"I'll keep it hidden," Alexandra said. "I won't get you into trouble, Livia."

"Don't get yourself into trouble."

"I promise." Alexandra's hand was still in her pocket.

"Say that with your fingers where I can see them."

Alexandra made a poor attempt at looking abashed.

Goody Pruett was just as happy as they expected her to be that her family's enterprise would soon be a school for Muggle-born witches and wizards. As they walked out of the warehouse half an hour later, the portrait's moans and wails almost drowned out the sound of the Clockworks.

"I have one other gift for you," Livia said, as they approached her car.

"A car?" Alexandra admired Livia's new car. It was a very nice one.

Livia snorted. "You can't even drive yet. Actually, it's more of a gift for Claudia. She asked me to get it for you." She opened the trunk and took out something wrapped in white paper. She handed the large, bell-shaped package to Alexandra, who took it and found it much lighter than she expected.

"A cage," she said.

"With a Silencing Charm on it," Livia said.

Alexandra's face screwed up in annoyance.

"It's a very nice cage," Livia said. "It's also got temperature control charms, cleaning charms, a mirror, and shiny dangly things. Your raven will love it."

Charlie probably would love it, Alexandra thought, except for being Silenced.

"Thanks," she said. "I appreciate all this, really I do." Although Livia was beginning to remind her a bit of their father — trying to make up for an absence by throwing money around.

Livia smiled. "We'll talk about a car when you get a driver's license."

"Really?" Alexandra said.

"Depending on how successfully you stay out of trouble."

Alexandra got into Livia's car, and watched with heightened interest as her sister started the vehicle and put it in motion. Well, if she really wanted to throw money around...

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Alexandra spent the final days of July practicing with both wands. Every morning, she went with grim determination to the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse. The Clockworks ignored her as she ascended the stairs to the third floor, and when Goody Pruett's tirades got on her nerves, Alexandra practiced Freeze-Frame spells and Silencing Charms on her. Afternoons she spent with Brian, but she did not bring him to the building on the corner of Third Street again.

From the outside, the warehouse looked the same. Livia had not had the faded Regal Royalty lettering removed from the brick face of the building, and no one passing by on the street noticed any change in the abandoned structure. The Muggle-Repelling Charms continued to render it the most ignored and uninteresting of buildings, creepy and forbidding to those few Muggles who gave it a second glance.

Inside, it had been completely transformed by the Clockwork crew and it now boasted classrooms on the ground floor and laboratories and a lecture hall on the second floor. The third floor's offices had been renovated, and a teacher's lounge added.

The empty half of the third floor that Alexandra had been using as a practice studio remained an open area, but all the scarred, burnt floorboards had been replaced, and the walls cleaned and repainted. Alexandra didn't know if Livia had seen the upper floor before the Clockworks renovated it, but she thought any more fire and acid marks would invite questions her sister might have refrained from asking before, so she concentrated on less destructive charms and transfigurations.

Once the Pruett School opened its doors, Alexandra doubted she'd be able to get away with sneaking into the building and using it as her private studio.

The basswood wand had an entirely different feel than the obstinate resistance of the yew wand. It didn't want to point where Alexandra pointed it, and it dribbled out magic meagerly and resentfully. Alexandra measured her progress by how far she could push a plunkball with the wand; the day after Livia gave it to her, her best effort would have made her eleven-year-old self laugh. After a week, she'd still have been bested by Constance and Forbearance, the plunkball champions of sixth grade.

This was what she was reduced to, she thought. Governor-General Hucksteen and Richard Raspire and Lilith and Diana Grimm all wanted her handicapped, reduced to using third-rate wands and working the puniest of magic spells.

In the evening, she studied her magical textbooks; no longer out of curiosity or childish eagerness to learn, but because the world was against her (even her own wands were against her!), her friends were few and far between, everyone she loved could be in danger, and she did not intend to be beaten.

## **\*Chapter 7\*: I Am Not a Fool**

The first week in August was scorchingly hot. With the air conditioning turned all the way up, Alexandra, Livia, and Claudia were still sweating as they gathered around the fireplace at 207 Sweetmaple Avenue. None of the heat came from the cold bricks; there was no fire. But Livia, sitting in the soft cushioned chair nearest the fireplace, wiped her forehead and sipped iced tea while Claudia and Alexandra stood next to her.

"I hope she arrives soon," Livia said. "All this tea doesn't seem to be cooling me off, but it is filling my bladder."

As if on cue, a cloud of green smoke exploded out of the fireplace, covering the three women in fine, green powder. Livia calmly placed her hand over the top of her glass, to prevent any of the powder from getting in her tea, but her unprotected eyeglasses were coated instantly.

"Oh my!" A feminine voice with a lilting Southern accent spoke from within the billowing cloud. "I can't see a thing! I do hope I'm in the right place. Alexandra, are you there?"

"Hello, Julia." Alexandra grinned beneath the layer of green smoke. She stepped forward and grasped the hand materializing out of the cloud.

Livia pulled off her glasses and wiped them against her pants, then stood up and produced her wand.

"*Scourgify!*" she said, and simultaneously, Julia said, "*Tergeo!*"

The green dust boiled off all the surfaces in the room, including the women, streaming into the waste basket like miniature cirrus clouds. Some was drawn in a whirling vortex into Julia's wand. In moments, the room was almost dust-free. Only a little bit of green ash still clung to their hair and eyelashes.

Julia beamed. Her hair bounced in tightly-rolled brown curls, and she had made herself up with what Alexandra thought was excessive elegance, further emphasized by her finely-patterned lavender robes. She pulled Alexandra to her, grasping her younger sister's hand in one hand while holding her wand in the other.

"Alexandra! You are looking very well. Though I notice you cut your hair again." She kissed Alexandra on each cheek.

Alexandra smiled. "Long hair's a pain. I don't have house-elves."

Julia arched an eyebrow, then turned to the other two women. There was a pause, filled with tension. They were four sisters coming face-to-face as a group for the first time and taking stock of the sudden reorientation of their relationships.

"Claudia," Julia said, breaking the brief silence first. Her voice was warm. She released Alexandra's hand and grabbed Claudia's shoulders as if to draw her into a hug, and only stopped at the last moment. "I may call you 'Claudia,' now, mayn't I?"

Claudia hesitated. "Yes, of course." She hadn't gone into shock at the eruption of Floo powder and Julia's emergence from the fireplace, having been prepared for it, but she still wore an expression like someone in the presence of a very large and friendly dog who had been bitten by a dog as a child. When Julia embraced her, Claudia's face rippled with confusion and uncertainty. For a moment, her eyes met Alexandra's, as if searching for a cue. Then she bent before Julia's affectionate onslaught, and hugged her younger sister back, if not so fiercely.

As quickly as she'd subjected Claudia to the force of her personality, Julia turned to Livia. She paused, looking the one sister she had not yet met up and down. Livia reciprocated coolly, though her lips quirked. She had watched Julia bring both Alexandra and Claudia into her orbit in a matter of seconds, and seemed ready to see how she would greet the most prodigal of Abraham Thorn's daughters.

"My goodness, how far along are you?" Julia asked. The way her eyes sparkled as she clasped her hands together in delight took away any sense of indelicacy in her question, and left Livia, too, disarmed.

"Almost five months," Livia said. "I'm just starting to show." Her hand went to her belly.

"So it will be a December birth, then. How wonderful!" Julia embraced Livia. "I am so glad to meet you, Livia, dear. I've only ever heard about you from Alexandra. There is so much I want to ask you."

"Yes, well." Livia smiled, a little bemused. "We do have a lot to catch up on."

"Thank you for letting me Floo to your home, Claudia," said Julia. "I'm so grateful to meet my sisters, and to visit, and — oh, I want to meet all your friends and see your town, Alexandra!"

"Remember, no magic," Claudia said.

"Claudia, I'm seventeen," Julia said. "In Roanoke Territory, that makes me of age."

"But it's eighteen in Central Territory," Alexandra said. "And you know the Trace Office will use whatever rules screw us the most."

"Tsk." Julia shook her head.

"She's right," Livia said. "You can get away with that Cleaning Spell because I'm here; if anyone asks you can blame it on me. But don't use your wand in a Muggle neighborhood if you don't want yourself and Alexandra getting into trouble."

"And don't use it in the house either," Claudia said. "Especially not around Archie."

"Oh yes, when do I get to meet my brother-in-law?" Julia turned her wide, guileless eyes on Livia. "Both of them."

Livia picked up her iced tea again. "I'm sure you'll get up to Milwaukee one of these days." She sipped, frowned, and ran a finger along the inside of the glass. It came away with a green film.

"Archie will be home this evening," Claudia said.

"Didn't you bring any luggage with you?" Alexandra asked.

"Oh!" Julia exclaimed. She drew her wand. "Why yes, I was told to signal when I was ready for them to send my bags after me. Claudia, I must use my wand for this. We can blame that on Livia too, can't we?" She winked.

Claudia barely suppressed a wince. Julia drew a line with her wand through the firebox beneath the flue, then made a yanking gesture. With a great cough, the fireplace burst forth another gout of green smoke, this time sending plumes all the way across the living room. Three suitcases, a large bag, a purse, and a folded pink parasol were dumped onto the bricks.

Alexandra was amused if not terribly surprised by the sizable pile of luggage. "You're only going to be here for a couple of days."

"But then we're going to the Ozarks! I brought some clothes for you, too. And some Muggle clothes for myself, but you're going to have to help me choose suitable outfits. Also those books you asked for, and maybe we'll do something about your hair." Julia mentioned Alexandra's hair with a sigh that conveyed disappointment and anticipation at the same time.

"Did you pack a house-elf in there?" Alexandra asked. Claudia looked alarmed.

Julia laughed, and gave Alexandra another kiss on the cheek. "Certainly not. Though Deezie wanted to come."

Livia and Claudia exchanged looks, while Julia waved her wand again to levitate the luggage out of the fireplace. "Oh, we shall have such a splendid time! Don't worry, Claudia — I shan't do this after Livia leaves or when Archie is around."

"Alex is on her best behavior," Claudia said, more to Alexandra than to Julia. "So I hope you won't tempt her into anything. I'd hate to cancel your trip to Missouri."

Julia laid a hand over her chest, fingers spread. "I? Tempt Alexandra? Why, my dear sister, she's the one who tempts me, if you must know."

"That's true, actually," Alexandra said.

"And you wouldn't be so horrible as to ruin our Ozark trip, Claudia?" Julia continued.

"Oh, she would," Alexandra said.

Livia smiled in spite of herself.

Completely off her footing, Claudia said, "Why don't we talk after Alex shows you to your room?"

"Yes, Claudia," Julia said with perfect humility. Alexandra bit her lip as they went upstairs.

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Julia was put in the "guest bedroom" that had never held a guest. It was upstairs next to Alexandra's room, with a bathroom between them. It reminded Alexandra of the suite she and Anna had shared with Darla and Angelique, and later Sonja and Carol, at Charmbridge.

No sooner had Julia deposited her luggage in the guest room than she wanted to see Alexandra's room. Charlie greeted her with a caw; the raven was in the fancy cage Livia had given them, but Alexandra had left the door open as usual.

"Why, hello Charlie!" Julia greeted the raven as cheerily as she had greeted her sisters.

"Pretty bird," said Charlie.

Julia extended a hand and Charlie hopped onto her wrist. Julia beamed with delight. "Pretty bird," she cooed, pursing her lips to make kissing noises at the raven. "Goodness, Alexandra, I rather expected to find your room would be messy or tomboyish or full of interesting Muggle artifacts, but..." She looked around at the bookshelves, the dresser, the bed. There were very few things, and almost no decoration. Almost everything Alexandra had collected in childhood had burned up in the fire that destroyed her house when she was eleven, and she hadn't accumulated many possessions since then. She had books and a few photographs and some electronics, but not much to show of her life since entering Charmbridge Academy. No posters on the walls, no games or toys. A bracelet with small raven and snake charms lay on the little stand next to Alexandra's bed. Julia picked up a small box next to it and opened it. Alexandra didn't object to her sister's inquisitiveness. The box contained the two pairs of earrings Alexandra occasionally wore.

"It's a little... spare, isn't it?" Julia sighed and turned the magic mirror she'd given Alexandra away from the wall where Alexandra had faced it. Her reflection in the glass was radiant and lovely; everything about Julia was magnified. The reflection looked at Alexandra and winked.

Alexandra shrugged. "Maybe compared to Croatoa. Most of my magical stuff is, um, hidden away."

Julia lifted Charlie back to the bird cage, then stepped over to the dresser next to Alexandra's bed. A glass cube sat on it, and Julia leaned forward, then picked up the cube and silently turned it about to watch the pictures that faded in and out on each of its faces.

Maximilian, their older brother, was in each picture. In some, he wore his Junior Regimental Officer Corps uniform; in others, he was dressed in the long overcoat he favored, and in a couple he wore wizarding robes. Some included Alexandra, during her seventh grade year when Maximilian had visited Charmbridge Academy from the Blacksburg Magery Institute. Others showed Max by himself or with his BMI friends.

Julia smiled, through a sheen of tears. "Oh, Martin," she said, as Maximilian's best friend tormented Alexandra with a hair-jinx in one picture. "He still writes to me, you know."

"I got a birthday card from him," Alexandra said. "And he sent me a picture when he got commissioned into the Florida Regiment."

Julia smiled. "Me too. So handsome." She sighed. "I wonder if he has a sweetheart. He wouldn't tell me that."

"He, uh, maybe he didn't want to make you jealous." Alexandra bit her tongue. She'd blurted it out, trying to make a joke, because she didn't know how else to respond.

Julia turned toward her slowly, still holding the picture cube. She had the most exquisite way of expressing herself with a raised eyebrow or a twist of the lip, and now Alexandra felt herself pinned by her sister's sad, amused stare.

"Dear Alexandra. I had a crush on Martin when I was twelve, but I am not a fool. I knew about him and Max. You did too, didn't you?"

Alexandra gave Charlie a warning look as the raven hopped to the dresser and fixed avaricious eyes on Julia's glittering earrings. Julia raised a finger and made a tut-tutting noise at the bird.

"I didn't know you knew," Alexandra said quietly. "How did you know I knew? I mean —"

"Neither of them would tell us, no." Julia wiped a tear away with one finger. "But I was Maximilian's sister. Of course I knew. You knew, because you were also his sister, and you are not a fool either. And you're too much like him — keeping things to yourself that you don't need to."

Alexandra didn't know what to say. Silence hung between them. Then Julia set the cube down and glided to the doorway. "Now come here and see what I've brought from Roanoke, dear sister. I am going to make you pretty before you introduce me to your Brian. And you must tell me if my *blue jeans* are presentable. I feel almost scandalous at the thought of wearing them in public!"

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Livia stayed for dinner that night. Archie Green, who like Alexandra had spent the better part of ten years believing she was his stepdaughter, now had to contend with three sisters-in-law under one roof.

He was a beefy blond man with a red face and a mustache, and Julia was fascinated when he came home in his Larkin Mills Police Department uniform. She wanted him to explain all the badges and gear he wore and the tools he carried. Bemused and no more resistant to her charm than Claudia, he indulged her until she wanted to examine his sidearm. At that point, he assumed the gruff tone Alexandra was more familiar with.

"It's not a toy." He paused. "Although... I could take you shooting."

"What?" Alexandra exclaimed. One of the few rules Archie and Claudia had laid down with such dire threats that even she had never tested it was the prohibition against ever laying hands on Archie's firearms. That he would now casually offer them up to Julia not only surprised her, but made her feel an odd and unfamiliar sensation: a greenish spark of jealousy. Archie obviously *liked* Julia. Next he'd be letting her drive his truck!

"I meant you, too," Archie said. "You're old enough to learn to shoot."

Alexandra blinked at him in astonishment.

"I would have taken you a long time ago," he said, "but you weren't mature enough. I learned to shoot when I was twelve, but you..."

Alexandra folded her arms. "Now I'm mature enough?" She thought about pointing out that she'd been carrying a weapon as dangerous as a gun since she was eleven, but thought better of it.

"Well," Julia said, "I would love to learn how to shoot a *fire-arm*. That would be so kind of you, dear brother-in-law."

Archie grinned. "I can take all of you to the range tomorrow."

"No thank you," Livia said. "I have no desire to shoot, and I have no love of guns."

"I don't love them either," Claudia said.

"But you're a good shot," Archie objected.

"You shoot?" Alexandra felt more preconceptions crumbling.

"Archie took me shooting on our second date. He said every woman should know how to handle a gun." The smile Claudia gave her husband was one Alexandra had never seen before. It was as if the two people who raised her had entire lives that had gone on without her awareness.

"Oh," said Julia. "Why, how... romantic." She looked at Alexandra as if seeking confirmation that this was indeed a courtship ritual among Muggles. Alexandra shrugged.

After dinner, Livia refused once more the offer of a fold-away bed and drove to the hotel where she was staying while she supervised the completion of the Regal Royalty warehouse renovation.

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Archie kept his promise the next morning. Alexandra found the shooting range considerably less exciting than her younger self would have. She took all of Archie's instructions seriously, and tried not to become bored when he spent half an hour repeating gun safety rules before even letting her or Julia touch a gun.

The revolver Archie gave her bucked in her hands, reminding her of her uncooperative yew and basswood wands, throwing hexes everywhere but where she pointed them. Only one of her bullets struck the black silhouette.

Archie squinted. "You did a lot better your first time," he said to Claudia.

"It takes practice," Claudia said.

*I'll stick to wands*, Alexandra thought.

Julia was polite and attentive, but Alexandra could tell she didn't enjoy the experience either. Archie had to keep telling her not to close her eyes when she pulled the trigger.

After the visit to the shooting range, they met Livia one more time back at the house. They had lunch, and Livia said her good-byes, promising to return to Larkin Mills for the opening of the Pruett School. She kissed Claudia and Alexandra on the cheek, but Julia wouldn't let her go without a full embrace.

"I will write to you," Julia said, "and I know we haven't known each other long, but we can be sisters now, can't we, Livia? And you will let me visit after your baby is born so he can get to know his Auntie Julia? I warn you, I intend to spoil him rotten. I'm going to compete shamelessly with Alexandra and Claudia for favorite aunt."

"Not much competition," Alexandra said.

Livia could not extricate herself from Julia's embrace until she made vaguely affirmative sounds, then she said, "The spoiling really isn't necessary. So, do you two want a ride to the mall, before I hit the Automagicka?"

With waves to Claudia, Alexandra and Julia got into Livia's car.

"I like the dress," Livia said.

In the back seat, Alexandra slouched. Julia, watching her in the rear view mirror, which she found as fascinating as everything else in Livia's car, tsked. "I hope you don't make that face when Brian tells you he likes your dress."

"I don't. Wear. Dresses." Alexandra pulled self-consciously at her skirt. Julia, with her unerring eye, had brought Alexandra several perfectly-fitting outfits from Glinda's Good Witch Apparel in New Roanoke. The proprietor had helped select appropriate wear for going out in Muggle society, and the yellow sundress with a knee-length skirt was the least appalling thing Julia could induce Alexandra to wear in public.

"Well, I don't wear pants," Julia retorted, "yet here I am, and it feels most unnatural, not to say unseemly."

"It was *your idea*," Alexandra pointed out. She still didn't know how Julia had persuaded her to wear a dress while donning blue jeans herself.

"If you really didn't want to wear a dress," said Livia, "then I doubt even Julia could get you into one, persuasive though she is."

Julia batted her lashes innocently, while Alexandra crossed her arms.

"You can sit there and sulk, but I think there's a little part of you that wants to see Brian's reaction," Livia said. "Enjoy the movie."

She stopped in front of Larkin Mills Mall, and her two younger sisters got out.

"Thanks for the psychoanalysis," Alexandra said. "And, um, thanks for everything else."

"See you in a few weeks," Livia said. She drove away. Julia's head craned about to take in the mall that was now Larkin Mills's main gathering place for the town's teenagers. To Alexandra, it seemed small and unexceptional now that she had been to Chicago a few times, though it represented a major upscaling for Larkin Mills. Julia, she reminded herself, would find even the most banal chain restaurants and discount clothing stores exotic, much as the Goblin Market had once been an otherworldly walk through a storybook for her.

"Alexandra!" The voice came from the crowd of young people loitering in front of the mall theater. Brian separated himself from a group of teenagers she vaguely recognized as former classmates of theirs, back when they had been in elementary school together. He strode over to the two girls, and stopped short as he took in Alexandra's dress and the makeup Julia had inflicted on her. He was dressed in khakis and a polo shirt, his usual casual outfit for dates, and looked a bit sheepish. After several long moments, he turned to Julia.

"Julia, this is Brian," Alexandra said. "Brian, this is my other sister, Julia."

"I'm so pleased to meet you, Brian," said Julia, holding out her hand.

Brian shook it. "Nice to meet you too. You're from, uh, North Carolina?"

"Thereabouts," Julia said. "Alexandra talks about you a great deal."

"She does?" Brian said.

"I do?" Alexandra said.

"Actually, she doesn't tell me anything interesting. That's why I wanted to meet you. So how do you like her dress, Brian?"

"Julia!" Alexandra said.

Brian looked at Alexandra and grimaced. "I want to say you look pretty, but I know how you'd react. Your sister must have cast some spell to get you to wear a dress."

Julia's eyebrows went up.

"You do look really nice," Brian said.

"Thanks," Alexandra said uncertainly. Brian took her hands and gave her a quick kiss, which prompted hoots and cheers from the kids in front of the movie theater.

"Friends of yours?" Julia asked.

"Just from school." Brian shrugged. "Want to see the movie now?"

It was an action flick. Alexandra enjoyed it more than she expected. Julia, who was neither jaded nor self-conscious, gasped and clapped her hands at the most thrilling moments, and thus expressed all the enjoyment that Alexandra was too self-conscious to allow herself. They all shared a bucket of popcorn, and Brian held her hand.

After the movie, they toured the mall. Alexandra wanted to show Julia everything in the Muggle world, and felt embarrassed that all she had available to show her in Larkin Mills were Gaps and Radio Shacks and pharmacies and a food court with a fountain at the center.

"How do Muggles animate their drawings without magic?" Julia asked, watching a video game demo through a storefront window.

"Those aren't drawings," Alexandra said, glancing at Brian. "It's... technology. It does some things as good as magic."

Brian whispered in Alexandra's ear: "Is that what I am? A Muggle?"

She gave him a small smile. "It's not a bad word." But she wondered. When she started school at Charmbridge, she had never thought of people as divided into magical and non-magical folk the way wizards did. But now she used the word as easily as Julia did. When had she started thinking of Archie and Brian and everyone else in Larkin Mills as "Muggles"?

When they sat down in the food court and Brian went to get hamburgers and drinks for all of them, Julia turned to Alexandra and said, "He's a very nice boy."

"Yes," Alexandra said. "We've been friends forever."

"And you still treat him like a friend. A friend you share kisses with. But you aren't mad for him."

Alexandra shrugged. "I've never been mad for anyone. Do I have to be?"

"Of course not. But if I can tell you don't return his feelings as strongly, he probably can too."

Alexandra looked across the food court at Brian, who smiled and waved to her from the line. "Livia said I don't handle boys well."

"Oh, I think you *handle* boys fine."

"I can't feel something just because someone wants me to. Or even because I want to. I'm not lying to him."

"No, you're not. I didn't mean to imply there's anything wrong with how you feel, dear Alexandra." Julia slid her hand across the table to press it over Alexandra's. "I just hope you don't withhold your heart for reasons other than, well, not feeling mad about him."

"What do you mean? What other reasons?" Alexandra stared at her sister. "You don't mean because he's a Muggle, do you?"

"Certainly not!" Julia's eyes searched hers. She seemed about to say something else, but Alexandra caught sight over Julia's shoulder of Brian approaching their table, and someone else approaching as well.

Brian went sprawling, the hamburgers and cups of soda flying across the tiled food court floor, as a larger boy's foot tripped him only a few feet from the table where Alexandra and Julia sat. Brian jumped to his feet to face Billy Boggleston, who was accompanied by his friend Gordie Pike. Alexandra looked quickly around to spot Tom Gavin, Billy's other wingman, but the third member of the bully trio didn't seem to be present.

"Whoa, man, so sorry!" Billy said, with effusive counterfeit remorse. His broad face was fleshy but not completely given over to fat; beneath his football jersey was a bulky body that owed as much to lifting weights as food court meals. He'd grown rapidly in the past few years, and though he was the same age as Brian and Alexandra, they were both scrawny kids compared to him. Gordie, not quite so brawny, was still much bigger than Brian, who balled his fists up as he faced the two boys with a dripping shirt.

Alexandra stepped forward and reached into the pocket where she carried her wands, before remembering with dismay that she had no pockets; the sundress afforded nowhere to hide a wand, and after being without one for weeks, she had gotten out of the habit of never leaving the house unarmed.

Julia had tried to add a purse to Alexandra's outfit, and Alexandra now regretted rejecting the suggestion. Mental notes concerning ways to insert magical pockets into a sleeveless dress, or learning Livia's trick of tucking a wand down her front, cycled through her mind, alongside a plan of action to deal with Billy, before Julia caught her arm and held her back.

"You're a jerk," Brian said, shaking soda droplets from his fingertips. "You did that on purpose."

"Prove it," Billy said. "Whatcha gonna do, cry for help?" He stood in a not precisely threatening posture — fights in the mall got you expelled from the premises and permanently banned — but he had invaded Brian's space, and his smirk was that of a bully secure in his invincibility. He finally took notice of Alexandra and did a double-take. "Damn. You almost look like a girl, Quick. Nice chicken-legs."

Brian's face turned red. He trembled and jerked forward as if about to throw himself at the larger boy.

"Brian," Alexandra said, trying to think of a way to prevent him from getting his ass kicked without humiliating him.

Then Billy's eyes fell on Julia, and he did another double-take. "Um, hello."

"And who are you, may I ask?" said Julia, confronting the bigger boy with her hands on her hips.

"Uh, my name's Billy." If a person could deflate without the aid of magic, Alexandra was sure Billy would have shrunk visibly in Julia's presence.

"Do you have a last name, Billy?"

Billy shuffled, his eyes going from Julia to Alexandra, and back to Julia. Alexandra didn't miss his eyes traveling up and down Julia's figure. "Boggleston," he said. "Billy Boggleston."

"Well, Billy Boggleston," said Julia, "I think you're very ill-mannered, and I'll thank you to look me in the eye." She snapped her fingers in front of her chest. Billy's face resembled a beet as his eyes snapped to her face. "Did your mother raise you to be a clumsy-footed, bad-tempered oaf and cast lewd gazes? You are in a public place. Is this how you prefer to be seen conducting yourself? I can't imagine many girls find that attractive, but I suppose you don't care about that."

"I, uh, I, that's not, what are you, look, it wasn't..." A jumble of fragmented sentences tumbled out of Billy's mouth; he couldn't seem to find an ending to any of them.

"Are you going to apologize or not?" Julia demanded.

"Sorry?" Billy said, as if offering the word for approval.

"To Brian. And to Alexandra." Julia pointed to each of her companions in turn.

Billy mumbled something inaudible between his teeth, then gathered a scrap of composure. "Uh, who are you?"

"My name is Julia, but it's 'Miss King' to you. I am Alexandra's sister." She folded her arms. Billy and Gordie looked back and forth between Alexandra and Julia, mouths hanging open. Brian stood next to Alexandra, dripping and glowering, but as hapless as the other boys before Julia.

Alexandra, impressed in spite of herself but unwilling to let Julia take complete command of the situation, said, "The other clumsy-footed oaf is Billy's lackey, Gordie Pike. And yes, they are very ill-mannered."

Gordie and Billy both bristled.

"Well, I'm sure they didn't mean to be," said Julia.

"Since when do you have a sister?" Billy blurted out.

"Not like it's any of your business," Alexandra snapped.

"Since she was born," Julia said. "That's what 'sister' means, Billy Boggleston."

"You're not from around here," Billy said.

"Brian, why don't you go dry off your shirt," Julia said, dismissing the other two boys merely by utterly disacknowledging their presence, as effectively as if she'd cast a Banishing Spell. "I'll get us more hamburgers and soda. Look, I have Mug— that is, money." She reached into her back pocket, which drew Billy and Gordie's eyes back down to the tight fit of her jeans, and pulled out several folded bills. "Allow me please, Alexandra?"

"Okay," Alexandra said. Billy and Gordie, rendered into mute bystanders, watched as Brian retreated to the restrooms while Julia entered the fast food line as if practicing for her Apparition License. Alexandra was left standing at the table while an unhappy employee in a polyester uniform, not much older than her, shuffled over with a mop to clean up the mess. Alexandra caught Billy staring at her, and said, "What?"

"Your sister is *hot*," said Billy.

"Get lost or I'll put a curse on you."

"Yeah, right." But Billy and Gordie both flinched slightly, and the two of them shambled off — not in the direction of the restrooms, but toward the mall exit, thus allowing Alexandra to sit slowly back down at the table and ponder just who had "won" that encounter, and whether Julia had been trying to save face for Brian or for her.

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Their movie-date over, they walked back to Sweetmaple Avenue from the mall. Julia commented on everything while Brian held Alexandra's hand and occasionally answered a question about Larkin Mills.

"It was really nice to meet you," he said to Julia. "It's cool finding out Alexandra has sisters."

Alexandra didn't think "cool" was his initial reaction, but any resentment he felt at the information she had withheld from him seemed to have been melted away by Julia. She would just have to hope the information she was still withholding from him would not also come to light; Brian could not, would not, be told everything.

Julia gave him a kiss on the cheek. "And I was delighted to meet you, Brian Seabury. I will be visiting my sisters again, so I daresay this will not be the last time we meet."

Alexandra frowned at Julia's use of the plural. Brian didn't notice, as he was checking a text on his phone. He groaned. "Great, Bonnie is missing. Again."

Julia glanced at Alexandra. Alexandra said, "His sister. I thought you might meet her, but..."

"She was already grounded — again — but she left the house while Mom wasn't looking, and now I'm supposed to find her," Brian said.

"Oh dear," said Julia. "Should we help?"

"Do you have a spell that will find her?" Brian asked.

Julia raised her eyebrows. Alexandra said, "Brian..."

"I know, I know. I was kidding." Alexandra wasn't sure he was kidding, but he leaned in to give her a kiss. Alexandra kissed him back. "Don't worry about it. Enjoy your trip to Missouri."

Alexandra could hear the curiosity in his words, but he kept it off his face. She had been vague about the upcoming trip. He could probably guess it had to do with the wizarding world; he was learning not to ask too many questions.

Alexandra and Julia had scarcely returned to their rooms when Alexandra changed out of her dress and put on pants and a t-shirt. Julia knocked on her door, then entered her room having changed back into a dress.

"Pretty bird," said Charlie in greeting.

"That was much more exciting than visiting the Muggle village on the island," Julia said. She wiggled her fingers in front of Charlie and allowed the raven to peck at them affectionately. "Claudia said tomorrow we can visit the hospital, and Archie offered to give us a ride in his police car."



Alexandra couldn't help smiling at Julia's enthusiasm for the mundane. "I think the Ozarks will be a lot more interesting than Larkin Mills."

"Oh, I'm sure that's true, and I know everything here is quite ordinary to you." Julia spoke lightly, but she sat down on the edge of the bed with a serious expression Alexandra had come to associate with important matters weighing on her heart. "Alexandra, would you really have drawn your wand on that boy if you'd remembered to bring it?"

Alexandra grimaced. "I'm such an idiot."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Julia said.

"I'll never leave home without it again." Alexandra wondered where the best place to hide a sheath beneath a sundress might be. Well, no matter — she didn't think she was going to wear it again.

Julia's face fell. "Oh, fie. I was hoping you were chiding yourself for wanting to hex a foolish Muggle, but you have a habit of learning the wrong lessons, dear sister. You do realize how much trouble that would have gotten you into?"

"I wouldn't really have hexed him," Alexandra said. "Probably."

"And how would Brian have felt if you had intervened, with magic or not?" Julia asked.

"Are you saying I should have just let him face Billy because it would hurt his pride for me to intervene?"

"Well, yes. And also that he didn't need your help."

"*You* intervened."

"Yes, but I'm older — practically a grown-up — and I'm not his girlfriend. Really, Alexandra, you *don't* handle boys well."

Alexandra frowned. Julia had dated a little, but they shared all their escapades, so Alexandra knew exactly how much experience her older sister had with boys — which was even less than her.

"Never mind that," Julia said, as if sensing the direction of Alexandra's thoughts. "It's not precisely what I wanted to talk about. Tell me, if you do fall madly in love with anyone, what will you do?"

Alexandra was prepared for Julia to ask her almost anything, but she was not prepared for a question like that. "Um, I don't know. I don't even know what that would be like. I do really like Brian. And I care about him. I mean, you could say I might kind of love him, maybe?"

"Hmm. Perhaps." Julia smiled. "But when you look into the future, do you see yourself more than kind of maybe loving someone?"

Alexandra made a strange face. "Why are you asking me this, Julia?"

Julia's smile faded, and she studied Alexandra for a long, tense moment. Her fingers tapped nervously on the edge of the bed. Charlie hopped onto her shoulder and the bird peered inquisitively at her and then Alexandra.

"I am terrible at subterfuge, aren't I?" Julia said at last.

"I guess so," Alexandra said, "since I don't even know what you're getting at."

Julia sighed. "You must promise not to be angry, Alexandra."

Alexandra sat up straight in her chair. She snapped her fingers, and Charlie immediately fluttered off of Julia's shoulder and landed on hers. "Angry about what?"

"Do promise," Julia pleaded.

Alexandra's nose wrinkled in annoyance. It seemed very unfair to her to ask her to promise not to be angry about something before she knew what it was. Of course she couldn't imagine what Julia could have done to make such a promise necessary, and with all her own transgressions raw in her mind, she couldn't deny the request. But it took her a few seconds to gather her thoughts and answer.

"Okay, I promise."

Julia scooted closer to her. "I have been exchanging letters with your friends."

Alexandra stared at her. "My friends? Who —?" Suddenly suspicion and realization dawned. "Anna?"

"Anna," echoed Charlie.

"Anna sent me an owl first. Out of love and concern for you, Alexandra. She was terrified — she still is — of your reaction."

Alexandra's heart sank as her temper rose. "Oh, no she didn't."

Julia clasped her hands before she could pull away. "You promised. You must not be angry with me or with Anna or the rest of the Alexandra Committee." She put a hand to her mouth, unable to suppress a slight giggle.

Alexandra stared at her mutely. Julia's expression immediately became more serious.

"I told you, I am not a fool, Alexandra," she said quietly. "I knew something happened to you after you tried to use Valeria's Time-Turner to bring back Max. I knew something more than grief and guilt weighed heavily on your dear, brave heart." She squeezed Alexandra's hands. "Yes, they told me about your 'bargain' with the Generous Ones and the pronouncement of the Stars Above."

Alexandra's teeth clenched together. "They had no right."

"Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes," Charlie said mournfully.

"They had no right, but they had every reason," Julia said. "And if you feel betrayed that for your sake they went to me, your sister, imagine how I feel that you would tell all your friends but not me. Was it because you didn't trust me, or because you think so little of me that you didn't think I could be as helpful as a bunch of sophomores?"

"That's not fair," Alexandra said.

"Fair! Fie on fair! Oh, let me guess — you didn't want to 'hurt' me." Now Julia's eyes lit with unexpected fire. "Anna has alluded to this line of thought; you prefer to carry burdens all by yourself and decide for others what burdens they are fit to carry. Well, Alexandra dear, haven't Livia and Claudia taught you the harm in carrying secrets?"

"Some secrets *should* be kept."

"Some," Julia agreed. "But the fact that you expect to have only six years to live? Didn't you think you'd have to share that with me eventually? When did you plan to tell me? After you've defeated Death and the Generous Ones and the Stars Above, I suppose?"

Alexandra closed her eyes. Julia sat still, and even Charlie did likewise. After Alexandra didn't say anything for a time, Julia leaned forward and put her arms around her younger sister.

"So now you're a member of the Alexandra Committee," Alexandra muttered.

Julia laughed. "Indeed I am, Alexandra. And we are going to save you."

Alexandra opened her eyes. "You can't tell Claudia. Or Livia. Or your mother. Or —"

"What about Father?" Julia asked quietly.

Alexandra shook her head. "Especially not him."

"Still determined to keep secrets from as many people who'd help you as you can?"

"How could Claudia or Livia help me? Julia, it's more important than just me."

Julia waited.

She didn't know everything, Alexandra realized. The Alexandra Committee had kept some secrets... at least, secrets they didn't trust even to ciphered messages sent by owl.

"What do you know about —" Alexandra hesitated, then slipped out of Julia's embrace and grabbed a pen and notebook sitting on her desk. She flipped it open to an empty sheet of paper and wrote:

### **The Deathly Regiment**

Julia's brows knotted together in puzzlement.

Alexandra crumpled up the paper and tore it into tiny pieces, dropping half of them into the wastebasket and keeping the rest clenched in her fist, to be disposed of elsewhere.

"We can't talk about this here," she said.

Julia folded her arms and her brow furrowed skeptically.

"When we all meet, in the Ozarks, and we're allowed to use magic again, we'll talk about it there," Alexandra said. "But don't ask any more questions until then. Okay?"

Julia considered this, then nodded slowly. "Oh-kay," she drawled.

*I'm going to kill them*, Alexandra thought, with anger, exasperation, relief, and worry all stewing together. Her promise notwithstanding, she and her friends were going to have *words*. And she wondered what their father would think of her sharing what she knew with Julia. No doubt he'd have words for her, too.

## \*Chapter 8\*: Holler People

Alexandra and Julia stood before the fireplace at Sweetmaple Avenue. Alexandra held her magical backpack in one hand and Charlie's cage in the other. Julia was surrounded by her baggage.

Alexandra still didn't understand how the Floo Network worked or what made it easier to connect than enchanting Portkeys. Something else to study, she supposed. She would have resented the fact that she could have just traveled to Chicago the easy way all this time if Claudia hadn't been in denial, except that riding the Charmbridge Bus was one of the things she'd come to look forward to each September. The memory of those trips, never to be repeated, was already a painful loss.

"You know this is not going to be a regular thing," Claudia said, as if reading Alexandra's mind. She almost didn't look anxious; only her hands, rubbing together with slow, nervous energy, gave away the apprehension she still could not suppress whenever magic manifested in her presence. "I don't have a wand to clean up all that powder."

"I know," Alexandra said. "Livia said they'll connect the boiler in the warehouse before school starts."

Claudia said, "Julia, don't let Alexandra steamroller you or talk you into anything. You keep insisting you're practically an adult, and your mother and I are trusting you to prove it."

"How about trusting *me*?" Alexandra said. "You keep talking like I'm going to burn down the Ozarks if I'm let off my leash."

"Troublesome!" said Charlie.

"You're not helping, bird-brain," Alexandra said, tapping the bird's cage.

Julia squeezed Alexandra's hand, while giving her other sister a smile with no trace of impatience. "Alexandra will have to explain what 'steamrollering' means before she can do it to me, but it sounds unpleasant, so I certainly shan't allow it. Oh, do trust both of us, dear sister. And knowing Ozarkers, I daresay there will be guards and chaperones everywhere to keep anyone from stepping the least bit out of line."

Alexandra didn't know how much Claudia actually knew about Ozarkers. Claudia made a noncommittal sound, then said, "If you do step out of line..."

"...then you'll never let me go anywhere ever again and you'll take my wand away and cancel my allowance and send me to bed without my supper," Alexandra said. "And also you're still legally my guardian until I turn eighteen and this is still your house and just because I've seen a few things doesn't mean I'm grown up. Come on, Claudia."

"Tsk," Julia said. "There's no need to be so impatient. Claudia is rightfully concerned, and you should appreciate how much she cares about us. I know you would not speak to my mother like that, Alexandra."

Alexandra forced her eyes downward. "Sorry." The grudging apology practically burned her tongue.

"Well played, Julia," said Claudia. "Safe trip. Be careful." Only on the last part did the dry tenor of her voice betray a touch of concern beneath the exasperation layered over most of her words.

This time, Julia pushed her luggage ahead of her. She blew Claudia a kiss, then tossed a double-handful of green Floo Powder into the fireplace and said, "Chicago Wizardrail Station!" She stepped into the fireplace and disappeared with a rush of wind.

Alexandra met Claudia's eyes for a moment, felt all the conflicting emotions that had thickened every conversation between them for the past six months lingering there, and tried to look bold, cool, mature, worldly-wise, and a trace yielding — just a tiny trace — all at once. She repeated Julia's gesture and words, and she too was gone.

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Charlie made a terrible racket even after the cage's Cleaning Charms blew away the Floo Powder. Charlie did not enjoy the Floo, and was going to enjoy a Portkey even less.

"It seems backward to take a Floo to Chicago and then take a Portkey to the Ozarks," Alexandra said, as she and Julia dusted green powder off their sleeves beneath the high, convex ceiling of the Chicago Wizardrail Station. "Missouri and Arkansas are actually in the opposite direction from where we just came."

"Misery and Ark'n'saw," Julia repeated. "Someday I must learn Muggle place names. I don't know how you understand those maps Muggles draw — they're so fixed and inaccurate, as if locations were absolute."

"They are when magic doesn't move them around and obfuscate them," Alexandra said.

As they walked along, with Julia levitating her luggage behind her, Alexandra kept her eyes on all the wizards and witches bustling past them, entering and leaving the station, boarding trains to other parts of the Confederation, or getting into the long lines at the Portkey booths. After Abraham Thorn sabotaged the Wizardrail network three years ago, the Confederation had rerouted some lines so they no longer traveled through the Lands Below, but people were still nervous about taking the train.

"Lovely misses' hair still has Floo dust," said a voice from knee-height that seemed to creak under the weight of some painful burden. "Junk makes gone for three Pigeons."

Alexandra and Julia both turned their eyes downward. A woebegone elf wearing a faded many-colored patchwork of stitched-together rags bent almost double before them. The creature's forehead hovered inches above the floor.

Appalled, Julia said, "A house-elf offering... *paid* labor? Why, I've never!"

"Never, never!" said Charlie.

"Two Pigeons," the pitiful elf said. "Junk banishes every speck, without misses must even lift their wands."

"But," Julia said, "does this mean you are...?"

"A free elf," Alexandra said. She had only ever met one free elf before: Quimley, who lived in the Lands Below.

Tiny shoulders slumping, the elf trembled. "Just one Pigeon, pretty misses? Junk knows misses could clean dust better their own selves, but Junk has no mistress to serve no more, Junk is so —"

"Junk!" bellowed a male voice, and the elf jumped and began scrambling away, still with head bowed low. A red-robed wizard wearing a Wizardrail Auror Authority badge strode after the elf. "I've told you about harassing folks in the station!" He had his wand out, and was rolling it between his fingers as if ready to cast a hex.

Alexandra stepped forward. "He's not harassing us. We asked him if he'd dust us off. We just took the Floo here."

The Auror halted his advance and gave Alexandra a cursory glance. "We don't encourage schnorrers here, miss. There's more and more of them cadging coins and food, and we don't want them hanging about in the station."

"Where are they supposed to go?" Alexandra asked. "And how do elves wind up on the street?"

The Auror shrugged. "The increase in household taxes, combined with all these new Clockworks — more and more families are freeing their elves."

The elf called Junk shuddered.

"You mean... they are simply kicked out?" Julia said, aghast. "House-elves are not Clockworks! They belong to their families! It's unconscionable to simply set one free and make no provisions for their care! I had heard things like this were happening in other Territories, but I never imagined —"

"Miss, there are Elf Welfare houses," the Auror said impatiently. "He can go there."

"No, no, no," said Junk, muttering and shaking his head. "They comes for us there. ASPEW thinks they helps, but they does not."

"Go before I Banish you," the Auror said, "and I mean *Banish*."

"Wait," Alexandra said. She reached into the pocket of her robe, pulled out all the Confederation money she had — six Lions, an Eagle, and a handful of Pigeons — and knelt to press the coins into Junk's hands.

"Don't encourage schnorrers!" the Auror said angrily.

"Go," Alexandra whispered in the elf's ear. "I'm sorry."

Junk disappeared with a pop. Alexandra stood and faced the Auror with a defiant shrug.

"Next time I see that elf, he's *gone*." The Auror twirled his wand meaningfully. Alexandra just glared at him. The wizard shook his head and walked away.

Julia walked to Alexandra's side, a hand over her chest. "That is appalling," she said. "I just can't imagine."

"Appalling!" echoed Charlie.

"Maybe you should," Alexandra said. "Not all elves are lucky enough to live on Croatoa."

Julia gave her a sharp look, but Alexandra didn't look away.

Julia dropped her gaze first. Behind her, her floating luggage dipped in the air. "I know what you think of keeping house-elves," she said softly. "But you just saw what happens if you free them."

"So they're all enslaved for their own good," Alexandra said. "No wonder they're so grateful." She was uncomfortably aware that David had once used this exact argument with her.

Julia visibly flinched, and now Alexandra felt guilty. There wasn't any reason to lash out at Julia like this. Alexandra didn't know enough about the history or the magic behind house-elf servitude, or the Compact Quimley had referred to, so she didn't know if she was being fair.

"Anyway, I just gave away all my spending money," she said, with forced cheerfulness. "So I'm going to have to borrow coins from you if I want to buy anything in the Ozarks."

Julia lifted her head. "Indeed?"

They made their way through the bustle of the station to the Portkey booths. Alexandra was tense, half-expecting Diana Grimm or Richard Raspire or some other adversary to materialize at any moment. That always seemed to happen whenever she went out into the wizarding world, particularly when she was just minding her own business with friends or relations. A number of witches and wizards cast apprehensive looks at her, as if carrying a raven in a cage made her a Dark sorceress. Wizard superstitions were as strong as ever.

She also kept an eye out for elves, hags, and any other Beings who might be loitering in the station despite the Aurors' proscriptions, but all she saw were people and Clockworks. There were several of the metal golems pushing brooms and mops across the polished marble floor.

*Why couldn't they give those jobs to elves, if they need jobs?* she wondered.

"It's a good thing your ticket is already purchased, or we would be in quite a fix," Julia said.

"Maybe we could have asked Junk to take us to the Ozarks," Alexandra said.

"Tsk. You know elves can't replace Portkeys, Alexandra." Julia was still a little wrought after their tête-à-tête, so her chiding didn't have quite as light a tone as usual. Alexandra didn't say anything as they walked to the Portkey booth and showed their tickets.

"Going to the Jubilee, eh?" said the attendant behind the metal grate. She inspected the girls' tickets. "That's not the usual destination. I didn't know there were any Portkeys for... Furthest."

"We're expected," Julia said.

"By Ozarkers?" The attendant was dubious. "Most visitors are going to the 'Foreign Town' they set up."

"Yes," Julia said, "well, we are going to be guests —"

"It's none of her business," Alexandra said. When the attendant frowned at her, Alexandra said, "Can you please find us our Portkeys so we can go?"

The woman rang a bell to summon a uniformed porter. This man examined the tickets and led Alexandra and Julia to a booth at the far end of the row, walked around it into a storage room, and emerged with two items on a broad pillow which he supported with both hands. One was a large, rusty pail; the other was a small tin container of some sort, narrower in the middle than at either end, with an open, bowl-shaped top. It was painted, but the old, faded decorations had worn through in places, and were covered by brownish stains in others.

"Ozarker workmanship," the porter said. "They don't make many Portkeys. Their enchantments are first-rate, but they don't put any thought at all into aesthetics."

"Not stuff to show foreigners, anyway," Alexandra said.

"Well, one for each of you. Take your pick," the porter said.

Julia tilted her head. "That is a milk bucket, if I'm not mistaken, but what is that other... item?"

"A spittoon," said the porter.

Julia turned to Alexandra. "You get the spittoon."

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The yank through space was not as violent as Alexandra's trip to Roanoke. She didn't know if this was because the Ozarks weren't quite as far away, or because the Ozarker-made Portkeys were better. She stumbled out of thin air onto a gravel driveway and stood there blinking in the hot mid-morning sun, blinded after the shade of the Chicago Wizardrail Station.

Julia "landed" with more grace, as if she had gathered up her skirts and hopped over the merest ankle-high obstacle. Settling onto her feet, she lowered the pail to the ground. Alexandra realized she was still clutching the spittoon in both hands. She dropped it and wiped her hands on her robe, then piled her bags at her feet once more with a wave of her wand. She lifted Charlie's cage and made soft cooing noises. She'd been told that animals did not like Portkey travel, but she had been assured it was safe if unpleasant for them.

Charlie's wings fluttered and then the raven screeched: "What the hell?"

"Are you okay, Charlie?" Alexandra asked.

"Crazy!"

"I'll take that as a yes." In fact, Alexandra could feel Charlie's annoyance, which was a good sign — if the bird was angry and upset, it wasn't hurt.

"Stupid!"

"Shush, Charlie." Alexandra stuffed a treat through the bars.

"Well," said Julia, looking around. "I don't see your friends."

"They'll be here," Alexandra said. "They can't know the exact minute we're going to show up."

"No, indeed. I'm sure they will be here." Julia folded her arms.

Alexandra realized with some surprise that they were standing in the back lot of an old A&W stand. A sign rose overhead, and painted root beer bottles and hot dogs were still visible, barely, on the weather-beaten back wall. There was also a dumpster with evidence of recent use, and Alexandra saw a couple of cars in the parking lot on the other side of the building, so the store was evidently still in use. She wondered that the Ozarkers would have fashioned Portkeys to dump them so close to Muggle eyes.

After several minutes of listening to the bird sounds and insect buzz around them, Alexandra said, "You're upset at me, aren't you?"

Julia inhaled deeply. "I am not."

"Jerk!" said Charlie.

"That's enough." Alexandra activated the Silencing Charm on Charlie's cage. She set down the cage, letting Charlie squawk silently, and turned to Julia. "I was really upset by Junk... who named him 'Junk' anyway? Sometimes wizards just piss me off."

Julia regarded her wordlessly, neither smiling nor frowning, but something stirred in her dark eyes.

"No, it doesn't make me feel better that I'm a wizard," Alexandra said. "Also I've gotten paranoid about telling anyone anything about me or where I'm going or what I'm doing."

"And all that explains why you are so...?" Julia's genteel voice trailed off just so.

"No. I just am sometimes." Alexandra shrugged. "I'm sorry."

Julia reached a hand out and pinched Alexandra's ear, then leaned forward and kissed her cheek.

The sound of an engine and wheels on gravel made them both turn about. A big boat-like car full of teenagers rolled around the A&W stand and came to a stop a few yards away. Two boys in the front seat, two girls lounging in the back, all wearing sunglasses, skimpy shirts, and jeans in the summer heat. The boys wore baseball caps, and one leaned out the passenger window to grin at Alexandra and Julia.

"Afternoon, ladies," he said. His voice carried a twang that was not unlike Constance and Forbearance's, though his accent wasn't quite the same as theirs. "What're you'all doin' standin' out back o' the A&W?"

"We're waiting for some friends," Julia said. Alexandra stuck her hands in her pockets, and closed one around her Grundy's wand. She wondered whether the Ozarkers had a Trace Office.

The boy raised his sunglasses to peer at Julia, who wore a flattering, feminine dress that was clearly out of place here. He glanced at Alexandra, who wore plain robes and her magical shiny JROC boots, but she didn't merit more than a moment of his attention; it was obviously Julia he wanted to look at. "Waitin' *here*?"

"Yes, indeed," said Julia.

"Well, if you don't mind my sayin', I hate to leave pretty gals standin' out in the sun. We got plenty o' room in the back here if you're wantin' to go somewhere." The girls already in the back of the car did not look as if they were quite so eager to share the available space, but they said nothing.

"I don't mind at all," Julia said. "You're very kind." The way she dipped her chin and softened her voice made the boy grin from ear to ear. "But we'll wait here, thank you."

The boy behind the wheel said, "You'all ain't exactly dressed for walkin' around. You'all goin' to a folk festival or somethin'?" He eyed Charlie, a dark but silent figure inside the cage at Alexandra's feet.

"Something like that," Alexandra said.

"Alexandra," Julia whispered, "take your hand out of your pocket. These Muggles don't mean us any harm."

Alexandra almost snapped back: "You can't know that." But she held her tongue and casually slipped her hands out of her pockets. She didn't watch the boys in the car any less warily.

"My name's Donald," said the boy in the passenger seat, "an' this is Buster. And they's Colleen an' Meg. So whereabouts you'all from?"

"Out of town," Alexandra said.

Donald snorted. "Well heck, I figured that."

Julia gave Alexandra an admonishing look. "My name is Julia, and this is my sister, Alexandra."

"Julia an' Alexandra." Donald drawled the names out like exotic foreign sounds on his tongue. "They's real pretty names."

"Thank you." Julia made a small waving gesture with her hands, like the start of a curtsy, not quite bobbing her head.

"You'all sure you wouldn't like a ride?" Donald asked.

Julia looked at Alexandra. "What do you think, Alexandra? Should we go for a ride?"

Alexandra's jaw dropped. "Julia!"

"Aw, c'mon girls, we're safe," said Buster from behind the wheel. "Colleen, Meg, tell'em we're safe."

"Yeah," one of the girls said, and they giggled. "They're safe. 'Less you're talkin' 'bout Buster's driving."

"Sheeit, Colleen!" Buster snatched his hat off his head and swiped it at the girl, who laughed and raised a knee to fend it off.

Then, abruptly, both boys paused, their eyes focused somewhere behind Alexandra and Julia, and their mouths opened soundlessly. It took a moment for Colleen and Meg to notice their reactions, then they sat up and looked ahead, and also went very still and wide-eyed.

Alexandra and Julia turned around. Riding out of the woods behind the A&W were a pair of girls in flowered calico dresses and bonnets, sitting astride a pair of mules and leading another pair behind them. Their faces lit up with delight at seeing Alexandra and Julia, but in the shadows of their bonnets, their delicate lips pursed as they saw the Muggle automobile.

Alexandra turned back to look at the Muggle teenagers. The four of them stared at the girls on mules, then Donald and Buster's eyes went from the Ozarkers to Alexandra and Julia, and seemed to take in Julia's full dress and Alexandra's robes with new meaning. They stared again at Charlie. Fearful realization rippled across their faces.

"Holler people," Donald said with a gulp.

Colleen and Meg put their hands to their mouths; their eyes were wide, as if the apparitions bearing down on them were Death and Famine, not Constance and Forbearance Pritchard, whom Alexandra could not imagine inspiring fear in anyone.

Buster threw the car into gear and with a spray of gravel, it spun almost in place before hurtling past the A&W stand and out onto the road, where it squealed away out of sight.

Julia and Alexandra looked at each other.

"You were totally flirting with them," Alexandra said.

"We might have gotten a ride in their vehicle," Julia said. "It could have been fun." She winked.

"Alexandra!" Constance and Forbearance both called at once. They seemed to have been trying to kick the mules into a faster pace, but the mules saw no reason to hurry. At the edge of the gravel driveway, the Ozarker girls slipped off the animals and led them forward, before Constance handed the reins to Forbearance and rushed to greet Alexandra, arms outspread. They hugged, and Constance said, "Missed you terrible!"

"Missed you too," Alexandra said. "It's great to see you both." She turned. "This is my sister Julia, but you probably guessed that."

Julia beamed, all quarrels of a moment ago forgotten. "Constance and Forbearance Pritchard, I am so pleased to meet you at last. And I do hope you will forgive me if I mistake one of you for the other at first."

"Oh, that's no bother at all," said Constance.

"Sometimes our Ma an' Pa mistakes us," said Forbearance. She handed the reins to Constance, and embraced Alexandra in turn. Both girls shook Julia's hand.

"Your dress is awful purty," said Forbearance.

"Why thank you!" Julia held out her skirts for Constance and Forbearance to admire. "And I love yours as well. No, honestly, I do, and Alexandra and I would both be delighted to wear Ozarker dresses while we are visiting, if it would be more polite to your folk."

Alexandra made a choking sound.

"Really?" Constance and Forbearance said together. They turned to Alexandra, wide-eyed, and their faces broke into grins — they knew as well as Julia how enthusiastic Alexandra would be about putting on a dress.

"That would be a calamity," Constance said.

"Alexandra Quick made complete with a bonnet," Forbearance said. "My stars, but I'd cherish that!"

"Yeah, you'll see that when mules fly," Alexandra said.

Constance and Forbearance both turned startling blue eyes on her, their faces suddenly blank.

"What?" Alexandra said.

The twins broke into laughter.

"Oh, Alexandra," said Constance.

"What?" Alexandra said.

"We'uns'll take that as a promise," Forbearance said.

"You done heard her, din't you, Julia?" said Constance.

"Indeed I did," said Julia, bemused.

Constance and Forbearance led the extra pair of mules to Alexandra and Julia. "Now, don't you be feared none, these'uns are the gent'lest mules we got. They'uns'll take us back to Furthest Holler."

"Right," Alexandra said. She grunted as she mounted her mule. She had ridden Granians and Thestrals, and Julia had been riding winged horses since she was a little girl, so she didn't expect either of them would have a problem riding mules. "Um, why were those kids so afraid of you?"

The Pritchards' mouths sank into frowns again.

"We'uns don't mingle with Muggles much," Constance said.

"An' they'uns prefers it the same way," Forbearance said.

"They called you 'holler people'," Alexandra said.

"Really, is that what they'uns calls us?" Constance sounded interested. "We'uns keep to our ownselves best we can, and they'uns knows to do the same, mostly, but they'uns must glimpse us every now'n then, I reckon."

"We'uns don't scare 'em purposefully, you do understand," Forbearance said, casting a glance at Alexandra. "We'uns don't never do harm to 'em. It's 'gainst our ways."

"I know." Alexandra knew Constance and Forbearance would never harm anyone. She wasn't so certain about bigots like Benjamin and Mordecai Rash.

They rode away from the A&W stand, Julia's mule burdened by all her suitcases. Soon they were out of sight of the building and the roads. There was no path between the cedar and oak trees that pressed around them in the hot insect-heavy air, but the mules ambled patiently along with an unerring instinct for avoiding low branches or obstructing foliage.

They chatted for a few minutes about their trip from Larkin Mills to Chicago and thence to the Ozarks. There was so much more Alexandra wanted to talk about, but she held back her curiosity about the wonders of the Ozarks and the details of the Pritchards' lives, which she would see soon.

enough. She sensed her friends holding back questions they wanted to ask her and Julia also.

Julia asked, "How far is it to your home?"

"A fair piece," Constance said.

"Our Hollers is way, way back in the backwoods," Forbearance said. "Far from Muggle eyes. That's why they'uns doesn't never but rarely see us, an' might could be why they's feared of us."

"Cause mostly it's only tales they'uns knows of us, an' tales is mostly confabulations," Constance said.

Alexandra nodded. The slow, unhurried pace of the mules did not seem very efficient. She let Charlie out of the cage, and the raven perched on the back of the mule, saying nothing. If Charlie wanted to give her the silent treatment, that was fine with her.

"So, uh, you get most places by mule instead of broom? Can't you use brooms back in the holler?" she asked.

"Back in the holler, 'course we can," said Constance. "But brooms is hard to craft, an' foreign brooms is awful dear, so hain't many families with more'n one. An' mules we'uns can ride if Muggles is about."

"Too bad you don't have Granians," Alexandra said.

"Oh, we'uns have a few winged horses 'bout, but they's big an' costly — they'uns takes a passel o' space and eats, well, like horses. Mules get about adequate for most purposes."

"They're charming," Julia said, patting her mule.

"A little slow," Alexandra said.

"Only 'til we'uns is outter sight o' Muggles," said Constance.

"Which we is now," said Forbearance. "This here's where Furthest starts."

"Now hold on tight," said Constance.

"And you start thinkin' 'bout what color bonnet you prefer," Forbearance said, laughing gaily.

"What?" Alexandra said.

The mules, all four of them, took off, floating away from the ground as if carried by invisible balloons.

"Fly, fly!" said Charlie, taking wing.



## \*Chapter 9\*: Furthest

Mules, it turned out, were stabler and smoother than horses in the air. There was something lost in the absence of great pegasus wings beating against gravity while the wind rushed past one's face, but as a mode of transportation, Alexandra had to admit that flying mules beat brooms or Granians for comfort. Charlie now glided along beside her.

Here and there, as they passed over green hills liberally spliced with rivers, creeks, and lakes, they saw houses and small communities, devoid of automobiles or power lines or paved roads. Once she saw another couple on flying mules floating away from them. Constance and Forbearance waved, and the couple waved back, but none of them called to each other.

Alexandra guessed they were deep in the Ozark Hollers. They floated placidly along like one of those slow children's rides at an amusement park, and it was only when they began to descend that Alexandra looked back, saw how many mountains were behind them, and realized that they hadn't been traveling at such a slow rate of speed after all.

Below them was a sprawling wooden homestead with attached barns and fenced pens where pigs and chickens rooted in the dirt. As they settled on the ground, over a dozen people came out of the house to greet them, and Alexandra felt a stab of apprehension.

Constance and Forbearance, along with their younger sister Innocence, had almost been withdrawn from Charmbridge Academy more than once. Their proud but traditional parents allowed the girls to attend one of the most prestigious magical schools in the Confederation, but events at Charmbridge, and in the Confederation at large, frequently gave them second thoughts. Alexandra had been at the epicenter of many of those events, and as the daughter of the man who was the cause of the Confederation's unrest, she was more than a little surprised that Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard had invited her to their home. Constance and Forbearance had assured her that their parents didn't blame *her* for her father's deeds, and Alexandra supposed that saving Innocence's life two years ago must have weighed in her favor. But Ozarkers were so reclusive and conservative, and so leery of "foreigners" and Muggle influences, she couldn't imagine what powers of wheedling and persuasion her friends must have brought to bear.

She might not be wearing a dress, but she had come in traditional robes, with no obvious Muggle accessories. Alexandra was determined to be on her best behavior. She didn't want to do anything to make her friends look bad.

"Behave, Charlie," she said, as her familiar settled on her shoulder. "I mean it."

As she and Julia slid off their mules, a high-pitched, almost unintelligible voice hollered: "Confound it all come back har you rampitious varmint or ah'll meller yore haid!"

A young goat with small, ridiculous-looking wings trotted along, dragging a rope tied around its neck on the ground behind it. From out of a barn, a girl of about nine chased after it, trying to keep a soft, floppy bonnet clapped to her head with one hand while waving a stick with the other. Catching up to the kid, the girl was about to step on the rope to bring it to a halt when the goat flapped its wings vigorously, and with a "*Baaah!*" of derision, leaped into the air and sailed away from the girl. It landed directly in front of Alexandra.

Alexandra reached out and snatched the rope around its neck. The goat rolled contemptuous eyes at her, then clamped its teeth onto her wrist.

"Ow!" Alexandra cried, and raised a hand to whack it over the head. She saw the young girl's face contort in dismay, and gritted her teeth and refrained, keeping the rope in her fist. She muttered, "I hope we're having goat stew for dinner, you little —"

"Wicked!" cried Charlie, flapping off of Alexandra's shoulder to peck at the goat's face. It released Alexandra and backed away with an angry "Baah!"

Constance grabbed the kid's tiny horns while Forbearance took the rope from Alexandra. "Oh, dear," Forbearance said. "I'm so sorry, Alex."

Alexandra inspected her wrist. The goat's teeth had left marks in her sleeve and her skin was bruised, but at least she wasn't bleeding.

"Whimsy, why in tarnation would you let loose your kid when we'uns has guests?" Constance asked. "Less'n you planned to set it out for dinner?"

"No!" The younger girl grabbed the goat's rope and regarded her sisters and their guests with wide eyes. "I jes' wanted ter show Dewdrop off, he weren't meant to get loose!"

"Hi, Alex!" Alexandra turned around at a new voice. A grinning girl who was the spitting image of Constance and Forbearance but for a couple of years threw her arms around her before Alexandra could finish wiping goat drool off her sleeve. "I reckon y'all met Whimsy an' Dewdrop."

"Hello, Innocence." Alexandra returned the hug with one arm. She started to introduce Innocence to Julia, but by now the Pritchards' parents had joined the gathering, along with brothers and sisters and in-laws, and all the introductions, insistence that the guests be taken inside, scolding of Whimsy and fussing over who would put the mules away took on the character of a melee. Julia stood patiently and nodded to each person who spoke to her, and Alexandra tried to decipher Mr. Pritchard's unrevealing wooden expression.

Charlie fluttered up to sit on the roof.

While Constance and Forbearance took the mules to the barn, Mrs. Pritchard, a soft-spoken woman who looked much like an older version of her twin daughters, dressed in a dark blue dress and bonnet, murmured to one girl or another, occasionally addressed a word to her sons, and quietly directed the flow of traffic toward the house and saw to it that all the animals were under control. Mr. Pritchard, a tall, dark-bearded man with flinty eyes and a weathered face, continued to say nothing, merely tipping his straw hat by way of greeting to Julia and Alexandra.

Prudence, the oldest sister, was taller than her mother, and thin-boned and pale beneath her bonnet and shawl. Two daughters stood on either side of her, hands held firmly in hers. Prudence released them just long enough to shake hands with Alexandra and Julia and apologize that her husband had had to stay home. Faithful, the second oldest daughter, had brown curly hair, unlike her mother and sisters, and was a little on the plump side. She had a baby on her hip and another small child clung to her skirts. Her husband mumbled something and Alexandra didn't catch his name before she was swept onward. There was a very pregnant dark-haired sister-in-law named Grace. Her husband, Able Pritchard, the oldest brother, was away on some business that was not precisely specified. The unmarried brothers, Noah and Burton, were two years apart but very similar in appearance. They both had neatly trimmed beards, much shorter than their father's. Noah's hair was darker than Burton's sandy brown,

and he had a thick, full mustache, unlike Burton's sparse, stubbly one. Alexandra guessed that Burton, the younger brother, was about eighteen or nineteen, and Noah twenty or twenty-one.

The two youngest Pritchards were Whimsy and Done. Julia pressed her lips together and nodded solemnly when the little boy, who looked about five, was introduced.

There were so many Pritchards! A baby was crying, and another toddler tried to clamber up on Grace, who remonstrated with the child in a piqued tone. Done stared up with frank fascination at Alexandra. He had a runny nose and she hoped she wasn't going to be expected to pick him up. Noah and Burton had positioned themselves on either side of Julia with conspicuous gallantry, and were loudly trying to talk over one another.

*Not too bad*, Alexandra thought with some relief, as they made it to the porch. She hadn't offended anyone or killed the stupid goat, and at least they liked Julia — well, the older brothers did, anyway.

"I'll take you to your room straightaway, Alex," said Innocence, clasping her by the arm. "I knows Connie an' Forbearance wants to talk confidences with you. You hain't gonna 'sclude me from the big kid talk, is you? We'uns can't do that 'til after dinner anyhow. I hope y'all're hungry."

"Sure," Alexandra said.

"We'uns have more guests." The gravelly voice of Mr. Pritchard got everyone's attention; they were the first words Alexandra had heard him speak.

"Why, it's the boys from Clearwater," Faithful said jovially, looking down a dirt trail where a pair of figures could be seen.

Innocence let out a little squeal of dismay, and looked fearfully at Alexandra before turning to her father.

"Pa, you din't say they'uns was supperin' with us tonight!"

"They'uns sent an owl whilst Constance and Forbearance was fetchin' their friends," said Mr. Pritchard. "I din't see no reason not to invite 'em. We'uns already have so many guests over right now, 'tween our foreign visitors, Grace, an' Prudence 'n Faithful's folk."

Alexandra eyed the approaching pair. They strode toward the house with long-legged gaits, arms swinging confidently. They wore long coats and tall hats — not quite ball-like finery, but they had definitely dressed up.

*Comin' courtin'*, Alexandra thought sardonically.

Benjamin and Mordecai Rash halted a few paces from the gathered mob on the porch, doffed their hats, and said in unison, "Evenin', Mister an' Missus Pritchard, gentlemen, ladies."

"Benjamin. Mordecai." There was no tone of welcome or anything else in Mr. Pritchard's voice; he might merely have been confirming their identities.

The blond twins stood almost at attention until Mrs. Pritchard said, "We'uns are right pleased to have you, boys. Constance an' Forbearance is in the barn but they'll be back directly. I'm sure they'uns'll prefer to wash up 'fore receivin' company. I hope you'uns don't mind waitin'."

"S'no fuss at all, ma'am," said Benjamin.

"We'uns don't want to put no one at any inconvenience," said Mordecai.

Throughout their polite greetings, neither of the Ozarker boys had looked directly at either Julia or Alexandra. They were forced to when Mrs. Pritchard said, "I reckon you'all know we'uns got guests for the Jubilee. This is Miss Julia King, an' her sister Miss Alexandra Quick, whom you surely know from school. Hain't it a wonder them both comin' to visit with Connie an' Forbearance this summer?"

"Yes'm," said Mordecai, raising his hat. "A wonder. Pleased to meet you, Miss King."

Julia nodded. "I'm pleased to meet you, Benjamin and Mordecai Rash. I believe Alexandra has mentioned you before."

"She surely has, I'll wager." Benjamin fixed cold blue eyes on Alexandra, and raised his hat with a gesture identical to his twin's, but somehow more ironical. "I din't honestly think we'uns'd have the pleasure of her company again. 'Tis surely a wonder. An' how've you been farin', Miss Quick? Or kin I call you Alexandra, seein' as how we is former school chums?"

Alexandra's smile was a stretched wire. "Oh, please do call me Alexandra, Ben," she said, with a honeyed voice. "And I'm just awesome."

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Even the Pritchards' huge table was not large enough to hold all the guests sitting for supper, so people were scattered through several rooms of the sprawling split-level log house. It was spacious and quite a bit cooler than the muggy Ozark summer outside, though not as cool as a modern house with air conditioning. Alexandra hadn't yet brought up the question of baths; she hoped she'd be pleasantly surprised by magically-pumped water or something, but was prepared for conditions more like those she'd endured camping with Maximilian in the Lands Below. She saw a small wooden chair chasing one of Faithful's children, and wondered if the other furniture was animated.

Alexandra, Julia, Constance, Forbearance, and Benjamin and Mordecai were all placed at a separate table in the same room as the adults. Alexandra assumed the arrangement was by age group, and that proximity to the adults was to ensure proper chaperoning. She would have been quite happy if the Rashses had been seated with the adults, leaving the girls to enjoy dinner without them.

Innocence protested bitterly at being assigned to sit with her younger siblings and nieces and nephews, until her mother took her aside and spoke a quiet word in her ear. Chastened, Innocence went to join the other children with only an envious glance and a pouty lower lip betraying her sense of injustice.

"That girl's a caution," said Mordecai.

"I think she's delightful," said Julia. "And your home is lovely."

"Thank you," Constance and Forbearance said together.

"But we'uns know it's puttered an' not magicked much," said Constance.

"There is other Ozarkers whose homes is much finer, an' enchanted with all the latest charms," said Forbearance.

Benjamin and Mordecai sat up a little straighter, as if stung by Forbearance's comment.

"If'n you'uns prefers a home worked by hand," Benjamin said, "we'uns hain't no furriners who can't get by without gewgaws an' elf-work."

Alexandra caught the slight, and saw that Julia did too, but neither of them said anything. Constance opened her mouth, but was interrupted as Prudence came by, still holding her baby under one arm, floating table settings through the air with a wand in her other hand. Mrs. Pritchard, Prudence, Faithful, and even Grace, with her swollen belly, were doing all the work of serving dinner. Only Grace looked put out about it.

Prudence levitated plates and bowls piled high with pork, corn, potatoes, and gravy onto the table. "Eat up, y'all," she said cheerfully. "Connie an' Bear, you two best enjoy sittin' at the table havin' others wait on you."

"We'uns don't usually," Forbearance protested.

"Oh, I knows you'uns helps more'n your share," Prudence said. "When you'uns hain't away at that fancy school."

"Fancy schoolin' hain't good for girls," said Grace, passing by with a tray full of cups balanced on her hand, stacked so high that only magic could have kept them from tumbling and spilling their contents everywhere. "Takes they'uns minds off'n kith 'n kin." She looked harried and annoyed and there was something about the lines around her mouth that made Alexandra think she wasn't teasing. Constance and Forbearance shrank into their seats a little, though Prudence dismissed her comment with a chuckle and patted the twins on the shoulders before moving away.

"Well, guess I won't have to worry about that," Alexandra said. "No more fancy schooling for me."

There was an awkward silence, as everyone dished food onto their plates. Then Julia said, "I'm afraid I must be quite ruined already. But I'm sure your sister-in-law was joking. Constance, Forbearance, I confess I often wished I had a large family when I was growing up."

"Oh, it's wonderful to have so much family," Constance said, pleased.

Forbearance smiled, although not quite as brightly as usual, Alexandra thought.

Conversation around the "big kids table" remained polite and tense. Benjamin and Mordecai seemed on their best behavior while trying to ignore Alexandra's presence as much as possible. They were barely more gracious to Julia. Constance and Forbearance wanted to know about Roanoke, and Julia happily carried most of the conversation.

At the next table, the adults spoke of the Jubilee and all the visiting "foreigners." Alexandra tried to listen in on their conversation, as it sounded more interesting.

"Hain't surprised — them Scotch Ridgers is allus high-levatin' themselves," said Faithful's husband. "Now they think they'uns don't need to coven with the rest of us? Let 'em sit up there an' shun the Jubilee, the fools."

"But even Clearwater folk're talkin' exodus now," said Prudence. "And most o' Clearwater is steadfaster'n us."

"Ceptin' present company," muttered Grace.

A low rumble from Mr. Pritchard hushed them all. Alexandra didn't catch his words, but she quickly turned her attention back to her plate when she saw Mrs. Pritchard and Prudence and Faithful all looking in her direction.

After dinner, yells and squeals filled the house at greater volume than before. The commotion of the younger Ozarkers drowned out everything else. The menfolk stood from their table and walked outside, while the women began clearing dishes away. It was easier using wands, Alexandra had to admit, and it was quite a spectacle as well — the Ozarker women sent streams of dishes and table settings and leftovers floating through the air like a food fight caught in slow motion, yet nothing collided, even as youngsters got in the way. Innocence rushed past chasing one of her young nieces, with barely a moment to smile at the older teenagers. Alexandra noticed none of the men lifted their wands to help.

"Would you'uns like to set outside awhile?" Mordecai asked.

He was looking at Constance and Forbearance when he said it, but Benjamin clarified to leave no doubt of their intent: "Without your guests, seein' as how they'uns'll be visitin' for a spell an' I reckon you'uns'll spend most o' the Jubilee with them." He sounded resentful.

"The Jubilee lasts the whole year," Constance said, "an' our friends won't be here but a few days."

"An' you'uns ought not rudely suggest we abandon 'em," Forbearance said.

"I'd be happy to see that Miss King hain't abandoned," said Noah, appearing suddenly at Julia's elbow, just behind her chair. He and his brother had lingered while Mr. Pritchard and his son-in-law stepped outside onto the porch. "That is, I could show her round the house an' all."

"Maybe she'd like to walk outside too," said Burton.

"I'm sure Alexandra and I would both be delighted to see your home, inside and out," Julia said. "That is so kind of you both."

A silent contest ensued between Noah and Burton: eyes darting meaningfully from side to side, hands twitching in not-quite-gestures. Alexandra found it very amusing, and she and Julia both rested their chins on their hands waiting to see how they would resolve it. Finally, Burton, the younger of the two, turned to Alexandra and grinned broadly at her. "I'll wager you hain't never seen a hide-behind."

"What is that?" Alexandra asked.

"Burton, Noah, don't you saw off no whoppers to our friends," said Constance.

"And don't you'uns be tryin' to scare 'em neither," said Forbearance.

"Aw, we'uns hain't gonna scare you or run a sandy on you or your sister, Miss King," said Noah. He gave Burton a stern look.

"I would like to see you try to scare Alexandra Quick," said Benjamin.

That was nearly a compliment from Benjamin Rash, but Alexandra said, "Julia's not easy to scare either. But don't try anything with my sister."

Julia pursed her lips. Noah looked amused.

"Does that mean I can try somethin' with you?" Burton asked.

"Burton Osric Pritchard!" Constance's scandalized tone only further amused her brothers.

"I would like to see you try that, too," said Benjamin.

"Benjamin!" Forbearance exclaimed.

"Hain't no one gonna try nothin' with nobody!" said Noah. "Merlin's fuzzy britches, what is wrong with you boys? How you'uns look to our guests!"

With slightly awkward gallantries, the Rashes led Constance and Forbearance outside, while Noah and Burton showed Alexandra and Julia their house. Alexandra was initially interested only in figuring out where she would be sleeping and what sort of bathroom facilities they had, but she noticed as they explored the interior that its layout did not match its exterior.

"It's larger inside," she said aloud.

"What?" said Burton.

"Your house. It's a wizard-space."

Julia turned slowly about, eyes widening.

"It's subtle, though," Alexandra said. "I mean, you don't just walk through the front door and see it, like on wizard buses and trains, or at Charmbridge."

Noah smiled. "Maw carves the magic into the planks 'n timbers, and Paw puts the charms into the very pitch 'n nails. Connie an' Bear oughtn't have spoke so humble 'bout our house. I think those gals is gettin' too accustomed to frilleries and foreign fancies. Maybe they'uns is learnin' to be ashamed o' bein' from the Hollers. I'm sure your houses is grander'n oun, but you won't find better Work in the Governor-General's mansion."

Alexandra wasn't so sure about that, but she nodded.

"We gots a fraid hole down here," said Burton, indicating a heavy wooden door in the floor. "For picklin' an' we'uns used ter hide there when we'uns was little, if'n a tornado come."

"Or from Paw's wand," said Noah.

"Noah an' Burton, don't you try'n take them gals down into the cellar!" called Prudence from some room nearby. All the noise and the children, combined with the enchanted layout, made it hard to track who was where in this house.

"Pru, whatever are you conceivin'?" Noah called back.

"I knows your ways, you anticks! You let them gals be!"

Noah sighed dramatically, but Burton winked at Alexandra.

Aside from the interior size, there was very little about the Pritchards' house that was obviously magical. The Kings' mansion, Croatoa, had magical lamps and mirrors, animated portraits hanging on the walls, windows and doors that opened and closed with a snap of the fingers, and of course, house-elves. But except when the women were floating dishes through the air, to an unaware person this house would appear much like houses Alexandra imagined Muggle Ozarkers might live in.

Noah and Burton led them outside, to a back-facing deck with an unbroken view of the deep woods beyond. During dinner, Constance had told them that their nearest neighbor lived a quarter of a mile away. The sun hadn't quite set yet, but the rear of the house was entirely in shadow, and the trees were a wall of solid black, interrupted by the brief flashes of lightning bugs. The smell of tobacco smoke drifted around from the front of the house, where Alexandra could hear Mr. Pritchard talking to Faithful's husband. She wondered where Constance and Forbearance and the Rashes had gone.

Charlie came flying down from the rooftop and settled on the railing in front of her.

"You were very good, Charlie, and patient," Alexandra said, and gave her raven some of the food she'd tucked into her pocket as a reward.

"That's yore familiar?" Burton asked.

"Yeah. I hope you don't have a problem with ravens."

"Nah, but the hoot-owls an' other critters might."

"Charlie will sleep in my room, with a cage."

Burton nodded, studying the raven for a moment. Then he leaned in, so he could speak into her ear. "So, do you have a chub?"

"A what?" Alexandra turned her attention from the trees and the lightning bugs to Burton. At the other end of the deck, Julia sat on a wooden bench while Noah illustrated something with his wand, drawing a trail of fireflies through the air.

"A beau," Burton said. "You know, a sweetheart."

"You mean a boyfriend? Yeah."

"Oh. That's a darn shame." Burton grinned at her. His teeth were better than those of the Muggle boys who'd been driving the car back at the A&W. He was also not too bad looking; in fact, Alexandra might have considered him handsome, except that he was Constance and Forbearance's brother.

"Are you hitting on me?" She intended to sound indignant, but her voice had no real force in it. Still, Burton's grin disappeared.

"What? Hell's bell's, I hain't never hit no girl, not even my sisters, an' there's times they done wanted it, too."

"No, I mean —"

From across the deck, Julia laughed. Her own wand was out, and she and Noah were doing something with the large, whirring bugs that swirled around them. Some glowed, some fell out of the air and bounced on the wooden planks with brilliant flashes of light, and a stream of them flew past Alexandra and Burton like a formation of old propeller planes, buzzing and chopping the air with their passing.

"Connie 'n Bear 'n Innocence talks 'bout you a lot," Burton said. "They'uns esteem you right highly."

"I esteem them highly, too."

"Hain't never had no furriners here afore." Burton leaned against the railing behind him. "Tell a honesty, you an' yore sister is the first foreign witches I ever spoke to more'n a few words."

"I was kind of surprised your folks invited us. I mean, I know they're grateful I saved Innocence, but I thought it's, like, a taboo for Ozarkers to mingle with non-Ozarkers."

Burton turned his head, hawked, and spat over the railing. Well, Alexandra thought, *that* wasn't attractive.

"Lame," said Charlie.

Burton looked at the raven a moment, then replied to Alexandra. "Hain't percisely taboo, if'n I understand how you mean that word. We'uns don't regularly step outside our Hollers, that's true. But Maw an' Paw did allow my sisters to go to Charmbridge, an' they'uns is minglin' plenty with furriners there."

"You know, even when your sisters call me a foreigner, they don't say it the way you do, like it's a dirty word."

Alexandra couldn't read Burton's expression in the dark, with only Julia and Noah's lightning bugs and wand flashes casting light against the side of his face, but she could feel him giving her a long look, and then he turned and spat again.

"Don't hold back yore opinion none, do you?" he said. "They'uns said you is fierce an' untempered."

"I've been called worse."

"Now girl, they'uns gave it like praise. I kin see why. You is kind of interestin'. But I kin also see why they'uns calls you Troublesome."

*That again*, Alexandra thought. "You've known me for like three hours."

"I done heard plenty. And you do make an impression."

"Really."

"Now don' take no umbrage, Miss Quick. I reckon Maw an' Paw wanted to see for themselves what this gal is like they done heard so much tell of. Is it true you churned Ben an' Mordecai at school?"

"If you mean did I beat them in a wizard-duel... they started it."

Burton guffawed and slapped his knee. "You are a calamity! An' them boys was improved by it. But to hear they'uns was licked by a girl! Broom me out!"

Alexandra was tempted to challenge him to a wizard-duel, just to see how he'd react, but bit back her response. She glanced in the direction of the other couple. Julia was telling Noah about the ocean.

"I heard tell even the Grannies know yore Name," Burton went on.

Alexandra didn't say anything.

"Yes'm, I was plenty curious to see the notorious Troublesome my ownself," Burton said.

"My name is Alexandra," Alexandra said. "Alexandra Quick. Daughter of Abraham Thorn."

She wasn't sure why she felt the impulse to reference her father. More often than not she tried to stay out of her father's shadow. It annoyed her that mentioning his name always made people take her more seriously, but she wondered if Ozarkers also flinched at the mention of the Enemy.

"Troublesome," said Charlie.

It seemed to her as if the insect and night-bird noises quieted for a moment, and she was aware of Julia and Noah looking at her from across the deck.

Then Noah said, "Well, I reckon Mister Thorn is welcome to come to the Jubilee too. Think he might shake my hand?"

"He might," Julia said, "if he had a favorable impression of you as a gentleman. I'm sure I can't imagine why he wouldn't."

Noah threw his head back and laughed. "Why Miss Julia, you do flatter me."

Their conversation continued, and Burton leaned forward.

"What d'you think?" he asked in a low voice. "Would yore Paw shake my hand?"

"Are you a gentleman?" Alexandra asked.

Burton's teeth gleamed as he grinned slowly in the dark. "I reckon yore sister favors gentlemen more'n you do."

"What? What's that supposed to mean?" Alexandra felt heat rising to her face. She was grateful for the darkness.

Her face heated more when Burton laughed quietly. Then he said, "Now don't take offense. I'm just joshin' you. It's fun to tease li'l girls my sisters' age who hain't quite so green as them."

"I —" Alexandra wanted to ask exactly what he meant by "green," and decided not to. She folded her arms and leaned away from him, staring into the darkness. A startlingly loud croak came from the woods, almost a roar, and back in the trees leaves shook and birds took off with shrieks and caws and hoots. Charlie hopped from the railing to Alexandra's knee.

"A jimplicute or hide-behind, might could be," Burton said. "The woods at night is a hazard. I hope you don't take it into yore head to go out into them by yourself."

"Why would I do that?" Alexandra asked. She thought of the legendary hodag that supposedly haunted the woods around Charmbridge. She suspected "jimplicutes" and "hide-behinds" were just as mythical.

"One never does know," Burton said. He hawked and spat again.

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The Pritchards' house was large, but there were many Pritchards. Alexandra and Julia had to share Constance and Forbearance's room. They didn't really mind; the girls' room was spacious enough, and Mrs. Pritchard had conjured an extra bed. However, this meant that Constance and Forbearance would be sharing a bed to allow their guests to each have their own.

"We'uns don't mind," Constance said. She and her sister were dressed in long white gowns and sleeping caps. "We'uns shared a bed 'til we went to Charmbridge."

"We'uns still sometimes did even at Charmbridge," Forbearance said, "'til we got accustomed to sleepin' separate."

Alexandra and Julia shrugged. Neither of them were particularly comfortable with displacing their hosts, but they realized that arguing would only make the twins more uncomfortable. Alexandra would have doubled up in a bed with Julia if required to, but she couldn't say she would sleep comfortably like that. Charlie settled into the cage with surprisingly little fuss.

"Mercy sakes!" Innocence barged into the room looking harried, her bonnet askew. "Ma *finally* said I could leave off caretakin'! If Peter yanked my hair just once more I was just fixed to hex his sticky li'l fingers an' Merideth is such a brat I caint even tell you!" She plopped down on the bed next to Alexandra. "What're y'all talkin' 'bout? You'uns hain't started to share confidences yet, have you?"

There was a moment of stunned silence. Then Constance, with a slight frown, said, "Innocence, that hain't no way to enter."

"I enter this way all the time!" Innocence turned to Alexandra and Julia. "You'uns don't mind, do you? Or is this a 'big kids only' gatherin'?" Alexandra was unaccustomed to hearing such sarcasm from Innocence, and evidently so were her sisters.

"Innocence, dear, you ought not be so impatient with the little'uns," said Forbearance.

"You wasn't made to mind 'em all day an' all evenin'!" said Innocence. "Prudence an' Faithful an' Grace done birthed 'em, they oughter have the carin' of 'em!"

"Now, Innocence," said Forbearance, trying to preempt Constance's brewing ire, but Alexandra interrupted them both.

"We haven't started sharing confidences yet," she said. "I was just about to tell Constance and Forbearance about my trip to Chicago."

"Oh!" said Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence together.

"You don't mind Innocence being here, do you?" Alexandra asked Julia.

"Certainly not," Julia said, smiling. "Why, we've barely had a chance to get acquainted. And I do admire your patience, Innocence."

Alexandra did too, and she thought Innocence had a point about unfairness. But she didn't want to say that in front of Constance and Forbearance.

She told them the story of her hearing at the Territorial Headquarters building. Soon they were peppering her with questions about Livia, and Claudia, and then they were sharing stories about Charmbridge. The Pritchards asked Julia about the Salem Witches' Institute and Croatoa. Somehow the subject turned to boys, and more questions about Brian than Alexandra liked. But very late at night, with all of them sprawled indecorously across the three beds and the floor in the fatigue that comes after hours of non-stop conversation, Alexandra drifted off to sleep and realized she hadn't thought about Geases or Traces or the Office of Special Inquisitions once since arriving in the Ozarks.

## \*Chapter 10\*: The Foreigners' Village

The next morning, it was tub baths in the backyard for all of them. Alexandra feared something like the wooden barrels she had seen in old cartoons, but the tub was made of metal, and Constance and Forbearance showed her how to conjure water into it and heat it comfortably. It was actually not much different from a bathtub back home, except for being outside. A wooden palisade provided privacy from the house, as the girls took turns bathing and drying off before donning the clothes with which they would go to the "foreigners' village."

Alexandra climbed out of the tub and wrapped a towel around herself. Above her, Charlie sat sentinel atop the palisade. It was early morning, with the sun just above the horizon and not yet visible from the Pritchards' house, which was nestled in a valley and surrounded by tall trees. Already the air was warm and muggy, which meant drying off took longer without magic. Alexandra flicked her wand to dry her hair, a trick Julia had showed her, but flinched at a sharp crack, as if someone had rubbed their feet vigorously against a thick carpet and then touched the back of her neck. Her scalp tingled and wisps of steam curled around her head.

She stared, horrified, at her reflection in the plain mirrored glass hanging by the tub. Her hair was frayed and frizzed, as if baked beneath an overheated hair dryer, curling in all directions. She glared at the treacherous yew wand.

Turning to where her clothes had been laid out, she paused. Instead of the outdoor robes she'd brought, there was a calico dress.

"I'm not wearing this!" she called over the wooden barrier.

Constance and Forbearance answered with laughter, then Forbearance said, "You promised, Alexandra!"

"It wasn't a promise!"

"Oh, Alexandra, be a good sport." Julia had already finished bathing and was now waiting with the Pritchards.

"You hain't really gonna refuse, are you?" Now Forbearance sounded put out, even a little hurt. Alexandra realized they really were going to hold her to her foolish words.

"I said I'd wear a bonnet, not a dress!"

"You can't wear a bonnet without a dress," said Constance. "You'd look plumb foolish."

"Alexandra..." said Julia, with her "big sister" voice.

"You're really going to make me meet David and Anna in a dress and bonnet."

"You'll look darling," Julia said.

Alexandra made a face that Julia couldn't see.

"Anna will think you're adorable," Forbearance said.

"And David won't dare aggerpervoke you," Constance said.

"Oh, really?"

Alexandra grudgingly donned the plain shift that went underneath, then pulled the yellow checkered dress over her head and down over her body, and fastened it up the back of her neck. It was only a little uncomfortable.

When she stepped out from behind the palisade, Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence all shouted with glee. Julia clasped her hands together, then gasped. "Oh, Alexandra, your hair!"

"Well," Constance said, "I reckon it's lucky you'll be wearin' a bonnet after all."

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The foreigners' village that hosted visitors to the Jubilee was located in Down Below Holler, which was a fair piece from Furthest as the crow flies. The Ozarkers and their guests flew on mules.

Noah and Burton had been sent by Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard to escort the girls between Hollers. They left behind a disconsolate Innocence, who was once again consigned to childcare.

Alexandra looked down as they rose high above the trees, drifted over the green hills of Furthest, and kept going until they could see Muggle towns and highways below them.

"But how can they not see people on *flying mules*?" she asked. "We learned in school there's no such thing as an invisibility spell."

They were high in the air, but not as high as airplanes flew. Any Muggles who looked up would certainly see the curious shapes in the sky, and a decent pair of binoculars would reveal six people on flying mules.

"Hain't invisibility," Constance said. "It's more fancy than that." She said this with a degree of smugness.

"We'uns figured out way back that flyin' mules is *so ridiculous*, no Muggle would believe such plumb foolishness," Forbearance said.

"So the same magic what makes mules fly makes Muggles refuse to see 'em," Constance said. "They just will not, 'less'n you take off or land right 'fore their eyes."

"Which is strictly forbidden," said Noah. He interjected himself frequently into the conversation. Burton, for his part, did not spend so much time trying to take the reins of conversation; he just flew alongside Alexandra with a smarmy grin every time he caught her looking at him. It annoyed

her, so she studied the ground far below or listened attentively to whatever Constance or Forbearance or Julia said.

"So it's rather like a Muggle-Repelling Charm," Julia said.

"There is some similar principles," said Forbearance, "but lots more to it."

Constance said, "The mules has to be —"

"Constance Gwendolen Pritchard, you hush your mouth now!" Noah said. "I do apologize, Miss King, Miss Quick, but Ozarker magic hain't to be discussed with furrin— outsiders."

Constance and Forbearance looked down.

"I'm sure it's not a big secret," Alexandra said. "Everyone knows about flying horses, and we learned about Muggle-Repelling Charms and Disillusionment and everything else at Charmbridge."

"Really?" Now Burton was the one who sounded smug. "Then how d'you feature even the Confederation Air Force hain't got flyin' mules? An' they can't hide their winged horses an' dragons an' wyverns an' other critters without conjurin' big ol' stormclouds?"

"Confederation Air Force?" Alexandra forgot all about magical theory. "Dragons and wyverns?"

"They'uns come this week to show off, 'long with the Regiment," Burton said. "But they'uns would like the secret of our mules."

"An' they'uns won't never get it nohow," said Noah.

"The Central Territory Regiment is here?" Alexandra asked. "Why are they coming to the Ozarks?"

"For the Jubilee, 'course," said Burton.

"A flight o' dragons an' manticores an' other Beasts, an' the Regiment performin' wand 'n broom drills," said Constance.

"And then there'll be fireworks," said Forbearance.

The flying mules carried the Ozarkers and their guests from one end of the Five Hollers to the other. There was no sense of the mules flying particularly fast, so it seemed to Alexandra as if Down Below Holler was practically the next hill over from Furthest. Yet she knew that inasmuch as the Hollers could be mapped, it was quite far indeed, nearly as far as from Down Below Holler to Larkin Mills. There was more magic than flight at work here. She wondered if the mules traveled along a sort of Automagicka in the sky.

Down Below Holler, according to the Pritchards, was the first place Ozarkers had settled. The northernmost of the Five Hollers, like Furthest it was no longer far from highways and campgrounds and Muggle communities when seen from the air, but as the six mule-riders descended below the hilltops, the Muggle world fell away, and the woods that covered the hills could have been undisturbed by humans since the mountains rose. The six of them settled silently on the ground, amidst chirrups and buzzes and whoops and tweet-a-deets from the trees around them, and even the mules docilely lowered their heads in silent honor to the magic of the holler.

Alexandra remembered long afternoons spent lying on her back near the polluted, brackish mud of Old Larkin Pond. With the Interstate just over a ridge, truck sounds occasionally disturbed its solitude, yet that pond was where she'd most strongly believed that magic was real. And of course, she had been right.

She tried to see her surroundings now with Witch's Sight. She was just beginning to understand that the awareness of magic which her father had encouraged her to develop went well beyond what she could see with her eyes. Her concentration did not change the appearance of the trees and hills, but the feel of magic was strong — very strong. Much as it had been back at Furthest.

"Where is the foreigners' village?" Julia asked.

"Over yonder," Noah said. Alexandra was learning that this expression conveyed with subtle nuances, even without accompanying hand gestures, a meaning that Ozarkers could translate with great precision, even if to "foreigners" it seemed only to describe any place that was not here.

Noah led them toward a sunlit thinning in the trees. Alexandra asked, "So will any Jubilee events take place outside of Down Below Holler?"

"The Jubilee takes place throughout the Five Hollers, year 'round," said Burton.

"Is everyone else confined to the foreigners' village?"

"Hain't no one confined," said Noah over his shoulder. "You think we kin Bar everyone?"

"Well, how do you keep foreigners out of the Ozarks?"

"Mostly by not invitin' 'em," Burton said.

As they emerged from the woods, they saw a valley spread before them: Down Below Holler. Most of it was heavy forest in which only the occasional glimpse of homesteads and cleared land was visible, but directly across from where the Pritchards and their two guests sat astride their mules was what looked like a cross between a county fair and a Western boomtown. Tents and clapboard buildings drew hundreds of witches and wizards milling about wearing everything from traditional Ozarker clothing to flashy New Colonial wizard robes. There was a carnival-like atmosphere, with yells and music echoing across the valley. A dirt road led down from the opposite ridge, and behind the foreigners' village was a patch of worn and torn up grass where a number of wizard automobiles were parked, including a very familiar bright orange short bus.

While they watched, wizards and witches descended from the sky on brooms and flying carpets, and more materialized out of thin air near the "parking lot."

"That surely is a mess o' furriners," said Burton.



Alexandra sent Charlie into the trees, saying, "I think it's better if you stay away from the crowds, Charlie." The raven cawed and flapped off to a nearby perch from which it could survey the village, and no doubt swoop down to snatch any items of food or sparkly things that might be left unattended.

"Let's go find our friends," Alexandra said, her heart beating faster.

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Rows of quickly-erected structures made of wood, rough stones, and clay bricks held together with magic served as hostels and hotels for visitors touring the Five Hollers. There were also conjured meeting halls and restaurants and shops catering to long-term and day visitors.

Ozarkers had set up stalls where they sold magical wooden toys and "traditional" Ozarker brooms and self-filling buckets and clockwork bugs and other quaint artifacts. The Pritchards told Alexandra and Julia that most of these artifacts weren't things Ozarkers actually used, nor were they really traditional crafts — they were "contrivances" they sold to foreigners.

They tethered the mules to a long rail where other mules and a couple of winged horses had been hitched, and made their way through the crowd toward a bright red building designated as a "Youth Hall." Kids in Colonial garb were streaming in and out of the building. Alexandra recognized several Charmbridge students. She walked right past Karina Knutzen, a girl she had cursed in a fight at Charmbridge two years ago. Karina didn't recognize her in her bonnet and dress, though the older girl did nod to Constance and Forbearance.

The ground floor of the Youth Hall was full of tables with open seating. Teenagers from around the Confederation were eating food from a buffet tended by a crew of Ozarker girls supervised by a matronly woman, whose girth filled the space around her as she used her wand to replenish trays of eggs and sausage and flapjacks and scour empty plates and tableware.

"Constance!" someone yelled.

"Alex!" yelled someone else.

The group turned toward a table in the back. David Washington was standing up and waving his arms. Anna Chu stood next to him, wearing shiny red and orange robes, with her long black hair tied back in a single braid. Seated at the table was Sonja Rackham, a pretty redheaded girl with a face that seemed to have become more freckled over the summer.

"Howdy, y'all!" Constance called, earning frowns from her brothers. The group of them made their way through the tables to the trio on the far side of the room. Other than the serving woman and her assistants, there weren't any other Ozarkers inside, so everyone else stared at them. Alexandra realized they all thought she was an Ozarker too.

Sonja rose to her feet. She and Anna both stared at Alexandra.

"Well, I didn't foresee this," said Sonja.

David grinned at the Pritchards. "You found us. But where's Alex?"

For a moment, no one spoke. Then David noticed the girl in the yellow dress and bonnet, and his grin collapsed as his mouth fell open.

Alexandra glowered. "Say something, dork."

"Nice bonnet," he managed.

"You look... cute," Anna said. She looked at Constance and Forbearance as if seeking an explanation.

"She's adorable!" said Sonja.

"Isn't she, though?" said Julia. "Why, I am thinking of buying one of those darling bonnets I saw for sale outside."

Alexandra gave her sister a sour look, then said, "Introductions all around. These are my friends Anna Chu, David Washington, and Sonja Rackham. This is my sister, Julia King."

"And these two boys slouchin' like bored, unmannered durgens is our brothers, Noah an' Burton," said Constance.

"I'll take you'uns right back to Furthest, if'n you're gonna be nettlesome," said Noah. He tipped his hat to Anna, Sonja, and David. "Pleased to meet you'all."

Burton mumbled an echo of Noah's greeting, while Julia seized Anna's hands and said, "I am so happy to meet you after everything I've heard about my sister's friends!" She let Anna's hands drop, then did the same with Sonja, then offered a hand to David.

"So, can we hang out, or do you have to chaperone us all over?" Alexandra asked Noah and Burton.

Burton smirked. "Are you hasty to get shy of us, Miss Quick?"

"We'uns actually have better things to do than mind young'uns," said Noah. "Beggin' yore pardon, Miss King, I didn't mean you."

"Are you saying I'm not young?" Julia asked.

Noah gave her a small grin. "Now, you know that ain't how I meant it."

"I am only seventeen," said Julia, placing a hand over her chest and batting her lashes. "I might still be in need of chaperoning."

"I'd happily chaperone you anywhere you please," Noah said.

"Oh my God," Alexandra said. "You two."

"I do not know what you are talking about, dear sister." Julia affected an affronted, deep, thick accent. Constance and Forbearance both covered

their mouths.

"We'uns'll be seein' to the Jubilee arrangements and talkin' to a few folk here in Down Below Holler," Noah said. "We'll be back to collect y'all 'fore dark."

"Gallin' around, I don't doubt," said Constance.

"Hush yore mouth, girl, or I'll fetch the Rash twins to chaperone you'uns," said Noah. Constance and Forbearance fell silent at that. David scowled.

"Behave, y'all," said Burton. "'Specially you, Miss Quick." He winked at Alexandra, and he and his brother departed.

"Why especially me?" Alexandra asked.

"You are destined to do something outrageous," Sonja said. "Even someone without the Inner Eye can foresee that."

"Oh man, Sonja, would you give that nonsense a rest?" said David.

Anna sighed, and whispered to Alexandra, "Apparently Sonja has decided that calling down the Parliament of Stars has opened her 'Inner Eye.' She's been going on about it ever since we got on the bus."

Several minutes of conversation and catching up followed. Alexandra was not surprised that Anna and Julia were immediately taken with each other and chatting like old friends. Sonja pestered the Pritchards with questions about the Ozarks, and Ozark magic, and what the Jubilee would be like.

"So seriously, what's with the bonnet?" David asked.

"Punishment for making a promise I shouldn't have," Alexandra said. "That seems to be a bad habit of mine."

That put a chill on the conversation, until Sonja said, "There will be a solution to your problem, and it will be found here in the Ozarks. You will see dragons and fire and stars and your fate—"

"Which problem?" asked Alexandra.

"Seriously, Sonja, no one believes you're seeing the future," said David. "You're just telling us things we already know!"

"How do you know she hain't got the Sight?" asked Forbearance.

"Thank you, Forbearance," said Sonja, while Constance looked away to hide her exasperation.

"Let's go check out the Jubilee," Alexandra said. "I mean, you said there would be dragons and fireworks, right?"

"The Confederation Air Force don't arrive 'til tomorrow, and the fireworks is Friday, day afore you'uns leave," Forbearance said. "But there is games an' contests an' plenty o' feasts."

"Singin' and dancin' also," Constance said.

"Oh yes, a great dance afore the fireworks," Forbearance said.

"A mixed dance," Constance said.

"You mean Ozarkers and foreigners?" David asked.

"That too, but I meant girls 'n boys," Constance said.

"Excellent!" said Sonja, grinning. "Do your brothers have girlfriends?"

Constance and Forbearance looked at her in astonishment.

"What, you don't know that already with your inner eye?" asked David.

Sonja laughed. "I was kidding!" She stuck her tongue out at David.

The seven of them walked outside, where the dirt road running through the foreigners' village was even more crowded than before. Ozarkers were selling everything from winged goats to bonnets and dresses to magical carving knives, banjos with strings plucked by invisible fingers and fiddles that threw sparks when played, and all manner of jarred, canned, and magically-preserved jams and fruits, pies, pork, conohany, winged goat milk, and more exotic recipes whose authenticity Alexandra doubted, such as jimplicute tail stew and Ozark Snipe.

They stopped at a large rack of headgear and ribbons. Julia bought an enormous bonnet that cast enough shade for three heads, in a brilliant fuchsia color. Sonja chose a thin one that didn't do much to cover her curly red hair. Anna considered, and with a little help from Constance and Forbearance, selected a more modest bonnet, one slightly smaller and less decorative than the ones the Pritchards wore. She smiled at Alexandra as she tied it on. "Now you can stop looking so grumpy, since we're all wearing bonnets."

David was trying on a wide-brimmed hat which an old man claimed was made of wampus-cat hair.

"You can sell that to all the other furriners, but don't you build no pigpens for us," said Forbearance. "Mister, you din't never kill no wampus-cat and make it into a hat."

"Graves an' gullies, did I so, girl!" declared the elderly Ozarker. He wore suspenders and canvas britches, with a hat on his head similar to the one he was trying to sell David. His wife, the purveyor of bonnets, nodded vigorously, and the old man embarked upon a tale of his adventures in Hundred Boggarts Holler, a place he declared to be the fearsomest of all the Five Hollers, disputed by Constance and Forbearance with periodic objections and disclaimers, which they delivered gleefully in a manner that seemed nearly as staged as the hat-seller's storytelling. Alexandra

listened with a smile on her face, realizing that the ridiculous story was probably a retelling of one of Brother Randolph's tales; the man's performance was clearly an integral part of his sales pitch. Anna stood next to her and rested her head on Alexandra's shoulder.

At the end of the Ozarker's story, David handed over two Lions.

"You was took," Constance said to him as they walked away.

"If'n you let Noah or Burton haggle for you, they'd get you a reasonable price," said Forbearance. "An' that hain't no wampus-hair hat."

David pulled the hat on over his thick, curly hair, which he had allowed to grow out over the summer. It had a tall peak and a wide brim, like a cross between a wizard's hat and a detective's fedora. "This is one bad-ass hat," he said. Constance and Forbearance both blushed.

"Hey!" A young voice caught Alexandra's attention, and she had barely turned around before a stout boy with blond hair practically ran into her. "Oh, gosh! Sorry." He panted a little. "Wow, Alexandra, it's you! I thought I recognized Constance and Forbearance, but you —"

"William!" Alexandra looked at the younger boy with surprise. William Killmond, a Muggle-born boy in the class two years behind hers, was wearing a disheveled Junior Regimental Officer Corps uniform.

"You got to come on this trip?" she said. "I thought it was for tenth graders and up. What are you doing in uniform?"

"Ms. Shirtliffe — I mean, Witch-Colonel Shirtliffe — organized a two-day trip for JROC students. We're going to do broom drills before the Regimental parade. JROC wanders from all over the Territory, not just Charmbridge." William wiped sweat from his forehead. "Uh, you're wearing a dress. And a bonnet."

"Ms. Shirtliffe had better not see your uniform all messed up like this," Alexandra said. She straightened his collar with a yank and poked him in the belly, just above his loose belt. He blushed and tightened it.

"Hello Constance. Hello Forbearance," he said.

"Hello William," said Constance.

"We'uns're mighty pleased you could visit," said Forbearance.

"An' you're wantin' to know where Innocence is at, I reckon," said Constance.

William blushed again, and nodded.

"She had to stay home today, to watch the young'uns," said Forbearance. "But she'll join us at the Jubilee tomorrow."

"An' if'n Ma 'n Pa allows it, she *might* be allowed to come to the big dance," Constance said.

"Oh! That's great. I mean, that would be cool." William nodded. He was still staring at Alexandra, until she folded her arms and stared back at him, and then he looked away and his gaze fell on Julia.

"This is my sister, Julia King," Alexandra said.

"Hi," William said. This seemed to drain him of his remaining powers of speech.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, William," said Julia, extending a hand.

"Hi," he repeated. He took her hand, shook it, and didn't let go. Julia regarded the hand wrapped around hers with a patient smile.

"Isn't her bonnet lovely?" Alexandra said in a sweet tone. Sonja made a noise next to her, a snicker swallowed quickly.

"Yes," said William.

"And she's hot, too."

"Yes," said William. Then he blinked and turned bright red. "I mean — nice to meet you! Tell Innocence I'm sorry I missed her. See you later! At the dance, maybe. And come watch the broom drills. Bye!" He turned and ran away.

"Alexandra Quick, you're terrible," said Julia.

"Are you hot, Julia?" Forbearance asked with concern.

"Smokin'," said David, tugging at the brim of his hat. Alexandra elbowed him.

"We'uns best find some shade — we forgot y'all hain't used to Ozark summers," said Constance.

In fact, Alexandra was already sweaty. Other foreigners were retreating to shady benches and picnic tables or inside as the sun climbed higher. Julia had brought a pink parasol with her, tucked under one arm. She opened it, and it cast deep shade over her despite being made of fabric so thin it should hardly have blocked sunlight at all.

The seven of them sat down at a wooden table not far from the main avenue fronting the growing number of Ozarkers come to sell wares and songs and small charms and enchantments. Julia snapped open a fan and began fanning herself. Anna looked a bit wilted beneath her bonnet. Alexandra adjusted hers with a frown, wanting to take it off but knowing she couldn't while all the other girls still wore theirs.

"So tomorrow is the Convocation," David said, "and your elders give a welcome speech and stuff and formally invite us into the Five Hollers. Will they talk about Unworking and tell us what it's about?"

Constance and Forbearance reflected surprise. "Where'd you hear 'bout the Convocation and Unworking, David?" Constance asked.

"The Convocation's on the schedule they gave us at the foreigners' village," Anna said.

"I read about Unworking in *Hillwizards: Secrets of the Ozarks*," David said. "Do you really throw away all your magic items?"

"Oh, that book!" Constance made a face.

"It's awful, David," said Forbearance. "Don't mention that book to no one else. Folks hereabouts don't take kindly to it or the wizard who wrote it."

"He weren't no Ozarker an' he thought just 'cause he married a waylost witch he knew us," said Constance.

"What do you mean way lost?" Alexandra asked.

There was a moment of uncomfortable silence. Constance slowly pushed her bonnet back, just an inch, exposing a little bit more of her sweat-glistened forehead. When she saw David was watching her, she pulled her hand away and put it to her flushed cheek.

Forbearance cleared her throat. "We'uns call someone who leaves the Ozarks to live with furriners waylost."

"They get shunned forever, Barred from returning to the Hollers," David said.

"Now David, that hain't true," said Constance.

Forbearance clucked her tongue. "Don't you believe nothin' in that book."

David's shoulders slumped beneath his wide-brimmed hat. "I was just trying to find out about your culture. I didn't find a lot of books written by Ozarkers at Boxley's Books."

Constance smiled at him. "If'n you wants to know 'bout our ways, David, you oughter just ask us."

"So what's this Unworking?" Alexandra asked.

Constance began retying her bonnet, after pulling it firmly forward again. Forbearance spoke after a pause that she seemed to hope would be filled by someone else. "Every seven years, we'uns let fall all enchantments throughout the Five Hollers. No works cast can last past the Jubilee. Every charm is broken, every transfiguration undone, and if'n you has laid a curse or a blessin' on anyone or anything, it must be lifted."

"All charms?" Julia stopped fanning herself. "What about the Muggle-Repelling Charms that keep your homes hidden?"

"Them too. They has to end, and be cast anew," Forbearance said.

"What if Muggles come upon you in the meantime?" Julia asked.

The twins shrugged. Constance said, "We'uns is vigilant, but I reckon that's where most o' them 'Holler people' tales come from."

"What about your wands?" Anna asked.

"Wands is the sole exception," Forbearance said. "Course we keep them. Couldn't Unwork or rework nothin' without 'em."

"But why do you Unwork everything?" Alexandra asked. "What's the point of making magic items and then... throwing them away?"

Constance and Forbearance shared one of their meaningful looks. Alexandra sighed. "I get it — not to be discussed with foreigners."

The twins shook their heads. "It hain't so much that we'uns can't discuss it," Constance said.

"It's a bit muddled," Forbearance said. "It's about traditions passed down everlastin' since we'uns settled in the Hollers."

"Oh, Forbearance, tell the unskint truth," Constance said. "We'uns don't know why. It's all elder talk an' I'll wager half the elders don't have an inkle. It's just done 'cause it's done."

Forbearance blinked at her sister in surprise. "The Grannies know," she said, not so much with conviction but in protestation.

"Well they'uns hain't told us," Constance replied.

Everyone was silent a moment. Julia cleared her throat. "I'm sure there's a sensible reason, and perhaps they will tell us at the Convocation."

Julia was being Julia, Alexandra thought, always wanting to fill awkward silences or distract from social mishaps with something cheerful, if completely off-point.

"It explains why Ozarker artifacts are so valuable," Sonja said. "I guess the only ones that survive are the ones you sell to foreigners."

"Actually, anything we craft for trade has a 'spiry worked into it," Constance said.

"A what?" Alexandra asked.

"You mean *expiration*?" David said. He winked. "See, I'm learning to speak Ozarker."

The twins both folded their arms.

"It also explains why you're not as wealthy as the rest of the Confederation," David said. "You toss all your magic every seven years. You can't keep any big enchantments. Things like the Wizardrail or the Goblin Market or the Invisible Bridge, you can't just reenchant that every seven years, can you?"

"Reckon you got us all figured out, do you?" Constance said. "Poor durgens, we'uns hain't as 'wealthy' as the rest of the Confederation 'cause we'uns don't clutter the Five Hollers with great works, or own all the magical gewgaws y'all do. Clockworks to mop your marble floors, talkin'

portraits, tables that set themselves an' dishes that wash themselves an' crystal balls an' magic buses an' brooms made to last twenty years 'cept you'uns buys a new one every year 'cause last year's hain't in style no more."

"Whoa!" David said, holding up his hands. "I just meant — ah, heck."

Alexandra's mind drifted away from the discussion between David and Constance and Forbearance. The air was thick with humidity and bugs, and Julia's fan didn't even stir the air near Alexandra. Next to her sat Anna, who had been very quiet for most of the morning. Alexandra pondered what the Pritchards had said about Unworking magic, and the Grannies, and tried to make a connection between that and the Grannies' inexplicable interest in her. When would she get a chance to talk to them and ask about this "Troublesome" business?

"So, I notice Alex has kept us from talking about the most important thing."

Anna's voice interrupted Alexandra's reverie — actually, she had been nodding off. She sat up in surprise. "What most important thing?"

"Your appeal," David said. "Expulsion from Charmbridge. What are you gonna do?"

"She'll go to another wizarding school," said Sonja dreamily. "One of the Big Four."

"Two of the Big Four don't even exist anymore, and she's been expelled from Charmbridge. That leaves BMI," said Anna.

Sonja shook her head. "New Amsterdam Academy has resumed classes in the city, even though, uh—"

"Even though my father destroyed the school," Alexandra said. "Both of them already turned me down." She wiped sweat off her forehead. "My sister Livia is starting a day school right in Larkin Mills. So I guess I can go there to keep learning magic."

"A day school?" Anna said. "You were accepted at Charmbridge Academy! And now you're going to settle for a day school?"

"I don't have a lot of choices," Alexandra said.

"Aren't there magic schools in other countries?" David asked. "Some of 'em are supposed to be as good as ours. Even better."

"Another country?" Anna said. Her sadness was so evident, Alexandra just wanted to comfort her.

She didn't mention that Medea had proposed the same idea, but said, "I thought about that, but even if they'd accept me, I'd have to learn, like, French or Swahili. Unless I go to that creepy castle in Scotland where Voldemort went to school. No thanks." She looked at her friends and tried to smile. "Maybe we can find a way to meet up in Chicago sometimes. Like when you're on your way to and from school during breaks..."

"What about the *other* stuff?" David asked. "The Alexandra Committee. We got any solutions to that problem yet?"

"No," Alexandra said. "Do you?" She looked at Sonja, who for once had nothing to say.

It was a gloomier coda to their afternoon than she'd wanted. As they walked back to the hostel where David and Sonja and Anna had to rendezvous with the other Charmbridge students, Julia engaged them in conversation about their hometowns. She was as interested in David's Muggle neighborhood as she was in Anna's magical community of Little Wuyi, but even her charm didn't lighten the mood.

Alexandra said to Anna, "I wasn't trying to keep you from talking about me. I just don't have anything new to tell you. And I don't think I'm the most important thing to talk about all the time."

David, walking ahead of them, said, "Really?"

Alexandra shoved him. "Yeah, really. Since when do I want everyone to always be talking about me?"

"That is true," said Julia, who was walking just behind Alexandra and Anna with her parasol over one shoulder. "Alexandra would much prefer never having to tell us anything."

"That's not true," Alexandra said. Catching a sideways look from Anna, she added, "Look, if anyone thinks of anything, let's talk about it. But I'd rather enjoy having my friends and my sister here and not spend the week talking about gloomy stuff we can't do anything about."

Anna closed her mouth, but she was clearly not satisfied with ending the discussion there.

Julia sighed. "There are certain topics we have yet to discuss, dear sister."

"Well, you'uns look plumb wore out," said a hearty male voice. The seven of them turned their attention forward again. As they meandered their way back to the youth hostel, Noah and Burton had approached from down the avenue of stalls and tables to walk alongside the group of younger teens. Noah, who had spoken, addressed Julia with some concern. "Best if'n you take a rest when we get back to Furthest."

"I assure you, I'm in no danger of swooning," Julia said. "It does get hot and humid in Roanoke, you know."

"But you're next to the ocean," Noah said. "I reckon that cools things a bit."

"Yes," Julia admitted, "an ocean breeze *would* be lovely right now."

"Is your brother always so concerned about poor womenfolk in danger of swooning?" Alexandra whispered loudly to Constance and Forbearance.

The twins laughed.

"I feature you find our weather fair enough, Miss Quick?" asked Burton.

"Not so different from home," Alexandra said. "And I've been to Dinétah. It's a lot hotter there."

Burton frowned. "Deenayta? Where's that?"

"The Indian Territories."

Burton continued to look blank. "What were you doin' in Injun territory?" he asked.

Alexandra was slightly annoyed, though she couldn't say why. Perhaps because of Burton's ignorance of anything outside the Ozarks, perhaps because she suspected he was teasing her. "It's a long story."

"We'uns'll have time, back in Furthest," he said.

She shrugged. Behind her, Julia chided: "There, you see? I haven't heard everything about your adventure in Dinétah."

"Me neither," said Sonja. "I want to hear about your adventures, too."

"Maybe next time," Alexandra said. She liked Sonja, but she had not been friends with her since sixth grade as she had with Anna and David and the Pritchards, and Sonja didn't know everything the rest of the Alexandra Committee did. She wondered if the other girl felt left out.

Sonja said in a quiet voice, "It's true about the wardens. But beware what you set free. What you set free, you will have to deal with."

Alexandra looked at her and blinked. "What?"

Sonja turned away and walked to a cauldron corn stand, leaving Alexandra befuddled.

While Noah and Burton went to get the mules, the rest of the group parted from David, Sonja, and Anna on the lane through the foreigners' village. They exchanged embraces and handshakes. Alexandra and David hugged awkwardly.

"Anna, Sonja, we'uns'd sure love for you to come back home with us," said Forbearance.

"You too, 'course," said Constance, with a quick glance at David. "To visit."

"We have to stay here, with all the other Charmbridge students," Anna said, with real regret.

"Chaperoned by Mrs. Speaks and Miss Gambola and Major-General Shirtliffe," said David, rolling his eyes.

"Witch-Colonel," Alexandra said.

"Whatever."

"Maybe we'll get a chance to visit your holler before we leave," Anna said. She held Alexandra's hands, and only reluctantly let their fingers slip apart as Noah called impatiently from down the street.

As they flew back to Furthest, Alexandra looked down at the ground from muleback, and had a sudden thought. "What about the mules?"

Everyone turned to her. "What?"

"We, umm..." Alexandra's voice trailed off. She looked from Constance and Forbearance to their brothers, wondering if she would get the girls in trouble for mentioning their conversation. But David had known about the Unworking from a book — surely it wasn't a great secret?

Forbearance seemed to apprehend the direction of her thoughts. "We'uns told our friends 'bout the Unworking," she said to her brothers. "Hain't secret. I reckon they'll speak of it at the Convocation."

"I don't feature that," said Noah, "but do go on, you two. There seems no stoppin' you from runnin' yore mouths when yore friends is about."

Forbearance turned red and fell silent.

Julia said, "That's not nice, Noah Pritchard. If these are secrets not to be shared with foreigners, then blame Alexandra and myself for being nosy and pressing your sisters too hard on the matter."

Noah and Burton hemmed and hawed. Finally, Noah said, "I allow as it hain't no secret that we'uns Unwork all our spells at the end of the Jubilee."

"An' that includes mules," Burton said. "For a while they will have to get used to stayin' on the ground." He patted the shoulder of his mule.

*So they aren't bred as flying mules*, Alexandra thought. They weren't like the winged goats, or Thestrals and Granians, whom she was pretty sure couldn't simply be turned back into mundane goats and horses. She had another thought. "What about your house?"

"Our house?" Noah said.

"You said your parents laid all those enchantments into the timbers of your house. But if you have to Unwork it..."

"Oh, yup," Burton said. "They do. And then they'uns rework everything. Takes a week, even when all us sons helps."

"We'uns'll be helpin' this year," said Forbearance.

"That remains to be seen," said Noah.

"But... for a week you have to fit everyone into a house that's no bigger on the inside than the outside," Alexandra said.

"Gets a mite crowded," Burton admitted. "But Prudie an' Faithful will be gone by then, an' hopefully Grace'll be back home with Able too."

"That would be lovely," Constance said lightly, in a tone of voice not quite loud enough to carry.

Alexandra puzzled over this all the way back to Furthest. Why create magic items just to destroy them every seven years? Why cast spells that couldn't be permanent? Why redo perfectly good enchantments?

Every seven years.

The connection hit her, not like an electric shock running up her spine or an illuminating light above her head, but with a cold shiver as from a sudden plunge into icy water.

She had no evidence, nor could she figure out how they were related, but it was surely not a coincidence that the Jubilee followed every year after the Deathly Regiment.

Everyone else flew on, oblivious to Alexandra's revelation. She caught Julia watching her thoughtfully, though. Probably thinking about Alexandra's promise to explain the Deathly Regiment, a promise Alexandra wished she hadn't made.

## **\*Chapter 11\*: The Five Families**

Innocence greeted them on the porch of the Pritchard homestead, emerging so quickly that she must have been watching for their return. There was not as much bounce in her step as Alexandra was accustomed to seeing at Charmbridge. Woebegone and resentful, Innocence had been forced to stay home and look after her young nieces and nephews while the older kids went off to Down Below Holler.

"I had to mind *five* chillun all day!" she cried. "Five!"

"Don't carry on like you was mindin' 'em all on your own," Forbearance said. "Prudence 'n Faithful 'n Ma 'n Grace was here. All you had to do was help out a little."

"A little! A little!" Innocence tugged a strand of hair loose from her bonnet, causing her sisters to frown disapprovingly. Innocence's yellow hair was now a brilliant green. "Lookit' what Cody done to me! An' he tried to blow up Misery like a balloon!" She held her toad familiar cradled protectively in one arm. Misery let out a mournful croak. "An' when I was minded to paddle the li'l calamity, Faithful told me I dasn't lay a finger on him! Made out like *I* was bein' unreasonable!"

"Well," said Burton, coming up behind them after having put away the mules, "the boy must be right brimmin' with magic then, hain't he? That's some fearful work for a li'l tad. Jonah an' Faithful oughter be proud."

Innocence glared at her brother. He grinned back at her. "Now tuck yore locks, Innocence, 'fore you get 'em shorn."

"Innocence," said Constance, "how 'bout we go down to the crick for a dip. We'uns could all use freshenin', I reckon."

Innocence brightened.

"An' you'uns stay away, you heathen kobolds," Forbearance said to Burton and Noah.

"Unless you'uns'd like Actaeon's Curse put upon ye," Constance said, very seriously. The boys stopped grinning.

The creek was a short hike through the woods. The bubbling course of water running through the trees was almost invisible until they were upon it. Coming down the hill, wending between rocks and branches, it was no more than ankle-deep in most places, but the Pritchards led them to a spot where it cascaded over a three-foot bluff, spilling into a wide, relatively placid swimming hole.

At the water's edge, Alexandra was nonplussed as the Pritchards stripped off their dresses and bonnets and slid into the water as bare as the day they were born. The sight of their long, blonde hair floating loosely around them was more shocking to her than their pale, naked bodies.

She glanced at Julia. The two of them shrugged, and after some hesitation, they followed suit.

The water was cold but refreshing, and Alexandra felt much better after the unexpected skinny dip, though the yew wand nearly blistered her when she tried to cast a Drying Charm afterwards. Julia tsked, as she used her wand to try to undo some of the damage Alexandra had done to her hair that morning.

As they shuffled through the woods back to the house, Charlie cawed an alarm. They all realized that someone was watching them from beneath the trees. Constance and Forbearance gasped together. Julia and Alexandra followed the direction of their gazes, and Julia drew back in alarm, while Alexandra grabbed both of her wands and raised them together clenched in her fist.

"Afternoon, my dears," said an old woman's voice. "It's a fine day for a swim, hain't it?"

"Granny Pritchard!" exclaimed Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence.

The old woman wore a dress much like the girls', but it was blue and brown, and whatever pattern it once held had faded into a long-forgotten memory. Her bonnet shaded her face almost completely, but her eyes were bright as she stepped forward and accepted the embraces of the three sisters. Then she fixed those gem-like eyes on Alexandra, who had dropped her fist to her side but still held her wands clenched in it.

"So," said Granny Pritchard, "this is that troublesome gal we'uns heard tell of."

"I reckon," Alexandra said.

Granny Pritchard laughed with a surprisingly light, merry voice. "Nettlesome too, hain't she, my dears?"

"Yes'm," said Constance. She and Forbearance both gave Alexandra very serious looks that seemed to be warning her against any more smart retorts.

"I'm Alexandra Quick," Alexandra said. "Pleased to meet you."

Charlie abruptly landed on her shoulder, and standing straight and tall, said in a clear voice: "Troublesome."

"Ah," said Granny Pritchard. She walked forward. She was old — how old, Alexandra couldn't say — but there was no limp or hobble in her step, and her back was as straight and proud as Charlie's. She looked both Alexandra and the raven in the eye.

Alexandra felt uncomfortable beneath her scrutiny. She was sure she was being examined with something beyond vision. She had to concentrate to avoid fidgeting. Beside her, Julia shifted restlessly.

"Thank you," the old woman whispered at last.

"Thank you?" Alexandra repeated in surprise.

"For saving my great-granddaughter," Granny Pritchard said. For a moment, the hard clear edge in her voice softened. Now Alexandra did fidget. Then Granny Pritchard said, "And who is your fine feathered friend?"



Charlie preened and said, "Charlie."

"And this is my sister, Julia," Alexandra said.

Julia made a small curtsy. "I'm very pleased to meet you, ma'am."

"Such fine manners," the old woman said. "I do hope you don't steal one of our beaus from out'n the holler. There's somethin' 'bout foreign witches that draws Ozarker boys, though I could not tell you what. No offense to present company."

"No offense taken, I'm sure," Julia said with a blush. "But I assure you, I'm here for the Jubilee, not for beaus."

"Then enjoy it, my dear." Granny Pritchard turned back to Alexandra. "We'uns'd like a word with you, Miss Quick."

"We'uns who?" Alexandra asked.

"Why, us Grannies."

Behind her, Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence's eyes all widened. Alexandra looked around, almost expecting to see the other Grannies appear out of the woods.

"Not now," Granny Pritchard said. "You young folks go have yourselves a fine time at the Jubilee. But if'n it pleases you, I'll find you later."

"Are we going to go somewhere?" Alexandra asked.

"Not far," Granny Pritchard said.

"What if I don't want to go?"

Constance tensed. Forbearance put a hand to her mouth. Beside her, Julia took Alexandra's arm.

Granny Pritchard only raised her eyebrows with a perplexed half-smile. "We'uns hain't gonna carry you off like hill dwarves, girl. I reckon t'others will be disappointed. But the choice is yourn."

"I'll think about it," Alexandra said.

The old woman didn't seem to like that answer, but she shrugged. She turned back to her great-granddaughters. "You'uns be good, an' don't let me hear that you're bein' an unbiddable little turnipseed, Innocence Catharine. You help your Maw, just like Constance and Forbearance did when you was in nappies."

Innocence, red-faced, hung her head. "Yes, ma'am."

Granny Pritchard patted Innocence on the cheek and kissed her forehead. Then she raised her walking stick and took three steps toward the heavy underbrush alongside the path the girls had been following back to the Pritchards' home. With a wave of her stick, the vegetation parted before her, and she vanished between the trees.

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The next day, everyone left Furthest immediately after breakfast. The Pritchards wore their finest dresses and bonnets. Alexandra refused to don hers again, even if her hair was still a little frizzled, but she agreed to at least wear proper robes without Muggle attire beneath them.

Today they were flying to Clearwater Holler, which was much closer than Down Below Holler and the foreigners' village. It was, the Pritchards said, a more conservative place. Like all the other Hollers, they were open to outsiders for the Jubilee, but few foreigners would be making the trip.

"All the most important families will address their kith an' kin," Noah told them. "S'what we'uns think of as the proper start o' the Jubilee."

David, Anna, and Sonja would be there, along with the other Charmbridge students. So would the Rashes — Clearwater Holler was their home.

As they flew through the air, and a heavy breeze whipped Alexandra's loose hair around her face, Burton drew up alongside her. Alexandra wasn't sure how he did that — no spurring, kicking, or verbal encouragement from her seemed to change her mule's speed.

"Fly! Fly!" said Charlie, gliding along next to them.

"You gots fine raven hair, Miss Quick," Burton said. "Hereabouts it's considered right immodest to show yore hair like that, but I likes to see it."

"Is that so?" Alexandra felt like Burton was teasing her, maybe because his older brother was dominating Julia's attention. She looked sidelong at her sister. Julia was laughing at some comment of Noah's. Alexandra frowned at Noah's familiarity with Julia as he touched her knee to steady her while she lifted both hands to retie her bonnet, which was catching the breeze.

"They'uns make a right purty couple, don't they?" said Burton.

"Julia's just being nice. She's nice to everyone," Alexandra said, annoyed.

"Why Miss Quick, I get the feelin' you feature Ozarkers beneath you."

Burton's voice was loud enough for his sisters to hear. They turned startled eyes in her direction. Alexandra exclaimed, "No! That's ridiculous!"

Burton laughed. Alexandra scowled at him.

"Alexandra, don't you mind this peezealtree backwoods gnarl we'uns is unfortunate enough to be kin to," Constance said.

The mules descended toward the ground, which was a panoply of people and color snaking around a wet, wooded landscape surrounded by rivers and lakes.

Burton just kept grinning at Alexandra.

"Jerk," said Charlie.

"You tell him, Charlie," Alexandra said.

Burton clicked his tongue. "What a terrible vain, vexin' thing."

"Don't insult my familiar," Alexandra said.

"Wasn't talkin' 'bout yore familiar." Burton laughed loudly as they settled onto the ground and kicked his mule forward to amble out ahead of Noah and Julia. He swiftly leaped off and took Julia's mule as she prepared to dismount, prompting a brief contest of gallantry between the two Pritchard boys.

"Jerk," Alexandra muttered.

Clearwater Holler did not have a foreigners' village, only a collection of booths, sheds, tents, and stages erected amongst the trees, with charming wooden bridges arching in defiance of wind and gravity over the streams and rivers that sliced through the woods every hundred yards or so. There were platforms magically suspended up in the trees; some had musicians on them, playing pipes and banjos, while others seemed to be merely observation decks for gatherings of Ozarker children who watched the foreigners passing below them with wide eyes. Alexandra saw one boy, too young for a wand, sighting on someone with a slingshot. Before she could see whether he would actually let loose a stone, someone called her and her friends' names.

Sonja, David, and Anna came squeezing through the crowd. Sonja wore regular robes today and had abandoned her bonnet, letting her red curls tumble loose around her shoulders. Anna wore flashy Chinese robes. Rather than a bonnet, she had pinned her hair into elegant ribboned spirals. David wore his best dark robes and the hat he'd purchased the day before. They didn't quite match, but David strutted along looking more pleased with himself than usual.

"Check this out," he said when he reached Alexandra and the Pritchards. He lifted his hat, turned it over, reached his hand into it, and pulled out his wand.

"Great," Alexandra said, sliding off her mule. "You learned a magic trick. I had a book that taught me how to do that when I was nine."

David frowned. "This isn't a Muggle magic trick. I actually enchanted my hat. Look." He dropped his wand into the hat, and it disappeared.

"Oh," Alexandra said. "Well, that's pretty cool."

"That hain't cool, it's great!" Innocence exclaimed.

"That's a right pretty piece of work, David," said Constance.

"You don't start learning to make wizard-spaces until you get to Advanced Enchantments at Charmbridge," Anna said.

"Told you this hat was awesome." David basked in the approbation. He shook the hat, then frowned and turned it upside down. When nothing happened, he reached a hand into it, then his arm, all the way past the elbow.

"Beware new enchantments," Sonja intoned. "You tamper with forces —"

"Shut up, Sonja!" David's expression became increasingly frantic.

While Noah and Burton tied up the mules, David spent the next several minutes trying to get his hat to disgorge his wand without success. When he seemed on the verge of despair, Alexandra pointed her yew wand and said, "*Accio wand*."

David's long beechwood wand shot out of his hat and struck Alexandra on the collarbone; the stinging impact knocked her back a step. David hastily snatched his wand off the ground, while Alexandra rubbed the spot that would become a bruise shortly.

"Alexandra!" said Julia with concern.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked. "That wand of yours doesn't seem to be working right."

Alexandra glared at the wand clenched in her fist. "It's just taking a while to adjust to me."

Constance and Forbearance looked at each other.

"Alex," said Constance, "if'n a wand hain't kinned to you..."

"It won't just 'adjust,'" said Forbearance.

"You have to edzact yourself to it," said Constance.

"An' that's hard 'n difficult work."

"Also," Constance said, and the twins both paused.

"What?" Alexandra said.

"Well, it takes patience," said Forbearance.

"A heap o' patience," said Constance.

"What it needs is to learn who's boss." Alexandra put the wand away, feeling its resistance beneath her fingertips.

"I do believe you are proving Constance and Forbearance's point, dear sister," said Julia.

"Well, howdy, Miss Chu, Miss Rackham, Mr. Washington," said Noah as he and Burton returned. "The Five Families is about to elocute, if'n y'all want to move along to the speakin' grounds."

"Five Families? Sounds like mobsters," David said.

"I don't know what a mobster is," Noah said, "but the Five Families is the Sawyers, the Donaldsons, the Stuarts, the Bevins, an' the Pritchards."

"So you guys are actually one of the families in charge of the Ozarks?" Alexandra said.

"I had no idea," Anna said.

Burton chuckled, while Constance and Forbearance shook their heads forcefully.

"Hain't no one in charge o' the Ozarks," said Constance. "We'uns hain't got no leaders, not wrote official like in the Confederation. But the oldest families, the ones who was first to cross from the Old World, they'uns is esteemed more'n most."

"Hence the words of our family heads got some weight," said Noah. "But don't misapperhend that we'uns is Elect or such like, Miss Quick."

Alexandra exchanged a look with Anna. Not many people talked about the Elect even in the Confederation. She wondered how much knowledge Ozarkers had about the Deathly Regiment.

The "speaking grounds" were no more than a bare knoll surrounded by a large amount of dry ground with few trees, set apart from the creek-side tents and sheds and the bedecked trees where the festivities were going on. Ozarkers and a small number of foreigners were still flowing out of the trees to form a large circle around the knoll, atop which a group of men milled about, smoking wizard tobacco and drinking from thin glass flutes that looked quite out of place here. As the crowd grew, most of the men, dressed in wool trousers and jackets, drifted toward the near edges, where their wives stood in dresses and bonnets, leaving five men in top hats at the center, including Mr. Pritchard.

"Well I'll be spitted proper," said an Ozarker man standing nearby in a tall felt hat, speaking to his companion, a younger fellow likewise dressed in a jacket and hat and puffing on a corncob pipe. "Balthazar Donaldson done showed."

"Thought everyone from Scotch Ridge was gonna shun the Jubilee whilst furriners is about," said the man with the pipe. His eyes and his companion's both slid in the direction of Alexandra and her friends. Anna and David both frowned. Julia fixed her attention on the men in the center of the gathering, but Alexandra met the man's gaze until he looked away.

None of the Pritchards had mentioned their father's role in the gathering today, nor hinted that their family held any particular status. Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence all pushed forward as far as they dared, their faces lit with adoration. Noah and Burton also seemed to swell with pride as the Ozarkers noted and recognized them. Burton, Alexandra thought, was the more swell-headed of the two. He stood with his thumbs hooked under his suspenders and his chest puffed out, and when he caught Alexandra scrutinizing him, he cocked an eyebrow and nodded toward the knoll.

"Yeah, I got it, that's your father," she said.

"I hain't drawin' yore notice to my paw," he said. "Look further."

Alexandra did. Past Mr. Pritchard and the other Ozarker patriarchs, past their wives, there was a small break in the crowd encircling them. There, seated in the only chairs in evidence around the speaking grounds, was a gathering of very old women, all dark and drab in contrast to the calico patterns and bright stripes and flowers worn by the other Ozarker women at the Jubilee. Most of the elderly witches wore bonnets matching their plain, dark dresses, but a couple wore robes and hats like Colonial witches. One of the latter was Granny Pritchard.

So, Alexandra thought, these were the Grannies. She counted twelve of them. None seemed to be looking in her direction, but she still felt a prickling at the back of her neck that made her stand up straighter, as one being measured and not wanting to be underestimated might do.

"Greetin's to all my kinfolk from Down Below Holler!" called one of the five men at the center of the crowd. He did not use magic to amplify his voice, but most of the crowd quieted, except for a contingent of Ozarkers apparently from Down Below Holler who hooted and cheered.

"And o' course all you'uns from t'other Hollers, an' our foreign guests as well!" The speaker was plump and jovial, quite a contrast from the other four, who, including Mr. Pritchard, all wore dour expressions and seemed to be in anything but a festive mood.

"I'm Leland Sawyer, but most o' you'uns already knows that," continued the cheerful speaker. "For the furriners amongst us, I hope you'uns enjoy yore visit, an' that you'uns will favor us with yore attendance at the big dance Friday night, one of the few times you'uns will ever find our folk dancin' with youall."

While some of the younger people cheered at this, a sort of disgruntled hush fell over most of the Ozarkers. It didn't appear that a mixed dance was a universally welcome event. The Grannies sat almost immobile, faces like stone. Two of them were knitting. Granny Pritchard folded her arms across her chest in a posture that reminded Alexandra of Constance.

Leland Sawyer's welcome speech went on for several minutes. It was devoid of interest to Alexandra — he didn't talk much at all about the Jubilee itself or its purpose.

"No wonder ol' Leland's gettin' himself a reputation for bein' a Confederation lickspittle," someone nearby muttered.

"Sounds like a durned barker," said someone else. "Just open the Ozarks right up to every witch 'n warlock, why don't we?"

Julia looked around as tension grew in the air. Aside from the Pritchards, all the other Ozarkers near them were giving the foreigners a wide berth.

"Reminds me of back home," Anna whispered in Alexandra's ear. "A lot of Chinese wizards still think my great-great-grandfather betrayed our community."

Then a pang of realization crossed her face, and she looked down.

Alexandra knew what Anna was thinking: *He did*. The Chu progenitor had led the Chinese wizarding community into the Confederation, and bound them to the Deathly Regiment. She took Anna's hand and squeezed it. Anna's father was trying to undo what his ancestor had done, though Alexandra's father believed that Mr. Chu's cause was hopeless.

"Dancin' and sellin' our best works an' showin' Ozarker hospitality is fine and good," said one of the other men at the center of the great gathering, who stepped forward without introducing himself when Leland Sawyer wound down. "But let all our visitors know, as we'uns need also be mindful, that the Jubilee celebrates forgiveness o' debts an' obligations."

"Jeremiah'll sermonize us for-ever," grumbled a man behind Alexandra.

"Them Bevins is allus long-winded," agreed his companion, a man older than any of the men at the center. "His daddy would go on for hours."

Alexandra wanted to shush the Ozarkers who continued to talk and mutter. The speakers were now talking about something Alexandra was interested in, and she squeezed Anna's hand harder to vent her frustration at the continued chatter around her.

Anna didn't resist or pull away, just said, "Ow," softly.

Alexandra released her grip. "Sorry."

"Every seven years," Jeremiah Bevins went on, "we'uns sacrifice our works, our magic, all the charms an' blessin's an' transfigurations we have accumulated to make our lives easier. In doing this, we'uns give up comforts that outsiders enjoy. We impoverish ourselves, despite the fact that our magic is as powerful as any in the Confederation... indeed, some might argue," and here his voice became low and conspiratorial, and the audience stilled and leaned in in response, "much. More. Powerful."

Even the grumblers behind Alexandra fell into respectful silence. It was the handful of foreigners in the crowd who muttered. One man laughed, before the glares of dozens of Ozarkers caused him to shrink back beneath his cloak.

"And why?" demanded Jeremiah Bevins.

Yes, *why*? wondered Alexandra. But "sermonizing" seemed right — she recognized the cadence of the man's speech, much like the times she had been forced to listen to the minister lecture the children at Larkin Mills Baptist Church's Vacation Bible School, and suspected that like the Baptist preacher, he would answer his own rhetorical question with a long, windy speech that would explain nothing.

Instead, the oldest of the five family patriarchs, a white-haired, hatless man standing next to Mr. Pritchard, stepped forward.

"Yes, why?" he demanded in a booming voice. Next to him, Jeremiah Bevins was no less surprised than Alexandra at hearing her silent question echoed aloud.

"Jeremiah Bevins, you speak finely of the sacrifices we'uns make, though perhaps you oughter speak o' the sacrifices we'uns *don't* make."

Silence fell over the crowd, while Alexandra nearly pushed Innocence aside as she leaned forward, listening intently.

"For how many generations," said the white-haired man, "have we'uns dwelt here in our mountain steadfasts, shy o' the Confederation 'cept when they'uns impose revenueurs an' Inquisitors 'pon us? An' wasn't we'uns originally resolved to have no truck with them from the world o' sorcerers beholden to the Compact? Yet now every seven years we'uns welcome — *welcome!* — furriners into our midst!"

Uneasiness stirred the crowd. Confusion and disquiet registered on the faces of Ozarkers and visitors alike.

"Aye, that's the Jubilee tradition. We'uns must forgive all debts an' let all wrongs be forgot. But I see Ozarker witches an' wizards sellin' dolls and dresses and bonnets to all the furriners come to gawk and jeer at our simple, primitive ways, an' do you doubt there is charms an' enchantments bein' exchanged for Confederation gold — *goblin* gold — which will leave the Ozarks and not be Unworked?"

The nervousness of the crowd increased. Nervousness and guilt, Alexandra thought, seeing the shifting gazes and uncomfortable stances of people who were not at all happy about what they were hearing, especially the parts they knew to be true.

"Dangnabbit, Balthazar's got a thorn up his hindsides," said the Ozarker in the felt hat.

"I don't reckon he's done yet," said his younger companion.

Indeed, Balthazar Donaldson spread his hands in the manner of a classical orator. "I say," he declared, "that it is time for a real Jubilee, a true Jubilee, the forgivin' of all debts for all time, and the end of our seven and seven and seven years, over and over again, seven years o' labor for one day o' waste. We'uns have done it for generations — we'uns ought do it no longer!"

He stretched a finger out over the crowd. "We'uns have done it not for our ourselves," he said. "You'all were no doubt told stories in the cradle 'bout the first Ozarkers an' how we'uns made a world apart to protect our kith 'n kin. But it's a lie! It's the kind o' lie that has a seed o' truth an' so is the worst kind of lie as it hides what ought to be known — we'uns do it for *them*. The Muggles."

Audible gasps rose from the crowd now. Leland Sawyer and Jeremiah Bevins stepped close to Mr. Donaldson and spoke to him in low voices, but he shrugged them off. A few feet away, Mr. Pritchard said nothing, but if a face that barely moved at all could be said to grow more taciturn, his did.

"Constance," whispered Alexandra to the nearest of the Pritchards, "what is he talking about?"

"I don't rightly know," Constance said. "But I'm purty shore he oughtn't be talkin' 'bout it."

"We'uns live in a world apart," said Balthazar Donaldson, raising his voice to drown out the whispers and the mutters and to dismiss the words of the men next to him, "when we'uns should live in a world away! Away from all this! A world where we'uns are beholden only to our own, a world free o' foreign oaths and Compacts, free of elves an' goblins an' hags and other Dark creatures, and without the Confederation ever sittin' on our borders *pretendin'* to let us live in peace. Without Dark Wizards recruitin' our young people, and the daughters of Dark Wizards infiltratin' our very Hollers!"

Alexandra stiffened. So did Julia. Constance and Forbearance's eyes went wide. Then, almost immediately, they moved closer. So did Noah and Burton, as if to form a protective shield around the two daughters of Abraham Thorn.

"I think he's speaking rhetorically," Anna whispered, her eyes darting left and right.

"Maybe," Alexandra said.

Noah, standing tall next to Julia, surveyed the crowd around them. No one else seemed to be giving them unusual attention.

"The eldest amongst us know whereof I speak!" shouted Balthazar Donaldson, now quite warmed up to his topic and evidently not to be stopped short of use of force, which no one seemed inclined to do. He turned around and dropped his accusing finger lower, leveling it at the crowd of old women seated behind him. "The Grannies, they know! I suspect they'uns knows far, far more'n they share, keepin' secrets in the spiteful way of old women. I have heard whispered Names, and chaw 'bout gathered pieces of a Great Work."

"Is he drunk?" asked David, a little too loudly. Several Ozarkers in the crowd glared at him. Innocence put a hand over her mouth, to hide shock or laughter, Alexandra couldn't tell which. But she was paying more attention to the Grannies. If Balthazar Donaldson expected them to recoil, object, or deny his accusations, he was disappointed. They continued listening with polite attention as if he'd commented on the weather. The two women who were knitting didn't drop a stitch.

"We'uns will allus remain here in our world apart, so long as we'uns lack the gumption to do what we'uns assayed to do centuries ago," Donaldson said, turning back to the crowd. "And that is why we of Scotch Ridge decline to participate in this Jubilee. We'uns will *not* participate in the Blessing, or as I call it, the Scapegoating. Let them as would sacrifice for the sake o' furriners an' those not of our blood go on sacrificin'... or join us in rejecting this seven-year sham and folderol and force them who has perpetuated it longer'n ever it was needed to stop it. It is time, my brothers and sisters! The World Away awaits us, and it hain't lack o' magic or lack o' learnin' that keeps us from it, only lack o' will!"

With that, Balthazar Donaldson turned and strode away from the four men beside him, through the crowd gathered around, into the midst of a group of male Ozarkers, uniformly dour men in dark pants and shirts. All of them Disapparated away, leaving the rest of the Jubilee gathering in turmoil and confusion.

"What the *heck* was he talking about?" David demanded.

Julia put an arm around Alexandra. Noah and Burton gathered with her friends in a protective circle despite the fact that there had so far been no sign of an actual threat, no indication that Donaldson's allusions had been taken literally or that any of the bystanders nearby had placed faces to the nameless "Dark Wizards' daughters."

Alexandra wasn't very worried about this, but she studied the faces of the spectators, including Mr. Pritchard, still at the center of the gathering, trying to see a hint of hidden knowledge, an indication that someone knew more than they were saying. That was when her eyes fell upon the Grannies. Now that attention was no longer focused on them, they were talking to one another. One nodded, another shook her head, and they were all rising to their feet, some helped by younger relatives, but each and every one of them, at some point, looked in Alexandra's direction.

## \*Chapter 12\*: Exodans

"Scotch Ridge has allus been full o' starched britches 'n stiff necks," said Noah as they dispersed with the crowd. He and Burton walked on either side of the group, casually eyeing the Ozarkers who jostled against them on all sides. "I wouldn't put no mind to what Balthazar said. The Donaldsons is a runctious lot, every last one of 'em, even the ones who went to other Hollers by marriage."

"They'uns're all Exodans, hain't they?" said Innocence.

"We'uns don't need to talk 'bout that, Innocence," Noah snapped.

"Seems to me," said Constance, and she paused, as if gathering her nerve before continuing: "Seems to me that they'uns're eager to talk 'bout it. Raised it right up there afore the entire Five Hollers, guests 'n Ozarkers alike, Mr. Donaldson did. It don't seem to me that they'uns wants to be discrete atall."

Noah let out a long breath. Before he could speak again, Burton said, "I reckon Connie's right. I heard 'em spreadin' evil words 'bout furriners an' the Confederation. They reckon the Jubilee's a good time to bring more folks into their camp."

"The Exodan camp," said Alexandra.

"You got sharp ears, don't you Miss Quick?" said Noah.

"An' a big nose," said Burton. He tapped his own nose. Sonja giggled, and he winked at her.

"Yes, Alexandra is very good at digging up secrets," Julia said, "and keeping them." The reproach in her tone pulled Alexandra's attention away from Burton's smirk.

Anna said, "You don't have to explain anything to us you don't want to."

"You know Alex won't let it go," David said.

"Hey!" Alexandra protested.

Noah shook his head. "It hain't that the Exodans is secret. But talkin' 'bout 'em is like talkin' 'bout an ornery uncle who drinks too much of his own shine — everyone knows 'bout him, but you still don't like the subject bein' raised 'round outsiders."

"We are sorry," Julia said. "We don't wish to embarrass you."

"I know you'd never, Miss Julia," said Noah.

"We'uns hain't embarrassed," Constance said.

"'Cept by Mr. Donaldson," said Forbearance.

"But what is it that Balthazar Donaldson said you're doing for Muggles?" Alexandra asked. "What did he mean by a 'real' Jubilee, and sacrifices? And all that stuff about a world apart, like you aren't already apart enough from the Confederation?"

"Well, that's just it," Noah said. "They'uns reckon we ain't." He pulled off his hat, ran his fingers through his dark hair, and paused to let another family pass by. A bearded man and a plump wife and four young boys, all wearing matching suspenders and red knit shirts, stared at Alexandra, Anna, David, Sonja, and Julia as if they were exhibits in a zoo.

"They'uns is *furriners*," whispered one boy.

"BOO!" David shouted. All four boys yelped and scrambled away, seeking refuge behind their mother. She glared at David. The family hurried on.

"That weren't nice, David," said Constance, trying not to smile.

Alexandra waited impatiently. Noah put his hat back on, inclined his head toward the long wooden fence where many mules besides their own were tied, and resumed walking. Everyone followed.

"We'uns, that is to say, our ancestors, took the Road West to get away from the rest o' the wizardin' world," Noah said. "First from the Old World to this one, an' then when foreigners came in ever greater numbers an' surrounded us all about, we'uns went west again, from Appalachia to the Ozarks."

"What, you thought nobody else would keep going west?" David said. "You could've gone all the way to California and you still would have been surrounded again."

"My community lives surrounded by Muggles," Anna said, "but we still live in a world apart."

"Apart, yeah," Noah said. "But you'uns can't get away from Muggles entirely, can you?"

"My mother is a Muggle," Anna said, with an edge in her voice.

Noah paused, perhaps drawn up short by Anna's tone, or perhaps by his sisters' scowls.

"Ozarkers don't never harm Muggles, Miss Anna," he said. "I will allow as there's some who don't much prefer Muggles, but an Ozarker will no more harm a Muggle than he'd harm a mule."

Anna stopped in her tracks. David's expression matched Anna's.

"Noah Arthur Pritchard, you're right beastly," Constance said.

"Noah's meanin' wasn't to compare Muggles to mules," Forbearance said, distressed.

"Sounded like it to me," David said.

"Now listen, I do not despise Muggles," Noah said, "but I'll be broomed if a bunch o' *young'uns* is gonna lecture me." They had reached the corral, and Noah untied his mule with jerky motions that made the animal bray in disapproval.

Alexandra held her tongue because she still wanted to hear about Exodans. Noah, however, fixed his features into stone. Whatever had made him momentarily loquacious, he was no longer in a talkative mood. He said only, "Let's hie back to Furthest. *Some* of us have work to do afore we'uns can go dancin' an' frolicatin'."

Anna, Sonja, and David, though they had to return to the foreigners' village and rejoin the other Charmbridge students that evening, had gotten permission to visit Furthest for the day, which meant riding the mules back. Anna and David eyed the creatures dubiously.

"Flying mules," David said.

"You've seen flying carpets, flying brooms, and flying goats and horses," Alexandra said. "What's so hard to believe about flying mules?"

"Well, flying goats and horses have wings," Anna said, trying not to shrink away from the mule that poked its nose at her. "Innately non-magical creatures can't be given the power of flight without adding wings or something... It's complicated, but there's a whole field of Arithmantic equations related to flight—"

"They fly, Anna dear," said Forbearance. "You can ride with me. Don't worry, Sterling's gentle as can be."

Sterling brayed loudly, making Anna jump.

"Well, obviously I knew we'd be flying by mule," Sonja said. "I'll ride with Burton." Burton grinned.

"Who'm I riding with?" David asked, edging casually toward Julia.

"Me," Alexandra said, grabbing his sleeve. "And you can hold onto the saddle, not me." As she mounted her mule and gave David a hand up, Julia winked at her before leaning close to whisper something to the still-brooding Noah.

The mules rose with barely a twitch, ascending like hot-air balloons with four legs.

David relaxed a little after the first few minutes, though he still kept muttering about preferring brooms. Anna wrapped her arms around Forbearance's waist so tightly that Forbearance asked her to loosen her grip a bit.

The flight back to Furthest was scenic at first, but between the Hollers, the bright cloudless morning turned overcast. Even just a few hundred feet off the ground, clouds formed with astonishing speed. Where minutes earlier Alexandra had been able to see to what must have been the Arkansas border, suddenly Noah, only a few yards in the lead, had become a gray shape in the mist.

A shadow fell across them all, and Alexandra thought at first that they must have become disoriented and were drifting close to a hillside. Then the mules all sent up a cacophonous braying that almost drowned out the beat of leathery wings. Charlie let out a shrieking caw and abruptly dove out of sight. Sonja screamed.

Alexandra's yew wand was out of its sheath and in her hand before her brain registered what she was seeing — vast scaled wings, a tail as large as a tree whipping through the air, great talons large enough to seize one of the mules — and then it had passed on, wings slamming the air and tail lashing in its wake.

"Whoa," David said.

And then they were surrounded, dragons on all sides, surging past them like great lethal sharks swimming past a school of minnows too puny to even take notice of. They were green and black, tinted blue and silver, with scales like shingles and heads that were serrated racks of fangs and horns.

Anna squeezed her eyes shut and buried her face in Forbearance's back. Julia sat straight and tall. Her eyes were wide, but she watched the great reptiles with more amazement than fear.

"Jeez," said David, as the mule he and Alexandra rode shuddered and dipped lower. Alexandra was still holding her yew wand in one hand, though she realized how foolish it would be to throw a spell at the beasts flying past. Any one of the dragons could sweep the lot of them out of the air in an instant. With her other hand she pulled on the mule's reins, trying to keep the animal from dropping to the ground.

"It's the Confederation Air Force," said Noah, in a tone not of awe or fear, but irritation, almost disgust.

The dragons had riders. Men in blue pants and tunics, with heavy leather boots and thick gray cloaks flapping behind them, sat astride the reptiles on hard black saddles. They were faceless behind burnished steel helmets, but clinging to each man was a passenger, and the passengers' faces, protected by goggles and leather caps, were turned in astonishment toward the flying mules and their riders.

They were kids, Alexandra realized, and they wore the blue and gray uniforms of the Junior Regimental Officer Corps.

"William!" shouted Innocence.

Although his blond hair and pudgy face was hidden beneath his headgear, the short, stubby boy in a JROC uniform was unmistakable. He was clinging to the rider of one of the biggest dragons of all, an enormous black leviathan with wings that blocked out the sun. William slipped one hand free to wave at them, and then the dragons were gone, disappearing into the fog over the Ozark hills.

"See, nothin' to be feared of," Burton said. He had fallen back to hover alongside Alexandra and David. Sonja was clinging to him in terror.

"I wasn't feared," Alexandra said, yanking on her reins. "It's this stupid mule who's feared."

"I wasn't feared — I mean, afraid — either," said David. "What's the matter, Sonja? Your 'inner eye' couldn't see a freaking *dragon* coming?"

Burton thumped their mule on the head. The mule's ears flicked forward and it brayed indignantly. "You behave, Breezy."

Breezy brayed again, and Burton grabbed the reins from Alexandra's hand, ignoring her protests, and yanked hard until the mule stopped its descent. Burton descriptively cataloged the animal's behavioral, aesthetic and familial deficiencies, including a few words Alexandra hadn't heard before. Breezy brayed, but stopped resisting.

"I thought Ozarkers would never hurt a mule," Alexandra said.

"I din't hurt this cowardly, ornery thing," Burton said. "That's just how you gotter talk to mules. They're a bit like girls — they'uns don't listen 'til you talk sweet to 'em." He winked and leaned forward. Sonja giggled, with a touch of hysteria. Their mule carried them back to where Noah and Julia floated.

Alexandra rolled her eyes behind his back. "He is such a jerk."

"Big fat jerk," said Charlie, reappearing out of the mist and landing on the back of the mule's neck.

"Nice of you to rejoin us, scaredy-bird," said Alexandra. She cast a glare over her shoulder at David. "What are you snickering at?"

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Mr. Pritchard hadn't returned home from Clearwater Holler yet, so only Mrs. Pritchard and her eldest daughter and daughter-in-law were there to greet the returning teenagers. David, Anna, and Sonja were politely appreciative of the homestead, with David and Sonja showing more overt curiosity. The two youngest children, Whimsy and Done, were overtly curious in turn about the foreigners, as they assembled in the Pritchards' large dining room. The women and the twins had gone to prepare food for everyone.

"Are you from China?" Whimsy asked Anna.

"No, I'm from California," Anna said.

"Oh. Do you speak Californian?" Whimsy asked.

"Like, omigod, totally," said Anna.

Alexandra stared at her. "You've been watching TV."

Anna grinned.

"He's never seen a black person before, has he?" David asked, gesturing at Done, who stood silently next to Whimsy, one hand in his mouth and eyes wide.

Constance entered the room with a tray full of stew bowls and bread and tea. "You was the first black person we'uns ever met, David, that day on the Charmbridge bus." She laid the tray on the table and gently nudged her little brother toward the next room with Whimsy. "But we'uns hadn't seen many furriners atall afore that, an' Whimsy an' Done hain't never even left Furthest. I'm sorry we'uns hain't as *cosmopolitan* as you'uns in Detroit an' Chicago an' San Francisco. But we'uns never thought ill o' no one, even if you'uns was *all* terrible strange an' foreign to us when we'uns first left."

A graver expression settled over David's face. "I know that."

"I hope you know that," Constance said. "We'uns invited you'all here 'cause we'uns want you to know that Ozarkers is not hateful people."

"Where's Julia?" Alexandra asked. David and Constance didn't seem to hear her. Anna looked around and shrugged.

"Talkin' to Noah outside," Forbearance said, entering the room with another tray of food. She tilted her head at Alexandra's frown. "Is somethin' amiss?"

"No, of course not," Alexandra said.

Sonja asked to use the bathroom and slipped away. When Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence were all out of the room again, Alexandra turned to Anna. "You told Julia," she said. "You told her everything."

"Not everything," Anna said.

"You told her way too much."

"Don't just blame Anna," David said. "She talked to me about it first, and I agreed we should."

"Then I'm pissed at you too," Alexandra said.

Anna turned her face away.

"Hey," David protested.

"You had no right to tell Julia about my geas," Alexandra said.

Anna raised her head abruptly and said, "I'm not sorry."

Alexandra stopped talking, taken aback.

"You're right, I didn't have the right," Anna said. "Julia's your sister and it's your family business. You can keep everything secret from your sister, who loves you and is at least as good at magic as all of us, because you're stubborn and you hate having anyone help you and you think you're the



only one allowed to take risks or be in danger. But I did it, because I think she can help and I knew she'd want to know, and you were being a jerk by not telling her."

Alexandra stared at her friend. David folded his arms and studied the floor.

"I don't blame you for being angry at me," Anna said, "but I'm not sorry. So you can yell at me or hex me or just be pissed, but I did it for your own good."

"We did it for your own good," David said. "And please don't hex me."

"For my own good?" Alexandra repeated. "You're making decisions for me for my own good now?"

"Yeah, 'cause you never make decisions for anyone else for their own good," David said. "Anna's right — be mad, but don't be a hypocrite."

Stung, Alexandra said, "You could have talked to me about it first. You could have *suggested* I talk to Julia."

"You'd have said no," David said.

Sonja returned, ending the conversation.

Alexandra's anger wasn't lessened by the feeling that her friends had her dead to rights. She felt aggrieved and betrayed, and petty and small for feeling that way. She tried not to show her ill temper when Constance and Forbearance returned, carrying yet more food.

Noah and Julia joined everyone else at the table when they all sat down to eat. Noah said little, and he and Burton both disappeared immediately after lunch, leaving their mother and sisters to do the cleaning.

"Oh, do let us help," said Julia, rising and drawing her wand. Alexandra, Sonja, and Anna immediately chimed in their agreement.

David slouched in his chair with a lazy grin until Alexandra kicked his ankle. He jumped up and said "Me, too."

"I will not hear this," said Mrs. Pritchard. "No guests in my house are doin' chores. You'uns put your wands away. I mean it!"

She shoed her daughters' friends outside, so the five teens ambled out onto the porch, waiting for Constance and Forbearance to finish.

"Doesn't look like the boys do much work," Alexandra said.

"That's for sure," Anna said, with a sideways glance.

"Hey!" David protested. "I offered, too."

"You shouldn't make assumptions, Alexandra," said Julia. "Noah has to fix the barn, which is held together by charms that are going to be dispelled soon, and Burton has to make sure the goats and pigs and other livestock won't get out after the Unworking."

"So while Noah was telling you all that, did he tell you about Exodans?" Alexandra asked.

"We did not discuss Exodans," Julia said.

Alexandra folded her arms and watched balefully as Burton emerged from an outbuilding with large coils of rope slung over both shoulders. The ropes were heavy and thick, and he wore a long-sleeved shirt even beneath the beating summer sun, so he was sweating profusely before he began rigging up some sort of complicated tether around the flying goats' pen.

Sonja looked back and forth between Burton and Alexandra. She put a hand over her mouth.

"What?" Alexandra demanded.

"Nothing." Sonja dropped her hand. "I'm going to talk to Burton. You won't mind, since you want to talk to everyone else without me."

Alexandra opened her mouth.

"I know more than you think I do, Alexandra," Sonja said. "I've seen it with my Inner Eye."

"Okay, where's my father, right now?" Alexandra asked. "If that works, I could think of some really useful things to do with your Inner Eye. Have you ever heard of a Muggle game called a lottery?"

Sonja scowled at her. "It doesn't work like that. My Inner Eye sees, it doesn't look."

"Uh huh."

"Eventually you'll learn to appreciate my gifts. You consulted me for your Naming, and for witch's knowledge, which you definitely shouldn't forget."

"Witch's knowledge? Oh my," said Julia, as Alexandra's cheeks reddened.

"What is — never mind," said David.

"It's fine. Talk to your sister," Sonja said. She hopped off the porch and walked over to Burton.

After a minute of silence on the porch, interrupted only by animal and insect noises and the clinking of dishes inside, Julia laid a hand on Alexandra's shoulder.

"So, do we not have things to discuss, dear sister?" Julia asked.

Anna said, "We can't have a private conversation with all these people around."

Alexandra watched Burton working around the pens, while Sonja sat on a fence chatting with him. Sweat was streaming down his face and back. His shirt clung to him, and he paused to wipe a damp sleeve across his forehead.

"Maybe down by the creek," Alexandra muttered.

"Do you want to go skinny dipping again?" Julia asked, amused. "It is very hot today."

"Skinny dipping?" Anna exclaimed.

"Wait, again?" David said. "You mean, you went —"

"Wipe that smirk off your face, dork," Alexandra said, transferring her attention from Burton to David.

"So, we gonna go skinny dipping?" David asked.

"Sure," Alexandra said. "You first, and we'll watch."

"Watch what?" asked Constance, walking out onto the porch, followed by Forbearance and Innocence.

"Nothing!" David said quickly.

"Skinny dipping," said Anna. "We're learning a lot about Ozarker customs."

The Pritchards blushed.

"How about we take a walk by the creek and keep our clothes on?" Alexandra said. She pointed a finger at David. "Say one word."

He held his hands up, but the smirk stayed on his face.

Alexandra turned to face the Pritchards. Innocence's face was alight, until she saw Alexandra's.

"Oh no," she said, "are you goin' to skeet me back inside to help with the little'uns an' cleanin' an' fetchin'?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "I mean, not the chores. I'm sorry you keep getting stuck with those. But —"

"Guess I hain't really your friend noways!" Innocence cried, barely controlling her tears. "Y'all are just like my bossy sisters who think I'm just a stupid li'l chile!" She turned around and stomped inside, brushing off Forbearance's hand.

"Awkward," said Anna.

"She'll meller out and forgive us soon enough," said Forbearance.

"Is it really necessary to exclude her?" Julia asked. "And Sonja? I know she's chatty, but surely she can be trusted."

"Yes, we need to exclude them both," Alexandra said. "You'll understand after I tell you."

Julia raised her eyebrows at that, but didn't argue. As the six of them trooped off into the woods, Burton called out, "Hey, where y'all goin'?"

"Skinny dipping!" Alexandra called back, before Burton's sisters could answer. Anna and David snickered and Julia giggled. Even Constance and Forbearance laughed.

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They came to the same watering hole as before, but though the water was clear and inviting, everyone sat on one of the big rocks, or at the water's edge. Anna pulled her robes up to her knees and slid off her shoes and socks. David rolled up his pants legs and did the same, and the two of them dangled their feet in the water.

"Well?" asked Julia. She folded her hands expectantly on her lap.

Alexandra drew her yew wand and concentrated a moment, rehearsing the word and the gesture in a way she didn't normally have to for a spell she'd thoroughly mastered. "*Muffliato*."

There was the sound of air escaping somewhere around her ears, accompanied by a slight buzzing, but the spell seemed to take. With a sigh, she put the wand back in her sleeve.

"So, my *friends* told you about my geas," she said. Her cutting tone made Anna and David examine their hands.

"Yes, they did," Julia replied coolly, "and if you're angry at them for sharing confidences, then may I point out that it hurts me deeply that you didn't see fit to take me into your confidence in the first place."

"I wasn't trying to hurt you," Alexandra said. "I was trying to —"

"Protect me, yes, you foolish girl." Julia waved a hand dismissively, almost angrily. "And we both know you are a gallivanting headstrong fool, and you *have no business trying to protect me*! I'm older than you, Alexandra, and Maximilian would want me to look after you, not the other way around. It's my right and privilege to do so, and you would deprive me of it. And you don't trust me and you turn your anger on your friends because you're so unbearably obstinate!"

The words shocked Alexandra. It was the second time that afternoon she'd been dressed down. Julia wiped away tears from the corners of her eyes. Everyone was silent.

Finally, Alexandra said, "I do trust you, Julia."

"Then prove it," Julia said.

Alexandra looked off into the trees, where birds chirped and wind stirred all the greenery in the hills, and no one else was to be seen.

"You know about how I went down to the Lands Below," she said. "And you know how Darla Dearborn died, trying to save her sister."

"Yes, but I don't understand what she thought she was saving her sister *from*," Julia said. "You've never really explained that part."

"What Darla was trying to save Mary from," Alexandra said, "was the Deathly Regiment."

She didn't extract a promise of secrecy from Julia before she proceeded. She trusted that Julia would understand once she heard the whole truth.

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Julia was quiet for a long time after Alexandra finished. Everyone waited, watching her. Julia was the oldest among them, and for all her playfulness and frivolity, Alexandra respected her maturity and wisdom. But Julia was sensitive, too, even more sensitive than Anna. Julia's heart was too gentle, Alexandra thought. She wasn't a fighter and she shouldn't suffer trauma and horrors. Losing Max had been the most terrible thing to happen in Julia's life, and now she had to learn about the darkest secret of the wizarding world, and why their father waged war against the Confederation.

"So all this time, it hasn't just been a personal vendetta," Julia said. "Father has had reason for being an enemy of the Confederation."

Alexandra didn't say anything. No one else did either.

Julia turned her face upward. Alexandra had remained standing as she told about the Deathly Regiment. Julia's brown eyes were less soft, more stormy. "And what is it you plan to do about the Deathly Regiment, Alexandra?"

"I don't know." Alexandra hesitated. "He offered me the chance to join him. But... he may be right about the Confederation, but killing people on trains and destroying schools can't be the way to stop the Deathly Regiment."

"No, I don't suppose it can." Julia put a finger to her lips. "But our father is not a fool. If we can see that his strategy doesn't seem very likely to work, surely he can as well. So either he is blinded by vengefulness, for what that terrible man Hucksteen did to poor Claudia, or there must be a method to his madness."

"I asked him. He wouldn't tell me any more. Not unless I wanted to join him. I guess I can't blame him. But I'm not sure he isn't just blinded by vengefulness."

"Even so," said Julia, "it is an abomination. It cannot be allowed to continue."

Alexandra was both heartened and worried by Julia's reaction. "I don't know how to stop it. And that's not what we're here for. If the Thorn Circle can't stop the Deathly Regiment, I don't think a bunch of kids can."

Which didn't mean she wouldn't try. Somehow. But she wanted Julia to laugh and try to make her wear dresses and flirt with boys. Not join a war against the Confederation.

David said, "Alex is right. We're not here to fight the Confederation. We're here to save her stubborn ass." When the Pritchards gave him disapproving looks, he said, "Sorry. But not sorry."

Alexandra glared at him. She knew he was as outraged by the Confederation's dirty secrets as she was.

"Perhaps we'uns are here to do both," said Forbearance.

"Huh?" Alexandra turned with everyone else.

"Connie an' I done a heap o' thinkin' since ever you told us 'bout the Deathly Regiment," said Forbearance.

"And now, with what Balthazar Donaldson said 'bout the Jubilee, well..." Constance's voice trailed off.

"You think the Exodans might have something to do with the Deathly Regiment?" Alexandra asked.

The twins nodded.

"You'uns know that most Ozarkers think that furriners is wicked," Constance said. "An' we'uns stays in our Hollers, as apart from the rest of y'all as we can get."

"Surely you don't really think that," Julia protested. "Everyone has been so friendly."

"We don't," Constance said. "And even Pa will allow as some furriners is decent folks."

"That crowd in Clearwater Holler wasn't so friendly after Balthazar Donaldson's speech," said David.

"Yes, well." Constance and Forbearance were in sync now, looking down together, taking breaths together, and alternating sentences in perfect rhythm.

"Since ever we'uns settled in the Hollers, and the Grannies say since we'uns first arrived in the New World, we'uns have lived in a world apart," said Forbearance.

"But it is said that there is worlds even further away than the Ozarks," said Constance.

"Further'n California, too, or even China," said Forbearance.

"Worlds where no wizards dwell, no people atall."

"And that we'uns — I mean to say, Ozarkers who'd leave this world an' its wickedness behind — will only truly be free of, well, you'all, when we'uns go to a world away from this one."

"That's what Exodans wish. To leave this world behind, an' go to a world away."

Alexandra said, "And Steadfasters want to stay?"

The twins bowed their heads, silently considering, weighing words.

Constance took up the reins again. "It hain't so much that our kinfolk don't — in principal — agree with 'em."

"But it's Exodans who is so strict 'bout keepin' us to the Unworkin' and stayin' apart from furriners, and opposin' anythin' that might bring wickedness into the Hollers," said Forbearance.

"Like foreigners," said Alexandra.

"Or education," said David.

The twins fixed sharp looks on him.

"Steadfasters reckon we'uns oughter make the best o' things in this world, an' not expend all our effort an' magic for some other one that like as not don't even exist," said Forbearance.

"I don't see what this has to do with the Deathly Regiment," said David.

"I do," Alexandra said.

Everyone turned to her again.

"Why do they think the Confederation is so wicked?" Alexandra asked. "Just because we're foreigners and we don't follow Ozarker customs? I mean, you guys are, uh, traditional, but lots of Old Colonials are pretty traditional too."

"But their traditions hain't ourn," Constance said.

"Right, and maybe some of your people know about the Confederation's *secret* traditions," Alexandra said. "Maybe it's not just about girls going to school and leaving their hair uncovered, or enchanted brooms and mirrors and clockworks."

Constance and Forbearance nodded slowly.

"Yes," Forbearance said.

"That's what we'uns feature," Constance said.

"You believe some Ozarkers know about the Deathly Regiment?" Julia said.

"It's kind of a coincidence that the Jubilee is every seven years," Alexandra said. "And our father didn't tell me much about *why* the Confederation enforces the Deathly Regiment, but he implied it's the basis for their power. Instead of enjoying the benefits other wizards have, Ozarkers throw away all their magic every seven years. Almost like keeping it around in objects and enchantments would be a debt they'd have to repay."

Constance said, "I know Ozarkers don't participate in no Deathly Regiment. I know it to my bones."

"Even if we'uns never heared of it, there just hain't no way it could happen in our Hollers an' not be known," Forbearance said.

"One child every seven years," Anna said quietly. "If it's one child in the entire Confederation, it wouldn't be an Ozarker child very often."

The twins shook their heads vehemently. "Never."

"Anna, your father told me his great-great-grandfather made some sort of... deal with the Confederation that allowed Chinese wizards to join the Confederation," Alexandra said. "They had to join the Deathly Regiment. It's the reason why Ozarkers and the Majokai are Cultures, and you're not."

Anna swallowed. "So because they haven't joined the Deathly Regiment..."

"Cultures don't get whatever benefits the Confederation does. Do the Majokai throw all their magic away every seven years?"

Anna shrugged, with an effort at hiding her disdain for her traditional nemeses. Alexandra wished she could ask Tomo Matsuzaka, the Majokai witch who attended Charmbridge Academy, but she doubted she'd have an opportunity to talk to Tomo again.

"So if you're right," Alexandra said to the Pritchards, "then the Jubilee and the Unworking has something to do with keeping Ozarkers out of the Deathly Regiment. You only get to keep magic past seven years if you're subject to it. Or something."

"Somethin' like that," Forbearance said weakly.

"Stands to reason," Constance said, also faltering as they considered the implications.

"Do you suppose your father knows about the Deathly Regiment?" Alexandra asked.

Constance and Forbearance looked ill.

David stood up. "If he does, then he's against it. That's why he supports you staying traditional. Even if it does mean being engaged to tools like Benjamin and Mordecai Rash. Maybe all that stuff about twins marrying twins having special magical significance, it's about keeping magical power in Ozarker families, since you can't afford to lose any. Something like that."

Constance and Forbearance frowned at him.

"Bespoken, not engaged," Forbearance said.

"Somethin' like that, might could be," Constance said. "And I s'pose you feature it as more Ozarker backwardness."

"I think your old man is looking out for you," David said, "and your folks obviously want nothing to do with the Deathly Regiment. And I get wanting to stand by your people. But I still think you shouldn't marry someone you don't want to."

"That is not somethin' we are here to discuss," Constance said stiffly.

"Dear Merlin," Julia said. "If this Deathly Regiment is really the reason for the Confederation's existence, then I can't blame the Cultures who choose to stay apart from it. Perhaps Ozarkers have the right idea in wanting to go to a world away from such an awful institution." She looked ill. Alexandra wished she'd never had to tell her sister.

A shaking and a squalling in the bushes at the edge of the creek suddenly drew all their attention. Someone was being dragged out of them, under protest, and the voice was familiar. From the tree branches overhead, Charlie cawed a belated warning.

"Innocence Catharine Pritchard," said another familiar voice, "hide me an' tan me if you hain't got no better raisin' than a wildcat an' the seemliness of a billygoat! I am shamed to think you is my own great-grandchile!"

Granny Pritchard appeared at the edge of the path where they all cooled by the waterside. Innocence was at her side, red-faced, with her head tilted painfully and awkwardly toward her great-grandmother thanks to the hand that held her ear in a tight, merciless grip.

"Innocence!" exclaimed Constance and Forbearance in identical horrified tones. Then, "Granny Pritchard!"

"Hello, girls," Granny Pritchard said cheerfully. "Just look who I found a' lurkin' an' a' snoopin' — for all the good it might'a done her, thanks to that spell Miss Quick cast. That sneakin' 'bout the bushes din't do you a lick o' good, did it, Innocence Catharine, since you couldn't hear a word they said?"

Innocence tried to shake her head, was unable to because of the grip on her ear, and mumbled, "No, Granny Pritchard."

"So you'd've better just stayed at home and minded yore garters like you oughter," said Granny Pritchard.

"Yes, Granny Pritchard," said Innocence, her face turning redder.

"Shame, shame, shame, you wicked child." Granny Pritchard released her. Innocence stood up and took a step back, rubbing her ear and sniffing. She looked chastened and defiant at the same time, though the defiance was directed more at her sisters than at Granny Pritchard. With Constance and Forbearance's astonished, outraged gazes upon her, she lifted her chin, while darting her eyes anxiously in the direction of her great-grandmother.

"Innocence Catharine, go back to the house," said Constance.

"We'uns will deal with you later," said Forbearance.

"Now girls, I reckon I done set the fur on her adequately, don't you?" said Granny Pritchard. "Hain't really no call for further remonstrance. The girl has learned her lesson, hain't you, Innocence?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Innocence, this time with a trace of sullenness.

"Then be off with you," the old woman said, not unkindly. "Yore sisters an' yore friends will be back to the house shortly, I reckon."

"Not *my* friends," Innocence said, and skulked back through the woods.

Constance and Forbearance sighed.

Julia said, "I do feel sorry for her. I remember when Max and his friends would come to the house, and then they'd go out to the woods or the beach, and they wouldn't let me come with them."

"Did you sneak after them?" Alexandra asked.

Julia gave her a knowing smile.

"Hey, Charlie!" Alexandra called. "What good is having a familiar if you're not going to warn me when people are sneaking up on me?"

Charlie's caw was indignant.

"One does wonder just what you young folks was gammonin' about so secretive," Granny Pritchard said. "With an impenetrable charm 'gainst eavesdroppers, my word. Can't blame Innocence for bein' curious."

Alexandra wondered how "curious" Granny Pritchard was, but she didn't say anything. She waited the old lady out. After a moment, Granny Pritchard spoke again.

"So, Miss Quick, have you decided whether you will give us the pleasure of yore company?"

Alexandra nodded. "Yes, ma'am. I'd like to talk to the Grannies."

"Splendid!" Granny Pritchard clapped her hands together. "Are you'all finished with yore confidencin'?"

"You want us to go right now?" Alexandra asked.

"If'n you don't mind," Granny Pritchard said. "Seein' as how they'uns is waitin' on you."

*Like they already knew where and when to find me, and that I'd come along when asked,* Alexandra thought.

"If it's all right, ma'am, I'd like to accompany my sister," said Julia.

Granny Pritchard chuckled. "Stars Above. Are you really so affrighted of a bunch of old women?"

"It's all right, Julia," Alexandra said. "I think the Grannies just want to see who it is they Named."

Granny Pritchard closed her mouth and eyed Alexandra once more. Then she said, "Aye."

Alexandra pulled the crumpled bonnet out of her pocket and tied it onto her head. She made a half-hearted effort to smooth it and pull it back into shape, then gave everyone a confident smile, trying to banish their apprehension. "I guess I'll see you later this evening." She turned to Granny Pritchard. "You think we can make sure Innocence doesn't follow us this time?" *Or anyone else.*

"Oh yes, we can do that." Granny Pritchard snapped her fingers, and she and Alexandra were elsewhere.

## \*Chapter 13\*: The Grannies

Alexandra stood in a wooded glen not unlike the one she'd just left, except there was no creek nearby. She felt wind blowing against the back of her head, and saw to her left a large valley spread out below, all forested and devoid of highways, power lines, or other construction.

"Whoa," she said. "How did you do that?" She hadn't felt the yank or pinch that normally accompanied Side-Along Apparition. She remained solidly on her feet with no disorientation when she arrived, and Granny Pritchard hadn't even touched her.

"Apparition?" Granny Pritchard said. "You don't mean to say you'all don't learn about that at Charmbridge Academy? I thought my great-granddaughters is s'posed to be gettin' a fine education at that high-falutin' school of magic."

The old woman was toying with her, but Alexandra kept her retorts to herself. Before her stood or sat the rest of the Grannies, a dozen of them, a collection of wrinkled, judgmental gargoyles, all fixing their eyes on her like something fetched for their examination.

Well, she could serve honeyed sarcasm too. She made an exaggerated curtsy and bowed low. "How do you do?" she said to the Grannies.

There was a short silence, and then the oldest of them (or so Alexandra thought, just going by her shrunken-apple-head appearance) chuckled. It was a ghastly sound that made the hunched-over woman sound as if she might topple over and die on the spot.

"This one's sweet as a mess o' pestled ants, an' wouldn't she like to run scorpions up our skirts? Lawsy, lawsy, that look!"

Alexandra tried to compose a neutral expression. "Well, here I am. You wanted to talk to me and I came."

The silent scrutiny continued. She wondered if she should twirl around for them. Maybe they were waiting to see if she'd lose her temper or boil over with impatience, so she folded her arms and stared right back at them.

"Hain't much to look at," said one of the other Grannies, the only one who was wearing robes and a black hat, like an Old Colonial witch, rather than the dresses the others wore. "But I reckon she does have her father's iron and her mother's fire."

Alexandra asked, "Do you know my parents?"

"Don't everyone know your father?" answered one of the other Grannies. "Abraham Thorn, the Enemy of the Confederation?" Alexandra was not surprised that these women didn't hesitate or flinch at speaking her father's name.

"We'uns know who your mother is, too," said Granny Pritchard. She spoke in a kindlier voice. "She hain't one of us."

"What do they have to do with my being Troublesome?" Alexandra asked. "That's why I'm here, isn't it?"

The oldest of the Grannies chuckled again. Her eyes were like flickering flames buried in waxy folds of skin, and she leaned forward against a cane, gripping it in hands that were a mass of blue-black knuckles. "That's your Name, right as rain," she said. "An' what a Troublesome you might be."

Alexandra said, "With all due respect, ma'am, I feel like I've been jerked around since practically the day I became a witch. Maybe longer. And last year, you all '*Named*' me, and used Constance and Forbearance and Innocence to do it. And I went along with it because I didn't know what else to do, because I had other problems, like seven years to live and finding out about the Deathly Regiment, which I'll bet you already know about. So thanks for helping me talk to the Stars Above, who told me practically nothing useful. I hope this doesn't sound disrespectful, but instead of giving each other knowing looks and mumbling vague things about my fate, or some Ozarker legend, why don't you just tell me what I'm supposed to do? *What do you want from me?*"

She'd let her anger leak out — and she'd been trying so hard to meet the Grannies' wise old knowing smirks with cool poise. But none of them seemed offended. The ancient crone before her nodded her head as if what Alexandra said was perfectly reasonable.

"Troublesome never minds, nor does as told," the crone said. "If'n we'uns was to tell you what to do, you'd just go do contrariwise."

"I would not," Alexandra said. "At least, not just to be contrary. You can't tell me that an Ozarker nursery rhyme predicts my future and everything about me."

"That 'nursery rhyme' has been passed down for generations as a collection of nice and accurate sayin's," said Granny Pritchard, "and while we'uns don't know if a Seer first said 'em, we'uns've done enough Namin' and Foreseein' since that we'uns knows a girl named Troublesome hain't just a fairy tale."

"So because you Named me Troublesome, I'm supposed to be her?" Alexandra said. "You just pick some girl, some *foreign* witch, and Name her Troublesome so she can fill a role?"

"That hain't quite the way o' things," said Granny Pritchard. "You hain't the first Troublesome. Though I reckon you are the first furriner."

"Why me? What am I supposed to do?" Alexandra demanded, almost pleaded.

"We'uns want you to be properly situated," said the older, seated Granny, "so that when trouble's afoot an' all ills are set free, you will be where you ought to be."

That rhyme again. Alexandra closed her eyes. "You're really not going to tell me anything, are you?"

"We'uns want you to open the World Away," said Granny Pritchard.

Alexandra opened her eyes. Now the Grannies were thoughtful. Some were pensive. For once, they actually appeared to be waiting for her response.

"Tell me what that is," she said. "If you please. Ma'am."

The wizened witch studied her from those sunken candle-flame eyes, then said, "You can call me Granny Ford. The World Away is where all Ozarkers hope to go someday."

"Sounds like heaven," Alexandra said. "I heard about that in Vacation Bible School."

"Insolent child," one of the other Grannies said.

"Aye, you're just bein' vexatious now," Granny Pritchard said. "I'm plumb certain you know we'uns hain't talkin' 'bout no pearly gates an' celestial choirs. We'uns means a place where them as is still livin' can go. Constance and Forbearance told you about Exodans, I reckon?"

Alexandra wondered if admitting that they had would get her friends in trouble. "Noah said something about them earlier, after the gathering in Clearwater Holler when Mr. Donaldson spoke. But he wouldn't tell us much."

"Oh, no?" Granny Pritchard said.

"I reckon," said Granny Ford, "that Miss Quick might like to hear a story."

"Okay," Alexandra said dubiously.

At this point the Grannies all engaged in some sort of silent contest, their aged and steely eyes spearing and riposting, pressing and evading the responsibility offered. Alexandra got the impression they were playing a game of "Not it!" conducted entirely by unblinking stare and curt chin gestures. Finally, one of them said, "Abigail, why'n't you tell it?"

"Aye, Granny Morrison, hain't been so long since you had your own little'uns on your knee, not like the rest of us." This produced a chorus of cackling and dry, dry laughter.

Alexandra thought it had been a long time since any of these witches had bounced little ones on their knees — the youngest of them must have been a grandmother before she was born. But Granny Morrison evidently was the most junior among them.

The Granny with the black robes adjusted her pointy hat so that the brim shaded her eyes. She took a seat on an unoccupied stump, and folded her hands in a way that suggested a schoolteacher waiting for rowdy children to pay attention.

Alexandra, feeling very much like a little kid at storytime, but realizing this might take a while, sat on the ground in front of the Grannies, folding her legs inside her robe and arranging it beneath her with some annoyance.

Granny Morrison, never once showing any sign that she resented being "it," cleared her throat and spoke as if there was an entire audience waiting for her, and not merely Alexandra.

*"It was a long time ago, not long after we'uns came to the New World, but afore we'd set out on the Road West to the Ozarks. Back then we'uns was newly arrived in Appalachia, an' we esteemed it the most beautiful land in all creation. We built our homes in the hollers of the Blue Ridge Mountains an' lived apart from the wizardin' world... an' for the most part from each other, 'cept the occasional play-party or weddin'. We'uns was right boonish an' liked it that way.*

*There was Injuns livin' thar too, but it's said we din't bother 'em none and they learned to leave us be likewise. The Little People also lived throughout the hills, an' they'uns was a bit more bothersome. Sometimes they'uns was helpful an' sometimes not, but we'uns coped with 'em. There was also lamias an' rougarous, raven mockers an' wampus cats, stone giants an' horned serpents, an' other fell critters, but that was the same as in the Old World afore wizards cleared 'em out o' civ'itized lands. We'uns was still witches an' wizards o' the Old World, so we'uns feared no creatures of the Dark.*

*Well, come a time that the Grannies had anticipated since the Crossing: more folk from the Old World arrived, wizards an' Muggles alike. They'uns came on ships, an' not many wizards 'mongst 'em 'cause most wizards did not favor months at sea with Muggles, but there was a few. Mostly half-bloods an' Muggle-borns. There was also wandless charlatans an' warlocks in exile for practicin' Dark Arts, an' there was them who'd never had schoolin' in witchcraft and wizardry because of the taint o' Muggle blood... or Giant or Goblin or Undine, because there weren't many pureblood families in the Old World what wasn't dallyin' outside their lines, an' the more they'uns did carry on 'bout 'pure blood', the more likely someone was...*

"Abigail," said one of her peers in a dry voice, "there hain't no need to dwell on wickedness. We'uns all know the Old World was a nest o' shameful sordid disportment. That's why we'uns left."

Granny Morrison was visibly annoyed at the interruption. "Well, you are a sour persimmon, Honoria Sawyer. I'm learnin' the child some history she hain't gonna hear in school."

"There's a passel o' things she won't learn in school that she needn't learn from us neither."

"Excuse me," Alexandra said, "but I know what 'dallying' means. And by that I mean I know where babies come from. Seriously." Though she had to admit the idea of wizards *dallying* with Giants, Goblins, and Undines put some rather incredible, not particularly welcome images in her head.

Granny Sawyer's spectacles flashed in Alexandra's direction. "Are you under the misapprehension that Ozarker gals *don't* know where babies come from? That hain't the point."

"I will get to the point, if'n I may continue without starchin' yore drawers, Honoria?" said Granny Morrison.

"Please do go on, Abigail," murmured Granny Ford, in a wearied voice. The ancient one's head was sagging as if the weight of it was becoming too much for her neck, and Alexandra worried she might just pitch forward, but the old woman's eyes, still fixed on her, had lost none of their brightness.

Granny Morrison sniffed and continued.

*"Anyhow, here in America any sixth son could become the only wizard in a village and claim pureblood ancestry back to Merlin — who was to say different? Most 'purebloods' in the Confederation is descended from mountebanks, Muggle-borns, sorcerers, Squibs, warlocks, an' hedge-wizards.*



*The dishonored and the disreputable fleein' from Ministries of Magic, or on account o' the Old World not bein' big enough for 'em.*

*So they come to the New World, an' they'uns created a wizarding world here, an' purty soon there was a Governor-General an' Territories an' 'pureblood' families high-levatin' themselves as the Elect o' society.*

*Now, as Muggles became more numerous in Appalachia, we'uns din't make much nevermind 'bout it, 'cause Muggles is easy to hide from. Also, though them as goes on about pure blood won't admit it, there was some minglin' with the newcomers, who was boonish an' contemptuous o' their 'civilized' kin an' perferred to be isolated, just as we'uns did. 'Purty soon there was ties 'tween all the families of Appalachia, regardless of magic.*

*That was when the Confederation took a interest in us, an' they'uns demanded we pay tithes an' follow Confederation law, an' we'uns looked at their Confederation, an' it was wicked! As wicked as any law in the Old World, an' we'uns wanted naught to do with it. But we'uns could see that we was already outnumbered an' there was more wizards comin' to the New World all the time, and too many Muggles about for us to hide.*

*So we'uns talked 'bout leavin' our homes, loathe as we was, for a place where the Confederation wouldn't bother us.*

*Now, the first idee was to go West, where the Confederation wasn't yet, an' the only Muggles was wild Injuns. The Injuns had magic no Old Worlders kenneed. That had some folks a'feared, as we'uns hadn't had no disputes with Injun wizards for generations, but we'uns reckoned maybe we'd work out things peaceable.*

*But we Grannies, well, we'uns knowed right enough that we'uns could go west 'til we reached the place where the sun does set, and still the dagnabbed Confederation would follow, or we'uns'd find some other folk to contend with. There was no place in all this world, we'uns said, where we could be alone forever. An' that's when some wise Granny, whose name is lost to us, suggested we leave this world behind entire.*

*Now, it was known that there is other lands, such as the Lands Below an' the Lands Beyond and the lands where Powers dwell, an' there's some has said there is such lands beyond countin', which I understand is studied in highfalutin' colleges today, but has been known to wizards for ages so.*

*That auger-eyed Granny said why should we'uns not find a world of our own where we'uns can be truly away from this wicked world and never be bothered again?*

*Well. There was two problems with that idee, an' we'uns hain't quite solved either one just yet.*

*The first is that whilst we'uns have sought to withdraw from this world since afore we left the Old World, it's one thing to talk 'bout leavin' this world behind and another to actually do it, 'specially when you have allowed ties to Muggles an' furriners to encumber you over the years. So there's those who is eager to leave an' allus has been an' is most fired 'bout urg'in' everyone to dis'sociate from furriners entirely, sayin' we'uns oughtn't have no truck with anyone who would hold us to this world.*

*The second is that there is those who hain't quite so eager, or maybe just after so many generations they'uns have forgot why we'uns left the Old World and stay apart today. They'uns are content to live in our Hollers and hope outsiders will leave us be, which they never will. Steadfasters they call themselves, but we'uns call 'em stay-behinds, an' Exodans sometimes call 'em worse things. While Ozarkers won't raise a wand 'gainst other Ozarkers, this ruction has split us ever so."*

"You...Grannies, you want to leave this world behind," Alexandra said. A tiny froth of anger bubbled inside her. "The Pritchards are Steadfasters." She looked accusingly at Granny Pritchard. "Is that what you think of your great-granddaughters, that they're... heretics? Cowards? Not good Ozarkers for wanting to stay behind?"

"You are hearin' a mighty abbreviated version, Miss Quick," said Granny Pritchard mildly. "There is particulars we'uns do not care to explain to you as they are neither yore nevermind nor pertinent. But how do you know Constance an' Forbearance want to stay behind?"

That silenced Alexandra.

"Do you mind if'n I continue, Missy?" asked Granny Morrison archly.

"Are you going to get to the point?" Alexandra grumbled. "What does all this have to do with Troublesome?"

"I'm gettin' there!" Granny Morrison snapped.

"Wicked child," muttered one of the other Grannies. The weight of their disapproving stares might have withered even Alexandra, if she weren't wondering if it was true that her Ozarker friends would leave this world behind if given the chance.

Granny Morrison cleared her throat.

*"There is a story told 'bout Troublesome, an' if'n it hain't true, it happened to someone an' maybe Troublesome just got blamed for it."*

Alexandra knew this was how most Troublesome stories started. This seemed to be their excuse for blaming Troublesome for everything bad that happened in Ozarker tales.

*"One sunny summer day, whilst allus here in the Ozarks was discussin' the Muggle problem an' the Confederation problem, Troublesome went a'walkin' in the mountains by her lonesome as she was wont to do, never-you-mind atall 'bout what concerned anyone else.*

*That day, Troublesome came upon a hill dwarf. Now as everyone knows, hill dwarves is meaner'n goblins an' wickeder'n a one-eyed warlock, but Troublesome greeted him courteously.*

*'Good mornin', she said. 'The weather's fine, hain't it?'*

*'What be so fine about it?' snapped the dwarf.*

*'Why, it's sunny 'n warm 'n not a cloud in the sky,' declared Troublesome. "'Tis a plumb fine day for walkin' or pickin' huckleberries or evadin' chores.'*

*'Be it a terrible day for my kind,' said the dwarf, 'as we prefer darkness and cold and would not I be out in this blinding sun if not for dire necessity.'*

*'Why, do tell,' said Troublesome, because she was curious and never minded her own weeds but was wont to poke into others'.*

*'If do not I deliver this sack of rocks to the next mountain over, will there be terrible trouble and calamity,' said the dwarf. An' indeed he'd slung over his shoulder a bulging sack which looked right heavy. The little feller groaned beneath its weight and in the hot sun he wiped sweat from his wrinkled forehead and looked across the valley to the next mountain over, which was a fair piece to walk for a person and an awful long stretch for a dwarf.*

*Troublesome followed his gaze and saw what a hike it would be, but she had naught better to do that morning, so she said, 'You know, it happens I was walkin' that direction' (which weren't true at all as she'd had no intention of goin' that far, but Troublesome frequently cozeed words and no sooner was they outter her mouth than they was the bless'd truth in her own mind) 'and if'n you would prefer for me to carry that sack for you, it don't look so very heavy.'*

*Now, the dwarf's yellow eyes lit up, but then they narrowed with suspicion. 'Why would you do that for me?' he asked. 'Where's your cider?'*

*Troublesome laughed, making the crows take flight. 'Hain't no cider in it for me, Mister Dwarf, I just thought I'd do a neighborly thing. But if'n you'd rather carry them rocks your ownself, then good day to thee.' And she curtsied and walked on down the trail.*

*'Wait!' cried the dwarf. Huffing and puffing, he hurried after her. 'Would I be much obliged to you, Missy. But must I make two requests of you.'*

*'Alright,' said Troublesome. Her wicked eyes flashed with amusement, thinking this hill dwarf was mighty demandin' for someone receivin' a favor.*

*'First,' said the dwarf, 'must you not open the sack or look inside.'*

*'I don't feature what's so special 'bout a sack o' rocks,' said Troublesome, 'but alright. And what's your second request, Mister Dwarf?'*

*'When hand you the sack over to my kin living in the next mountain over,' said the dwarf, 'might they offer you a gift. But mustn't you take it.'*

*Troublesome put her hands on her hips. 'And why is that? Not that I was lookin' for gifts, seein' as how I was just offerin' to be neighborly in the first place, but what's it to you if'n I accept a gift?'*

*The dwarf's beady yellow eyes fixed on Troublesome as he grinned a snaggle-toothed grin. 'Do not you know that a gift be a bounden obligation? As our folk say, a gift is a debt painted as a bauble.'*

*'Hmph,' said Troublesome. To be fair, most folk can't make sense of hill dwarf sayin's, so she shrugged her shoulders and said, 'Very well, Mister Dwarf, hand that sack over an' I'll tote it for you an' not look inside and accept no gifts, but you'll remember I done you a favor.' Whatever else Troublesome might be, she weren't stupid.*

*The hill dwarf only hesitated another moment before lookin' up at that hot, hot sun an' across the valley that long, long way. Then he handed the sack o' rocks to Troublesome. 'Be off with you then,' he said, without a word o' thanks, but Troublesome din't take no offense 'cause she knew hill dwarves consider 'thank you' a kind o' debt as well.*

*She walked off down the trail, and that sack o' rocks was heavy, but she waved her wand and cast a Featherweight Charm and then it rested as light on her shoulders as a sack o' feathers. Laughing, she said 'Silly dwarves,' and continued on her way.*

*Well, it was a hot day an' even with a Featherweight Charm that sack was a weight upon her shoulders. Soon Troublesome's bonnet was wilted on her head and her dress clung draggly to her and her feet was sore, so when she stopped to rest, she set down the sack and looked at it, wonderin' just what was so special 'bout a sack o' rocks.*

*Well, I'm sure it won't surprise you none that she opened that sack right up to look inside. An' what do you suppose she saw? Them rocks was great big chunks o' solid gold, each one bigger'n her fist. Here she was carryin' a pharaoh's fortune on her shoulders!*

*'Rocks indeed!' Troublesome said. She lifted one out and hefted it in her hand and thought about all the dresses an' baubles an' beautiful bonnets she could buy with just one o' them nuggets. A flutewood carriage pulled by winged horses, a yard full o' winged goats an' a great blue ox, a singin' well an' an Old World mansion, all those things she could buy.*

*'Why, I could leave the Hollers an' go live like a queen 'mongst the Colonials,' she thought, 'an' have house-elf servants bringin' me truffles an' meat pies an' fancies I hain't never even imagined.' And wouldn't no one call her wicked and scandalous, an' might could be there'd be a boy who'd court her.*

*'Oh yes, I'll wager beaus would come o' courtin' in droves when I'm rich as the Queen of Sheba!' she laughed.*

*She held that chunk o' gold in her hands a long, long time afore she put it back. And then she hefted the sack and continued her hike, thinkin' hard all the way. Oh, she saw sugarplums and bonnets and other play-pretties, all the way across that valley, but whilst there's many things Troublesome's been called, she hain't often been called a thief. So the gold weighed on her mind heavier'n it weighed on her shoulders, but she brung it to the next mountain over without slippin' one o' them gold nuggets outter the sack.*

*Well, when she arrived, another hill dwarf emerged from a cave and greeted her with some surprise an' not terrible pleased. 'How came you by that sack?' he asked.*

*'I was given it by one o' your folk on the next mountain yonder,' Troublesome said, jerkin' her thumb back the way she come. 'I offered to tote it here, so here I am.'*

*'Mighty kind of you,' said the hill dwarf. 'And did you by chance look inside the sack?'*

*'I did not,' said Troublesome, the lie passin' easily twixt that shameless girl's lips.*

*'And did you by chance touch anything inside the sack?' asked the hill dwarf.*

*'I did not,' said Troublesome, with a mouth that wouldn't melt butter.*

*Well, the hill dwarf took the sack from her and without a thankee or another word, he opened it and looked inside, suspicious-like, snufflin' about, an' Troublesome wondered if maybe dwarves could smell when human hands had touched their gold. Finally the dwarf looked up an' smiled at her.*

*'Be we obliged to you for delivering this to us, I reckon,' the dwarf said.*

*'Oh no,' said Troublesome, while visions of gold danced before her greedy eyes, 'I was just bein' neighborly.'*

*'Just so,' said the dwarf. 'But come back in a month and will we return the favor.'*

*With that, the dwarf dragged the sack back underground with him, leavin' Troublesome standin' outside in the hot sun as dragged a sight as ever you saw, with blistered feet and her dress stuck to her like she done forded a stream and not a single nugget o' gold for her trouble.*

*'Well,' she said, puttin' her hands on her hips, 'that's what I get for bein' neighborly!'*

*But she come back a month later, both curious an' greedy, wonderin' what 'favor' she might be proffered. An' there was the same hill dwarf she seen before. Or maybe it was a different one, since truth be told they all look purty much alike. But she come up the path to the same cave where she brought the sack o' gold, an' the hill dwarf says to her, 'Good morning, Miss Troublesome.'*

*Now first of all, Troublesome noticed that it was a fine sunny day, and the dwarf din't complain 'bout the sun like the other dwarf had. An' second she noticed that he called her by name. But she din't give that no nevermind, and merely said, 'Good mornin', Mister Dwarf,' right back. 'You told me to come back in a month, an' here I am.'*

*'Indeed,' said the dwarf, 'and have we made a present to give to you.'*

*Now Troublesome remembered what she'd been told 'bout 'ceptin' gifts from the hill dwarves. But to her way o' thinkin', it weren't a gift but a kind o' payment. She reckoned she done 'em a favor and now they'uns was just returnin' it. So she said, all innocent, 'Why, whatever for, Mister Dwarf?'*

*The dwarf, he smiled, and maybe she ought've minded how shivery that smile was. He held up a thin chain made o' pure gold and said, 'Seeing as how carried you all that gold, for was it indeed gold in that sack, across the valley for us, and didn't help yourself to any of it, we are of a mind to give you a little token of our appreciation.'*

*Well, it certainly weren't no nugget o' gold bigger'n her fist, but it weren't nothin' neither, so Troublesome said, 'That's mighty kind o' you, Mister Dwarf,' an' she only hesitated a moment, more fool her, before takin' that chain and holdin' it up to admire it.*

*'Would it look mighty fine 'round your neck,' said the dwarf. And Troublesome agreed that it would. It was an unbroken circle with no clasp or hook, so she had to take off her bonnet and pull it down over her head, but she weren't shamed to do that, and soon she had laid that strand o' gold 'gainst her neck. An' no sooner than she did but it squeezed her windpipe and bit her skin and commenced choking her.*

*'Foolish girl,' said the dwarf, 'did you think we wouldn't know that you opened that sack and handled our gold?'*

*Troublesome could feel that cursed gold chain stranglin' her, but she gasped, 'I din't take nothin'!'*

*'But you touched our gold and what you touched, we cannot use. That be a debt you owe us, and must that debt be paid.'*

*'I'll pay! I'll pay!' cried Troublesome.*

*With that, the chain pulled tight — and vanished. Troublesome gagged and ran a hand over her throat, and felt no trace of the gold chain. It was as if it had sunk into her flesh an' disappeared.*

*'Someday,' said the hill dwarf, 'will you give us back that gold and your debt will be paid. But until then will your kin pay it. Never will your people leave this world until you bring enough gold for every one of you Crossers, and repay us for all the gold you touched. Only can you go to a World Away, no one else, until all debts are settled.'*

*And that's why we'uns have never been able to leave this world, because until Troublesome pays her debt — our debts — we'uns can never go to the World Away. Only Troublesome can open the way."*

Alexandra waited a moment while the Grannies all watched her. When she realized the story was finished, she tried to outwait the Grannies. But beneath the gazes of all those old women, with a collective weight of centuries, she scuffed her toe in the dirt, bit her lip, and squirmed in place, until she broke and spoke first.

"So Troublesome... touched some gold, which ticked off the hill dwarves, and indebted herself and all Ozarkers to them?"

"So the story goes," said Granny Morrison.

"I don't get it. It doesn't make any sense. Why couldn't they use gold just because she touched it? What did they want to use it for and what does it have to do with you all going to a World Away? Is the gold supposed to be a metaphor for something? Or is this one of those parables where there's a secret meaning hidden in the tale?"

"Hain't she clever?" said Granny Sawyer, with a patronizing tone.

"What does any of that have to do with me?" Alexandra demanded. "If this Troublesome screwed up, go ask her to fix it. I'm not your folk character."

"You are Troublesome," said Granny Ford. Her voice, ancient and creaking, still carried more power than any of the others. "You or some other Troublesome, it's you who will open the World Away. If the tales are true. Which they may not be. After all, they are just 'nursery rhymes.'" Her tone was as dry as her parchment skin.

"You don't actually think I know how to get to the World Away, do you?" Alexandra asked.

"Course you don't," said Granny Pritchard. "But dependin' on where your adventures lead you, you may find your way there."

"And I guess I'm supposed to pick up a pile of gold along the way to repay the 'debt' that Troublesome owes?" Alexandra's anger grew. "How? Why would I even want to go there? I don't want to leave this world behind. And I don't understand how you can expect me to find this... other world, this World Away, this place no other wizard or all you wise Grannies with all your secret magic can get to. Why don't you ask my father? If anyone could travel to a World Away, he could."

"If anyone could, he could," agreed Granny Ford. "But I rather think he can't. Might could be he's tryin', but it's his daughter, the eighth child, who's like as not to find the way."

Alexandra drew a breath. "You still haven't explained why me. Why should I be Troublesome?"

"Whys and wants don't matter, bein' as you *are* Troublesome," said Granny Ford, her eyes now glittering like pools of deep, dark water. Alexandra shivered a little, but clenched her fists and mentally dug in her heels.

"Here's a 'why' that matters," she said. "Why should I help you? Why should I do anything for any of you? Constance and Forbearance and Innocence are my friends. If they want to go to a World Away... well, I'll help them, if I can. Not that I have any idea how I'm going to lead you Ozarkers to another world. But if they don't want to go, then as far as I'm concerned, you all can stay here and keep griping about how wicked the Confederation is. Because this is the world I'm living in, and I'm not planning to run away to another one. You want to leave this world? Find your own way."

Three of the Grannies reared back or gasped, affronted. Granny Ford continued staring at Alexandra impassively, while Granny Pritchard folded her arms and asked calmly, "Why are you so angry, child?"

"Because you manipulated me!" Alexandra said. "You want to use me! Just like my father did. Just like everyone has, just about every adult I've known. Have any of you offered to *help* me? I guess Constance and Forbearance told you I'm supposed to have only six years to live? I already owe a debt, so I don't need to be paying anyone else's."

The Grannies looked at each other. More unspoken communication passed between them, but they seemed more unsettled. She wondered if they felt guilty about setting up some 'foreign' witch to be their Troublesome. One Granny leaned in close and whispered something in Granny Ford's ear. Granny Ford nodded. "Aye," she croaked. Then another Granny leaned in to whisper in her other ear. Granny Ford shook her head. "No."

Granny Pritchard leaned forward. Alexandra couldn't make out the whispering that passed between them.

"If we'uns could lift your geas, we would," said Granny Ford.

"Well, thanks anyway," Alexandra said, not hiding her bitterness.

Granny Ford held up a gnarled hand.

"That don't mean there might not be a way to escape it," she said. "Troublesome's tales is full of her escapin' as many snares as she sets foot into."

"Great. I'd love to listen to more folk tales," Alexandra said.

"*Mind yore tongue!*" snapped Granny Morrison. "You are the rudest, most aggerpervokin', vexatious witch —"

"I'm Troublesome. Aren't I supposed to be?"

"You might just find yore tongue tied in knots if'n you don't learn a little respect," said Granny Sawyer.

"Is there anything else you want from us?" Granny Pritchard asked.

Alexandra took a few deep breaths to settle her anger and bite back the retort she wanted to throw at Granny Sawyer. Then she said, "Constance and Forbearance told me that wands need to... 'ken' to their owners."

"That's so," said Granny Pritchard.

"My wand, the one that was kenne'd to me, was broken. I have a new one, but... it doesn't seem to like me very much." Alexandra spoke with less anger now. "Is there a way, with your wandlore, that you can make it ken to me?"

"Prob'ly not," said Granny Pritchard, "but let me see it."

Alexandra drew the yew wand from the sleeve of her robe. She held it a moment, reluctant to turn it over to someone else even if it didn't feel quite right to her, then offered it to Granny Pritchard.

While Constance and Forbearance's great-grandmother held it up and turned it over in her hands, all the other Grannies scrutinized it, their heads leaning forward as they made *hmming* and *harrumphing* sounds.

"Yew," said Granny Pritchard. "I cannot quite be sure o' the core. It hain't... entirely familiar." She frowned. "This is one dreadful wand and a mighty fine piece o' work, but it hain't edzacted to you atall. How came you by this wand, Miss Quick?"

"It was given to me," Alexandra said.

"I see." Granny Pritchard didn't press the point. "With much trial and vexation you might master it to your will, but it will never truly serve you. You did not take it from its previous owner, did you?"

"No," Alexandra said. "I'm not a thief." *But how did Medea acquire it?* she wondered.

"Well," Granny Pritchard said. "Well." She folded her arms and thought deeply for a bit. None of the other Grannies said anything.

Granny Pritchard looked up and met Alexandra's eyes. "I will make you a wand."

Alexandra remembered how reverently Constance and Forbearance spoke of their great-grandmother and her wandcrafting. Supposedly, Granny Pritchard's own mother had been one of the best wandcrafters ever among the Ozarkers. And Alexandra was sure that for an Ozarker to make a wand for a non-Ozarker was no trivial boon.

"What do you want in return?" she asked.

Granny Pritchard sighed and laid a hand against Alexandra's cheek. It was dry and warm, and softer than Alexandra expected.

"I will not deny you have been ill-used," she said. "I can see how you might feature you been ill-used by us. But we'uns are not set against you, child. An' you are beloved by my great-granddaughters, and you saved my Innocence. This is a gift, with no hidden strings. It hain't a snare I'm fixin' to put 'round yore neck."

Alexandra swallowed and nodded.

"But there is a catch," Granny Pritchard said.

*I knew it!* Alexandra thought. But she just asked, "What?"

"A wand for you, crafted by me, has to be special an' unique," Granny Pritchard said. "We'uns can't just go out to the woods an' cut a branch, an' I don't keep dragon guts 'n Thestral hair in my cupboards. I hain't no Grundy's Department Store, nor a wand shop with boxes 'n boxes o' wands waitin' for the right witch or wizard to come along. The process of craftin' a wand special is a Mystery. And for you, Miss Alexandra Troublesome Quick, the wand o' yore choosin' must be crafted o' materials obtained in the only fit 'n proper way."

"And how's that?" Alexandra asked.

Granny Pritchard smiled.

"Why, you will have to go on a Quest, of course."

## **\*Chapter 14\*: A Solemn Quest**

Granny Pritchard returned Alexandra to the Pritchard homestead the same way she'd taken her, Apparating with an instantaneous snap that hardly felt like moving at all.

Alexandra's friends crowded through the front door to descend into the yard. Charlie beat them all, swooping off the roof to land on Alexandra's shoulder.

"Miss you terrible," said the raven.

"Is everything all right, Alexandra?" asked Julia, extending her arms.

"Of course everything's all right," Alexandra said, allowing Julia to take her hands. She pursed her lips at Charlie. "Did you really miss me, birdbrain?"

"Troublesome," said Charlie.

Granny Pritchard shook her head. "My, my. What *did* you'all think we'uns was gonna do to her?"

"So, were the Grannies... helpful?" asked Anna. She studied Alexandra's face, with an expression of worry, relief, and something else. "Did you... talk about anything in particular?"

Alexandra laughed at Anna's circumlocution. She glanced at Sonja, who said, "Don't worry, I didn't even try. My Inner Eye remained closed."

Anna and David both rolled their eyes.

From inside the house came the voices of the Pritchard women and the little ones.

"We talked about *stuff*," Alexandra said, lowering her voice. "But no big answers, I'm afraid."

Granny Pritchard sniffed.

"Oh." Anna was clearly disappointed. "Well, we have to go back to the foreigners' village. Noah and Burton said they'd take us. You don't all have to come along, since we'll see you tomorrow."

"Um, yeah, about that." Alexandra caught the collective intake of breath, and Anna's apprehension. "I'm... going to be doing something else tomorrow."

Everyone waited expectantly.

"Granny Pritchard has offered to make me a wand. A proper wand, that's actually matched to me," Alexandra said.

"Oh my," said Julia.

"Cool," said David.

Constance and Forbearance reacted as if Alexandra had announced that Granny Pritchard meant to marry her. They stared at their great-grandmother in disbelief, then back at Alexandra, mouths hanging open.

"Hain't done," Constance said in a hushed voice. "I mean to say..."

"I reckon I can make a wand for whomsoever I please, my dear," Granny Pritchard said.

"Oh, of course!" Forbearance said. "An' it's wonderful generous of you, Granny Pritchard! Alexandra, you do realize this hain't a done thing an' you oughter..."

"I ought to be very grateful?" Alexandra nodded. "I am. But there's a catch." She glanced at Granny Pritchard, who had laid a hand affectionately on Constance and Forbearance's shoulders. "I, um, have to go on a Quest."

"A quest?" Julia said. "Well, that sounds exciting." Her tone was light, but wrinkles appeared above the bridge of her nose, a hint of concern that was reflected more deeply in Anna's brown eyes.

"Apparently I'm supposed to find an appropriate core for my wand," Alexandra said. "Without knowing what it is ahead of time. It's one of those 'You'll know it when you see it' sort of Quests."

"Is it dangerous?" asked Anna.

"How long is it expected to take?" Julia asked.

"A Quest is over when it's over," said Constance quietly.

"I'm sure it will be no big deal," Alexandra said. "I mean, find some magical creature, and, uh..." She hoped she wouldn't have to kill anything.

"When do you leave?" Anna asked.

"Tomorrow morning." Alexandra smiled apologetically. "I'm really sorry I can't join you at the Jubilee tomorrow, but the day after that —"

"I want to go with you," Anna said.

Alexandra blinked. "What?"

"Me too," said Julia.

"Well, count me in," said David.

"Ooh, this sounds like fun," said Sonja. "Me, too!"

"Um, I don't know," Alexandra said.

"Oh, of course, you want to do it all by yourself because you don't need any help," Anna said. "Well, we're not letting you this time."

"Anna," said Forbearance.

"I don't see why we can't come along," said Julia. "I've never been on a quest before."

"Julia, dear," said Forbearance.

"This isn't a picnic!" Alexandra said.

"You just said it's no big deal," David said.

"David," said Constance, "don't raise up so."

Granny Pritchard shook her head. "I can see you'all are boon friends. But you'uns can't come along. This is a solemn Quest for one. Can't have the lot o' you traipsin' all o'er the Ozarks."

"Why not?" Anna demanded.

"Anna, dear," Forbearance whispered.

"Don't 'dear' me when Alex is about to go running off to do something stupid and dangerous again because the Grannies said so!" Anna gave Granny Pritchard her haughtiest, angriest glare, which impressed Alexandra for a second, before it faltered and Anna's defiance crumbled in the face of the old woman's weathered, imperturbable demeanor.

"Anna, it's just a hunt for wand materials. What do you want me to do, keep fighting with a wand that's not meant for me, or some piece of crap from Grundy's?"

"Tsk," said Granny Pritchard.

Anna was like an angry firecracker, throwing sparks even on the verge of tears. "You said yourself they used you, they Named you for their own purposes! Why can't you just... for once... be normal, and behave, and not find trouble?"

Anna's outburst silenced everyone. Alexandra was as stunned as anyone.

After a moment, she said, "I'm a witch, Anna. Where I grew up, that made me 'not normal' the day I started doing magic. And I'm Abraham Thorn's daughter. That means no matter how well I behave, I'm always going to find trouble." She stepped closer to her friend. "Why are you so upset? Do you really think I'm going to get myself killed that easily? I always come back — don't you know that?"

Anna sniffled and wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her robe. Julia patted Anna on the shoulder.

Alexandra put her arms around Anna, and Anna leaned into the hug.

"You don't have to be afraid for me," Alexandra said. "I'll be careful."

"No you won't," Anna said.

David stifled a guffaw. Then he grabbed Alexandra's arm which was still encircling Anna's shoulders.

"I don't trust these old ladies either," he said.

"David!" said Constance.

"David Washington, that was just rude," said Forbearance.

"What was rude, speakin' his mind or callin' me an old lady?" asked Granny Pritchard. "Twasn't nothin' but the truth. You and Missy here don't hide yore feelin's, and you hold yore friend precious. That's a good thing. A fine thing. Now run along, I see Noah and Burton have saddled up the mules, and Miss Quick oughter get some sleep for her adventure tomorrow."

They all walked Anna, Sonja, and David to where Noah and Burton had brought out a quartet of mules.

Alexandra said, "I'll ride back with you."

"Why Miss Quick, you done been thinkin' bout romantic moonlit mule rides," said Burton.

"Barf," Alexandra replied.

Noah said, "You'all are welcome to come 'long." His eyes were warm and fixed on Julia. "'Cept Connie 'n Bear. You'uns got chores."

"We do not," said Constance. "Ma said we'uns was excused 'til our guests leave."

"No," Anna said. "Get some sleep. Rest like Ms. Pritchard said."

"That's *Granny* Pritchard, Missy," said the Granny. "I hain't no Miz."

Anna turned to her. "My name is Anna, not Missy, ma'am."

Icicles practically formed on Granny Pritchard's eyebrows, while Constance and Forbearance looked as if they wanted to hide inside their bonnets. Then Granny Pritchard nodded her head.

"I am corrected," she said. "Good night, and pleasant meetin' you, Miss Anna."

"Good night, ma'am," Anna said. Alexandra unslung her arm from around Anna's shoulders, and Anna hugged Julia and then the twins. She whispered something in Forbearance's ear. Forbearance's eyebrows scrunched together and she murmured something back. Anna hugged her tighter as she pressed her lips to Forbearance's ear.

Then she pulled away and allowed Noah to help her up onto her mule. David faced Alexandra and scuffed his shoe in the dirt.

"Be careful," he said.

"You're all being ridiculous," Alexandra said. "This isn't like any of the really dangerous things I've done." She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "That was from me and Julia."

"It was?" Julia said.

"What's all this talk 'bout dangerous things?" asked Burton.

"We'uns'll tell you later, Burton," Forbearance said.

Alexandra faced Sonja last. "So, did you see anything about my quest, with your Inner Eye?"

"The phoenix feather isn't for you," Sonja said sadly.

Alexandra frowned. "What?"

Sonja smiled wanly and gave Alexandra a hug. "You really should tell me more, and then maybe I could be more help." She joined David and Anna.

Alexandra didn't say anything. She did feel bad about excluding Sonja, even if she was getting weirder and weirder.

David, Anna, and Sonja waved as they all took off, flying back to Down Below Holler.

Granny Pritchard watched them float away, then said, "Well, I reckon I'll visit awhile with Lamentation and my great-granddaughters and great-great-grandbabies. Shall we go inside, my dears?"

They retired to the house. Everyone made quite the fuss over Granny Pritchard, and while they remained solicitous of their guests, Alexandra and Julia were happy to slide off to the corner and let the Pritchards visit. Alexandra noticed that Innocence was still sulking, though she spoke mildly enough to her great-grandmother.

Much later that night, Alexandra lay on her bed, next to Julia's. The twins had fallen asleep some time ago, as Alexandra could tell by their slow, steady breathing. Charlie had taken refuge in the cage, while Constance and Forbearance's barn owl familiars sat on a crossbeam overhead.

Julia whispered, "Alexandra?"

"Yes?" Alexandra whispered back.

"What are you thinking about?"

Alexandra hesitated. Then said, "Our father."

Julia was silent for a long while. Then she whispered, "You aren't thinking about your 'quest' at all, are you?"

"Only a little." Alexandra rolled onto her side to face her sister, who was just a dark lump in the adjoining bed. They both scooted toward the near edge of their beds so they could lean their heads close and whisper more quietly.

"I do want to come with you," Julia said. "And don't you tell me you don't think I can 'quest' as well as you can."

Rather than arguing with that, Alexandra said, "Granny Pritchard was pretty clear that this is a solo quest. C'mon, Julia, it's not going to be dangerous."

"It wouldn't be a quest if it weren't dangerous."

"They're not sending me into a dragon's lair. They don't want me to die. They want me to do whatever I'm supposed to as Troublesome."

"Which is what?" Julia asked.

"Find some dwarf's gold?" Alexandra snorted. "I don't know."

"You remember what I told you about the woods in Croatoa," Julia said.

Alexandra sighed.

"I want you... I want you to promise me, dear sister, that you will be careful. Prudent. Cautious. Fie, I don't care if you're cowardly!" Julia's voice caught in her throat. "Promise me — on Max's grave."

Alexandra's teeth clenched together. "That's not fair, Julia."



"Fie on fair, too."

The owls overhead made sleepy stuttering noises, and one of the Pritchards mumbled and turned in the bed she shared with her twin, causing the other one to mumble back.

"Promise," Julia whispered.

"Fine, I promise," Alexandra whispered back. "Not to be cowardly. But I will be careful."

In the darkness, Julia extended a ghostly pale hand toward her. Alexandra took her sister's hand and held it, and Julia only let go when the two of them finally dozed off.

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They rose in the morning and went about preparing for the day in a hushed way that began to feel oppressive to Alexandra. She really hadn't regarded this "quest" with undue seriousness until now, but Constance and Forbearance's muted morning greetings and the worry that shadowed Julia's smile began to affect her. The rest of the household bustled about performing their morning rituals, and they all heard Innocence complaining about having acquired extra outside chores for the day.

Constance and Forbearance insisted that Alexandra bathe first. When she emerged from the metal tub, with her skin pink and tingly from the hot water and rough soap, she found that in place of the plain Muggle clothing and traveling robes she'd dumped next to her discarded pajamas, the Pritchards had laid out a colorful dress of green and white and yellow, with a long pleated skirt and a bodice strung with golden laces. The sleeves were elbow-length and ended in a flare, and there was a sash and a handful of ribbons to go with it. Alexandra could not begin to guess how they were supposed to be tied on.

There was an enormous matching green and white bonnet to go with it. Alexandra was surprised there were no green and yellow slippers, but the Pritchards hadn't touched her Seven-League Boots.

She took a deep breath.

"Guys..." she said.

"Do not argue, Alexandra," said Constance, from the other side of the privacy enclosure, in a tone that caused Alexandra's argument to die in her throat.

"I *know* you think it looks foolish, and girlish, and plumb ridiculous," said Forbearance. "But you are about to embark on a solemn Quest, and there is forms that must needs be observed."

Alexandra lifted the dress, holding it by the shoulders. She thought she would look rather like an overdressed leprechaun. Either that or a St. Patrick's-themed sofa.

"This is a formal Questing dress?" she said, hoping she didn't sound sarcastic.

"You must present yourself proper to the Grannies afore you begin your Quest," Constance said. "Ma made it special for you, with help from Faithful 'n Prudence."

"What? When did they do that?" Alexandra asked.

"Last night, while we'uns was all asleep," said Forbearance.

"You mean they stayed up all night to make me a dress?" Alexandra clenched the fabric in her fingers. Why couldn't they have made her a sword or some magic potions or something?

"They did," Forbearance said.

"They only just told me, Alexandra," said Julia.

"Now kindly put it on, Alex, dear," said Constance. "We'uns is waitin' to take a bath ourselves." She chided gently, but the underlying seriousness of the request made it clear — Alexandra would put on the dress, or she would insult and hurt her friends and their family.

Charlie, perched on the fence, cawed.

Alexandra closed her eyes and wriggled into the dress, doing her best to tie its many cords and laces. She finally emerged, bedecked in green and white and yellow, holding her arms out in defeat. "I may need a little help here."

Julia stood back with a smile, while Constance and Forbearance quietly circled Alexandra and tied up her sleeves, laced her back, wrapped a sash around her waist, and tied ribbons that trailed like streamers from beneath her bonnet.

"Pretty bird," said Charlie.

"Thanks," said Alexandra, feeling absurd.

"You do look charming," said Julia.

Alexandra gave her sister an "are-you-kidding?" look.

"Pretty hain't the point, if'n that pervokes you," said Forbearance.

"This dress hain't meant for dances or festivals," said Constance.

"It's meant for Questin'," said Forbearance.

"Is there some rule that I have to wear it throughout the Quest?" Alexandra asked.

"No..." the twins said, letting out a long breath together. "But you oughter wear it to start out."

"Fine. I will." Alexandra tried not to slump.

Inside, Mrs. Pritchard and her other daughters were serving breakfast: huge piles of flapjacks, bowls of hominy, slices of melon, and pitchers full of pumpkin juice, tea, and coffee. There were also bright green scrambled eggs. Prudence, Faithful, and Innocence maneuvered around the dining room laying down plates and pitchers, with Innocence casting glances of wounded resentment at the twins. She avoided looking at Alexandra entirely.

Grace, the daughter-in-law, sat at the table with her swollen belly and a demeanor that offered no greeting or conversation to anyone. Alexandra thought of Livia and wondered if she would become sour and unpleasant with pregnancy, or if that was just Grace's natural disposition.

She poked the green eggs with her fork. They almost matched her dress.

"Malachite flies got to the hens," said Prudence, noticing Alexandra's dubious inspection. "Turns the eggs green 'n they might taste a mite rusty, but they're still perfectly good."

"Paw likes 'em that way," said Forbearance, with a doting smile as Mr. Pritchard walked into the room and silently sat down at the head of the table. Faithful filled his plate, while everyone else sat down around the table.

Mr. Pritchard seemed to be assessing Alexandra's garb. It was the first time she could recall him looking directly at her for more than a second.

"I want to thank you for letting my sister and me stay here, Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard," Alexandra said. "And for letting my friends come yesterday. I hope we've been good guests."

"It's been wonderful having you," said Mrs. Pritchard. "Constance an' Forbearance an' Innocence think the world of you."

*Innocence not so much right now*, Alexandra thought.

"Miss Julia has been a delight," said Noah. He paused, and added, "An' Miss Alexandra too."

Alexandra let that pass, and said to Mrs. Pritchard, "Thank you very much for making this dress for me. I really don't know what to say."

"Well..." Mrs. Pritchard rubbed her hands slowly together, showing nervousness for the first time. "I couldn't hardly credit it when Granny Pritchard said you was to undertake a Quest. But, beggin' your pardon, I could not have you dressed as a foreigner for such an affair."

Alexandra let that pass too. She was about to thank Faithful and Prudence also when Mr. Pritchard said, "Are you takin' this serious, girl?"

Everyone fell silent. Even Noah and Burton stopped their grinning and long-armed snatching at food.

Alexandra met Mr. Pritchard's gaze, calmly and politely, but without the deference that his daughters gave him. He was a formidable man, but Alexandra had years of experience dealing with Archie, and she had faced down her own father, and Anna's father Congressman Chu. Mr. Pritchard didn't intimidate her.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"I don't feature what's goin' on in Granny Pritchard's head, or what any o' them old women is up to," Mr. Pritchard said.

*That makes two of us*, Alexandra thought. She almost said it out loud.

"But I do not like it," the Pritchard patriarch continued. "It hain't appropriate or seemly. An' I would not have a guest come to harm. I ask, Miss Quick, that you consider leavin'. Today."

"Dust," said Mrs. Pritchard, reaching a hand out to lay on his. Even Innocence's face was transformed from sullenness to shocked dismay.

"I don't mean to be rude or withdraw our hospitality," Mr. Pritchard said. "I wish to protect you from Granny-magic witchery. I'm given to understand you is somewhat headstrong, Miss Quick, an' might be known to set off on courses you hain't fully thought through."

Julia coughed, set down her glass of pumpkin juice quickly, and clapped a hand over her mouth.

While Burton and Noah both offered her napkins, Mr. Pritchard either didn't notice or ignored the display. "Please accept my suggestion and allow my boys to take you back to Down Below Holler and send you on your way home."

"Oh Paw," said Forbearance. Constance was speechless, her cheeks burning red.

"It's all right, Forbearance," Alexandra said. "Mr. Pritchard, I appreciate your warning. I do. And thanks for worrying about me. But I'll be fine. You're probably right about me, so I'll bet you already knew I wasn't going to just run back home. If you tried to talk me out of it for form's sake, or because you're worried how it will look if something happens to me while I was your guest, then I'm sure Julia will tell anyone who asks that you were excellent hosts." *Including our father.*

Julia's eyes were wide above the hand still clapped over her mouth, but she nodded slightly.

"Seriously, thanks for your concern, but I'm doing this Quest." This last said flatly, Alexandra waited for Mr. Pritchard's reaction, while his wife and children held their breaths.

He grunted, nodded, and turned his attention to his breakfast. After a nervous pause, conversation resumed, but no one said any more about Alexandra or her Quest.

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Following breakfast, Noah and Burton left the room with their father, speaking of building and digging and repair work they had to do, all by hand, to ensure their barn wouldn't collapse and their house wouldn't lose its roof after they Unworked all their charms.

Alexandra went into the room she shared with Julia and the twins, and checked the contents of her magical backpack. After her winter adventure in Dinétah, she had added some things to it, like a survival and first aid kit, stocked with both Muggle equipment and what potions and charmed items she could acquire. Now she found it full of things she hadn't put in it — a lantern, a small bottle of Theo's Ever-Burning Oil, wax candles, a heavy blanket with a warming spell (like she was going to need that in Arkansas in the summer!), extra socks and linen underclothes, wash cloths, bandannas, soap, a basket of biscuits, dried fruit, and a magical pouch that, like the backpack itself, contained more space within than its exterior size could accommodate. Alexandra wiggled her fingers inside the pouch and found it full of pemmican, several days' worth.

"Maybe this is for you," she said, holding up a small handful of pemmican for Charlie. The raven jumped from the rafter above to her wrist and pecked at the dried meat and berries.

"Well, a raven oughter be able to forage for itself," said Constance. She and Forbearance stood at the doorway.

Charlie cawed, gobbled down some more pemmican, then made a sound a great deal like an imitation of a belch. The twins both put hands over their mouths.

"I have no idea where Charlie learned that," Alexandra said, glaring at the raven.

"Alexandra," said Charlie.

Constance and Forbearance laughed. Alexandra dropped the pemmican pouch back into the basket. When had Constance and Forbearance prepared and packed all this?

"Guys, I really, really appreciate this," she said, "but I don't know why you think I'm going to be gone for days. I mean, I have to go home on Friday."

The other girls were serious again.

"We'uns don't think you're gonna be gone for days," Constance said.

"We'uns sure hope not," Forbearance said.

"But," Constance said quietly, "time moves different when you hain't in civ'lized lands. I reckon you have an inklin' what I mean, Alexandra?"

Alexandra thought of her flights, both ways, across the Lands Below, and her journey to the Lands Beyond. But she wasn't going to another realm this time — she was going to be right here in the Ozark hills!

"I wish you weren't making such a big deal out of this," she said. "You're going to scare Julia, and Anna's already freaked out."

"I don't think Julia's affrighted that easy," Forbearance said.

"An' Anna's got a tender, quick heart," Constance said. "But I reckon David's more... what you said, 'freaked,' than Anna. But he don't show the depth of his feelin's neither." She pursed her lips together as if considering saying something else.

"We'uns is all concerned for you, that's all," Forbearance said. "Oh, do be careful, Alexandra, and mind yore courtesies, and do not take foolish risks. I know you think this Quest is a silly Ozarker thing —"

"No, I don't think that." Alexandra's hand, still rummaging about in her backpack, closed around a metal tin, one more item put there by the Pritchards. She pulled it out to examine it, sniffed it, and twisted the lid. She squinted at it and then at the Pritchards.

"Wizard tobacco? Where'd you get — ?"

"Shh!" Constance said, while Forbearance looked over her shoulder. "Never you mind where it come from, Alex."

"You do know I don't smoke, right?" Alexandra whispered.

"Course you don't," said Constance. "Only men an' Grannies smoke. But tobacco is traditional on a Quest, an' it might be offered as a gift."

"A gift to who? Okay, never mind." Alexandra sealed the tin and dropped it back into her backpack. She slung the pack on her shoulders, already feeling bedraggled. It was growing hot inside the house, and the dress and bonnet weren't light and airy like the dresses the Pritchards were wearing. "Thank you," she said.

The Pritchards hugged her together.

She walked outside. Mrs. Pritchard was busy in the kitchen, singing something to Whimsy and Done, but Prudence and Faithful were on the porch waiting for her.

"Good luck, Miss Quick," said Prudence.

"And bring that fine dress and bonnet back home, if you please," said Faithful.

"I will. Thanks again." Alexandra hardly knew what to say to these older, married sisters of her friends, who were part of an adult world where she was still practically invisible. Yet they had taken notice of their sisters' friend, and gone to considerable trouble to help her. She wished she knew what to say to them. But the elder Pritchard daughters merely stepped aside.

Alexandra descended the steps to the yard, where Julia waited for her. Alexandra was pretty sure her sister had been talking to Noah, who was now leading the mules out to pasture, rather affectedly not looking in their direction.

Julia smiled, with shiny dew-like teardrops in her eyes. She gave Alexandra a tight embrace, and whispered in her ear, "I do not care for this, and I

have a mind to force my company upon you."

"Please don't," Alexandra said. "I'll be fine. Really. You're all just making a big deal over a hike. Maybe I'll meet some more ghosts, or hill dwarves, or a jimplicute, whatever that is. Just more magical critters."

"Do not be cocky," Julia said, and kissed her on each cheek.

As if by some practiced agreement, like embarking on a Quest was a staged event with each person taking their place to see the Quester off, they all stayed where they were and watched Alexandra walk toward the woods.

That's when she saw the one person she'd been missing in her send-off: Innocence, who was pumping water from a well into a dozen buckets. She had used her wand to levitate the buckets, so each one floated in a wobbly orbit around her after she filled it and tapped it with her wand. Seven buckets now hovered in the air, trembling and occasionally sloshing a bit of water over the side. Alexandra thought it would be a neat trick for Innocence to maneuver them all back to her house like that. Having noticed that Ozarkers rarely engaged in such crude uses of charms for manual labor, she decided Innocence was being passive-aggressively "biddable" while doing her chores.

They were within sight of the house, but no one had called Innocence back as Alexandra left, and Innocence seemed very, very focused on filling the eighth bucket, as if it were a difficult task requiring all of her attention, so that none could be spared to anyone who might happen to be passing near.

"Well, at least you don't think I'm doing anything dangerous," Alexandra said.

Innocence shot a glance at her — not quite stubborn enough to refuse to acknowledge her altogether — but turned her attention back to the well pump. It was rusty and didn't look like it was used often. Alexandra realized it must be a traditional, non-magical pump, probably only used during Jubilee years, when the Unworking left them without magically-running water.

"Well, bye then," Alexandra said. She turned her back.

Charlie, perched on her shoulder, said, "Good-bye! Good-bye!"

"Wait!" Innocence dropped the bucket, letting it spill water over her shoes. She ran to Alexandra and wrapped her arms around her, which surprised Alexandra a great deal.

Alexandra patted the girl on the shoulder.

"We didn't exclude you to be mean," she said. "There really are things it's better for you not to know. You shouldn't be so hard on your sisters."

Innocence stood back, wiped her eyes, and sniffled. "What would you do if'n your older sisters bossed you an' fussed at you an' excluded you, an' also made you do chores all the time while they'uns is sharin' confidences an' adventures?"

"I'd be pretty pissed," Alexandra admitted. "You know, I don't really know what it's like to grow up with older sisters, even though I have six of them now. But you're not missing out on any adventures. And haven't you had enough adventures for a while?"

Innocence blushed at the reminder of her journey to the Lands Below, and Alexandra's saving her from a one-way trip to the Lands Beyond. But stubbornly she asked, "Hain't you?"

"Maybe. But I do need a new wand. Also, I need to figure out why the Grannies Named me. And what all that stuff the Stars Above told me means."

"You think you're gonna learn all that on this Quest?"

"I don't know." Alexandra adjusted her bonnet, which was already becoming hot and itchy. "Look, just be less of a brat, okay? Trust me, it doesn't really get you much. And there are worse things than overprotective older sisters."

"Be careful, Alexandra," Innocence said in a voice more like her meeker self.

"I will."

With that, Alexandra continued down the path into the woods. She only got about a dozen yards, just far enough to put trees between her and the Pritchard homestead, when she came across another person sitting on a tree stump, whittling something with a small pen knife.

"I thought you're really busy with chores, getting ready for the Unworking," Alexandra said.

Burton looked up with a grin. "Took a break. Long enough to say good-bye and wish you well."

"Jerk," Charlie called out, and fluttered off Alexandra's shoulder to a branch overhead.

"You could have said good-bye back at the house. But thanks." Alexandra continued walking. Burton stood and walked alongside her.

"You know, there's another very important tradition where Quests is concerned, 'sides this bedecked frillery Connie an' Bear set you up with," Burton said.

"What's that?" Alexandra asked.

"Why, a kiss for good luck," Burton said.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding." Alexandra almost sputtered. "Would you just stop harassing me?"

Burton came to a dead stop, so suddenly that Alexandra, in spite of herself, stopped also. Burton actually looked stricken.

"I wasn't harrassin' you," he said. "Well, din't mean to, anyhow. Shucks, can't a feller flirt a little? Good luck, then, Miss Quick."

There was very little of his usual banter in his tone, and such genuine regret that Alexandra felt unwelcome stirrings of guilt and something else.

"Flirting? Why are you flirting with me? You like Julia."

Burton stepped closer. "Miss Julia's a mighty purty gal, sweet as honey butter, an' charmin' as a tad's first spell. But, first of all, she prefers Noah, and second, she hain't as fun to flirt with on account o' she don't take it serious."

"Neither do I," Alexandra said. "You're just teasing me."

"I hain't sure you know the difference 'tween flirtin' 'n teasin'," Burton said. "Teasin's what I do with my sisters."

"And flirting is what you do with 'foreign' girls?"

"You are pricklish an' ornery," Burton said, "and watchin' you sputter like a wet hen is a hoot —"

Alexandra grabbed the handle of her wand, sticking out of her sleeve. "Call me a hen again."

"— but I reckon you get angry out o' habit. It's a reflex. You like to get angry 'cause it's easier'n bein' gentle, hain't it? But I saw how you was gentle with Innocence."

Alexandra brushed sweat from her forehead. Cicadas chirped. She expected to hear a comment from Charlie, but the raven just sat on a branch overhead, black eyes fixed on them but saying nothing.

"You were eavesdropping." Alexandra said.

Burton rolled his eyes. "I meant to catch up to you afore you went traipsin' off into the woods, but you was already givin' advice to Innocence, so I din't interrupt. You was right kindly, an' hain't no one else she'd listen to tell her be less of a brat."

"She's not such a brat. She's just thirteen. I was a brat at thirteen."

Burton guffawed loudly enough to startle the crows in the woods, who cawed and took off.

"What's. So. Funny?" Alexandra asked.

Burton wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, making a poor attempt to remove his smirk. "I was just thinkin' how like Connie an' Bear you are, figurin' two years makes you so different." Then the smirk did fade, and his eyes grew more serious. "Anyhow, thank you for bein' a boon friend to my sisters. I confess I don't understand this other folderal you been speakin' of, a Quest an' you thinkin' you're s'posed to be Troublesome."

"It wasn't my idea. Ask your Grannies about it."

"No ma'am." Burton shook his head. "Be icicles in July when I go lookin' for trouble from the Grannies."

"Well, I don't seem to have much choice. They kind of dumped trouble on me."

"You coulda said no. But you want a wand."

"There's more to it than that. Anyway... keep on eye on Julia for me, will you? And I mean look out for her, not look at her."

"I will look all I please at whomsoever I please," said Burton. "But Miss Julia can look out for herself, I'm purty certain. You sure is curious, the way you think you oughter be protectin' your big sis 'stead o' the other way 'round. But I swear no harm's gonna come to her under our roof. You oughtn't need ask."

"Great. Thanks." Alexandra adjusted her pack. "Well, I better not keep the Grannies waiting."

"You better not."

Alexandra intended to walk on, but Burton's half-smiling gaze held her. She turned up her nose, disdainfully or so she thought, but when he leaned toward her, she didn't pull away. It was a brief kiss, but she couldn't say she didn't kiss him back. Burton's short, scratchy beard rubbed against her chin. She felt a silly urge to tug on his beard rather than complain about its scratchiness. She resisted the impulse.

"Is that *really* a tradition with Ozarker Quests?" she asked, pulling away.

"Ask the Grannies," Burton said. "Now git on with you. Don't keep 'em waitin'." He turned her around and swatted her on the rump.

"You... ass!" she said, jumping away from him. She thought about drawing her wand, as he stood there and laughed at her, but his words about how she got angry out of reflex were stuck in her head. And she knew she wouldn't really hex him, especially not with the unpredictable yew wand resisting her control, so it would just make her look more foolish. She turned and walked quickly away, not looking back. Charlie cawed and swooped through the air ahead of her.

## **\*Chapter 15\*: With Wit and Charm**

A mile further on, she found the Grannies waiting for her.

It could have been the same spot as before, except for the river running to the right. The Grannies stood or sat in a half circle, so like the day before that Alexandra wondered if they had even changed their clothes. They all inspected her, in her colorful Ozarker dress, so she slid her pack off her shoulders, spread her skirt, and twirled around. Charlie fluttered off her shoulder, then resettled atop her head when she was done.

"Well?" she asked. "Is this a proper outfit for a Solemn Quest?" Suddenly she wondered if the Pritchards had played an enormous prank on her, and the Grannies were all about to burst out laughing. But no, the Pritchards would never do that — and the Grannies' wizened, taciturn expressions didn't change.

"Mighty courteous of you to take this serious," said Granny Ford. The old, old woman's voice was dry and sour and might have been just a little bit sarcastic, though Alexandra couldn't tell for sure.

"Did Lamentation an' her daughters make that for you?" asked Granny Pritchard.

"Yes ma'am," Alexandra said. "They said appearances are important." She kept her eyes fixed in their sockets with an effort — it was so natural to roll them.

"So they are," said Granny Pritchard.

"You haven't really told me anything about what I'm supposed to do," Alexandra said, addressing the assembly of old women. "I have to say that just hiking into the woods and waiting for something to happen doesn't sound like a very solemn Quest to me. Also, if I'm not back by tomorrow, my sister and my friends will freak out, and I'll be in big trouble if I'm late getting home on Friday."

"Girl," said Granny Ford, and her voice now was the groan of iron hinges, "if'n you thought this was a 'hike' you wouldn't've come. So cease yore prattle. Once you set out on this Quest, you will return when you return and yore friends waitin' fer you and yore folks back home makes no nevermind. You know that. If'n you don't want to go, then say so now and go back to the Pritchards' homestead."

Alexandra was silent.

"Dorcas?" said Granny Ford.

Granny Pritchard stepped forward. "Your wand," she said. She held out her hand.

Alexandra hesitated a moment, but decided the wandsmith meant to do something with it, so she handed the old woman her yew wand.

Granny Pritchard tucked it into her skirt.

"Hey!" Alexandra protested.

"You won't be needin' it," Granny Pritchard said.

"Wait a minute — you're sending me on a Quest without my wand? How am I supposed to Quest when I can't do magic?"

"Can't you?" asked Granny Ford. "You're a witch, hain't you? With or without a stick o' wood?"

"I don't see any of you running around without your sticks of wood," Alexandra said.

Granny Morrison clucked her tongue.

"That wand is not suited to you and you know it," Granny Pritchard said. "As this Quest is meant to find you a new one, you must make do. Don't fret, I'll give it back to you when you return."

"How am I supposed to defend myself?" Alexandra asked.

"With wit and charm. An' one does not flit about by broom on a Solemn Quest neither. I'll take yourn as well."

Alexandra hesitated. How did Granny Pritchard know about the broom in her magic backpack? She considered denying it, then with her lips turned down in a pout, pulled the Twister out of her pack and handed it over.

Granny Pritchard took it with an appreciative whistle. "Well, hain't she purty? Furriners sure do make 'em fancy." She nodded to Alexandra. "Now, daylight's a' wastin', so I'd git goin' if goin' is what you aim to do."

Alexandra fumed. "Am I allowed to keep my pack?"

"Shore," Granny Pritchard drawled.

"And my familiar? I'm not going without Charlie." She reached a hand up to touch the bird. Charlie cawed.

"Course you oughter take your familiar with you."

"Okay then. Take off, Charlie."

The raven took off and flew into the woods. From deep in the trees, Charlie cawed, as if inviting her in.

Alexandra said, "I'll see you when I get back, I guess."

None of the old women said anything as Alexandra set off.

She walked a while through the trees, with Charlie hopping and gliding from branch to branch ahead of her. Alexandra followed the river a ways, in a slightly downhill direction, until it turned down a rocky slope that Alexandra didn't feel like climbing down, so she veered away and followed the circumference of the hill she was on, since that was the easiest walking. By late morning it was becoming very warm, and soon she was sweating profusely, with her back damp beneath the backpack and sweat pouring down her forehead.

She looked over her shoulder. The trees were dense around her, and she'd seen and heard no signs of other people since she'd left the Grannies behind. She must have covered at least a mile and a half.

Laying down her pack, she untied her bonnet, and unlaced the green, white, and yellow dress. Charlie watched her and cawed as Alexandra stepped out of the dress, carefully folded and bundled it up with its bonnet, and stuffed it into her pack. She took out a pair of shorts and a sleeveless tank top.

Now she was dressed like a Muggle. No doubt a half-naked Muggle, according to Ozarker propriety. It was how she might walk around back home, minus her Seven-League Boots, and it was a lot cooler than hiking in that voluminous dress with her head sweltering inside a bonnet.

She'd worn the dress to be presentable to the Grannies. She never promised to keep it on.

Next, she reached into her pack and took out the basswood wand she'd hidden there. "Wit and charm, my ass."

She shouldered her pack again and took a few breaths. The air was laden with the smells of damp plants and animals and other summer things. She set off at a faster pace, not taking the flying leaps that the Seven-League Boots were capable of, but no longer hindered by the swishing of a long skirt.

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The woods were hot and humid and Alexandra's clothes stuck to her. She stopped frequently to drink water. Sometimes she poured water into the cup of her hand for Charlie, though she knew the raven could easily find water in a nearby stream.

For the first hour or so, she enjoyed the scenery while wondering just how deep into the woods she might go. By rights she should reach a town or highway eventually — even here in the Hollers, Muggles were never that far away. Yet she couldn't remember ever hearing the sound of a car engine while in Down Below Holler, Clearwater Holler, or Furthest. Occasionally an airplane passed overhead, reminding her of the Muggle world, and she supposed the Ozarkers must hate that. But like the woods around Charmbridge Academy, the island of Croatoa, and the deserts of Dinétah, places where wizards lived somehow possessed an isolating power that could make you forget there were towns and cities and millions of Muggles with their cars and machines and power lines just a few miles away as the crow flies.

As she continued walking, the fact that she had no idea where she was going or what she was supposed to do began weighing on her. She looked around, as if hoping to see a sign or a guide or even a glowing ball of light, but so far all she saw were trees, birds, and squirrels.

"So where are we going, Charlie?" she asked.

She had a magical bond with Charlie — maybe her familiar was supposed to lead her. But Charlie cawed and settled on her shoulder, refusing to give advice or direction.

Perhaps she would have to camp out. The prospect didn't daunt her; Maximilian and the JROC had taught her the rudiments of outdoor survival. But she had been hoping to get home by dinner, and spending a night in the woods, let alone several, made this Quest business a bigger deal and a much more inconvenient one.

"Well," she said, "it would be great if something happened now."

When this didn't produce a response, she said in a louder voice, "Bored now." And in an aside to Charlie, she said, "And you need to find a branch." Since her shoulder was almost bare, the raven's talons were digging painfully into her skin.

With a disgruntled croak, Charlie flew away from her and into the trees.

That was when Alexandra felt a sensation that stopped her dead in her tracks. Tiny needles of ice that jabbed her first at the base of her neck and then progressed all the way down her spine and back in one shuddering instant.

She spun around. All she saw were trees and sky. From overhead, Charlie cawed, not in alarm but as if to say, "What's your problem?"

"Didn't you feel that, Charlie?" she asked.

The raven did not. She usually knew when Charlie was feeling what she felt.

She studied the gloomy woods, which had become foreboding despite the sun overhead. It was still afternoon, but she had yet to encounter anything that might qualify as a Quest, and she began to wonder if she would actually have to spend the night outdoors. The creeping conviction that something was behind her had faded so completely that she began to doubt herself, though she wasn't prone to such starts without cause, and she'd learned to trust her instincts. She fingered her nearly-useless basswood wand, and really wished she had the yew one. It might not be cooperative, but at least it produced magic.

Carefully, she turned her back on the way she had come, and proceeded in the same direction she'd been going.

She didn't get more than fifty yards when she felt it again. No sound, no movement in the corner of her eye, no smell, not even the slightest breath of air against the back of her neck, but *something was behind her*. Charlie squawked as she whirled and pointed her basswood wand.

Once again, there was nothing there. Alexandra opened her eyes wide, flared her nostrils, and held very still, trying to take in sight, sound, and smell, and look beyond what was visible to see the world with her Witch's Sight.

Still she detected nothing. The moment she turned, the feeling of something behind her vanished. She cast a glance at the black feathered form perched on a bush a few yards away.

"You're supposed to be watching my back, Charlie," she said.

Charlie protested with a shrill caw. Surely if she felt it, Charlie did too? Yet Charlie seemed confused by her reaction.

She resumed walking, stopped suddenly, and spun about. Nothing. Several more times she walked on, never for more than a minute, sometimes looking over her shoulder, sometimes spinning without warning. Charlie watched silently. It only annoyed Alexandra more that her familiar didn't sense anything, and none of her abrupt about-faces caught anything stalking her.

Yet when she finally forced herself to march on without looking back, it wasn't more than five minutes before she felt it again, an unmistakable presence behind her. Once more she looked over her shoulder and saw nothing.

"Fly, Charlie," she said, and with no further warning, she ran. Stepping with the full stride of her Seven-League Boots, she shot between trees and vaulted over gulches and streams at inhuman speed. Anyone who saw her then would have been astonished at a streak blurring through the woods. She didn't know where she was going, but since the Grannies hadn't bothered to give her a map or directions, she didn't figure it mattered. She did have her Lost Traveler's Compass still.

When she was sure she'd gone too far for anyone or anything to keep pace with her, she slowed and then nearly stumbled to a halt. She was on a sparsely-vegetated hillside that was turned away from the sun and toward the wind, so all that grew here was rough, sharp grass and a few straggly bushes poking up between jumbles of rocks. Below, another river valley spread before her, turning dark brown and shaded green in the lengthening shadows.

She bent over and rested with her hands on her knees while she waited for Charlie to catch up.

That was when she realized she was being watched. Again.

She stood up and turned about in a circle, but it wasn't the same sensation as before. She couldn't describe the difference, but this was a more *mundane* feeling of being watched, like she might feel in Larkin Mills or anywhere else.

It took a moment for her eyes to focus on the one part of the rocky hillside that didn't match the rest, and she almost jumped back with a start as she realized that a small, brown man in long sleeves and pants was standing motionless on a rock and staring at her from not five feet away.

"Hello," she said.

The little man was about half her height. Other than his skin color and mountain clothing, he looked a great deal like a goblin. His mouth was an unsmiling seam in a creased face. His eyes were small and hard, above a blunt awl of a nose. He radiated unfriendliness. Alexandra felt it even before she belatedly noticed his pickax.

"Um, are you a hill dwarf?" She remembered the Pritchards mentioning hill dwarves. They hadn't said anything good about them.

"I suppose I be," the hill dwarf said. "Be you a witch?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. *Well, at least he speaks English.*

"Be you no Ozarker," the dwarf said, looking her up and down. His gaze gave her the creeps. "What do you here?"

"I'm kind of on a Quest," Alexandra said.

"You be trespassing," the dwarf said.

Magical beings always seemed to have their own notions of property and territory. "I'm sorry. I didn't see any signs. If you tell me where I'm not supposed to go, I'll be sure not to go there."

The dwarf's face wasn't made for smiling at all, but it managed to fold into even greater expressions of discontent with ease. "Be you smart, girl?"

Alexandra could think of several replies to that. She held her tongue. She decided if the dwarf could answer questions by wordlessly wrinkling his features, so could she.

A few moments passed like that in silence. Then the dwarf said, "Bigfeet always be traipsing here in our hills. You want our secrets and our gold."

*Definitely related to goblins*, Alexandra thought. "Actually, I just want to be on my way. Sorry for trespassing." This dwarf was clearly not going to help her on her Quest.

"Wicked! Wicked! Wicked!" cried Charlie.

*Yeah, I figured as much*, Alexandra thought. She took a few steps backward, not eager to turn her back on an unfriendly dwarf with a pickax, when something flat and hard smacked her on the back of the head. Stunned, she fell to her knees, dropping her wand.

"You'll not be leaving so quickly," said another voice behind her. "You be trespassing. Be there a price for your unwelcomeness."

More small figures melted out of the rocks around her.

It wasn't unlike being surrounded by Redcaps when she was eleven. Including being without a wand. Well, without a good one. She grasped around for where she'd dropped the Grundy's wand, and then another blow to her head knocked her flat on her face.

She didn't quite black out, but she was stunned for several moments, during which the dwarves grabbed her arms and legs and pulled a coarse wool sack over her head.

She heard a fluttering and a great deal of commotion as Charlie squawked and the dwarves laughed. She screamed Charlie's name, and Charlie cried, "Alexandra! Alexandra!"

"Quiet!" Alexandra felt a kick in her ribs. The pain took her breath away.

"Got her wand," said one of the dwarves triumphantly.



"Make we sure she doesn't have another one," said another, in a tone that raised goosebumps on Alexandra's flesh despite the heat.

She felt small hands running over her body, and she squirmed and struggled, but between her dazed condition and the dwarves holding her down, she couldn't break free.

"Why would I have... another wand?" she asked.

"Witches be cunning," the dwarf said. She tried to kick him as his hand roamed more places where she was very unlikely to be hiding a wand. Over her protests, the dwarves proceeded to pull her arms behind her back and her ankles up to her wrists and hogtie her. It was very uncomfortable, but when she tried to resist, one of the dwarves planted his feet on her, just above her kidneys, causing even more excruciating pain.

The dwarf who'd been searching her so roughly added a pinch for good measure. Then they hoisted her off the ground, and she was carried away. She focused on Charlie. She could hear the raven's wings beating against a sack or a net, and she tried to calm her familiar: *Be still, Charlie. We'll get out of this. Don't hurt yourself.*

She'd been suspended from what she guessed was a pole being carried over the shoulders of her captors. They were hauling her over rough terrain, and now and then her chin or chest bounced against the ground. Charlie continued making noise.

"Where are you taking us? What are you doing to Charlie? Don't you hurt my familiar or I'll make you sorry!" she said.

"Without your wand?" said a gloating dwarf voice. "What will you do, little witch?"

She gritted her teeth as the wrenching of her shoulders and another thump against hard rocks brought pain searing through her body in earnest.

*I should have known this Quest was going to suck,* she thought.

## \*Chapter 16\*: You're Going to Pay

"Why did you put a bag over my head, anyway?" Alexandra demanded.

"So you'll not see our secret ways," said one of the dwarves. She thought it was the one she'd first met. Since none of them had offered names and they barely spoke at all while they carried her along, she dubbed that one Grumpy. The other six were Nasty, Grabby, Stupid, Ugly, Smelly, and Asshole. Asshole was the one who jabbed a metal point into her every time she spoke, like now.

They'd gone far enough that she no longer had a sense of distance, and she'd felt so many twists and turns and descents she doubted she'd have a clue how to get back outside even if she wasn't hooded. It was dark and cool; they'd left sunlight behind. Echoes and the scuffing of boots, and many jolts and bumps against hard rocks, told her they were filing through narrow underground tunnels. Charlie had mostly ceased to squawk, but now and then the raven made small, distressed sounds.

Alexandra thought hard about trying to use magic to free herself. All of her practice the previous year with wandless magic hardly left her feeling confident enough to do battle with seven dwarves while hanging hogtied on a stick, but if Grabby got any grabbier or if Asshole poked her one more time, she was ready to take her chances. Except for Charlie. She might be able to do something to her captors, but without a wand, it was likely she'd end up doing it to Charlie as well.

Charlie made a sound that was almost apologetic. Then Nasty shook the net he was holding, and Alexandra winced reflexively. "Stop it!" she shouted. Asshole poked her again. It wasn't a very sharp point, or she'd be dripping blood by now, but it *hurt*. As did her shoulders, bearing most of her weight, and her wrists and ankles, bound tightly together, and her chest, which kept getting dragged or bounced against the rocky floor. She'd learned to hold her head up so that her chin didn't keep smacking the ground as well, but this was making her neck strained and sore.

Her indignation offered no relief from the pain. Slow-burning rage began to seep through her.

*You're. Going. To. Pay*, she thought, clenching her teeth with each painful jounce. Something snapped inside her. She didn't care what rules she'd broken or boundaries she'd transgressed. She didn't deserve this. They had no right to treat her this way.

If hill dwarves didn't like trespassers then they should post signs. Alexandra was tired of magical creatures who thought they could do what they liked with any hapless person who fell into their clutches.

She was going to be charming and witty and say whatever she had to to get herself and Charlie out of this. And then she was going to teach these little creeps a lesson.

When at last they dumped her onto a cold stone floor and yanked the bag off her head, she could barely see more than shadows and a few orange planes of light on the craggy surfaces of her captors' faces. The light came from glowing embers ensconced in recesses in the wall. She struggled with the bonds still tying her wrists and ankles behind her back.

"Untie me!" she snarled, feeling all the anger that had built up since she'd been carried off. Then she remembered her plan to be witty and charming, and added, "Please?"

Charlie squawked in a distressed fashion. Alexandra wiggled her fingers, and wondered if she could improvise a variant on an Unlocking Charm to slip free of ropes. Maybe some doggerel verse, if she had to resort to that.

"Bigfoot intruder," one of the dwarves said. "Ozarkers know to leave us be."

"I didn't know this was your turf," Alexandra said. "I'm not from these parts."

"Be witches bare-armed, bare-legged, in your parts?" asked one of the other dwarves. That, she thought, was Grabby.

"When it's hot outside, yeah," she said. "Did I violate your dress code or something?"

Charlie squawked another rebuke. *Not doing a great job of being witty and charming*.

She heard them rummaging through her pack, and bit back another snarl. They were taking the things Maximilian had left her.

"This isn't a very polite way to treat a guest," she said.

The dwarves paused in their rummaging, then they erupted in laughter.

"You be no guest," said Grumpy. "You be a prisoner."

"Look!" said one. "Be it gold?"

"Be it magic?" asked another.

Alexandra raised her head enough to see the glint of light reflecting off her Lost Traveler's Compass. She started to shout at them to get their hands off it and put it back, but she strangled her protest, while her anger grew with the pain and the constriction of her bonds.

The dwarves found the fruit and the biscuits. With eager, piggish noises they began devouring all the food Constance and Forbearance had carefully packed for her. Alexandra clenched her fists.

One of the dwarves, still ransacking her pack, suddenly gabbled excitedly.

"Tobaccy!" he said.

"Gimme!" said another.

Alexandra heard a scuffle. She couldn't see more than rough movement from shadows, and wondered how the dwarves could see anything in this

light. Someone thumped the other two, causing squawks of outrage, and then Ugly, the biggest and broadest of the dwarves, said, "Spoils be shared, share and share alike, and biggest share is mine!" One of them protested, and Ugly thumped him again. After that, they divided up the tobacco, and Alexandra saw seven more flames burning in the darkness.

She began to think about what she could do without a wand. It was easier to do things with something that was already magical, and the dwarves were smoking wizard tobacco.

"Charlie," she said aloud.

The raven croaked from the shadows, "Alexandra."

Not too far away, she thought. Nasty had put Charlie down.

"Raven stew," said Nasty.

"Raven roast," said Grumpy.

"Raven boiled," said one of the dwarves whose voice Alexandra couldn't identify.

"Raven toast," said Ugly. He exhaled a long puff of tobacco smoke.

To Alexandra's horrified bemusement, the dwarves broke into a chorus:

*"We don't go out in the sunlight,  
Because it's far too bright,  
We avoid the nasty sun,  
And prefer the moonlit night,  
But when big feet stomp above our heads,  
When witches roam our hills,  
Then we take up our axes,  
And go look for witches to kill.  
Now look what we've caught;  
Two fine black birds,  
One's big enough to eat her.  
Let's put them both in a fire,  
And see whose meat is sweeter."*

They cackled again with laughter, all smoking their stolen wizard tobacco.

Alexandra said, "I have a rhyme, too."

The laughing stopped for a moment. Then Grumpy said, "Like we rhymes."

"Like we riddles better," said Nasty.

"Here's a riddle," Alexandra said. "What's ugly and stupid and really rude to visitors?"

The silence was thick this time. Then Ugly said, "I don't like your riddle."

"Then you probably won't like my rhyme," Alexandra said. *"Ugly little goblins, should've let me be. I suggest you run real fast, as soon as I get free."*

"Be we not goblins!" said Grumpy.

Metal scraped on stone. Asshole said, "Be you making threats? Never you be free."

Alexandra flexed her fingers.

*"Enjoy your smokes, you stupid dopes.  
While you told jokes, I broke my ropes."*

She rose to her feet, and her eyes burned green. The dwarves jumped up, just as seven fiery flashes flared in the darkness. The pipes full of wizard tobacco and the crudely rolled cigars ignited in blazing balls of fire. The dwarves screamed as flames erupted in their faces and between their teeth.

Four of them went running, two fell to the ground clutching their faces, and one staggered into a wall, bounced off it, and ran into it again, all while his face was engulfed in flames. Alexandra stepped carefully between the writhing dwarves on the ground to where Charlie lay wrapped in Nasty's net. She sensed more than saw the bird. She picked her familiar up gently.

"Charlie," she whispered, "are you hurt?"

"Fly, fly," Charlie managed, as Alexandra carefully unwrapped the constricting net.

"We will." Alexandra looked around.

As the flashes faded, the coals in the stone wall barely gave enough light to see by. Hill dwarves must have eyes like cats, she thought. The one who'd run into the walls — Ugly — was now trying to edge toward the exit through which the others had fled. The other two were still rolling on the ground, moaning and crying.

She felt a twinge of guilt, before she recognized Grabby, and remembered that they'd been talking about *eating* her.

She let Ugly escape and seized Grabby. "Where's my wand?"

Grabby made incoherent whimpering sounds, but when Alexandra groped around in his pockets, she found the basswood wand with goat feathers. It might not be much, but it was better than nothing. She grabbed the other crumpled form on the ground and said, "Take me to the surface."

"WY WIPS!" cried the dwarf. It was Stupid. "WY WHONGUE! OO URNGED WY WOUFF OHH!"

"I'll do worse," Alexandra said, trying not to let the smell of burned flesh and Grabby and Stupid's piteous cries bother her.

"Fly, fly!" Charlie cried, more insistently. A moment later, Alexandra heard many feet and a multitude of angry dwarvish voices coming their way. And the sound of metal clanking and scraping on stone, lots of it.

She grabbed her backpack, and was about to run into the yawning darkness furthest from the direction the voices came when a green ball of light materialized in front of her.

"What?" she exclaimed. But she recognized this fiery green apparition.

*Ignis fatuus* — like what she had created during winter vacation when she was in sixth grade. A will-o-wisp that had led her into a blizzard and almost to her death. It might have been exactly the same fire bobbing in front of her now. It darted forward, then back, clearly enticing her to follow it, and without even thinking, she took a step in that direction —

She stopped and shook her head. "No way." She knew she couldn't trust it.

Dwarves spilled into the cavern, carrying torches and awls and axes.

"Fly, fly!" repeated Charlie, more frantically.

Alexandra turned. "*Incendiarus blitzen fatalis! Dwarf mortis maximus!*" she yelled, making grand sweeping gestures with her wand. The dwarves pushing their way forward jerked to a halt. There was a mad panicked scramble as they backed over their comrades behind them, and Alexandra fled the cavern before they realized that her words had no effect. She followed the floating green ball of light; wherever it was going to lead her, it would be away from *here*, and right now here was a place she needed not to be.

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By herself, she'd never have been able to outrun the dwarves in their own tunnels, so she had no choice but to follow the will-o-wisp in a reckless, headlong plunge into the depths of the mountain. She might have simply chosen a random direction, except that she could barely see when there was a choice of paths to take. For all she knew, the tunnels were one big loop that would simply bring her back to the dwarves. But the will-o-wisp sped ahead and occasionally swerved right or left, like a helpful guide.

It wasn't being helpful, Alexandra was sure. It was getting her lost. But what choice did she have? She tried to be cautious, and watched her steps as much as she could, which was hardly at all. The light of the *ignis fatuus* was all she had. She could hear Anna scolding her for her recklessness, and mentally retorted that it wasn't as if she could do much else, without her Lost Traveler's Compass. She didn't dare light her wand, as even after several minutes of scrambling through the dark, the sound of her pursuers was still close behind.

They came into view several times, visible only as squat, ugly shadows cast long against the stone tunnels by the torches they carried. Alexandra yelled nonsense incantations at them. She managed to throw some sparks from her wand, and once she even made a dwarf's hat fly off his head. That had kept them cautious, but she didn't think bluffs were going to work when they finally caught up to her. If she couldn't produce real fireballs or something, she would be in trouble.

"Charlie!" said Charlie.

Alexandra didn't know if this was a warning or just an exclamation of fear. Charlie could see no better than she could, and certainly wasn't able to fly around in these tight confines like a bat, so she was carrying the bird tucked under her arm.

The tunnel had been getting narrower for many yards. Footsteps and voices echoed behind them, but the tunnels were such a labyrinth that their pursuers might have been a mile away or just around a bend for all Alexandra knew.

The will-o-wisp bobbed ahead of her, as if signaling impatience.

Alexandra squeezed between rocks that seeped moisture. It was becoming very cool and damp. She let go of Charlie to lift herself over some stones that extruded into the narrowing passageway in a waist-high barrier. Sliding over them, she set her foot down... into nothingness. She almost plummeted, but caught and held herself, balanced on the palms of her hands with her arms supporting her entire weight as her feet kicked empty air on the other side of the rocks she'd just clambered over.

She felt a faint breeze, and far below, a moist "plop" from a pebble she'd dislodged. Charlie fluttered around, almost swallowed in the darkness for a moment.

The green sphere of light continued to bob encouragingly in front of her, but its light did not reflect off of anything near it. This passageway, Alexandra realized, ended in a cavern of unknowable size, with a sheer drop into water below. The will-o-wisp had almost led her to her doom.

With a grunt, she heaved herself backward and collapsed. Her arms, already twisted and sore, could no longer hold her up, and she just lay on her back for a moment, her legs hanging over the drop into black water below. Charlie landed next to her.

After catching her breath, she pulled herself to a sitting position with a sigh.

"Nice try," she said to the ghostly green light. "You almost got me. Now buzz off. I'm not following you any more."

The light bobbed for a moment. Then, with one final dip down and up, as if saluting her, it drifted slowly off into the darkness, until it was a dim glow, then a pinpoint of light, and then gone.

"Well, Charlie," Alexandra said, "I guess we go back the way we came and try to find another way out."

"Crazy!" said Charlie.

"A little late for criticism," Alexandra said. "But if you have a better idea, let's hear it, birdbrain."

A rush of footsteps, angry, cursing voices, and the clank of weapons dragged or bouncing against tunnel walls, filled the narrowing passageway behind them.

"Fly, fly!" said Charlie.

Alexandra tore open her backpack. "Easy for you to say." Fire from torches lit their escape route with a dim orange glow.

A dwarf howled in triumph as he saw Alexandra. Alexandra made a threatening gesture with her wand and twisted her face into a wild-eyed fright-mask as she shouted, "*Avada Kedavra!*"

Perhaps because she was actually angry enough to kill someone, her wand glowed a sickly green.

The dwarf, and the dwarves behind him, flinched, but when nothing else happened, they continued charging down the tunnel.

Alexandra snatched her Skyhook out of her backpack with her other hand. She flung it into the darkness before her and yanked on the rope as it slid through her hand. As the first dwarves came within swinging range, she hooked her arm through one strap of her backpack and propelled herself off the stone ledge. The dwarves gaped at her in astonishment as she swung out into the darkness.

The empty space was not as vast as she'd imagined. She swung like a pendulum and bounced painfully off a rock face on the other side. Gritting her teeth as she swung back toward the mouth of the tunnel crowded with dwarves holding sharp implements, she allowed more of the rope to slide through her fingers while trying to wrap her legs around the rope so she wasn't hanging on with just the one hand.

Charlie circled her head cawing unhelpfully. A spear — or maybe it was a shovel — sailed past her from above. It made a splash in the water below. Then another thrown object struck her in the shoulder. Alexandra yelped in pain — she didn't know if it had impaled her, couldn't even see what had hit her — but the impact made her lose her grip on the rope. She fell and hit the water. It was shockingly cold, almost as frigid as when she'd jumped into Old Larkin Pond the previous winter. Before she could draw breath, she felt a pull from below that sucked her under.

It was just like diving into that icy pond, except this time her feet didn't touch the bottom. There seemed to be no bottom. Alexandra was sucked down and down by an irresistible force. Light vanished. It was dark and cold and she couldn't hold her breath much longer, and she was desperately trying to come up with a non-verbal spell that would save her and nothing came to mind and her head hurt and it was so cold and this wasn't fair —

Suddenly she was moving *up* instead of down, and then she surfaced. She had no idea where, because it was pitch dark. She gulped air and splashed about in a near-panic, until she realized that there was rock below her, within arm's length. She pulled herself out of the water onto a rocky embankment that cut her palms and scraped more skin off her knees.

She lay there for a moment, breathing hard. Her backpack had stayed with her, still hooked around one arm, but how much of its contents had spilled out?

"Charlie," she groaned.

There was no answering caw.

She lay there for another moment, eyes closed. She repeated the call to her familiar, this time in a whisper.

She didn't know where Charlie was, and she didn't know if it was because she was just too weak and unfocused to feel the connection that bound them, or... something worse that she didn't want to think about. Cold water dripped down her face and she would not add tears. But if Charlie had been hurt — if she wasn't able to reunite with her familiar — then those little bastards were going to *pay*.

Alexandra coughed and dragged herself further out of the water. She needed to get herself out of here before she could start planning vengeance against an entire clan of hill dwarves. Where was she? Deep underground. Well, she'd been there before. She'd fallen all the way to the Lands Below, for all she knew.

"*Lumos*," she said, and her basswood wand lit with a small but steady glow.

The Light Spell revealed a small cavern with walls and ceiling made of buckling, rolling limestone. The contours of the space stretched off into a still pool of black cave water and a dark opening that might lead somewhere else, or only to a wider part of the same cavern, but the rock in that direction continued above water. Behind her, the water from which she emerged was still rippling — evidently there was some sort of current, perhaps responsible for her being sucked under the surface and dragged here.

The rocks at water's edge she had dragged herself onto were sharp and rough. She was beginning to wish she'd kept her Questing dress on. Or at least worn long pants. Then she remembered the impact to her shoulder. Almost afraid to find out how bad the injury might be, she raised her hand to her left shoulder and ran it over her bare skin.

It felt bruised, but to her relief, she couldn't find a wound or any bleeding. Whatever had struck her, it hadn't been very sharp. One small mercy.

The contents of her backpack seemed mostly intact — that was another small mercy. She found the lantern the Pritchards had packed. They had given her flint and steel as well, but Alexandra had no need to resort to that. Even the basswood wand could produce a flame to light the lantern, so she did, and then extinguished her wand with the word, "*Nox*."

Before she set off to see where she might go from here, she stripped off her wet clothes. She was already shivering. She didn't remove the Questing dress from her backpack, but she did retrieve dry socks and underwear, long pants, and a shirt. She also replaced her Seven-League Boots with her magically waterproofed JROC boots, which seemed much more useful down here.

Dressed in clothes that were dry and slightly more practical for her environment, Alexandra felt better, though her knees and elbows burned and her arms and legs ached, and the headache from being hit by a spade up on the surface was fiercer than ever. She put a few bandages from her first aid kit on her cuts and swallowed down some Ibuprofen, wishing she had a healing potion instead.

She put the pack on her back and carefully edged around the nearest outcropping of rock, which threatened to push her into the water if she stepped unwarily. The interior of this cave made her feel like she was crawling around in some giant stone monster's intestines.

The continuation of the cavern branched into several black holes she could choose to descend into. None of them looked well-traveled or friendly to explorers, and all were at least partly filled with water. Alexandra wondered how deep this cave system went. Could she wander for days without finding an exit? She had no way of knowing whether there was any way to get to the surface from here. She hadn't heard any footsteps or even the faintest echo to indicate that the dwarves traveled these passages.

She could wander forever here, or more likely, starve to death.

*No*, she thought, *I'm a witch*. She chose one of the black mouths gaping into the unknown, and walked into it.

## \*Chapter 17\*: Sees-From-Laurel

The tunnel she chose went on and on, a small, rough fissure through the subterranean darkness, widening and narrowing, still giving Alexandra the impression of crawling through a stone intestine.

Water ran through it, sometimes pooling in the wider passages, sometimes running in a rivulet alongside a shelf of rock she could walk along, but several times filling a section she had to wade through. She stepped carefully, grateful for her waterproof boots, and managed not to come across any sinkholes that might plunge her into water to her knees.

Although pain and fatigue dominated her thoughts, Alexandra was also becoming unable to ignore her hunger. She continued moving for another twenty minutes, acquiring more bumps on her already battered elbows, and a scrape on her forehead from a tight squeeze through a keyhole formation that she didn't negotiate carefully enough.

When she reached a much larger cavern, with water stretching out to the edge of the circle of light cast by her lantern, she decided to sit down and rest. She needed to think. Wandering around hoping to find a convenient sunlit exit looked increasingly unpromising.

The water here was as calm as everywhere else in the cave system, but in this cavern, it had some sort of algae or moss growing in the black shallows. Wherever her lantern light fell on the water, strands of white stuff waved eerily below the surface. That made her think twice about drinking the water. If she got any thirstier, she might have to figure out a way to boil it.

Alexandra reached into her pack and let out a sigh of relief that was almost a cry when she found the magical pouch. The dwarves hadn't gotten that far, too distracted by the goodies closer to the top of the pack. She opened it and grabbed a handful of pemmican, which she stuffed into her mouth as greedily as the dwarves had wolfed down her biscuits and fruit. Charlie would sure mock her for her own greediness now! How she wished Charlie were here to mock her.

She took stock of her remaining supplies. If she was going to be down here much longer — and it didn't look like she was going to find her way out of here any time soon — she would need to sleep, and she'd be grateful for that Warming Blanket after all. She had changes of clothes, the pemmican would last her for a while, and there was plenty of water, even if it needed to be purified.

So she could survive for days. What she couldn't do was find her way out of here. The dwarves had taken her Lost Traveler's Compass, and now she'd lost her Skyhook. For a moment she wallowed in bitterness, thinking about all the things Max had left her that were lost, one by one.

A small motion in her peripheral vision and a faint dragging sound. She turned her head, and realized that the magic pouch was no longer at her side. Like some sort of creeping thing, it was edging toward the water.

"What?" she exclaimed, and slapped at the pouch to stop it. She saw a thin white hairlike strand stretching from the water to the pouch. Then something *jerked* hard on her ankle. It was the white stuff in the underground pool — it had emerged from the water and wrapped itself around her foot.

Another tendril of mossy white hair was stretching toward the lantern sitting opposite her. It moved more tentatively, as if trying to sneak up on the lantern. As Alexandra was pulled away, she saw the tendril snake quickly around the base of the lantern and twitch, hard, flinging it across the cavern, as if it were red-hot.

Alexandra kicked and tried to grab the rock beneath her, but the rope-like strands had wrapped around her ankles and she couldn't break free. Her fingernails scraped and tore against the rocks, her wand tumbled out of her hand, and she hit the water with a splash. For a moment she simply lay on the rock beneath the one she'd been sitting on, in only a few inches of water, and then she was jerked deeper into the pool. She took a deep breath, as her lantern sank to the bottom of the pool, still casting light for several seconds before it winked out and the entire cavern was plunged into pitch darkness.

She didn't know what it was that was pulling her through the water, but it didn't seem to be trying to drown her — at least not immediately. She was pulled *across* the surface of the water, rather than down. This caused her to bob and splash, and holding her breath had been prudent as her head was dunked underwater several times. She felt like a fish being reeled in by some monstrous, underground fisherman. She didn't like where that thought led. Something wet and ropy snaked around her wrist, and though she twisted and jerked her hand away immediately, this forced her face down in the water as she continued to be hauled across the cave. The tendril around her wrist constricted and pulled at her arm, flipping her over so she was able to gasp for breath, but also making her feel even more helpless. The stuff, whatever it was, was strong and now had three of her limbs.

She hit the far edge of the pool, and barely slowing down at all, was hauled out of the water and dragged across more rocks. Unable to see a thing, she had the feeling that she was in another cave. This one stank. The smell was moist and rank, like mildewed fish guts and wet dog and bad breath. Alexandra sensed, rather than heard, something moving in the direction she was being dragged toward.

She thought of the lantern hastily, fearfully snatched off the rock and tossed into the water. Surely a tiny flame like that couldn't have scared whatever this was?

Maybe it was the light.

Impossibly, the smell got worse. Alexandra fought not to gag. Forcing words out would be difficult. But the *thing* must be very close.

Her Name — Troublesome — came to her lips in an instant. It felt right, given the Quest she was on. The words were pieces of a rhyme she'd memorized some time ago. Improvising light had to be one of the most useful bits of magic one could prepare.

*"When Troublesome's threatened by evil at night,  
Then magic is needed, so let there be light!"*

She shouted the last four words, letting all her will go into them as she opened both her hands, the one held by the ropy tendrils and the one still free.

Normally she'd have tried to conjure a ball of light, or a circle of radiance, or something else more enduring, but her desperation drove the spell, so

light like a hundred lanterns blazed from her hands. Caught in the blinding flash, a hideous, gnarled creature crouched over her, mouth agape with square, brown and yellow teeth inches from her head. It might have been humanoid, but it was impossible to tell beneath the heap of filthy, matted white hair that flowed over its entire body and spilled across the floor of its lair and out into the water. It was like a hideous Rapunzel with impossibly long hair, growing for who knew how many years down here in the darkness.

Its mouth gaped even wider as it screamed shrilly. It was that wretched stench that assailed Alexandra more than the noise, but she flinched and covered her ears as the monster shambled away from her with astonishing speed. It moved like a demonic great ape, but the effect, beneath its gnarled carpet of hair, was more like a cat zipping beneath a bedspread. It ran up against the far wall of the cave, which Alexandra now realized was actually not that large, and cowered as if trying to press itself into the rock, turning its head away from the light. All around her, ropy tendrils of hair twitched and writhed like snakes. The hair clinging to her left hand tightened; the strands attaching it to the living carpet underfoot frayed and snapped and she was left with dirty white hair wrapped around one wrist.

Then the light blazing from her hands dimmed. She had expended all the light her doggerel verse could summon in one brilliant flash. She was half-blinded herself, even as the cave plummeted back into darkness.

*This is bad*, she thought. She concentrated, trying to keep the light alive. The glow from her hands didn't die entirely, but it was barely visible. The creature made a sound deep in its throat.

"Eat this!" she shouted, thrusting her hand forward, palm outward. Another burst of light flared in the darkness. The thing screeched again and buried its head in its arms, trying to protect its eyes.

Already, that illumination was fading too. Frustration was almost greater than her growing panic. Alexandra was desperately trying to cast a spell any sixth grader could manage — at least, a sixth grader with a wand. She wiggled her fingers and managed to throw sparks from her fingertips. She blew on them as if they were burning coals, then pressed her fingertips together, took a deep breath and closed her eyes, brushed them with her lips, exhaled slowly, and imagined magic in her breath. *I am a witch. I am not a helpless little girl. I have magic, even without a wand.*

She opened her eyes, and was rewarded with ten glowing fingertips.

It was pathetic. It was barely enough light to read by. But it seemed to be sufficient to keep the cave creature away. It huddled in the corner, covering its face.

Alexandra turned slowly about, keeping one eye on the ground. She was stepping on the creature's hair and she'd seen what it could do, but there was nowhere to step that wasn't covered with it.

This had to be its lair, because bones littered the edge of the cave. Lots of bones, mostly very old ones by what little Alexandra could make out from the dim glow of her fingertips. She grimaced as she spotted child-sized, elongated skulls. They could only be hill dwarves.

But then she saw a couple of skulls that were larger and rounder. The nearest one was turned away from her, but she didn't need to step closer to confirm her suspicion — those were *human* skulls.

She looked for her wand, hoping to see it floating on the surface of the water, but if it was, it was beyond the range of the glow from her fingertips. It might still be across the pool on the opposite rocky bank.

Alexandra contemplated what to do next. If not for the creature, she could probably swim back, or splash around in search of her wand. Then she could retrieve the lamp from the bottom of the pool. There was more Ever-Burning Oil in her pack, which was now on the other side of the cave. But she didn't like the idea of diving, lightless, into the water, where this thing's hair could once again snatch her out.

"Well," she muttered, "this sucks." The creature stirred, and something slid around her ankle, sly and soft. Alexandra clapped her hands together and green sparks flew from her palms. She clapped again, harder, then repeated it. Each time she clapped, more sparks flew. It was quite pretty, if primitive — a trick that would not impress a stage magician, and could be duplicated by any Muggle with a box of firework-stand sparklers. But the creature cringed away from the sparks, and its hair coiled away from her feet.

"That's right, Thing!" she yelled, not having a better name for it. "Sit your hairy butt right there and don't move or I'll... make a *really* bright light."

She was definitely going to have to work on her intimidation skills.

"He doesn't understand you," said a small, high-pitched voice. "He doesn't speak human."

Alexandra jumped and spun, immediately trying to look less startled and probably not doing a very good job. She held her fingertips out as if she could ward away whatever had snuck up on her.

Standing at the lip of rock above the water's edge was a small elf-like creature. Perhaps it was an elf. Alexandra could only make out a silhouette.

"If he's a friend of yours, tell him to stay back, because I'm a witch," Alexandra said. "A really powerful witch. Don't make me summon fire and lightning."

The smaller being seemed to consider that. "Why don't you have a wand?" it asked.

"I don't need a wand," Alexandra said. "I'm on a Solemn Quest. Witches on Quests don't use wands. We solve puzzles, answer riddles, slay monsters, all wandless."

"I see," said the little creature. "I have never heard of such a thing, but humans are strange folk."

"So, what's your name?" Alexandra asked. "And are you friends with this hairy... person here?"

"He is not a person. He is a bugbear. He would be very insulted to be called a person."

"Well, I sure wouldn't want to insult a cannibalistic bugbear," Alexandra flexed her fingers, thinking about ways to conjure fire and lightning. Fire she'd done before, though without much control. Lightning without a wand seemed like a terrible idea. Maybe she should just try a wandless Summoning Charm to retrieve her wand?



"Bugbears do not eat their own kind. So I do not think you should call him a cannibal either."

Alexandra squinted in the darkness. Was this little person *mocking* her?

"Right," she said. "I'll still set its hair on fire if it doesn't behave." She noticed the creature hadn't answered either of her questions.

"You're a very rude, angry little girl," said the other. "Do you usually walk into someone's lair and threaten to set them on fire?"

"I do when they want to eat me. Which, incidentally, would make twice today that I've had to set people — Beings, whatever — on fire for trying to eat me. So yeah, I am kind of angry, and I don't like being called a little girl." Indeed, her anger was rising. She embraced it as a replacement for fear. Once again, she was in a terrible position to bluff. It was like facing Martha the Hag all over again.

"Well," said her strange questioner, "I shall call you an angry witch instead."

"Call me... Troublesome," said Alexandra. "What's your name?"

After a pause, the small being said, "You may call me Sees-From-Laurel."

"Nice to meet you, Sees-From-Laurel." Just about every tale of meeting with magical beings emphasized the importance of good manners. And being careful with names. Maybe she should have thought of that sooner, but she *had* just barely avoided getting drowned and eaten. "I'm, um, sorry for being angry and rude. I've had a really bad day."

"Yes. It could still become worse." Around Alexandra, visible as dim shadows in the light cast by her glowing fingers, a forest of hairy tendrils rose, weaving back and forth.

"Do we really have to do this?" Alexandra asked. She flicked sparks from her fingertips. The strands of hair near her recoiled.

To her surprise, Sees-From-Laurel addressed the bugbear: "Nee tau kataphooei, Geegowl! Hagenik-il magahesh."

All the snake-like coils of hair slid away and then slumped to the ground. The bugbear replied in a voice that was half snarling beast, half petulant child: "Kaganik phooei ish-la-ha!"

"Ne-ne-ne, Geegowl, gawa hengu-ka. Shewan-gashe, magwan-heshe." The small creature tittered.

"Gaaaaao," rumbled the bugbear.

"You should say thank you," said Sees-From-Laurel.

"Thank you," Alexandra said.

"You're welcome, but I meant you should thank Geegowl. He has agreed not to eat you."

Alexandra scowled fiercely in the dark. "Geegowl should thank me for not setting him on fire. *He eats people!*"

"So do bears and catamounts. Do you go into their lairs and set them on fire?"

"Look, Sees-From-Laurel, sir, I just want get out of here. I didn't ask to be taken prisoner and dragged down here, and I wasn't looking for a fight. So if you'd be nice enough to show me the way back to the surface, I'd really appreciate it, and I'll be out of both your... hair."

She realized belatedly that she didn't actually know if this creature was a "sir," but Sees-From-Laurel didn't correct her. He cocked his head and considered her words. "How much would you appreciate it?"

Alexandra sighed. "A whole lot. Is there something I can do for you?" Of course there would be some kind of quid pro quo. Probably some tricky bargain. There always was.

"As it happens," said Sees-From-Laurel, "there is. And you being such a powerful witch, I'm sure it will be a very easy thing."

"I'm sure it will be," Alexandra said. Her teeth chattered a bit, cutting off the sarcasm. "But do you mind if I fetch my pack while we talk?" She was cold, with her clothes once again soaking wet. At this rate she would go through all the changes of clothes Constance and Forbearance had packed for her in one day.

Sees-From-Laurel snapped his fingers. Alexandra's backpack did not fly across the watery pool from where she'd left it — it simply appeared at her feet.

"Um, thank you." Alexandra knelt to pick it up. She could not bring herself to strip off her wet clothes and change in front of a bugbear and... whatever Sees-From-Laurel was. An elf or kin to elves, she was certain, not unlike the Generous Ones. "I don't suppose you could retrieve my lantern while you're at it?"

Behind her, Geegowl made a slobbering sound. Alexandra flicked her fingers, throwing more sparks.

Sees-From-Laurel snapped his fingers, and the lamp appeared. Geegowl howled as Alexandra relit it. Sees-From-Laurel spoke soothingly while Alexandra hooked the lamp to the outside of her pack where she could reach it quickly.

"You seem to have dropped something else," Sees-From-Laurel said. He snapped his fingers again. An object came spinning through the air. Alexandra caught it without thinking. It was her basswood wand.

Sees-From-Laurel's expression was unreadable.

Alexandra cleared her throat. "Thanks. I might have, uh, cheated a little. You're supposed to use your wits, when you're on a Solemn Quest."

"I see."

She suspected he didn't see at all, and that he also didn't really care. "So," she said, "just what is it you'd like me to do for you, in exchange for leading me out of these mountains?"

"Oh, a very easy thing, as I said," Sees-From-Laurel replied. "We would like you to kill the jimpicute."

## \*Chapter 18\*: The Jimplicute

Alexandra sat on the cave floor, within earshot of the underground pool where Geegowl "fished" for prey. She could hear water lapping against stone, but Sees-From-Laurel had led her somewhere the bugbear would be less tempted by fresh warm girl-flesh, and where Alexandra would be less tempted to set things on fire. The small creature had also left her alone long enough to put on another change of dry clothes. While she did that, she unwound the bugbear's hair from her wrist and stuffed it into the backpack.

"I'm sure your modesty is admirable among your own folk," Sees-From-Laurel said, when he returned, "but you should know, it's rather silly here. Your bare hide is no more interesting to me than Geegowl's."

"You don't talk like any elf I've ever met," Alexandra said. "Not like house-elves or the Generous Ones, and you don't talk like the hill dwarves either."

She set her lantern between them, and Sees-From-Laurel took a cross-legged sitting position within its circle of radiance.

Sees-From-Laurel had elfin features: a wrinkled, bare scalp, pointed ears, protuberant eyes, and a surprisingly long nose. His skin was muddy-dark in the lamplight. Interestingly, his garb appeared to be random bits of cast-off items. His flowing white and blue shirt's stitched quilting looked like something a human infant might once have worn. His pants were a patchwork of assorted scraps of clothing, and he wore bracelets that included a bottle cap with the center cut out.

Sees-From-Laurel said, "Hill dwarves are not my kin at all. We have not a drop of blood in common. The Generous Ones are a tribe from the Lands Below. They are a strange, dark folk. And house-elves... well, I'll thank you not to compare me with *them*. My folk are like yours in a way. The blood of the Little People who lived in these hills long before the arrival of wizards from across the ocean is mixed with the blood of the servile creatures you brought with you. I and my kin are both and neither, and as much a part of this land as any. And —" Suddenly his voice rose to a comical, nasal squeak: "We doesn't talk like this, Missus Troublesome."

Alexandra cleared her throat. The lineage of New World elves was interesting, but... "Why do you want me to kill this jimplicute?"

"It is a fearsome beast that hunts us in these tunnels. It has devoured many of us."

"Oh, so you don't like monsters who want to eat you?" Alexandra said. "Imagine that."

Sees-From-Laurel narrowed his eyes.

"Why don't you just leave?" Alexandra snapped her fingers. "I know your folk, whatever you call yourselves..." She waited, but Sees-From-Laurel did not fill in the blank. "...can pop in and out of any location, just about."

"We cannot leave this mountain," Sees-From-Laurel said. "We have been trapped here."

"Trapped how?"

"It is complicated," said Sees-From-Laurel.

"Try explaining it. I'm pretty smart."

The lids fell halfway down Sees-From-Laurel's large eyes, as he regarded her with an expression she read as amusement, exasperation, or cunning — possibly all three.

"There are oaths and wards that bind us, as they bind your house-elves," Sees-From-Laurel said. "We made a Compact with the Ozarkers ages ago. Originally we were free to come and go. But the Confederation made a pact with the dwarves, paying them with goblin gold to trap us in this mountain. Now we cannot leave, but neither are we permitted to war against other Beings, and so we cannot exact vengeance against the odoriferous hill-folk."

This only raised more questions in Alexandra's mind. She opened her mouth, but Sees-From-Laurel said, "Yes, you are curious to know more, but I have told you enough. Suffice it to say the jimplicute is a plague upon our folk. And upon the dwarves as well, though they are mostly able to keep it out of their tunnels. They fear it only when they venture outside. They undoubtedly meant to feed you to the jimplicute, in the hopes that it would be sated for a while."

"Is the jimplicute a Being, like Geegowl?"

"No, the jimplicute is not a talking beast."

"So why can't you kill it? Isn't your magic strong enough to just drop a big rock on it or something?"

"No," said Sees-From-Laurel firmly, "it has to be done by a wizard. Or a witch. Didn't you say you were on a Quest?"

"Yes," Alexandra admitted reluctantly. And this sure sounded like a Quest. Go kill a magical creature that other magical beings asked you to. But something smelled funny about the whole thing. "I've never actually seen a jimplicute. You want to tell me anything about it?"

"It is very large and very fast, and it has enough teeth to bite you in half," said Sees-From-Laurel. "But humans almost never see it, because it is so fast and because it fears your wands, the only things that can slay it. Well, perhaps those and firearms."

"How does it know if someone's carrying a wand? Or a firearm?"

Sees-From-Laurel shrugged. "It is very cunning, and patient. It will follow you through the woods until it is certain. Perhaps it can smell them."

Alexandra thought about the feeling she'd had earlier, of something lurking behind her in the woods. "How am I supposed to kill it, if it won't let me see it?"

"I know where it lairs. I will take you there... which happens also to be the way out."

"Of course it is," Alexandra said. "So, I'm supposed to sneak up on it or something?"

"Did you not say you must use your wits on a Solemn Quest? You are a wand-wielder. I will leave the slaying of the jimpicute to you."

"Thanks," Alexandra said. "No problem." She put her hand over her mouth to cover a yawn. "Do you mind if I tackle this part of my Quest in the morning? I've been running around trying not to get eaten all day. I could kind of use some sleep before I try to kill jimpicutes."

"There is only one jimpicute," Sees-From-Laurel said. "And you may sleep here."

"How about somewhere a little further from the man-eating bugbear?"

"Geegowl will not trouble you. You have my word."

Trusting the word of a wild elf concerning a bugbear didn't fill Alexandra with confidence. "He'd better not. I can be pretty troublesome myself."

Sees-From-Laurel paused. "Is your Name truly Troublesome?"

Alexandra could hear the emphasis on the word *Name*. "Is your Name truly Sees-From-Laurel?"

Sees-From-Laurel gave her another inscrutable look. Then he said, "We have an understanding with Geegowl. He only eats unwelcome intruders."

"Really," Alexandra wondered how many of those unwelcome intruders had been humans who accidentally found their way into these deep caves. "Fine. I'll just roll out my bag, then."

Sees-From-Laurel nodded. "I will return in the morning, and fulfill my part of the bargain by leading you to the outside."

"All right then," Alexandra watched as Sees-From-Laurel walked away, vanishing into the shadows.

She took her Warming Blanket out, then ate some more pemmican. She listened for the sound of anything else moving in the darkness, but Geegowl was too far away. *Biding his time, waiting until I'm asleep, then he'll creep through the dark, or —* She looked at the water and shuddered, imagining long, ghostly-white hair snaking its way through the water until it curled up onto the rock where she lay, snatching her and dragging her back into the water...

She yawned. She was very tired. She didn't want to go to sleep, but neither did she want to stay up all night and face a jimpicute exhausted from the previous day's trials and lack of sleep.

She walked around the little circle of light cast by her lantern, and did her best to create magical alarums and wards, but she suspected mosquito netting would be more effective than her obstinate basswood wand with its core of goat feathers.

She wished Charlie were here. Charlie would watch over her while she slept.

"Be okay, Charlie," she said. "Come back to me."

For a moment, she thought she heard a distant caw. She held her breath and strained her ears, but it had been her imagination. No sound had echoed through the caves.

*Maybe Charlie is out there, and that's what I heard, like sometimes I see through Charlie's eyes.* Or maybe she was just trying to convince herself of that.

Angrily, she rubbed her eyes, fighting back tears. This wasn't like her. It was exhaustion weakening her. She lay down, and uneasily rested her head against her arms. She thought it would take her a long time to fall asleep, but it didn't.

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Alexandra woke with a start. She was lying on her stomach beneath the Warming Blanket. The Ever-Burning Oil in her lantern still burned. Without a watch and no sky above, she had no way of knowing how much time had passed. Maybe she'd been woken up by the magical alarm she'd set, but she couldn't tell.

She thought she'd dreamed about Charlie, and she hoped that was a good sign. *I swear, once I get out of here, I will learn to call you to me no matter where you are,* she thought. She did not allow herself to consider the possibility that they wouldn't be reunited. Resolutely, she forced her worries about her familiar aside.

After checking the water for contamination by long white hair, she washed her face, then took out her metal canteen cup and dipped it in the underground pool. She set it on a rock and held her wand over it, conjuring heat until the water boiled. She sat with her chin cupped in one hand, levitating the cup in the air and waiting for the water to cool. It was so hard to do simple things without a decent wand!

The water had finally stopped bubbling when footsteps made her jerk upright and almost slosh the steaming water out of the cup. Sees-From-Laurel emerged from the shadows and stared at her quizzically.

Alexandra allowed the cup to settle on the ground. "I don't suppose you have any bottled water?"

"Why would we put water in bottles?" the elf asked, with an expression suggesting that humans were strange folk indeed.

"Never mind. So, anything else you can tell me about the jimpicute I'm supposed to kill? Does it breathe fire? Does it have a single missing scale I have to shoot an arrow through?"

"No, jimpicutes do not breathe fire like dragons. I do not know about missing scales, but if you want to shoot it with arrows, I can perhaps find you a bow."

Alexandra wasn't sure if Sees-From-Laurel was as serious as he sounded, but she shook her head. "How about a gun?"

Sees-From-Laurel's eyes narrowed. "What sort of witch uses a gun?"

*A witch who doesn't have a real wand.* "Just kidding." She reached into her pouch and pulled out a handful of pemmican. She was about to cram it into her mouth, but hesitated, then held it out to the elf. "Pemmican?"

She didn't expect the elf to accept the offer, but to her surprise, he reached a spindly hand out and took it. He stuffed the pemmican into his mouth with evident enjoyment. "It has been a long time since humans have left offerings of food for us."

"I'll be sure to mention to the Ozarkers that you'd appreciate some care packages. Of course, I have to survive the jimpicute to do that." Alexandra ate the rest of the pemmican in her hand and dug some more out, which she also shared with the elf.

Sees-From-Laurel waited while Alexandra put everything but the lantern back in her pack. She wore jeans and a sensible long-sleeved shirt.

"I notice I haven't seen any of your fellows," she said. "You're not the only elf down here, are you?"

"No," Sees-From-Laurel said, "but I am the only one you need to meet."

"I see." She didn't, but Sees-From-Laurel obviously wasn't going to expand on that.

The elf led her along the edge of the cavern — in the direction away from Geegowl's cave, Alexandra noted happily — to a small rushing channel of water between two rocks. The water in the cave drained out to an underground stream, but Sees-From-Laurel walked toward another low tunnel. Alexandra leaped over the water and followed.

They walked what seemed a great distance, now through tunnels that were all stone and dirt and usually completely dry, though sometimes they passed through a cave with moisture sweating out of the rock or pooling in crevices. Alexandra was as lost as before, which really meant no change in her situation. She mulled over ways she could kill a jimpicute. She would prefer to just blast it, except she didn't trust her basswood wand. If it wasn't fireproof, perhaps she could burn it. Maybe she could drop a rock on it?

Eventually they reached a tunnel that narrowed to a hole that even Sees-From-Laurel would have to stoop to fit into. Alexandra reckoned she could crawl through it, but only by dragging her backpack after her.

"I don't suppose there's another way around?" she asked.

"If you would like to take the long way," said Sees-From-Laurel. "It will take another day. Perhaps two."

Alexandra sighed. "So, how far does this tunnel go?" *Because I'm sure there's no other way out of these tunnels that you could have shown me.*

"Two hundred paces. My paces. So not far at all for you. It leads to an opening above a labyrinth of connected caves and tunnels where the jimpicute lairs. You will be able to see sunlight from where you emerge. Be careful, for if the jimpicute hears you, it can scale cliffs."

"Wonderful," Alexandra said.

"Good luck, angry witch."

"Thanks. Sure you don't have a gun you can give me?"

Sees-From-Laurel gave her another one of those squints. "If we had a gun, we would shoot it ourselves."

"Good point." Alexandra unslung her backpack and pulled out her Seven-League Boots. Sees-From-Laurel's eyes were wide with interest as he watched her unbuckle her waterproof boots, slide them off, and lace on the Seven-League Boots, before pushing the other boots back into her pack.

She put out the flame in her lantern, and she and Sees-From-Laurel were plunged into pitch darkness. She put the lantern in her backpack, then crawled into the narrow tunnel, hooking a foot through the strap of her pack so she could drag it after her. Sees-From-Laurel said nothing, and she heard nothing else as she squeezed herself down the passage. She moved very slowly, not wanting to make too loud a dragging noise. She stopped every foot or two and listened for something at the other end of the passage. No sounds came to her.

Two hundred elf-paces seemed like a much longer distance when crawling through a tunnel that was barely wide enough for Alexandra's shoulders. Eventually she saw a dim gray lightening in the absolute black ahead of her. She slowed her crawl even more.

In the gloomy underground, even the slightest difference in light quality was noticeable, so Alexandra knew she was indeed seeing sunlight when she emerged from the tunnel — really, it was not so much an emergence as a widening in the tunnel, enough for her to sit up in. Just enough light seeped in from somewhere ahead that she could see a drop into another, wider tunnel before her.

No sign of the jimpicute. After a minute of peering in vain through the near-darkness, Alexandra realized she was holding her breath. She almost let it out in a gasp, but forced herself to breathe out slowly before inhaling again very quietly.

After sitting motionless for ten minutes or so, she wondered if the jimpicute might be out hunting. Should she try exiting? What if she encountered the beast on the way out? She still didn't have any great ideas for fighting it. Flames or falling rocks. Neither seemed reliable or safe. Anna would definitely call them bad ideas.

*Sometimes there aren't any better ideas,* she thought.

She tensed when she heard a scraping sound from the main cave area.

Her fingers closed around a small rock. While preparing to cast the biggest fireball she could from her department store wand, she tossed the rock as far as she could.

In a blinking instant, a shape appeared near the mouth of the cave where the rock had fallen, so instantaneously that Alexandra didn't even see a blur of motion. It was as if the thing had soundlessly Apparated. Coiled and vaguely serpentine, it crouched in the light for a moment.

*Oh crap*, she thought, *this thing is fast*.

Maybe too fast to summon flames before it would be on her, even hidden up in her alcove. Could she bring the cavern down on it by will alone?

*And then how will you get out, genius?*

The jimplicute's head twitched this way and that, in jerky motions as quick as the darting of a toad's tongue.

Suddenly it was gone.

Then, just like that, a spiny reptilian silhouette eclipsed what little light penetrated to where Alexandra huddled. The jimplicute's head was directly in front of her — it had crossed the space to the wall above which she was perched, scaled it, and thrust its head into the nook where she hid. Alexandra gasped and rolled backward into the crawlspace from which she'd emerged as the thing's jaws closed where she'd been a moment ago with an audible snap. Its head, shadowy but distinct in shape, turned in her direction, and with cold dread, Alexandra realized that the jimplicute might be some distant relative of a dragon, but it was shaped more like a snake, and that serpentine head could come after her in the narrow tunnel she'd crawled through with ease. She was like a groundhog backed into its tunnel by a viper. And in these close quarters, a fire was sure to cook her as thoroughly as the jimplicute. No way she could improvise a Fireproof Charm —

A loud, belligerent shriek echoed from the cavern outside into the tunnel where Alexandra was cornered. She recognized the sound.

"Charlie!" she screamed.

The jimplicute's head snapped around with impossible speed, and Alexandra saw black feathers and flapping wings — somehow the raven had attached itself to the back of the beast's neck. The jimplicute's jaws gaped and it emitted an evil hiss. Then Charlie was flapping away, and screeching: "Fly! Fly!"

"Charlie, no!" Alexandra yelled, as the jimplicute disappeared after the raven, so fast she only saw a flash of its tail before it was gone.

She drew a deep breath, swallowed, and launched herself out of the tunnel. She snatched up the backpack, thrust her legs over the ledge, and slid the ten feet down to the cave floor below. Her Seven-League Boots cushioned the shock of her landing. As soon as she hit the ground, she bolted toward the light, running as fast as her magic boots could carry her.

She made one turn, veering around a rocky outcropping with only an inch to spare at a speed that would have snapped her spine had she collided with the rock. A bright hole in the gloom appeared ahead, the proverbial sunlit exit she had been hoping for the previous day. Had Charlie preceded her out there? Had the jimplicute? Guilt wracked her — she wanted to stop, call for her familiar — but she knew that if she stood still and the jimplicute came back for her, she was dead. She ran.

She burst out of the tunnel into glorious daylight — and found herself on a steep hillside, plummeting down so fast that only with the help of the Seven-League Boots was she able to keep her feet under her. Even so, she had no choice but to keep running. Alexandra shot down the side of a mountain, leaping rocks and dodging trees, which became thicker as she reached lower elevations, too breathless and panicked to even think about what she was doing or which direction to take. Only when she got to a lower slope that leveled out enough to slow down did she begin to slacken her pace, finally running to the edge of another steep bluff before stopping, where she turned to face the woods she'd just run through. She put her hands on her knees, breathing heavily.

From here, she couldn't even see the entrance to the jimplicute's lair. She listened, and heard lots of birds and insects, but nothing like a large, scaly reptile slithering through the woods. Had she eluded it?

*Charlie.*

Alexandra stood up straight again and closed her eyes, holding out her arms. If the jimplicute found her now, so be it. She concentrated, and with all her heart, cast her thoughts out to wherever her familiar might be.

She sagged with relief when she felt wind through feathers and saw the entire mountainside from high above, through a bird's eyes.

*Come here, Charlie*, she commanded. *Come to me.*

It took several minutes before the raven descended through the trees and landed on her two outstretched hands. She pulled the bird close to her, laughing and crying.

"You stupid bird!" she said. "Don't you ever do that again!"

"Clever bird," said Charlie.

"Yes," she said. "My beautiful, clever bird." She wiped tears from her eyes.

"Fly, fly," Charlie said.

Alexandra nodded, eyeing the woods warily, "Yeah. We should get out of here."

She ran for miles, letting the Seven-League Boots carry her away in a rush of speed, rocks and trees blurring past. Charlie followed. Alexandra stopped by a river and considered where to go next. So far her Quest had resulted in several near-death experiences and meeting interesting new creatures who wanted to eat her. What was she supposed to do next? Camp out and wait for something else to try to kill her?

"You did not kill the jimplicute."

Alexandra jumped, made a motion to draw her wand, then glared at Sees-From-Laurel, who was standing in the middle of a flowering thicket by the river.

"I thought you can't leave the mountain," she said. "You're trapped underground."

"So I am. However, some of us have always been able to speak to those in the world above through certain mediums. For me, it is the plant you

call laurel."

Alexandra looked again at the green shrubs with their whitish-purple flowers. The elf, standing amidst the branches and flowers, was on second glance not entirely solid, as if he somehow shared space with the plant. His blinking eyes were the bobbing of flower petals; where his spindly arms ended and the branches of the bush began was hard to separate.

"I get it," Alexandra said. "'Sees from laurel.' Cool. Well, sorry about the jimplicute. Turned out it was easier to outrun it."

"Yes." There was no mistaking the dissatisfaction in Sees-From-Laurel's voice, or the sour look he cast at Alexandra's boots. "I did not recognize those magic boots. That was foolish of me."

"You don't sound happy that I escaped," Alexandra said.

"You were not supposed to escape. You were supposed to kill the jimplicute, or..."

"Or get eaten?" Alexandra folded her arms. "Sorry to disappoint you. You didn't really expect me to survive, did you?"

"No one ever has. But you are a witch, and you boasted of your power. The jimplicute fears wand-wielders, so if there is a way to slay it, surely you were as likely to succeed as anyone."

"But you didn't really think that. So you sent me to my death, basically. You're no better than the hill dwarves!" Alexandra felt her jaw tightening, and a vein throbbed in her temple. The headache, which had never really gone away since being hit over the head by the dwarves, was returning savagely.

"It wasn't personal," Sees-From-Laurel said. "I have no animosity for you, angry witch."

"You sent me to die!" Alexandra yelled. Charlie cawed and Sees-From-Laurel actually stepped back, which didn't cause the slightest rustle in the laurel bush. "That is personal!"

"I did not send you to die. I sent you to kill the jimplicute. I expected you to die, but that is not the same thing."

"I've met two kinds of elves," Alexandra said through gritted teeth. "Helpful, and conniving little bastards who are out to screw you. I guess I know which kind you are. So thanks for nothing, Sees-From-Laurel. But I escaped and you didn't, so hah hah *hah*."

"Hahahah!" echoed Charlie.

"Troublesome witch," said Sees-From-Laurel, "if Troublesome you are, it may be you who is fated to free us."

"I don't want to free you," Alexandra said. "I want to finish my Quest, without any more elves or dwarves or other little people trying to trick me, eat me, or lure me into a monster's lair. So... go away." She waved a hand, as if to Banish the elf.

"If you are truly on a Quest, then the secret all other Ozarkers have sought must surely be of interest to you," Sees-From-Laurel said.

Alexandra paused. "What secret is that?"

"The way to a World Away," said Sees-From-Laurel.

## **\*Chapter 19\*: The Thren**

"Okay," Alexandra said slowly, "let's suppose I am interested in the World Away. Why should I believe anything you say?"

"I have never lied to you, angry witch," said Sees-From-Laurel.

"If you don't count lies of omission." Alexandra's clenched fists belied her cool tone.

Sees-From-Laurel answered quickly and smoothly. "I took you to the jimpicute's lair and told you it was the only way out. I warned you that it is very fast. What more should I have told you? That no one who has faced it has ever survived?"

"Actually, yes," Alexandra said. "You really should have told me that. Then I might have known I was walking into a death trap."

"Yet you did not die."

"Only thanks to my Seven-League Boots." *And Charlie.* "Anyway, maybe with the right spells, I could take it out. Unfortunately, I don't happen to be Questing with my, um, combat wand."

Sees-From-Laurel squinted again. "I thought wizard-folk only carry one wand."

"I thought elves were nice and helpful and jimpicutes were mythical."

The two of them stared at one another. Then Sees-From-Laurel shook his head. "We can be helpful. But I told you, we are not your house-elves. The Ozarkers seek the World Away, and their legends say that Troublesome will open the way. We too, wish to be free, and that can only happen after the Ozarkers leave this world behind."

"I don't think they're ready to go yet," Alexandra said. "I mean, it seems like they've been talking about it for a long time, without even knowing if it's actually possible."

"If they see it is possible," said Sees-From-Laurel, "then perhaps they will stop talking about it. I do not know. We cannot say what wizard-folk, Ozarkers or Colonials, will do. But I can show you the way, Troublesome, and then you can show them the way."

"Fine," Alexandra said. "Show me."

Sees-From-Laurel shook his head again. "It is not so simple. There is an obstacle."

"Of course there is. What is it this time?"

Sees-From-Laurel's image, melded with the laurel bush, seemed to fade slightly. "An underwater panther."

Alexandra stared at the elf, and was glad he was not really there, because she felt a sudden urge to kick him. "You've got to be kidding."

She remembered the terrible creatures who dwelled beneath Charmbridge Academy — or more precisely, beneath Charmbridge's gate to the Lands Below that Alexandra and Maximilian had passed through. They had almost been eaten by several panther cubs, each of them the size of a mountain lion, and when Alexandra had returned, without Maximilian, the mother cat, a horned, golden beast the size of a dragon, with flaming breath to match, had almost devoured her whole. Underwater panthers, according to Maximilian, were virtually unkillable, their hides capable of reflecting spells and blades alike. They were among the most terrible beasts known to wizards.

Sees-From-Laurel said, "I do not jest or deceive you, angry witch. An underwater panther guards the way to the World Away. It is a fearsome beast, with —"

"I know what they are!" Alexandra yelled. "I almost got eaten by the jimpicute, and you want me to fight an underwater panther? No way!"

"What if you did not have to fight it?" Sees-From-Laurel asked.

Alexandra laughed. "What should I do, say 'nice kitty' and make friends with it?"

The elf shook his head, either missing or ignoring her sarcasm, as usual. "They are terrible creatures. They cannot be befriended, and even wands are said to be useless against them. However, there is one sure way to kill even an underwater panther."

"Which you're going to tell me?" Alexandra turned her head right and left to keep an eye on the woods around her. "Not that I'm promising I'll do it."

"According to legend, the surest way to kill an unkillable creature is the song of the Thren."

Alexandra glanced at Charlie, sitting on a bush next to the one from which Sees-From-Laurel was addressing her. "I've never heard of a Thren. Is it some kind of bird?"

"Yes, it is a kind of bird. The Thren's song is so beautiful, it kills all who hear it."

"So, I'm supposed to find and capture this bird — without listening to it sing — and bring it to the underwater panther's lair."

"I know where a Thren nests," said Sees-From-Laurel. "It lives very high in the mountains atop a cliff, next to a laurel bush."

"How am I supposed to get up there, capture this bird, bring it to the underwater panther's lair, then get the panther to listen to it without it singing me to death?"

Sees-From-Laurel smiled. "You are a witch. You escaped the jimpicute."

Charlie said, "Wicked clever."



Alexandra shook her head. "I'm flattered by your confidence."

Sees-From-Laurel said, "There may be one thing I can do to help you."

"Oh?" Alexandra waited.

"As I can appear in this laurel bush, so can I make you disappear in one."

"You mean, I'll be invisible while I'm hiding in the laurel bush? The Thren won't see me?"

Sees-From-Laurel nodded. "But you must make no sound and remain perfectly still. This 'invisibility' is of a limited kind."

"Most invisibility is." Alexandra remembered that from her Magical Theory classes. Invisibility was one of the hardest feats of magic. "Can you transport me through laurel bushes? 'Cause it would be really convenient if I could get up there without having to climb a mountain."

"I am not actually present here," said Sees-From-Laurel. "As I cannot transport myself, neither can I perform this feat of moving you."

"Figures." Alexandra tried to decide how much she believed the elf. "So, tell me about the World Away."

"I can show you the way," Sees-From-Laurel said. "But only after you defeat the underwater panther."

"Why haven't you escaped there?" Alexandra asked. "Because of the underwater panther?"

"What makes you think we want to go there?" Sees-From-Laurel replied. "I told you, we are bound by other oaths, and by the Compact. And it was the hill dwarves who lured the panther, to keep your folk from leaving. They are the ones who trapped you underground in the first place, Troublesome. If not freedom for us or obtaining the object of your Quest, are you not motivated to give the smelly hoarders cause to gnash their teeth?"

Alexandra didn't reply, but in fact, she did like the idea that getting something that might fulfill her Quest would also settle a score with the hill dwarves. Actually, it would only begin to settle the score. She didn't figure letting their rivals out was nearly enough to pay them back, but it was a start.

"Okay," she said, "tell me where this Thren is."

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Alexandra craned her neck. "That is one steep cliff." She drank from her canteen, trying not to think about bears pissing in streams. At least there weren't bugbears out here.

Before her, a cracked rock face rose to a misty summit. She had already hiked up a mountain some miles from where Sees-From-Laurel had first spoken to her, and that hike had not been an easy one. The Seven-League Boots had carried her to this mountain quickly enough, and they were some help in the ascent, but once she reached the point where she was crawling over rocks and up switchback trails and narrow ledges, it was all physical effort unassisted by magic. She had tried an *Ascendio* spell a few times, but her basswood wand flung her haphazardly upward, and after the second time she landed hard and skidded back down the slope she was trying to bypass, she decided not to try it where she might get killed.

From the base of the uppermost cliff, she could see across what seemed like the width and breadth of the Ozarks, though she knew this was only a corner of it. Miles and miles of green hills cut with blue ribbons of water, overlaid with a shimmering golden haze. The sun was well past its zenith, but still some distance from the horizon, and Alexandra's clothes were damp with sweat. She'd refilled her canteen at every stream she came across and drunk it dry every time, and yet hardly had to pee at all. The Ozark heat was oppressive and dehydrating, and it wasn't a bit cooler up here on this mountain, because for all its relative height, the Ozarks were nothing like the mountains of the Southwest or the Rockies, in whose foothills she had climbed during her adventure in Dinétah.

The view was beautiful, but when she turned around to look up the cliff she had yet to climb, she wanted to go back the way she'd come.

"Do *not* fly up there," she said to Charlie. "If there's a bird that kills anything that hears it, I don't want you going anywhere near its nest."

"Pretty bird," Charlie said.

"Dead bird," Alexandra replied.

Charlie made a harsh sound, like "*kk-kk-kkk!*"

Alexandra surveyed the cliff. She was going to have to climb it without a Skyhook, and she wasn't sure how much confidence she had in a Falling Charm with her Grundy's wand. The cliff wasn't sheer and it was not quite vertical — there were ledges and outcroppings and large fissures — but it looked like the sort of cliff face rock climbers would ascend with ropes and pitons. Assaulting it bare-handed was obviously stupid and dangerous.

"Stupid and dangerous," Alexandra muttered. "Well, what else should I expect from a Quest?"

"Stupid!" said Charlie.

Alexandra looked around for any laurel bushes, but she'd left the last one behind well below her. "Sees-From-Laurel?" she called out. "Can you hear me?"

An answer came from one of the many cracks in the gray dolomite half-dome on which she was standing: "He cannot. There is no laurel here."

Alexandra peered into the shadowy crack, and saw a small wrinkled face peering back at her.

"Hello," she said. "Are you a friend of his?"

"We are kith," said the small creature. "You may call me Crack-Dweller."

Alexandra put a hand over her mouth to stifle a laugh, but didn't entirely succeed. Charlie added a few raucous caws. Crack-Dweller's large eyes

widened at Alexandra's sniggering, then thin lids slitted over them in disapproval. "What is so funny, angry witch?"

Alexandra cleared her throat. "Shh," she whispered to Charlie. "You aren't helping." To Crack-Dweller, she said, "I'm sorry. Uh, you might want to use another name if you ever speak to Muggles."

"Why would I speak to Muggles?" Crack-Dweller's eyes remained slitted. "You are supposed to be a witch."

"Yeah, I am." *Okay, Alexandra, grow up.* "Do you have a message from Sees-From-Laurel?"

"Yes," said the elf. "The Thren is not in its nest. It will probably not return until dusk."

Alexandra studied the cliff face again, and then the sun's position in the sky. She was not optimistic about climbing to the top before dusk. "I may have to camp out overnight, and try reaching the top tomorrow. The Thren isn't nocturnal, is it?"

"No." Crack-Dweller wrinkled his tiny button-nose. "As you wish. Do you have a plan?"

"Yes." Alexandra stared steadily back at the elf. *See if I'm going to tell you more than I have to.*

After a moment, Crack-Dweller shrugged. "The Thren spends most of the day away from its nest, but it does sometimes return. Tomorrow, Sees-From-Laurel will watch over its nest, and I will do what I can to relay any warning."

"Thanks," Alexandra said.

Crack-Dweller faded like an image whose contrast had been turned all the way down.

"Well, Charlie," Alexandra said, "looks like we're camping."

Charlie cawed.

"And this Quest is going on three days now." Alexandra sighed. In all her trekking over and under these hills, she hadn't seen a sign of human habitation. It was like she was in some other Ozarks, before people arrived here. Her sense of time was off too — when was the great celebration to end the Jubilee?

Camping out in the open on hard rocks seemed like a bad idea, so she hiked/slid back down the mountainside until she reached a creek she'd passed on the way up, and walked along it until she found a quiet bend where the water became still and deep.

Here, she unrolled her blanket and started a small fire. She shared some more pemmican with Charlie. She was getting tired of pemmican, and it was running low as well. That was one of the reasons she'd chosen a spot by a creek where fish might bite.

She rummaged about in her backpack and found her survival kit. It had an ordinary fishing line with a magical bob. She attached a hook and lure to the line, tied it to the bob, and placed it in the water. She hadn't done much fishing before. The owl-order catalog she'd ordered the bob from had advertised magical fishing rods as well, for reeling in larger and more "challenging" fish, but she hoped the bob would be enough to catch something edible.

Hairs prickled on the back of her neck. It was the same feeling she'd experienced when she first embarked on this quest — the feeling that someone or something was lurking just behind her. She spun around, but saw nothing. She stared into the trees, but if the jimplicute was lurking there, it was extraordinarily good at camouflaging itself. She brandished her wand, and shot a few sparks from it, hoping that what Sees-From-Laurel had told her was true about the jimplicute fearing wands. She experimented with conjuring a fireball, and managed to throw a tiny ball of flame halfway to the trees. Nothing stirred.

She really wished she had her yew wand. It might not have been particularly reliable, but it would certainly put on a better show.

"Clever!" said Charlie.

When Alexandra turned back to the creek, all of her senses on edge, the bob was dragging several inches underwater. She pulled the line up and found a fat catfish on the end of it. Charlie screeched in delight.

"Behave and I *might* share some with you," she said to Charlie.

"Greedy-guts!" said Charlie.

She stayed by the creekside as she took out her knife. She had gone fishing with Archie a few times, but he'd cleaned the fish afterwards. Gutting and cleaning a fish wasn't one of the skills Max had taught her, and it was more awkward trying to do it with the knife in one hand, her wand in the other, always keeping an eye on the trees. She did her best. The catfish flopped about for a while even after she cut off its head.

Grimacing, she tossed the head toward Charlie, who plucked out its eyes like savory treats, then continued to feast on the rest while Alexandra gutted the slimy body. She kept having morbid thoughts about what she'd look like, torn open and gutted. She looked at the trees again. She didn't still feel herself being watched, but she wasn't sure whether she'd really felt it before.

Soon her fingers were slippery with red-black ooze. Charlie picked over the raw guts she tossed away. Alexandra worried that she was cutting off as much flesh as she was scales and fins. Eventually, she had more or less edible chunks of fish, and she proceeded to cook it.

Shortly after sunset, she heard a distant birdcall from high overhead, lovely but eerie. It sent a shiver through her that caused her entire body to convulse for a moment. She glanced at Charlie, who was now full and sleepy after gorging on all the parts of the catfish she didn't want to eat. The raven seemed unperturbed.

"Hmm," she said. She noted that for future reference. Then she put out the fire, took off her boots, pants, and long-sleeved shirt, and slid into her bedroll. The temperature dropped after dark, and there were mosquitoes everywhere, so she huddled under her blanket and tried to get some sleep.

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Her arms and legs were stiff and her back was sore the next morning. Sleeping on the ground with only a blanket beneath her hadn't been comfortable. The bruises she'd accumulated from her encounters with the hill dwarves and Geegowl now ached fiercely. And one hand that had slipped out from under her blanket was covered with mosquito bites. It itched fiercely.

Alexandra put on a change of clothes, rolled up her blanket, ate a breakfast of half her remaining pemmican, and put some lotion from her first aid kit on the mosquito bites. It didn't help much. She used a dab of ointment from her magical supplies, which helped more.

She placed everything back into her backpack, and hiked back up to the cliff. She began stretching while surveying the rock face she was about to climb. As cliffs went, it wasn't the most unclimbable she'd ever seen. Witches' Rock, in Dinétah, was worse. She could never have gotten up it without her Skyhook. This cliff she could probably climb — it was just going to be arduous and dangerous. One loose stone or slip, and that would be that. This was exactly the sort of dangerous undertaking Julia would tell her she should walk away from. After all, what did she care about the World Away? What was she going to get out of this Quest? A new wand? Did she really need to die on this mountain?

Alexandra stood there for a long time, thinking. Charlie, acclimated to her moods, sat on her shoulder like a silent advisor who offered no advice at all.

"I really could die this time, Charlie," she said.

Charlie bobbed and brushed against her cheek.

"It's really hard to explain to my friends," she said. "They always think I'm being reckless and stupid. Sometimes I am. But sometimes you just know you have to do something."

If she turned back from this challenge, she would be a different person than the one who had faced it. She understood this on a level she could not explain. It wasn't mere fear of being cowardly, or a stubborn refusal to turn away from a challenge, though she realized both of those things were a part of it. Her life often seemed prescribed in ways she didn't fully have control over. She had *choices*, and this was one of them, but there was a certain inevitability about the choices she was given. She was on a Solemn Quest now, and you didn't just throw up your hands and say "Nope, too dangerous" on a Solemn Quest. If she did that — well, she would not be who she was.

*You could be someone else*, whispered a voice in her ear. *Would that be so bad?* For a moment, Alexandra almost thought it was a voice speaking to her, and it sounded a lot like Anna. This caused her eyes to shift to her wrist, where she wore the snake and raven charms Anna had given her.

Was Anna somehow communicating with her? No, that was silly. Surely Anna would have mentioned it if the charms had any such powers. Still, she put one hand against the small charms, and murmured, "Don't worry about me. I'll be all right. I always come back."

Charlie made an uncharacteristic chirping noise, for once not attuned to her thoughts and confused by her pensiveness.

"Let's go, bird-brain," Alexandra said.

"Fly, fly!" said Charlie, spreading wings and taking flight.

"I wish," Alexandra said. She walked up to the cliff and began her climb.

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It took almost four hours. Alexandra told herself that if she were really being reckless, she could ascend the cliff in half the time. But she moved cautiously, pausing and reconnoitering when her grip wasn't solid or the footing was uncertain. She moved up, down, and sideways, from ledge to foothold to fissure. She was tempted to try using an *Ascendio* spell, but knew if she missed her target, she'd fall to her death. And she'd sworn to Julia to be careful. *What I really need is a Spider Climb spell*, she thought. She decided to look that up if she ever got to a wizard library again.

Sometimes she only found a crevice barely large enough to wedge a foot into. Once Charlie cawed a warning to her, just before a blood-chilling buzz emitted from the crack she was about to use as a handhold. A shiver went down her spine and she almost slipped, but she held her breath, then slowly withdrew her hand from the crevasse where a rattlesnake was hiding from the late morning sun. She drew her wand and said, "*Petrificus Totalus!*" At least the basswood wand was able to manage a Body-Bind Spell on a snake.

She had to stop often to drink water. Charlie glided nearby, no longer offering sardonic commentary.

Close enough to the top that she could hear the wind blowing through the brush atop the summit, Alexandra stopped on a rocky ledge and eased herself into a sitting position, carefully turning her back to the cliff. She had just enough room to let her legs dangle. It would take a single careless motion to propel herself off the ledge and down. The steep drop before her terminated with nothing but hard rocks.

From where she sat, the Ozarks were spread before her like a magnificent green and brown oil painting with its clarity sharpened beneath glass. Absent were roads, highways, power lines, or towns. She wasn't quite sure how being in this place made the Muggle world fade away so completely. She knew there was no real barrier between them — they had not walked through a barrier or even a Muggle-Repelling Charm when Constance and Forbearance led her and Julia from the A&W into Furthest. Yet somehow there seemed to be two Ozarks. The world where Constance and Forbearance dwelled apart and away from Muggles, and the world that was criss-crossed, dotted, paved, and cemented, where it was hard to find more than a few square miles, even within the large national parks and forests, that were empty of human marks.

Alexandra removed her backpack, which seemed to grow more burdensome as she climbed, even though its magic all but nullified the weight of whatever it contained. She was hot and soaked with sweat, but her back especially was sore and wet. She ignored this as she took a canteen cup and one of the candles the twins had packed for her out of the pack.

"Let's see if I can manage this," she said to Charlie. She cast a Warming Charm to melt the candle.

She didn't flinch when the hot wax flowed out of her fingers and dripped into the cup. When it lay there in a soft, white, congealing pool, she rolled the burning wax that still clung to her palm into a small ball. She pressed the ball of warm wax deep into her left ear and filled her entire ear canal, until when she snapped her fingers next to her ear, she could only hear the sound from her other ear.

She collected another clump of melted wax from the bottom of her canteen cup, rolled it into another ball, and filled her right ear with it.

She couldn't hear the wind, or the distant sound of birds and animals, or the not-so-distant sound of insects.

"Say something, Charlie," she commanded.

Charlie's beak opened soundlessly.

"Almost as good as putting a Silencing Charm on you," she said.

Charlie's beak opened again. Alexandra had no doubt the raven was emitting some choice sounds. Still she heard nothing. She grinned at the bird. "Works like a charm. Literally."

A Silencing Charm would have worked better. She remembered making fun of Angelique Devereaux, back at Charmbridge, for casting a Silencing Charm on herself to deafen herself to her jarvey's curses. The problem with that was that a witch who was Silenced could not cast verbal spells, and Alexandra didn't think non-verbal magic would be enough to capture the Thren. Not with her Grundy's wand.

She resumed her climb, which seemed more perilous without the sound of wind and animals, nor Charlie's flapping wings. It was as if she moved in a dead, still world. Her hands were covered with cuts and her fingernails were torn and bleeding. Her knees and elbows hurt from repeated scraping against rocks. All the soreness of the past two days of abuse was catching up to her.

The sun was almost directly overhead when she dragged herself over the edge of the top of the cliff. She lay there for a while, ankles still hanging over the edge, head resting on a pillow of rough reddish-gray rock. She didn't move a muscle, even her head to look around, until Charlie hopped onto her elbow and pecked at her ear.

"Ugh. Stop it, Charlie." She could hear the sound of her own voice only because her vocal chords vibrated in her own body. Whatever nagging words Charlie might be croaking at her, she was blissfully unable to hear. The raven pecked again, and she lifted her head with a scowl.

Two feet from her face, Sees-From-Laurel glared at her from a scraggly bush of laurel, hands on his hips, tapping one foot.

"Can't hear you," Alexandra said, pointing at one ear. "Wax."

For a moment, the elf's face displayed unguarded bemusement. Then he made a beckoning gesture with his long fingers. Alexandra crept closer to the laurel bush, and closer still as the elf kept beckoning, until she was practically sitting on top of it. The elf, whose ghostly image drifted immaterially through the branches, edged away from her until he had almost faded from visibility himself.

Alexandra said, in a hushed voice, "So the Thren won't be able to see me now?" From her perspective, she was an arm's length from the nest and quite obvious, sitting in the middle of a bush that wouldn't even reach her chest if she stood up.

The elf nodded. He made settling gestures with his hands, which Alexandra took to mean "Hold still."

"So I have to just sit here for the next... however many hours?" She looked at the sun, still many hours from sunset.

Sees-From-Laurel nodded again.

"Okay, then."

The elf glanced at the cliff, back at her, and raised his eyebrows.

"I have a plan," Alexandra said.

Alexandra couldn't read the elf's expression, but he vanished, leaving her alone with Charlie on the mountaintop.

"You," she said to Charlie, "fly away."

Charlie cawed at her, or at least she thought Charlie cawed at her. She reached out and stroked the raven.

"I'd have to Silence you if you stayed with me," she said, "or its song will kill you. And you can't help catch it. So go away. Shoo! Come back when I call you."

Charlie gave her a beady-eyed reproving glare, then cawed soundlessly again and took off.

Sitting in one place for hours was almost worse than climbing the cliff. One thing Alexandra had not packed was a book, so she had nothing to do, and she was afraid to get up and stretch her legs for fear that the Thren might return just when she had broken the charm of invisibility Sees-From-Laurel had put on her. So she sat there, legs cramping and back becoming sorer and all the injuries and mosquito bites from the past few days tormenting her. Worst of all, she was bored. It was a hellish sort of wait, but she endured it, thinking about all the ways she might have better prepared herself for this adventure.

Near dusk, she saw a black spot on the horizon, wings flapping in a steady beat against the air. At first she thought it was a hawk or an eagle; she had seen several of those flying about. Then she thought it was Charlie. But as the bird came closer, the reddish sunlight reflected off of brilliant plumage that belonged to neither a raptor nor a raven.

The bird approaching her was a brilliant robin's egg blue. As it got closer still, she saw that it was also quite large. She was expecting a small bird, but the Thren had a form that was vulture-like, with a craning neck tilted forward beneath wings that folded against its back like hunched shoulders.

It landed on its nest and spread its wings, turned about, and for a moment, peered directly at her. Alexandra had been frozen in place since she first spotted the blue feathers, and now found it almost impossible to believe that she and the Thren could be staring at each other like this, her nose barely a foot from its beak, and it could not see her. But it folded its wings and turned its back on her, settling into its nest and looking out across the sky, which was a lovely pale pink with red clouds on the horizon, shading to magenta and then purple further from the setting sun.

Alexandra felt a strange shiver go through her. She still couldn't hear a thing, but as she watched the Thren fluff its feathers and bob its head back and forth, she realized that it must be singing.

It sat in its nest and sang, and even through the wax in her ears, Alexandra felt a subliminal tingle that was deeply unnerving, as if notes were penetrating her skin and thrumming against her skull.

*It must be trying to attract a mate*, Alexandra thought. She wondered how many Threns there could be in the Ozarks.

She had no time for these speculations. There was no point in waiting — either this would work or it wouldn't. She pointed her wand, mustered all her concentration and tried to think of the stubborn basswood and goat feathers as an extension of her will, and said, "*Incarcerous!*"

She intended to tie up the bird completely, hopefully without harming it, but only one thin cord whipped out of the end of the wand. It wrapped around the Thren's legs, but the bird flapped its wings and launched itself into the air. Alexandra reached out and grabbed the other end of the cord. Her lunge almost unbalanced her, which would have toppled her into the Thren's nest and possibly over the edge of the cliff.

The Thren flew about wildly, tethered by the cord Alexandra held. Its beak opened and Alexandra felt more shivers, but she managed to cast another *Incarcerous* Spell, this time binding the Thren's wings. It fell to its nest, and Alexandra put a hand gently on its body to hold it down.

As she reached into her pack, the Thren began pecking at her wrist, hard enough to hurt. It wasn't an owl or a parrot, but it did have a sharp and pointed beak, and by the time Alexandra had pulled out the gleaming metal cage Livia had given her for Charlie, the bird had drawn blood. Alexandra grimaced, opened the door, and as gently as she could, forced the Thren inside. Its vicious little beak had opened several more small wounds on the back of her hand and her fingers before she finally got the door closed and latched.

It took two tries to dispel the *Incarcerous* Spells. When the cords vanished, the Thren beat its wings and threw itself against the bars of the cage. Alexandra worried that it might hurt itself in its desperation to escape, but after a few minutes of frantic struggle, it folded its wings again and sat huffing and glowering.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said. "I only need to borrow you for a little bit, and then I'll let you go."

She doubted the Thren was even half as smart as Charlie, and was certain it didn't understand a word she said, but her voice didn't calm it — it flapped around inside the cage some more, pecked at the door, and then raised its head in what Alexandra imagined to be a despairing cry.

She activated the Silencing Charm on the cage, then dug one bleeding fingernail into the mess of wax in her right ear and carefully began prying it loose. It took a few minutes to pull all the wax out, and it was as if the curtain fell away from the world once more. Wind blew, birds hooted distantly, cicadas buzzed, and the cage made a slight sound as it rocked back and forth with the Thren's motions. But from within the cage, no sound emerged. The Silencing Charm was perfectly effective.

"Charlie," Alexandra murmured.

By the time she had cleaned the wax out of her other ear — a somewhat more difficult task, as this time it didn't want to all come out in one piece — Charlie had landed atop the cage, provoking more outraged commotion from the bird within.

"Don't tease him," Alexandra said. She assumed the Thren was male; bright plumage and a nest waiting for a co-occupant made that likely.

"Pretty bird," Charlie said.

"Yes." Alexandra rose to her feet. She picked up her backpack and put it on. Then she picked up the cage, and stood on the cliff looking at the steep drop below.

"Crazy!" Charlie said, perhaps surmising with some avian instinct what she was about to do.

"I've done it before," Alexandra whispered.

A Falling Charm was simple magic. The basswood wand made casting even simple charms like stirring oatmeal with a straw, but it was better than doggerel verse. She made the motions and spoke the words twice as slowly and carefully as usual, and then, without giving herself an opportunity to second-guess herself or double-check her work or undo the magic by trying to redo it — since she would never actually know whether it worked until she was falling — she stepped off the cliff and fell.

## \*Chapter 20\*: The Unworking

The climb up the cliff had taken hours. The plummet two hundred feet to the bottom took seconds.

With the wind rushing past her ears and whipping her hair, Alexandra felt that she was falling too quickly. Perhaps the Falling Charm hadn't worked after all. She was about to die.

But she landed feet-first and gently enough that the shock only jolted her for a moment. At the realization that her magic had worked, she let out a long breath that became a whoop. Charlie answered with an echoing caw.

"Well done, Questing Witch," came a voice from a crack at the base of the cliff. Alexandra turned to see Crack-Dweller peering at her from the shadows, barely more than a shadow himself.

"Yeah, I got the Thren." Alexandra held up the cage, in which the agitated bird sat, glowering at her. "Now what?"

"Now, you must return to the mountain," Crack-Dweller said.

"To the jimplicute's lair, you mean? What if it follows me?"

"It will not. It knows you have a wand." Crack-Dweller looked slyly at the cage. "Though if you could lure it back to hear the Thren sing..."

"One monster at a time," Alexandra said. "That was the deal."

The elf's face puckered, and it vanished.

Alexandra kept her wand at the ready as she returned to the cave she had fled the previous day. Before entering, she spoke to the raven perched on her shoulder. "You stay outside, Charlie."

"Never!" Charlie said.

Alexandra set down the Thren's cage, and her wand, and reached for the raven with both hands. She stroked Charlie's wings and leaned close enough that Charlie could have pecked at her eyes.

"This one, I have to do alone," she said. She was facing an underwater panther, and she had to let the Thren sing. She didn't know if she could protect Charlie from both of those threats. She wasn't sure she'd survive them herself. She couldn't project an air of confidence and unconcern to her familiar like she did to her friends — Charlie was not fooled. So she just kissed the top of Charlie's head, and said, "You can call me anything you like, birdbrain, but this isn't a discussion. You're staying outside, and that's that."

"Crazy!" Charlie protested.

Alexandra released the bird. Charlie's black eyes were accusing and resentful, but the raven finally bobbed its head in submission and flew to the nearest tree. Scolding caws followed her into the jimplicute's lair.

Alexandra hoped that Crack-Dweller was right. The jimplicute might fear wands, but she doubted hers would actually be a match for it. The cave was empty, however, and she found Sees-From-Laurel's corporeal self waiting for her.

"Aren't you afraid of the jimplicute?" she asked.

"Not while I am with you," said Sees-From-Laurel.

"You have that much confidence in me?"

"I have confidence in your wand. Or that if the jimplicute shows itself despite your wand, it will eat you first."

Alexandra wasn't sure whether this was elf humor, but she groaned when they reached the ledge she'd hidden on earlier. "I have to climb up there and crawl back through that tunnel?" She was so tired.

"The long way is longer," Sees-From-Laurel said.

Alexandra considered asking the elf if he couldn't simply Apparate all of them to where they were going, but thought better of it. "Fine." She took a breath and said, "*Ascendio!*"

This time the basswood wand lifted her high enough to land on the ledge, though not gracefully. After that rough landing, the crawl through the tunnel was a grinding misery. By now Alexandra had stopped paying attention to the sensations in her body. Everything hurt and her clothes were shredded and torn.

Something additional kindled inside her, burning underneath the exhaustion and soreness. Resentment.

*These elves*, she thought. And the Grannies too, for that matter. It didn't *have* to be this hard. None of them had to make it this hard.

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Even after she could walk upright again, the tunnels seemed to go on for miles. They walked along the underground river, or another underground river just like the previous one. The pools of water and caves looked familiar, but then they were all pretty similar. Alexandra had no need to light a lantern this time — the glow from her wand was bright enough.

As they walked, she finished off the last of the pemmican. She didn't offer Sees-From-Laurel any. She considered trying to feed the Thren, but her fingers still hurt from its beak earlier.

"We arrive," said Sees-From-Laurel. The river spread into a great underground lake, larger than Geegowl's lair. It stretched off into darkness

beyond the circle of light cast by Alexandra's wand. She felt a strange, electrifying sensation, like a breeze against her face. She stepped carefully over slippery rocks until her boots crunched on pebbles, then found solid footing where the cave floor turned to flat chert and limestone slabs along the water's edge. Just as she could see no light reflecting off the far sides of the cavern, she saw none reflecting from beneath the water. The bottom, if there was one, must have been very deep. Alexandra felt like she was standing at the edge of a bottomless, water-filled pit, a pit punched through subterranean rock by unknown, possibly eldritch means.

The "breeze" increased. It seemed to blow through her, rather than around her, bringing a tingling sensation that started at her fingertips and her scalp. It ran down her spine and up her arms, making her feel strangely invigorated despite her fatigue.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"The way to the World Away," said Sees-From-Laurel.

Alexandra raised her wand and said, "*Ter Lumos!*" to make the light brighter. She expected the basswood wand to resist her as usual, but it was as if the impedance in the stubborn goat-feather core had given way, and her spell shot through the wand and blazed out its tip, lighting the cavern so abruptly that the elf covered his eyes while Alexandra held her wand aloft and gaped.

The cave was much taller than it was wide; above her it stretched up a hundred feet. Across the water from her was a flat, vertical plane of gray rock. A black seam ran through it, stretching all the way to the top, a dark chasm whence the wind blew into her face.

But it wasn't a wind. She felt a breeze, but she wasn't cold. Her hair didn't stir.

"What am I feeling?" she asked.

"Ah, you do feel it." Sees-From-Laurel nodded. "Our folk do also, in a manner of speaking, but our senses are different from yours, I think. What you feel is magic."

There was a low rumble, then. At first Alexandra thought it was rocks falling, or some tectonic movement, but then the rumble became a growl, echoing through the chamber.

It came from the water.

Twin yellow beacons of light floated up from the depths, growing larger by the second.

Alexandra shivered. "You're not going to show me the World Away. You brought me here to die, didn't you?"

Sees-From-Laurel said, "I do not know if Ozarker tales are true, oh Troublesome, but only she who can open the way to the World Away can free us. Good luck." He disappeared without even a pop.

She looked down at the Thren, and wondered how she'd been convinced this would work. A great horned head burst through the surface of the water, and Alexandra stared into the enormous glowing eyes of a golden, cat-like creature whose head was nearly the size of a car.

"Oh, crap," she said. She tried to back away and found solid stone behind her. "Nice kitty."

The gigantic panther bared its fangs and roared. Flames poured out of its mouth. From a dozen yards away, Alexandra felt the heat of its breath, and smelled sulfur and blood.

"*Quietus*," she said. The Silencing Charm she cast on herself stilled all sound, and the world went deathly silent. Then she tapped her wand against the cage, and undid the Silencing Charm on the Thren.

The underwater panther lunged all the way out of the water, and its massive paws slammed into the rock shelf where Alexandra stood. Only her Seven-League Boots let her leap out of the way, but with that leap she was backed into a corner of the cavern, with solid rock at her back and to one side of her, the bottomless lake on the other. Behind the panther, she saw the Thren's cage go bouncing away in the opposite direction, knocked across the cavern with a bump from the monster's foot.

The light from her wand reflected dazzlingly off the giant panther's golden hide. It was as large as the great beast she had encountered three years earlier, a locomotive-sized monstrosity, and every bit as terrifying. Its eyes glowed balefully, and it closed the distance between them in two steps. Alexandra found herself looking directly up into its terrible maw, opened wide enough to swallow her whole.

A small, black feathered form flitted around its face, and it turned its head to follow the tiny nuisance that had suddenly appeared as if from nowhere. Alexandra screamed Charlie's name soundlessly.

*No, Charlie! No!*

The panther opened its jaws. It could have swallowed a hundred ravens in one gulp. Alexandra, unable to use incantations, could only point her wand and focus every ounce of her will into a nonverbal spell.

A tiny, purple arc of electricity sputtered and crackled out of the tip and touched the panther's nearest leg. Alexandra wasn't even sure it had felt it, until its head swiveled back in her direction.

*Fly, Charlie! Fly!* she thought. *Obey me, and live! I forbid you to die with me!*

She couldn't see where Charlie had gone. She didn't know if the raven had disobeyed her and followed her into the caverns, or if her own treacherous will had summoned her familiar, in the face of death, but she could face her own death more easily than Charlie's.

She was facing death now. Her plan had failed. The Thren was dead or silent, and the underwater panther was going to eat her.

A memory came to her, of looking up into the face of Galenthias, Dean Grimm's cat. It was her first year at Charmbridge. She had been transformed into a rat, by a curse the Dean had put on her and Larry Albo. She had not known then that Dean Grimm was her aunt, and that Galenthias was in fact her mother. She had not known a lot of things, like when to be afraid, or when death was staring her in the face.

She didn't look away as the underwater panther's head descended on her. She made one final attempt to Apparate. There was no twisting sensation, no splinch, nothing at all — she remained rooted in place as the panther collapsed to the rocks. Its massive head landed directly in front of her, so close that the impact would have knocked her down if she didn't already have a stone wall behind her. Its mouth opened, and for a moment she stared past teeth the length of her forearm into a red tunnel lit by internal fires, ready to engulf her.

Then, slowly, the jaws of the beast closed, and its head lolled slightly to one side, tilted to regard her through lidded eyes as if bewildered by the strange creature that dared to stand before it in all its fiery, impervious glory.

The underwater panther lay stretched out before her, like a giant cat waiting to be scratched behind its ears. Its eyes dimmed. One rear leg slid off the rocky shelf and dangled in the water. It continued to stare dully at her as the fire in its belly went out, and even its hide seemed to lose its glow.

Alexandra stared at the creature wide-eyed, with her heart pounding in her chest. Everything had happened as if in a silent movie, even when she felt the impact of the giant cat hitting the stones.

With shaky legs, she jumped over the panther's massive paw, which was almost the size of a sofa. She edged along the rock wall, squeezing past the panther's body, until once more she could see the Thren's cage, lying at the very edge of the water. And sitting atop it was Charlie.

"Charlie," she said, in anger and relief and wonder, and of course, silently, because the Quietus spell was still on her. She stared at the Thren, which peered out from between the bars of the cage, its body swelling and shrinking with each breath. Bright blue feathers lay scattered around it.

Charlie's beak opened in a silent raven reproach.

She pointed her wand and reactivated the Silencing Charm on the Thren's cage, then reversed the charm on herself. Restored sound struck her ears like a roar, though it was really only Charlie croaking and the dripping of water.

"You did it," she said to the Thren. She looked at Charlie. "Charlie," she repeated. She didn't know how Charlie had arrived in the nick of time, or how the raven had survived the Thren's song. But then Charlie sang, and Alexandra felt a faint shiver.

It was an imitation of the Thren's melody. Coming from the raven, it was merely eerie, but Alexandra looked from Charlie to the Thren, and understood. The Thren had been too terrified and shaken to sing from its battered cage, until Charlie... Charlie had induced it to sing. And the raven was apparently immune to the Thren's song.

"You clever bird!" she said, laughing. "You did it!"

"Clever bird," Charlie agreed.

"Yes. My pretty, clever bird, who keeps saving me." She held out her arms, and Charlie fluttered to her and allowed her to cradle the raven to her chest. "I told you not to do that again!"

Of course she'd be dead twice over if Charlie heeded her. There was probably a lesson there, or just an irony she couldn't appreciate right now, but she was too overwhelmed to think about it. She turned to examine the great golden monster behind her, magnificent as an ancient statue, pitiable in death. She reached out a hand to lay on its furry tail, then withdrew her hand quickly as its fine golden hair, sharp and hard as metal, cut her palm.

"You did it," said an elfish voice. Alexandra jerked her head up. Sees-From-Laurel was perched on a lip of rock barely large enough to hold him, just above the underwater panther's head. And he was not alone.

Elves had appeared as if melting out of the stones around her, and now crowded the cavern. Everywhere she looked — on a narrow ledge above the underwater panther's prone form, on the stone shelf at the edge of the water behind her and on the other side of the panther, even clinging to cracks and deformations on the walls of the cavern — she saw elves, all wearing cast-off clothes and rags, dolls dresses, mittens, discarded socks, even aluminum foil and plastic bags here and there. She was surrounded, and the elven multitude stared at her with eyes that were large and reflective and eerie. They seemed excited, murmuring to themselves and pointing. All Alexandra could make out of what they were saying was "Troublesome," repeated many times.

"Troublesome! Troublesome!" repeated Charlie, as Alexandra set the raven on her shoulder.

Alexandra remembered another time she had been surrounded by elves, deep underground. The hand clenching her wand trembled and became a fist. She was tempted to smite them all, or as many as she could. "You never expected me to survive."

"Yet you did," said Sees-From-Laurel. "As you were meant to. Troublesome indeed."

Alexandra pointed her wand at him. "You told me you'd show me the way to the World Away." The magical "breeze" was heightening all her senses, making her feel wired. She looked at Charlie again, as if hoping her familiar might have some sage advice, but Charlie's black eyes offered no wisdom.

"Yes," said Sees-From-Laurel. "Do you feel that, Troublesome? The Ozarkers have been celebrating their Jubilee. And now is the time when they Unwork all their magical workings, and send that magic... here. Do you feel it?"

"Feel... what?" But Alexandra did feel something.

The not-breeze from the cracked seam on the other side of the lake intensified. The magic that had been like a leaking exhalation became a rush of wind, and instead of tingling, it fairly electrified her. It was no longer coming from within the mountain, but from without. It was a torrent, a rush, a roar, and Alexandra opened her mouth to shout or to scream, because it was like nothing she'd ever felt before. It wasn't painful but it was too much. It was a storm engulfing her, and she couldn't believe her hair wasn't flying, her clothes weren't flapping. Charlie should have been blown away — indeed, so should the elves — yet nothing *physical* touched her.

But magic — magic was pouring over her like a stream of molten lava, like a storm of lightning, like flames in her mind.

It rushed past her and she saw colors her eyes couldn't see and her skin felt sensations impossible to describe. Charms and Transfigurations, Bindings and Conjurings, and Enchantments by the dozen, score, hundred. Spells that held things together, spells that kept them apart, spells



that Warded and Attracted and Summoned and Banished, spells that animated and repaired and replaced and transformed. They came flooding past, each one just a tiny bit of magic like what she might produce from her wand with the right words and gestures and knowledge, but this was the magic of hundreds, thousands of wands, magic cast over days, weeks, months, years. Magic holding up roofs, magic warding homesteads, magic pulling water from streams, magic boiling water in kettles. Magic repelling beasts and insects and lightning bolts, magic hiding the Hollers from Muggle eyes, magic that made mules fly. Magic that cleaned and polished, and some magic that was almost certainly illicit, magic that kindled love or planted seeds of lust or fanned them into flames. There were charms for childbearing and potency — a lot of those — and a smaller number of charms for protection against the same. Deceitful charms to make sloppy work look fine, trickster charms to pull shoes and hats and bonnets off or blow skirts up. A few nastier jinxes to burn or cut, to blister and pox, and here and there a thread of true Darkness, magic that had been cast with some evil and hidden purpose and surely whoever had cast it didn't want their neighbors to know about it, but these too were undone and sent to the mountain vault in the Ozarkers' great Unworking.

Potions and brooms and animations and wards, enchantments and artifacts of all kinds, everything made persistent or permanent by magic was magic no longer as the spells upon these things fled, back along with all the other magic being released in the Jubilee.

Alexandra, standing at the nexus where it gathered, could "see" it without seeing it, feel it washing across her skin though it never touched her. It was as if a third eye had opened in her mind, or a sense from an organ she'd never known she had was now thrumming with unbearable stimulation as she stood in the path of the magical energy and witnessed it all being drawn into that seam, into the place beneath the mountain where all the magic was stored —

Seven years' worth of magic. Seven years from all five Hollers, every spell the Ozarkers had cast, every item that had been enchanted, every charm still intact, everything, everything but their wands. Going to join the magic from the last Jubilee, the magic of all the Jubilees since the Ozarkers came here to these mountains, and maybe longer. Seven years times seven times seven.

There was so. Much. Magic.

Alexandra floated into the air, lifted by nothing more than her will. She hardly noticed her wand falling from her hand. She spread her arms and tilted her head back, gasping like someone drowning. She could breathe and the magic that ran up and down and under her skin was not burning her, not hurting her, but it was **so much**.

She curled her fingers and flicked them, and fiery lines glowed against the rocks on either side of the cave. Sees-From-Laurel and the other elves flinched. Charlie cawed, and Alexandra sent a thought the raven's way: *Don't worry, Charlie. I'll protect you. Whatever happens, nothing will hurt you.*

And it was true, because there was so much magic here that what she willed, she made real. She didn't need a wand. She was a wand.

She saw through the mountain, casting her Witch's Sight through the rock all the way to its heart and upward to the surface, so she saw the repository of all Ozarker magic like an enormous blazing coin in an unimaginably deep vault. She saw Geegowl cringing in the fetid air of his cave, and she saw *all* the dwarves within the mountain, in their dwarven tunnels and dwarven holes, with their tools and hoards and halls.

"Troublesome," said Sees-From-Laurel, "do you see the World Away?"

Alexandra let magic fill her eyes and saw with Witch's Sight as she had never seen before. She could see for miles. She could see everywhere.

There were cracks in the world.

They radiated across the earth and sky, mostly tiny, hairline fractures that even the most sensitive witch would never discern without some spell more refined than Alexandra could imagine. With her heightened awareness they were glowing threads running deep into the ground and up into the air. It was like being able to see atoms.

Larger than the tiny seams were cracks and fissures, spread far apart and mostly hidden away from inhabited areas, but stretching through the hills and under streams and occasionally, just occasionally, touching someplace in a town or along a bridge or highway. Some of the largest rents almost split open deep in forests or swamps. One was in a small lake bordered by Indian ruins and crossed by vacationers in speedboats, unaware of the crack in the world touched by the ripples they left in the water.

Those places, Alexandra thought, must be spots where even Muggles sometimes saw strange things.

"Cracks in the world," she said, speaking to no one.

"Can you open them?" Sees-From-Laurel asked.

Alexandra looked at the elf in surprise, focusing her vision back on her immediate surroundings.

"Open them?" She looked at the nearest one again — a seam in the air that touched this very mountain. She held out a hand.

The seam flared and split and Alexandra saw through it to the other side.

It was another land. There were hills and trees — blue-tinted trees and hills that shimmered with unnatural smoothness, like primitive pastoral paintings. A red-orange sun pulsed warmly, within concentric circles of yellow and white.

She turned her gaze on another one of the lines running through the Ozarks, this one crossing the nearest Muggle city, far out in what looked like the city's Old Town, near a crumbling train station where rails long since choked with weeds lay brown and rusting.

She opened that crack also, and saw through to — someplace else. Dark and watery, no land to be seen and the sky an eternal black lit only by lightning. No place any human would want to go. She shuddered, then realized that the crack was open right there in the town, spraying black water onto the street and flooding the abandoned railway station. She gulped and closed the breach, realizing in the moment she did it that this was within her power.

She pinched the other crack closed too.

"That's all?" she asked. "Find a crack and open it?"

But the magic she'd used to do that wasn't her own. She had no way of measuring how much she'd used, but she knew that what she'd just done was a feat many times greater than what her friends had done last year when they called the Stars Above. That was just to open a tiny pinprick to wherever the Stars Above dwelled, and let them shine through if they chose — which they did. Alexandra had done more than every student in Charmbridge put together could have managed.

And she'd only made a small tear.

To open a way, and hold it open, so that all the Ozarkers could pass through — and then close it again...

That would take a lot of magic. Possibly seven times seven times seven years' worth of magic.

As if reading her thoughts, Sees-From-Laurel said, "The Ozarkers have been husbanding their magic for generations. Saving it for the day when they can finally take their exodus from this world. In that time, perhaps they have forgotten how they originally meant to accomplish it. Or perhaps they fear the day when they must actually leave. They have no idea whether their magic is enough. But it is — isn't it, Troublesome?"

"I think so," Alexandra whispered. Maybe it had been enough for a long time. She stared at the lattice of cracks in the world, knowing that even after this magic faded, she would never see the world quite the same way again. Everywhere she went, there might be somewhere nearby a crack in reality that, with the right senses, with enough power, could be pried open.

She flexed a few of them, poking as one might with curious fingers, prying them open to spy inside, then closing them again. It was tempting and so easy. The magic available to her right now — it felt limitless.

"Troublesome," said Sees-From-Laurel, "when you free us from this mountain, and lead the Ozarkers to the World Away, our pact will be complete."

Alexandra looked down at Sees-From-Laurel and the elves surrounding him, and her face blazed. Those nearest to him gulped and disappeared.

"Is that so?" she said.

She looked up. High in the sky, like shimmering bands, like paths for divine chariots, were more cracks. Could she let the Stars Above themselves back into the world through them?

She looked down at the dead panther, and descended until her feet once more touched the limestone sloping to the edge of the water. Gently, she laid her hand on the panther's muzzle, and this time its hide did not cut her. She plucked its whiskers as if they were threads, and then, holding them in her hand, she sent the panther's corpse sliding back into the water with a thought. It sank like a giant gold statue, down to the fathomless depths where it had slept until awoken by trespassers in its domain.

*Good-bye*, she thought sadly. It wasn't the panther's fault, any more than it was the jimplicute's. They were just acting according to their natures.

Not like elves, or dwarves, or wizards.

She focused her vision to see instead through the stone of the mountain above her, and saw again all the dwarves moving about, vaguely aware of the magical investment taking place below but unaffected by it. They hammered at metal and fashioned weapons and counted gold. Alexandra saw a lot of gold.

*Those dwarves*, she thought. She'd sworn she would make the little bastards pay.

She reached a hand up. She was all-powerful. She didn't need incantations. She didn't need a wand. She stood at the center of magic greater than even her father could ever dream of wielding.

The mountain trembled.

"What are you doing?" shrieked Sees-From-Laurel.

"Payback," Alexandra said. "This is for messing with me."

She clenched her fist and the mountain shook. Now the dwarves jumped up and put on metal helmets and looked for exit tunnels. She found their panic hilarious. It made her feel like a child poking ants with a stick, and when she remembered the way they had hit her and tied her up and battered her and thrown her about, and threatened to eat her and Charlie, she didn't feel guilty at all. The magic was running through her and it was *meant to be used*.

"Troublesome!" said Sees-From-Laurel. "This is not —"

Alexandra spared one small thought for Charlie, which was enough to protect the bird from any shocks and falling debris — the elves could take care of themselves — and then she sent her will upward, and the mountain split wide open.

The dwarves screamed. Starlight shone down on them as rocks exploded to dust and the mountain came apart like a muffin torn in half, laying bare their tunnels and halls and vaults. The elves screamed as well, as the caves and caverns around them crumbled. The passage Alexandra had crawled through from the jimplicute's lair collapsed. Down in his cave, Geegowl frantically scrambled for a deeper tunnel. Alexandra thought about splitting the mountain open further, or sending fire pouring in after the bugbear, but then she became fascinated with the magic flickering and coruscating around her fingertips, pouring through her. She forgot about the mountain and the dwarves as she examined the thousand threads of magic she was drawing out of the air and throwing into her chaotic work.

Impressions floated through her mind as the magic eddied over her: a horseless cart that traversed water as easily as land, and was its creator's pride, even though he had to remake it every seven years. A dozen Soothing Charms; a baker's dozen of strength potions; a rainproof roof; simple homemade brooms by the score; magical lanterns of all shapes and sizes, self-lighting, eternally burning, floating, some even talking; Cold Spells for cellars. All of it was magic used for the past seven years by the Ozarkers, flickering away and consumed in an instant, each small charm and artifact a single drop in the river of magic Alexandra wielded to play with power as if she were a Power herself. How many days' or weeks' worth of Ozarker magic was she casually flicking away? The magic they had vouchsafed to the elves in this great Unworking, Alexandra was using as if it were limitless. She might have used years worth of their magic already.

She calmed the mountain. Most of the elves in the cavern had disappeared already, vanishing with pops and puffs of air.

A terrified band of dwarves was within sight of her now — she had opened the mountain up right to where they stood. They were a hundred feet up, exposed to the open air.

She cast her voice to them, and made it loud enough to be heard throughout all the no-longer-subterranean passages.

"I AM ALEXANDRA OCTAVIA QUICK, DAUGHTER OF ABRAHAM THORN. I AM TROUBLESOME. YOU MESSED WITH THE WRONG ANGRY WITCH!"

The dwarves trembled. So did the few elves who hadn't Apparated away already.

"YOU DON'T GET TO HIDE HERE AND AMBUSH PEOPLE ANYMORE," she said.

One of the dwarves, braver than the rest, called down: "But where we will go? When comes the sun, have we nowhere to hide! Almost the only hill left in all the Ozarks is this for our kin."

Alexandra laughed. "YOU SHOULD HAVE THOUGHT OF THAT BEFORE YOU DECIDED TO JUMP SOMEONE WHO WAS JUST MINDING HER OWN BUSINESS!"

It felt good to be this powerful, to terrify her enemies.

The Ozarkers' magic. She was using their magic. And what exactly did they want her to do with it? She glowered at the dwarves.

"IF I WERE YOU, I'D PLEAD FOR SHELTER WITH THE ELVES AND THE OZARKERS BEFORE THE SUN COMES UP."

The dwarves goggled at her.

"Will they have little mercy for our folk," said the dwarf who spoke.

"I WONDER WHY? SUCKS TO BE YOU."

Alexandra made the mountain shiver again, and the dwarves didn't say anything else, just scrambled away.

"YOU'RE LUCKY I DON'T TAKE YOUR GOLD!" she shouted after them. Then she let the magical amplification fade, and her voice sounded tiny. "But I'm not a thief, no matter what those stupid stories say!"

That reminded her of something, though. She was able to see at once all the gleaming, golden treasures the dwarves had accumulated, and found what she was looking for in one fleeing dwarf's pocket. She recognized him even through a hundred yards of stone. "Asshole!"

She snapped her fingers, and the Lost Traveler's Compass appeared in her hand. She snapped her fingers again, and Asshole's clothes caught fire. She giggled as the dwarf screamed and began rolling around on the ground, and then she forgot about him. She turned her attention back to a stunned Sees-From-Laurel and his remaining comrades. "As for you..."

"Us?" Sees-From-Laurel squeaked.

"You screwed me twice," she said.

"I deny it!" Sees-From-Laurel protested. "Never did we lie to you —"

"Lies of omission are still lies! You deceived me. You tricked me. You sent me to my death, and whoopsie, looks like I'm Troublesome so I didn't die, and now you think it's all good?"

"We dealt with you as generously as wizard-kind have dealt with us," said Sees-From-Laurel. "More generously yet."

"Don't say generously!" Alexandra snarled.

"We only wish to be free," Sees-From-Laurel said. "And that we can never be until the Ozarkers leave this world for the World Away, and that cannot happen until..."

"Until I open it for them?" Alexandra stepped toward the elf, with magic still suffusing her. Her eyes glowed, sparks rippled through her hair, and her fingertips flamed green. The rock beneath her feet turned to smooth, yellow topaz. The air smelled peppery and hot. Sees-From-Laurel gulped and stepped back. The few elves who hadn't vanished already disappeared. Alexandra realized that she could have prevented them. If she really wanted to, she thought she could call them all back. She didn't bother. Sees-From-Laurel had stayed behind, and he wasn't going anywhere.

Sees-From-Laurel, eyes wide and practically glowing with reflected light, said, "We are not your enemy, oh Troublesome. We wish only to fulfill the Compact and end our long service."

"Deal more *nicely* with the Ozarkers and anyone else who crosses your path and needs help," Alexandra said. "Or I will never help you. And if you ever cross me again, it will be the last time."

At her feet, the Thren was a frantic, silent creature trying futilely to beat its way out of its cage. Alexandra smiled at it. "I'm sorry. You're free now." She pointed her finger and Apparated it outside with a pop. She waved her hand, and both the whiskers she'd been clutching in her other hand and the Thren feathers lying on the ground were magically whisked into her backpack. She snapped her fingers, and the cage followed.

She cast her Witch's Sight far again. *Now where are those Grannies?*

There they were. In Down Below Holler, gathered with everyone else at the great dance where all of the Ozarks except Scotch Ridge was celebrating the end of the Jubilee. Most of the Ozarkers seemed unaware of the events that had just happened beneath the mountain where their great Unworking had sent their magic. But the Grannies were one and all craning their necks northward, toward Furthest where Alexandra's Quest had begun and ended.

"Well, I guess I'd better make myself *presentable*," she said, with a laugh that might have sounded like any girl's laughter if not for the mad pitch and the gleam in her eyes. Sees-From-Laurel gaped at her.

Alexandra waved her hands, and her ragged, dirty clothes vanished, replaced immediately with the dress and bonnet she'd stuffed into her backpack. Instead of her Seven-League Boots, she wore shoes that she had turned into slippers to match her dress. The instantaneous transformation delighted her. She'd have to remember that one.

She summoned her wand into her hand, and levitated her backpack onto her shoulders. Then, almost as an afterthought, she touched a finger to her mouth, and found the gap where she'd been missing a cuspid since her fight with John Manuelito.

If Ozarker magic could repair all those other things, she thought, it could surely repair this. She helped herself to a little more magic, and felt a twinge in her gums, followed by a sharp pain as a tooth grew out of the empty socket. She tasted blood, which she made vanish, then ran her tongue over the new tooth, and smiled.

"Come, Charlie," she said. The raven immediately flew to her arm. There was something in her voice that dissuaded any sass.

The heady feeling of power surging through her made Alexandra feel unstoppable. But she stroked Charlie's feathers and whispered soothingly, "I don't think this will hurt at all."

Then she Apparated the two of them across the Ozarks.

## \*Chapter 21\*: The Jubilee

Alexandra appeared in the center of the great tent where the end-of-Jubilee dance was being held with a flash and a boom. Everyone jumped, Ozarkers and foreigners alike, and the more faint-hearted screamed. A few drew their wands. Ripples of confusion replaced the waves of alarm when they saw that the source of the commotion was a teenage girl in an Ozarker dress, with a black raven on her arm and a backpack slung over her shoulders.

"Alexandra!" cried several voices. Julia, dressed in flowing, lacy robes, had been dancing with Noah, who looked dapper in his finest suit. She pushed through the crowd as most of the young people in the center of the tent moved away from the witch with the raven familiar.

"Hi, Julia," Alexandra said with a manic grin, as her sister reached her. "Are you having fun?"

"Am I having —?" Julia's eyes and mouth were round with surprise. "Oh! You ridiculous girl!" She grabbed Alexandra's cheeks and kissed her on the forehead. "Where have you been? What happened? Why do you smell worse than Charlie?"

Charlie uttered an indignant squawk. Alexandra grinned sheepishly. "Uh, no time for baths on a Quest."

"Oh my!" Julia stared at Alexandra's mouth. "Evidently you had time to replace your missing tooth."

This was true, Alexandra realized. She could have removed all the blood and sweat and dirt on her, when she stood at the center of the mountain, on the border of the World Away. It just hadn't occurred to her.

"What is the meaning of this?" bellowed a loud male voice. Leland Sawyer, the jovial head of the Sawyer clan who had spoken a few days earlier at the opening of the Jubilee, barged his way forward. He was less jovial now. His flabby mouth turned down in a scowl when he saw Alexandra and Charlie. "Did you just Apparate here? You oughter know better'n some furriner to — er, no offense, Miss." He made a gesture with his porkpie hat to Julia, as if to doff it, though he really did barely more than flick his finger against it. Without waiting for Julia to respond, he scowled back at Alexandra. "Who are you, Missy?"

Alexandra made a very slow curtsy. She evidently did it wrong — the Ozarkers murmured their disapproval as she lifted the hem of her skirts high enough to show her ankles.

She peered up at Mr. Sawyer from beneath her lowered bonnet with a cat-like smile.

"Call me Troublesome," she said.

He gaped at her. The Ozarkers near her gasped, while those further away muttered and whispered to each other.

"Alexandra, do be less melodramatic," Julia whispered.

Charlie cawed loudly, with wings spread as if to mimic Alexandra's curtsy.

"Charlie, you're just as bad," Julia said.

Straightening, Alexandra patted Julia's hand while scanning the crowd. She found Anna standing quietly on the fringes, wearing her red cloak with her hood pulled up. She was trying to get to Alexandra but there were too many people between them. Further away, one of the Pritchard twins stood arm in arm with Benjamin — or was it Mordecai? But where was the other? Sonja was visible all the way across the throng. She'd charmed her hair to flame, literally, a "foreigner" fashion which seemed to be drawing a number of Ozarker boys to her.

Alexandra turned to face the Grannies, who were gathered in the darkened back quarter of the tent, dressed in their usual dour garb, unlike all the other attendees at the dance, and given a wide berth by everyone else. Each and every one of them had their eyes fixed on her.

"I completed my Quest," she said. She stepped forward, ignoring the sputtering Leland Sawyer. One foot in front of the other, swinging each one casually before setting it down, like a child tromping unhurriedly across a muddy field, Alexandra approached the Grannies. They drew up with backs as stiff as if they'd been fitted with iron braces. Their faces were equally cold and hard. Only Granny Pritchard and Granny Ford didn't look as if something sour was lodged in their throats. Granny Pritchard watched Alexandra with curiosity and just a hint of softness. Granny Ford looked sleepy, which fooled Alexandra not at all.

"This," said Granny Sawyer, "is not how you are supposed to complete a Quest."

"Well, I'm so sorry. But since you didn't tell me what I was supposed to do, I kind of had to wing it." Alexandra stopped in front of them and shrugged off her pack. "I got ambushed by hill dwarves. I climbed a cliff and captured a Thren. I fought a bugbear, escaped a jimplicute, and killed an underwater panther. I had some interesting conversations with elves. You should probably leave them some food." She dumped her pack on the ground at the Grannies' feet. "I collected a few things, too."

Granny Pritchard raised an eyebrow, eyeing the pack.

"The elves told me about the World Away," Alexandra said. "And they showed me how to go there."

She looked around again. With the Unworking no longer coursing through her and the vault of all that Ozarker magic leagues away, she was no longer a mortal Power. The memory of near-omnipotence had left tracks in her mind, her brain still burned, and her fingers still tingled with the forces she had wielded, but she was once more just a witch with a barely-manageable wand. But her Witch's Sight had been transformed forever. She could still see those cracks in the world.

"What's this about... about...?" Leland Sawyer was behind her. So was Julia, and Anna had pushed her way to the front of the crowd.

"The World Away," Alexandra repeated. "That's what you want, right?" She addressed the Grannies, ignoring Mr. Sawyer.

"We'uns din't intend for this to be a public testament," said Granny Morrison. "You are makin' a right spectacle o' yoreself, Missy."

"I saw it," Alexandra said. She stepped away from Leland Sawyer and Julia, closer to the Grannies. She lowered her voice. "With all the magic of all those Unworkings, all of you could go there. If someone opened the way."

She had the Grannies' attention now. All those ancient eyes fixed on her in silence.

"Can you do it?" asked ancient Granny Ford.

"Maybe." Alexandra drew back. "Why should I?"

"Excuse me?" Granny Sawyer demanded.

Alexandra turned to face the rest of the crowd. The foreigners were perplexed; some were annoyed. The Ozarkers all stared at Alexandra with expressions of shock and dismay. Burton and Noah had both pushed to the front. Forbearance was still back in the crowd with one of the Rashes. Alexandra now saw Constance and David near one of the side entrances, standing on their tiptoes.

"Do you all want to go to a World Away?" Alexandra asked, which silenced every Ozarker in the tent.

She looked back at the Grannies, who did not look accustomed to being so put off-guard, then she turned back to the crowd and addressed Burton, the nearest of the Pritchards.

"Do you want to go?" she asked. "You and your family?"

"You mean right now?" Burton stammered.

"Miss Quick," said Noah, "you must know that's not a question we'uns can resolve on the spot like this. Even the Exodans never featured up 'n leavin' with nary a moment's notice."

Alexandra saw the alarm and consternation she was causing, but it only made her want to stir more trouble. She felt a kind of mania that demanded a release. Only the concerned faces of Julia and her friends sobered her.

"Well," she said, "if my friends want to go — if you decide you want to go to the World Away..." She found Forbearance in the crowd, and met her eyes, then Constance, in another quarter of the tent. She swallowed. "For them, I'll do what I can. If they ask me to."

She turned angrily back to the Grannies. "But the rest of you can go jump off a cliff for all I care."

Another wave of gasps rose from the crowd, and the Grannies' weathered faces turned shades darker.

"You need Troublesome, and if you want my cooperation, there's a price."

"We'uns did not send you on a Quest to barter with you when you returned," Granny Ford said.

"You know my problem," Alexandra said, speaking quietly to the Grannies again. "That thing my friends tried to help me with, that you sent Constance and Forbearance with a ritual for? Well, that didn't exactly help, and I still have the same problem."

"How do you feature we'uns can do aught about it?" asked Granny Pritchard. "Child, if'n we could remove the... curse —"

"What sort of curse?" asked Burton.

"Well, figure out something," Alexandra said. "You've got less than six years now. Or you can Name a replacement. Maybe that'll work." She shrugged, and turned away from the aghast Grannies.

"I'm really tired," she said. "I'd like to go home and get some sleep." She turned to her sister and her friends. "I'm sorry I interrupted the festivities."

"Not that sorry, I don't think," said Julia, with deceptive lightness. She put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder. "We probably should take our leave, though, dear sister."

"We'uns'll take you home," said Noah. "Round up the gals."

Alexandra noticed for the first time Innocence standing next to William, both of them glowing in the press of the older attendees, like children who'd snuck into an adult event. William wore his JROC uniform. There were many uniforms in the crowd, JROC and ROC. Alexandra winked at William. He blushed.

"So I guess you won't be staying for the dance," Anna said.

"I think I'd be a disruptive presence," Alexandra said, straight-faced. "But please stay and enjoy yourselves. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"Before we leave," Anna said. "We never did get to spend much time together."

"I'm sorry. I really wasn't expecting to go on a Quest."

Anna hugged her. Alexandra returned her embrace.

"I knew you were alive," Anna said. "That's why we weren't worried. Much."

Alexandra smiled. "How did you know I was alive? Was Sonja watching me with her Inner Eye?"

"She said she was. But I used these." Anna touched the raven and snake charm bracelets around Alexandra's wrist. Alexandra examined them, and realized there was a magical connection between them and Anna she'd never seen before.

"Why, you clever little sneak," she said.

Anna flushed. "I didn't mean... it's not a Trace or anything!"

"I'm not angry." Alexandra patted Anna's cheek, which made her stare, wide-eyed. She grinned at David, who had finally pushed his way through the crowd to them.

"Don't let her lie to you," David said. "She was trying to figure out how to locate you and help. She was worried sick. So was your sister."

"But not you?" Alexandra said, as Anna glared at David.

David, like Anna, seemed unnerved by her mood. "Maybe a little," he admitted.

Alexandra threw her arms around David's neck, which so startled him that he didn't turn his head when she kissed him on the lips.

"The hell...?" he mumbled. "What is wrong with you, Alex?"

"You're such a dork," she whispered. "Is Constance watching us?"

"You smell like you've been on a Quest," David said, gently pushing her away. "And you also look kind of wired."

Alexandra cocked an eyebrow at him, and smiled. She felt wired. The magic in the heart of the mountain was no longer roaring around her, but the memory of it was still alive in her eyes and her heart had not stopped racing. It felt as if all the events of the past few days had been compressed into an opening act just before she stepped onto the stage here at the culmination of the Jubilee.

She knew she wouldn't get many more chances to hang out with her friends. And she owed them explanations.

She saw Burton hovering behind her and Julia. "Hey Burton, you don't mind giving me a lift back to Furthest, do you?"

"Not at all, Miss Quick," said Burton. "But it won't be by mule." He held out a hand. "Apparition's the only way to travel 'tween Hollers 'til we'uns charm our mules an' brooms an' Portkeys again."

Alexandra thought about running back to Furthest in her Seven-League Boots. But Julia had already taken Noah's arm.

Alexandra took Burton's hand. "I hope you're good at this."

He waggled his eyebrows, and they Apparated away.

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"Now I reckoned you must be a proper hand at Apparatin', the way you just appeared in the middle of our dance," Burton said, as he held Alexandra up outside the Pritchards' home.

Her knees wobbled and her stomach felt as if it had been shoved up her esophagus. She held Charlie in her arms; the raven had toppled off her shoulder like a bird rebounding off a sliding glass door when they arrived.

"You're sure not," she managed to say.

All of the Pritchards had returned, Noah with Julia, Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard with their three daughters. The house was dark. Their oldest daughters and younger children and grandchildren had already gone to bed. The animals immediately clamored for attention as everyone appeared in the yard.

Burton coughed, still holding Alexandra firmly. "Hain't Side-Alonged no one so far before," he admitted. "But I did 'spect you to assist a bit."

"What I did was kind of a one-time thing," Alexandra said. "I couldn't do it again."

"Ah. Are you gonna tell us what you been up to these past three days?"

"Burton, really," interrupted Julia. "My sister is exhausted and has obviously been through great trials."

"You're quite right, Miss Julia," said Burton. "I beg yore pardon."

"Constance, Forbearance, do make sure their sheets are turned down, and heat some water for Miss Quick if'n she prefers to scrub the dirt off'n her face 'fore she goes to bed," said Mrs. Pritchard.

Scrubbing dirt off her face wouldn't begin to get her clean enough, Alexandra thought. But she wasn't going to ask Constance and Forbearance to prepare a full bath for her, especially when it would involve manual labor. "Thank you," she said. "I may just go take a dip in the creek, after everyone else has gone to bed." She cradled Charlie and walked with Julia back to the house, leaving Burton behind running his fingers through his beard.

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She gave herself a quick sponge bath with the bucket of water Constance heated with a spell. None of the Pritchards asked her questions. Constance and Forbearance just told her how glad they were that she was back safe and sound. Faithful's family had returned to their home, leaving a guest room for Alexandra and Julia, though Constance, Forbearance, Innocence, and Whimsy were now squeezed into the twins' room.

Julia kissed her, petted Charlie, and asked if she was hurt, cursed, or hexed.

"No," Alexandra said.

Julia looked her over. Alexandra had not let Julia see her undressed, but her nightgown left much of her arms and legs and neck bare, and she was covered with bruises and scratches.

"Maybe a little," Alexandra said. "But I swear, nothing that needs a Healer. Not right now."

Julia closed her eyes, as if summoning patience, or fortitude. "Is there anything else you're hiding that will make me wroth when you finally tell me

about it?" she asked.

Alexandra shrugged. "Not yet?"

Julia tilted her head. For a moment she looked very much like Thalia King.

"I had a lot of encounters and some pretty interesting things happened, and yeah, some of it was dangerous," Alexandra said. "But obviously, I survived."

"Obviously." Julia remained silent until both of them had slid beneath their bed covers.

Then Julia asked, "Alexandra, what is the World Away?"

"Later," Alexandra said. "I promise."

She should have been tired, and somewhere deep in her bones she was. Her muscles were fatigued. She felt every mile she'd traveled, every rock that had scraped or bruised her body. But she was restless and still brimming with energy, even if all that magic had drained away from her — or more accurately, been expended in a burst of wasteful displays.

When Julia's breathing had become slow and deep, Alexandra rose from her bed. She listened, and heard only the sound of the Pritchards' wood-framed house creaking ever so slightly, settling and flexing as breezes through the trees pressed against it, now unwarded against the elements, no more weatherproof than any ancient Muggle homestead.

Charlie fluttered to her shoulder. She crept out of her room, trod through the dining room and across the common room, and let herself out through the front door.

The porch creaked treacherously beneath her feet, but the sound was minute compared to the sudden braying of the winged goats in their pens. Alexandra froze, and didn't move again until the goats settled down and no sounds emerged from the house indicating that her night-time wandering had been noticed.

She continued down the steps of the porch, across the yard, and into the woods.

It was a short walk to the creek, and Alexandra followed the small, nearly indiscernible trail beneath a half-moon to the swimming hole where she and Julia and the Pritchards had gone skinny dipping a few days ago.

There was a crack rippling through the creek, a crack in the world. With enough magic, Alexandra could open it. She wondered what would happen if she did that — opened it and allowed the creek to flow into a World Away.

She tilted her head, slowly, entranced. Charlie, on her shoulder, became tense and alert.

Alexandra's lips moved and she spoke while trying to see through the split that was invisible to those who didn't have her special sight.

*"All's quiet,  
And the crack I see  
Stills the water by it,  
And it's closed to me.  
But if I pry it  
And open the way,  
This creek may flow  
To a World Away."*

She pried at the crack.

Charlie cawed.

There was a sudden gurgling sound, and a rush as of a waterfall just out of sight. Eerie light filled the gap in the trees where the creek ran between them, and Alexandra gasped as the creek sank a full foot and formed an enormous eddy she could see even in the semi-darkness, as if someone had pulled out a plug in the creek bed.

Glowing bugs flew through the crack. Fireflies, but fireflies the size of great bumblebees; their light was not flickering yellow, but a steady fiery blue, like gas flames.

Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut, visualizing the crack between worlds squeezing shut as well.

She knew better than to think that what was easily done was as easily undone. She did.

But she let out a long, relieved breath when she opened her eyes and saw the crack was sealed once again, as if it had never parted for those few moments. The creek was flowing normally.

Blue fireflies still hovered over the water, then flew off into the woods. Alexandra watched them go, hoping they might simply disappear. But no, they had flown away. Perhaps they would die — their short bug lifespans ending naturally, or else be eaten by birds that were attracted by their unnatural blue glow. Or perhaps they would multiply and in the years hence, Troublesome would be blamed for introducing blue fireflies into the Ozarks.

What she had done, though, was something she thought even the Grannies couldn't do. She wondered if her father could do it. Could they even see these cracks in the world, with their Witch's Sight?

She'd walked to the creek wearing her slippers and a nightgown. She stepped out of her slippers, then pulled the nightgown up over her head, carefully hung it over a branch, and stepped into the water, still holding her wand, for all the good it had done her. The night was hot and muggy, so the water was refreshingly cold against her skin, not merely a miserable, icy bath in a chilly cave like falling into the underground stream beneath



the mountain had been.

She plunged in deeper, dunked her head underwater, and floated in the quiet pool, before raising her head when Charlie cawed.

A figure was standing by the water's edge, next to the tree where she'd hung her nightgown.

"I wasn't sure if you was serious," Burton said.

"About what?" Alexandra asked. "Taking a dip in the creek?"

"These woods, they hain't always safe," Burton said. "There's bears an' worse things —"

"Like what, jimplicutes and hide-behinds?" Alexandra paddled slowly in place beneath the moonlight. "That Quest I was just on, it wasn't a joke, you know. So I think I can handle walking in the woods behind your house by myself." She tilted her head, regarding the boy — no, man — four years her elder.

Burton crouched, so he could look her in the eye more easily. She could barely make out his eyes, beneath the hat he wore even at night.

"And why are you here, Miss Quick?" he asked.

"After a three-day quest, a bucket of hot water just wasn't going to do it. I didn't want to make Constance and Forbearance prepare a full bath for me, but I didn't want to wait until morning to clean the blood and dirt off."

"Could'a just used a Scourin' Charm," Burton said. "Had a few o' them applied to my hide when I was a tad 'n gave Ma lip 'bout not wantin' a bath."

"Uh huh." Alexandra floated a little further out into the pool. "So why are you here, Burton?"

There was a long pause. Then Burton said, "Could be I misapprehended yore intentions, but I got the impression you was expectin' me to come."

Alexandra kicked herself another foot from him, her pale legs flashing in the water.

"So are you going to join me, or not?" she asked. She tried to say it as if it were a casual flirtation, or an invitation to an innocent swim-party, but her voice took on an unfortunate life of its own. She had been trying to produce something perhaps a little bit sultry, but what came out was deep and raspy rather than breathless.

Burton didn't move for a long time. Then he said, "You are a brazen hussy."

Alexandra was pretty sure that wasn't complimentary, especially among Ozarkers. Yet Burton made it sound almost flattering. She didn't say anything.

Burton rose to his feet, took off his hat and set it on the same branch where her nightgown hung, and unbuttoned his shirt.

Alexandra watched as he stripped off his clothes until he stood in the buff in the moonlight. Only for a second, though, and then he jumped into the water, not sliding in gently as she had, cautious of disturbing the quietude of the night, but cannonballing into the creek next to her, whooping loudly and spraying water in a huge splash that sent Charlie flying up to higher branches, with loud scolding noises.

"Jerk," Alexandra said, when Burton's head burst through the surface, a foot from hers.

His teeth flashed as he grinned. His hands found her shoulders, and he pulled her closer to him.

Her heart, which had not really slowed down since she Apparated away from the mountain, felt like it might beat through her chest. Surely Burton could feel it pounding against him when their bodies pressed together. He kissed her as both of them kicked slowly to keep their heads above water.

Charlie sat silent on a branch high above the water, watching them.

## \*Chapter 22\*: A Contested Wand

Alexandra lay on her back, looking up at the sky, until faint rays of light began to brighten the east.

There wasn't much in the way of grass by the side of the creek, only gravelly mud disturbed by hard, knotty roots. Burton had conjured a blanket, with a casual ease that impressed her more than she wanted to admit.

He lay next to her, as naked as she was. She was thankful for his Vermin Repelling Charm, as mosquitoes were thick in the air. She thought he was dozing, and she was thinking she should probably wake him up since they both needed to be back at the house before they were caught in flagrante seriously delicto. But Burton spoke first. "You, uh, you was charmed 'gainst a bairn, wasn't you?"

"A bay-ern?" At first she wondered why she needed to be charmed against a barn — it took her a moment to realize what he meant.

"Really? It's a good thing for you I'm a witch! And that I'm friends with Sonja."

"Sonja? What's Miss Rackham—"

"Don't you think you should ask things like that *before* you, uh..." Her voice trailed off. She couldn't think of an appropriate euphemism that wouldn't sound either juvenile or crude, but she balked at actually spelling out what they'd done.

*Sex. We totally Did It. Idiot.*

She wasn't quite sure how she felt about that. She knew it was supposed to be a big deal that she was no longer a virgin, and she wondered when the "big deal" was going to hit her.

"You're right," Burton said, actually chastened. "I do not know what came o'er me. I hain't ne'er been so incautious before. But I assumed you knew what you was about."

Alexandra laughed sarcastically, and sat up.

"Merlin's drawers!" Burton said. "I din't do that?" The denial came out as a tentative question. Alexandra wasn't sure what he meant, until she looked down at herself and remembered that her body was still covered with bruises and scratches.

She laughed again. "No, I got these being dragged over rocks and hit with spades and fighting monsters."

"Dragged o'er rocks an' hit with spades?" Burton sat up slowly and reached a hand out to touch her. He sucked in a breath through his teeth. "If I'd knowed you was hurt..."

"You'd have totally stopped, on account of me being so fragile and delicate?" Alexandra snorted, and pushed his hand away as he traced an older scar with his finger, the one just below her navel, left by the Nemesis Spirit. "It's a little late to pretend to be all gentlemanly."

Burton stared at her. "You are not just brazen, but pig-headed an' ornery an' without the least scrap o' sensitivity or romance."

Alexandra laughed loudly. "Romance? Wow, that must be one of those Ozarker words that means something totally different from how everyone else uses it."

Burton's face twitched. "Do my sisters know how you deride Ozarkers behind their backs?"

That took Alexandra aback. "I don't!"

"Then why're you bein' so contemptible?" he demanded. "I s'ppose you're gonna tell me you din't like it?"

Alexandra had become accustomed to thinking of Burton as a fool, a teasing, unserious jokester, not unlike Torvald Krogstad — the boy she'd dated last year and who had come very close to being the first boy she slept with. She hadn't always recognized when Torvald's feelings were genuine either.

But Burton was such a jerk!

*Then why did you do it with him, idiot?*

She pushed that question aside and leaned forward.

"I liked it," she said. She kissed him, trying not to grimace as his beard scratched her chin. She was not really a fan of beards, she decided. They looked nicer than they felt.

"Seriously," she said, "you're not gonna want a... *relationship* or something, are you? 'Cause, I mean..." Boy, this was getting awkward.

All she could see for a moment was his eyes, studying her in the gloom. Then he chuckled.

"No offense, Miss Quick," he said, "but you'd be a hard gal to fall for."

She sat back. "Oh, yeah? Well, I know I'm not *sensitive* and *romantic* like Julia."

"Nope," Burton agreed. "An' you're plain-faced, scarce-hipped, and you got hardly any—"

"Okay! I get the picture. So why me? You gave up on competing with Noah for Julia?"

"Well, you did prove considerably more available."

She shoved him in the chest, hard, and stood up. "Oh my God, you are a jerk!" she said, while Burton lay on his back and roared laughter.

Charlie cawed overhead, and said, "Big fat jerk!"

Alexandra threw her nightgown back over her head, thrust her arms through it, and pulled it down over her body. "Don't walk back with me," she told him. "If I get caught, I can say I just wanted to take an early morning swim. Jerk."

"Yes'm." Burton started to pull his pants on.

"You aren't going to say anything, are you?" Alexandra asked.

Burton paused, and spoke in a more serious tone. "I may not be much of a gentleman, Miss Quick —"

"Alex," she said. "My friends call me Alex."

"Alex," Burton said. "I hain't gonna ruin yore reputation."

Alexandra snorted. "I don't care about my 'reputation.' I mean, do you even know who I am? But Constance and Forbearance would kill me."

Burton stared at her, then barked laughter again. "Kill *you*? Li'l girl, what d'you reckon they'd do to me?"

"You? You're their older brother. They have to *obey* you."

Burton guffawed. "Miss Quick — I mean, Alex — you really don't know nothin' 'bout Ozarkers."

---

Alexandra had not taken into account how early Ozarkers got up. Mrs. Pritchard and Prudence were already in the kitchen when she returned to the house, and Constance and Forbearance were filling the large metal tub out back with hot water. Mr. Pritchard and Noah were outside, working some sort of charms on the fences around the animal pens, and as Alexandra snuck around to the back porch, she heard Mr. Pritchard grumbling in a low voice — the words didn't carry, except for Burton's name.

*Busted*, Alexandra thought. *We are so busted*.

But Constance and Forbearance greeted her with only a little surprise, casting glances askance at her muddy slippers.

"I really was feeling kind of grimy, after three days of, uh, questing," Alexandra said. "So I went for a swim. In the creek."

"Alexandra, these woods is not allus safe," said Constance, holding her wand in one hand and tapping it against the finger of her other, in a manner that Alexandra's guilty conscience construed as vaguely threatening.

"They hain't like the woods 'round Charmbridge," said Forbearance, holding a bucket in both hands and gazing at her very seriously, her blue eyes accusing and penetrating. *And just what were you doing out in the woods with our brother?* those eyes seemed to ask, though Burton was nowhere to be seen.

"You mean the woods inhabited by wild Boggarts and hodags?" Alexandra asked. "Those woods? Or are you saying the swimming hole where we went with Julia and your younger sister isn't safe, like the pond back home that had kappas and redcaps? Or do you mean something more dangerous than, say, underwater panthers and bugbears?"

Constance and Forbearance stared at her, their eyebrows going up together in that twin thing they still did.

"Alex, dear, you is a bit tetchy this morning, hain't you?" said Forbearance.

"I reckon you got reason," said Constance. "Oh, Alex, dear, we'uns so wanted to help you."

"You've helped me a lot," Alexandra said. "Just being my friends... and putting up with me, means more than you'll ever know." Inwardly, she sagged with relief.

"We'uns'll get this water heated right up and you have a nice *hot* bath," Forbearance said.

"And then," said Constance, "maybe you'll 'splain to us what all that was you said last night, 'bout the World Away."

"Good morning," said a bright, cheery voice. Julia stepped out onto the porch, and immediately fixed her gaze on Alexandra.

"Good morning, Julia," Alexandra said. "I hope I didn't wake you when I got up early. I felt like going swimming. I mean, I needed a swim. I couldn't sleep. You know, after killing an underwater panther and finding out about the World Away and..." Something in Julia's gaze kept her from being able to shut her mouth. Julia continued down the steps and laid a hand on Alexandra's shoulder, then pulled a leaf out of her hair.

Constance and Forbearance had both gone back to work getting the bath ready. Julia said, "That was quite a long swim. I could barely sleep myself, so you can imagine how worried I was when I woke and you were gone."

Her eyes were guileless, and impossible to look away from. Alexandra stammered something.

"We shall talk later, dear sister," Julia said. "Good morning, Charlie."

Charlie, sitting on the fence around the bath enclosure, said, "Yes'm."

---

Getting dressed was difficult without a change of clothes, which Alexandra realized with chagrin were all in the backpack she'd thrown at the feet of the Grannies last night. What had she been thinking?

She was beginning to think that she had, perhaps, not been entirely in her right mind. She needed her backpack back, and Granny Pritchard still had her yew wand.

She was forced to borrow something to wear. Constance and Forbearance were about the same height as her, if not so skinny, so she found herself putting on a dress once again.

The Pritchards' home was now very cramped. Alexandra didn't know exactly what happened to wizard-spaces when they were "Unworked," but all through the house the rooms were smaller. Everyone was now squeezing past each other in this shrunken version of their previous dwelling. The dining room appeared almost unchanged, but when they all sat down at the table, the walls were closer and the space tighter.

Alexandra made it through breakfast without looking at Burton. He and Noah came in from the yard arguing about how to erect a "way-bridge," whatever that was, and sat right down to be served food by their sisters. Mr. Pritchard had come in earlier and presided over the table in his usual silence.

Alexandra imagined everyone's eyes on her, then realized everyone's eyes *were* on her.

Mr. Pritchard cleared his throat. "I have words for you 'bout last night, Miss Quick," he said.

Alexandra almost choked on a biscuit.

"That was a right bodacious spectacle you presented," he continued.

"What?" Alexandra exclaimed.

"Apparatin' into the midst of the Jubilee, interruptin' the dance and, I gather, you had a bit to do with that tremor that shook the hills."

"Oh. Right." *The Jubilee. Idiot.* Alexandra reached for her glass of juice and took a big swallow. "I'm sorry for interrupting the dance."

Mr. Pritchard's expression barely shifted, but she had the feeling she'd missed the point.

"What," he asked slowly, "did you mean by all that foolishness 'bout the World Away?"

Alexandra took another slow sip of juice. When she set the glass down, she looked steadily back at him and said, "I believe I can open it for you."

She expected him to snort, or laugh, or ask who she thought she was to make such a bodacious claim. Instead, his next words caught her off-guard again. "If I din't mistake you, what you said was we'uns could all jump off a cliff."

She sat up straighter in her chair. "I didn't mean your family, sir."

"So you meant ev'ry Ozarker 'cept our family?"

Alexandra thought before replying, which took her some time — she wasn't used to it. "Mr. Pritchard, I really don't know exactly what the Grannies want from me, but they sent me on a Quest that almost got me killed."

"You could have said no," Julia interjected.

Alexandra nodded, without looking at her sister. "I think they wanted to prove something. I passed their little test, so maybe they figure I can do whatever Troublesome is supposed to do. If I hadn't passed their test, I'd be dead."

"Did I not warn you 'bout those old women?" Mr. Pritchard said.

"Oh, Pa," said Prudence, not without fondness, as if her father's dismissal of Granny wisdom was a longstanding source of exasperation for his children. Then a wail from the crib where her son was sleeping brought her out of her chair. "Scuse me."

"You didst go of yore own free will, if'n I recall," Mr. Pritchard said, after his eldest daughter left the room.

"Yes, sir," Alexandra said.

"And," Mr. Pritchard said, "now you claim that *you* — a furriner, meanin' no disrespect — can open the World Away."

"Yes, sir."

"But you hain't gonna."

Alexandra laid her hands on the table. "Do you want me to?" she asked quietly. "I said last night, I'd do it for my friends. If you want to go..." She looked at Constance and Forbearance and Innocence, and felt a moment of loss as acutely as if they were already gone.

Constance and Forbearance's mouths had fallen open in wordless astonishment. Innocence's eyes seemed to fill half her face, and her mouth also gaped open.

"Girls, do not provide perches for crows," Mrs. Pritchard said. All three of the girls shut their mouths.

Mr. Pritchard said, "That decision hain't oorn to make, an' I hain't gonna make it for you. An' I'll thank you not to put it on me or my family."

"Miss Quick," said Mrs. Pritchard, laying a hand on her husband's, "surely you don't wish the rest o' the Five Hollers layin' on my daughters' shoulders the burden o' convincin' you to do that which they'd have you do?"

Alexandra looked at her friends again. She hadn't considered that. She'd told the Grannies, and the rest of the Five Hollers, that she could do what the Exodans had apparently been waiting to do for... centuries? They couldn't pressure *her* or her family. But Constance and Forbearance and Innocence lived here.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't intend — I didn't think —"

"Well, there's a surprise," said Burton.

Alexandra clenched her teeth. He was mocking *her* lack of foresight?

"I believe," said Julia, "that you were not quite yourself last night, dear sister."

Alexandra looked at her suspiciously, but if Julia meant anything by that, it didn't show in her face.

"You was a bit wild," Burton said.

Alexandra wished he was sitting close enough to kick his shins, but Constance and Forbearance were nodding too. "You was almost like someone else," Constance said.

"You was like a fire that was holdin' too much heat," Innocence said.

Alexandra wasn't quite sure that simile made sense, but she said quietly, "I was full of magic."

"And now the Exodans might conceive you have the power to open the World Away," said Noah. He had been quiet throughout the conversation, and now folded his hands together and regarded Alexandra with calm interest. "Though I don't feature how one girl, even with the Grannies' help, can do what all of us can't."

"If I can, it's because I'm the right girl in the right place at the right time," Alexandra said. "I don't think I'm special, and it's certainly not because I'm extra-powerful. And I didn't ask for this."

"No," said Noah, "I don't reckon you did."

"But," said Julia, "you never turn away from any path put before you."

"I would strongly caution you not to speak further of the World Away," said Mr. Pritchard. "And when Noah an' Burton take you to Down Below Holler so's you can hop a Portkey back to Central Territory, I'd suggest you do so directly."

Alexandra had no time to reflect on this, because a knock at the Pritchards' front door made everyone sit up straighter in their seats. Noah rose to answer it. Alexandra wondered why everyone was so tense. Were Exodans already rushing to the Pritchards' homestead, demanding that Troublesome come out and fulfill her destiny? She was quite ready to tell them to —

"Granny Pritchard!" said Noah with surprise.

Granny Pritchard stepped through the doorway and entered the house, nodding courteously to everyone seated around the table.

"Good mornin', my dears," she said. "Oh Lamentation, please don't get up. All you'all, stay put, I've already eaten thankee. I din't come for a visit, much as it'd pleasure me."

"Why did you come, Granny?" asked Mr. Pritchard, in a mild voice that didn't entirely conceal its edge.

"Why, I came to see my great-grandchillun after all that dancin' they was up to last night," Granny Pritchard said, with a wink at Constance and Forbearance and Innocence. Then her gaze settled on Alexandra. "And to speak to Miss Quick."

"Go on an' speak, then," said Mr. Pritchard.

"Don't be such a cancre, Dust," said the old woman to her grandson. "Miss Quick, would you care to take a walk with me?"

"Is this to meet with the rest of the Grannies again?" Alexandra asked.

One eyebrow on Granny Pritchard's face went up. "Nope. Just me. But we'uns might be gone a while."

"How long a while?" asked Julia. "You aren't planning to send her on another Quest, are you? She's supposed to go home this evening!" Julia's hand sought Alexandra's.

"Heavens an' Powers, Miss King," said Granny Pritchard. "I promise to return yore sister safe an' sound afore supper-time with nary a scratch on her, other'n those she's already accumulated." There was something arch in the way she said that. Alexandra self-consciously ran her hands over her dress. Burton drew a hand across his face in a long, slow gesture, as if wiping away some coffee from his mouth.

"If you don't mind," Alexandra said to her hosts. She smiled at Julia, and the Pritchard girls. "I'll tell you everything when we get back."

---

They walked into the woods, while the heat of the day gathered and spread. Though it was early morning, the air was already humid and alive with insects. Alexandra slapped at one that settled on her cheek. Constance and Forbearance had told her that Ozarker bonnets were usually Charmed to repel bugs — she was beginning to wish she wore one now. Under her borrowed dress, she wore her Seven-League Boots, but she otherwise had little protection.

On her shoulder, Charlie snapped a bug out of the air.

"You cheated," said Granny Pritchard. "You was s'posed to finish yore Quest without a wand."

"So I cheated," Alexandra said. "I still finished it, right? And without a wand I wouldn't have survived."

"You would have," Granny Pritchard said. "I have confidence in you, girl. But bein' Troublesome, naturally you done it yore own way."

Alexandra snorted. "You knew I had another wand."

For the first time, Granny Pritchard grinned.

"So you're not mad at me?" Alexandra said.

"I can't blame Troublesome for doin' as Troublesome does. I am more put out at my great-grandson, who ought't've known better." There was a sharp and wicked gleam in the old woman's eye. "Do not flatter yoreself that it was yore wit 'n charm that seduced Burton. Every Ozarker buck dreams of beddin' Troublesome, though I 'spect they usually imagine her somewhat comelier."

Alexandra stopped in her tracks, her face turning red. Charlie left her shoulder, as usual when her temper flared.

"Aren't you a little old to be a voyeur?" she demanded.

"Tsk, girl. I was home abed last night like any decent woman. Had no idea what you'd been up to 'til I saw you at the breakfast table this mornin', you an' Burton an' yore shameful secret sittin' 'tween you'uns like another guest."

"I'm not ashamed!" Alexandra snapped.

Granny Pritchard laughed. "'Course not, you shameless girl. But Burton oughter be."

"Why, because he slept with a foreigner? I'm pretty sure I'm not his first." Anger colored Alexandra's voice. "No *Ozarker* girl would ever be so indecent or unrespectable, after all."

Granny Pritchard clucked her tongue. She resumed walking through the woods, so Alexandra hurried after her, stomping her boots.

"Why do you even care?" Alexandra asked. "You're not my mother."

"Praise be for that!"

"So did you bring me out here just to scold me? If that's the case, thanks, message received, I'll go back now." Alexandra halted, and Granny Pritchard sighed and turned around.

"You just hold on there, Missy." Granny Pritchard folded her arms and fixed stony eyes on her. "There's another set o' tales 'bout what happens after Troublesome's no longer a maid. You might've preferred to avoid 'em."

"I might've preferred to stay a virgin because you've got some more Ozarker stories about what happens to your folk character? You know, everything I've heard suggests nothing good's ever supposed to happen to Troublesome anyway. Well guess what? I'm not a fable or a fairy tale. I'm me, and I choose what I will or won't do."

Granny Pritchard sighed again. "So you say. I will not tell you otherwise." She drew herself up and looked down her nose at Alexandra. "I believe," she said, "that I promised you a wand."

Alexandra paused. "Really? You're still going to craft one for me?"

"I promised, din't I? Stop squinchin' at me like that, girl." Granny Pritchard began walking once more. They were now well off any trail or path, but the shrubs and bushes parted for her, and remained parted in her wake for Alexandra to follow, so long as she stayed close behind the old woman.

"Doesn't it take a while to carve and enchant a wand?" Alexandra asked. "Have you already started?" Now she was burning with curiosity, her indignation at the Granny's interrogation into her sex life rapidly fading. "Did you make it from pecan? I liked my pecan wand — no other wood feels quite the same. I don't know if I found anything that will work like chimaera hair, though..."

"I hain't never crafted a wand with chimaera hair," Granny Pritchard said. "I do not work with foreign beasts."

The foliage became thicker as they walked, with the trees also growing denser, until Alexandra thought that even woodland creatures would have trouble negotiating their way through the barrier-like thickets without Granny Pritchard's magic. Sunlight still made its way through the leaves overhead, but the forest floor was covered with vines and thorn bushes and long, twisting, knotted roots curled around large rocks. Granny Pritchard walked through it with no more trouble than if it were a cleared trail, but whenever Alexandra lagged behind, she felt the underbrush clinging to her legs and her feet stumbled over roots and stones. Charlie had been flying from tree to tree alongside them, but now landed on her shoulder again.

Abruptly, a small cabin appeared before them, in a clearing that seemed surrounded by a natural maze. Alexandra gazed at it, and couldn't help being reminded of sinister stories about witches with cabins in the woods.

As if reading her thoughts, Granny Pritchard said, "It keeps away unwanted visitors. Connie 'n Bear have been here many a time." She walked up to the door; it opened for her, and remained open after she walked inside. Alexandra followed her in. Charlie cawed as they crossed the threshold.

The interior of the cabin was a large, cozy living room, carpeted and furnished, with a big plush recliner, a sofa, bookcases full of very old books, and a fireplace, now cold and dark. Doorways led into other rooms. It was an entire house, stuffed into what should have been a one-room cabin.

"A wizard-space," Alexandra said. "But... didn't you have to Unwork it for the Jubilee?"

"I did," Granny Pritchard said. "An' restored it this mornin'. I've seen more Jubilees than you might think. I've done this a few times. It gets easier each time."

Alexandra thought about how the entire Pritchard family was going to have to spend days restoring their own house.

Granny Pritchard went to a table. Alexandra's backpack was laid out on it, with some of its contents: the bugbear hair, the Thren feathers, the long golden whiskers of the underwater panther, and her phoenix feather. Her Twister stood in a corner behind the table.

"These will make some interestin' an' unique wands," Granny Pritchard said. "I thankee for bringin' 'em to me."

"I'm glad my Quest paid off for you," Alexandra said sarcastically. "What about *my* wand?"

Ignoring the edge in Alexandra's voice, Granny Pritchard picked up the glowing phoenix feather. Its edges shimmered, as if ever on the verge of bursting into flame. "You did not mention encounterin' a phoenix."

"That wasn't from my Quest. It was a gift from Anna." Alexandra had been carrying around the phoenix feather for months. It was beautiful, and highly magical, but she had never known what to do with it.

"Ah," Granny Pritchard said. "Well then." She regarded the phoenix feather with an almost covetous expression.

"I thought you don't work with foreign beasts."

"I'd've made an exception for a phoenix feather."

"Can you use it for my wand?" Alexandra would love to tell Anna that she'd had a wand made from her gift. But Granny Pritchard shook her head.

"Feathers is wrong for you, girl. No, it's hair you need, which is why the yew wand, unkenned and unmastered though it be, is still fearsome in yore hands, while that department store wand is plumb terrible."

Alexandra nodded, but she didn't take the phoenix feather back.

*The phoenix feather isn't for you.*

She wondered if Sonja really had seen something.

"You're teaching Constance and Forbearance wandcrafting," she said.

Granny Pritchard frowned slightly. "Aye. I won't discuss that."

Alexandra said, "I want them to have that." She nodded to the phoenix feather. "Don't tell them until they're ready. But when it's time for them to make their first wands, not just for practice or whatever you do... tell them I wanted them to make a pair of fine wands. A pair of *great* wands. Tell them it was a gift from Troublesome, and tell them to let your folks know not everything that came from me was terrible and caused calamity."

The words spilled out of her unbidden, from some unseen well of bitterness and sadness.

Granny Pritchard stared at her. "You speak 's if you expect not to be around to tell 'em yoreself."

"Did you think of any way to break my geas, while you were doing all that pondering?"

Granny Pritchard let out a slow breath. "No, child," she said softly.

Alexandra shrugged. "Well, anyway, you all might have gone to a World Away by then. That feather is for your great-granddaughters. From me... and from Anna."

Granny Pritchard ran her fingers reverently along one glowing edge of the feather, as if feeling the heat contained within it, then nodded slowly. "Be it so." She set the feather down, and picked up the yew wand she had taken from Alexandra. "Whilst you was on yore Quest, I did some augerin' on this wand." She rolled it between her fingers. "It's quite a unique work. I'm more'n curious who crafted it."

Alexandra shrugged. "I have no idea."

"I wasn't sure what was in the core, 'til you brought back yore trophies." Granny Pritchard picked up one of the long, gleaming cat whiskers. "I hain't ne'er seen hair nor whiskers from an underwater panther before. They're reckoned near impossible to kill."

"I believe it," Alexandra said.

Granny Pritchard pursed her lips. "Well, at least one other soul managed it." She set down the whisker and held up the yew wand.

"Seriously?"

"Have you yet known me to be unserious, girl?"

"Wow," Alexandra said. "I'd really like to know how that wand was made."

"As would I. This wand is unique an' powerful, yes indeedy. Might not be any wand like it. I reckon even without bein' properly kenned, you could be right fearsome with it. But as I told you, much as you applicate it to bend to yore will, it will never cooperate fully." The wandcrafter twirled the wand lightly in her fingers with the deftness of an artist handling a brush.

"It sure hasn't been very cooperative so far."

"Course not," Granny Pritchard said. "Because it's contested."

"Contested..." Alexandra watched the pale wood in the Granny's hands. "You mean the previous owner is still alive?"

"Aye." Granny Pritchard studied her with a sharp gaze. "You said this wand was given to you, an' you did not take it. But so long's its original owner lives an' hain't yielded to you, it'll ne'er be wholly yourn."

"So, I still need a new wand," Alexandra said.

Granny Pritchard nodded and turned back to the table. There were a lot of other materials on it: piles of wood, stones, tools, and things in jars and trays. With her back to Alexandra, the old woman said, "You hain't wrong 'bout pecan, but I chose somethin' a little different." Still with her back turned, she held up a long, dark stick of wood. To Alexandra, it looked very similar in shape and length to her old wand of *carya illinoensis*. "This is black hickory. Pecan's a kind o' hickory. Black hickory is related, but it's a mite heavier, and a bit troublesome to work with. Strong, hard, quick to burn, but flexible to a point. Makes a solid, reliable wand."

Alexandra nodded. Solid and reliable sounded pretty good after all her trouble with the basswood and yew wands.

Granny Pritchard turned back to her. "You killed an underwater panther. Only that could truly make you the master of a wand made with the hair of the beast." She handed the yew wand back to Alexandra. "Unless you master whoever owns this one."

Alexandra took the yew wand. "You're going to use the whiskers of the underwater panther for my wand's core?"

Granny Pritchard nodded. "They say a wand chooses its wielder. In this case, I'm craftin' the wand for the wielder, and I am wiser than whatever fool at Grundy's gave you that goat feather dowser. But you must still make the wand yours, an' I expect it will challenge you just as the yew does. You will have to earn its respect, an' if you ever loosen up, just a smidgen, it'll know you don't mean business."

"I have to show my wand who's boss?"

"That sayin' sounds 'bout right." Granny Pritchard narrowed her eyes. "And I do not recommend you keep the others."

"Why not?" Alexandra asked.

"Are you fixin' to carry three wands about? There is few things that hain't been tried before, and you would not be the first witch to conceive that idee."

"What happens?"

"Wands do not cooperate. You try to cast a spell with more'n one at a time, they will *dispute*. The results is highly unpredictable, and rarely to yore benefit."

"Good to know," Alexandra said. But she wondered if it was possible to show even a contested wand who was boss.



## \*Chapter 23\*: Goodbye Summer

Alexandra and Julia sat on the railing of the Pritchards' porch as they sipped sweet tea with Constance and Forbearance.

"So, you won't actually leave with your new wand," Julia said. "That is so disappointing, after you had to go on such an adventure to earn it."

Alexandra shrugged. In truth, she was sorely disappointed. Granny Pritchard had told her it would take several days to finish crafting her new wand, and made it sound like it was Alexandra's fault that her Quest had taken so long.

Granny Pritchard had also promised Alexandra she would get her wand to her, even in Larkin Mills. Alexandra hardly expected the Granny to deliver it personally, and she certainly wasn't going to send it by FedEx. She wondered if it would be an owl or some more exotic method of delivery.

"You could just stay with us a few more days," Constance said.

"Thank you," Alexandra said. "But I'm pretty sure I've worn out my welcome here."

"Oh Alex, don't speak such foolishness," said Forbearance. "Ma and Pa'd be proud to have you, an' don't you let Pa's grumblin' say you otherwise."

"And you'd have Noah and Burton's *undivided* attention," said Julia, taking a deep draught of tea. Her eyes danced. Constance and Forbearance covered their mouths with their hands to stifle titters, while Alexandra concentrated on keeping her cheeks cool.

"Claudia would freak out if I stayed longer than I'm supposed to," Alexandra said.

"Oh, she would not. I could tell her when I go back by Portkey," Julia said.

"You could both stay longer," Forbearance said hopefully.

"Alas, no, the new semester at Salem starts on Monday, and I must be back to Croatoa by tomorrow so I can arrive at school the next night and get my new dorm assignment." A shadow crossed over Julia's face at this. Constance and Forbearance missed it, but Alexandra knew that the new dorm assignment had something to do with Julia no longer staying in the same house she'd lived in for the entire six years she'd been at the Salem Witches' Institute. Normally quite open about everything with Alexandra, one of the few things she remained uncharacteristically tight-lipped about was her situation at school. Alexandra didn't even know who her best friends were, but had a suspicion that Julia's friendships at Salem were now tenuous at best.

"However," Julia continued quickly, "you know very well, dear sister, that Claudia would not object to your staying here longer, with my assurances that you are safe and sound."

"Mightn't Alexandra be punished when she gets home?" asked Forbearance.

"Oh yes, I'm sure that terrible man married to Claudia would take a strap to her. He's such a brute! Alexandra's stories of him hardly did him justice." Julia put fingers to her lips, as if the thought of Archie's retribution had just occurred to her. Constance and Forbearance both went wide-eyed.

Alexandra put her glass of tea down with a thud. "She's joking. She got along fine with Archie."

"Why Alexandra, are you admitting that your stepfather —"

"Brother-in-law," Alexandra said.

"— is *not* an ogre who hates you and sent you to bed without your supper throughout your childhood?"

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "I never said he did that. But anyway, at least I won't be without a wand until Granny Pritchard is finished." She pointed her basswood wand at her iced tea and tried to make it freeze.

The glass rattled, and cold air condensed around it. A thin layer of ice formed. Alexandra sighed. The yew wand would probably have blown the glass apart in a shower of ice and glass. She was really looking forward to having a wand that wasn't lazy or resistant.

They were all silent for a little while after that, sipping their tea and listening to Innocence out in the front yard yelling at Whimsy, who was yelling at Done, and Charlie cawing atop the Pritchards' chimney.

Finally, Constance said, "We'uns have treasured havin' you'uns here."

"And we'uns wish Anna an' Sonja an' David could've stayed with us, too," said Forbearance.

Constance nodded. "But we did get to visit with 'em for one day an' night."

Alexandra put her wand away and gave the Pritchards a fond, sad smile. "I sure wish you guys had phones so I could talk to you."

"We'uns do have owls," Constance said.

"Yes," Alexandra said.

"And we shall all stay in touch this coming year, agreed?" said Julia. "It's been such a delight making all of your acquaintances, and getting to know Alexandra's friends, and helping keep my dear sister alive."

Constance and Forbearance beamed, and both embraced Julia. "We'uns were right honored by your visit, Julia," said Forbearance.

"We'uns would love to have you back," said Constance.

"Yes, we would," said a male voice from the house. Alexandra jerked away from the door as Noah stepped through onto the back porch, followed by Burton. Noah tipped his hat to Julia. "I am right sorry to have to take you away, now, Miss Julia. Seems like your visit weren't half long enough."

Julia smiled and offered a hand to Noah. "I would be delighted to stay longer, if only I could."

While Noah took her hand and kissed it, Alexandra tried not to make a face. Julia's sugary sweetness was so utterly sincere, it usually didn't bother her, but she didn't have to pour it on so much right now, did she?

"How 'bout you, Miss Quick?" asked Burton. "Would you like to stay longer?"

Alexandra folded her arms, inviting no handshakes or embraces. "We've already discussed that. I'd love to. Can't."

"That's a right shame," Burton said. "You only saw such a piddly bit o' the Ozarks. You be sure 'n come back; maybe next time you can take a tour o' the Five Hollers. Or go on another Quest 'n cause some more calamity."

He wouldn't stop grinning at her. Alexandra wanted to kick him again. If the idiot didn't stop looking at her like that, his sisters would catch on!

Innocence was freed from her chores to accompany them to Down Below Holler. The remaining Pritchards turned out to say good-bye to their guests: Mr. And Mrs. Pritchard, Prudence and her children, and Whimsy and Done. Grace remained inside, pleading sore feet and fatigue. Alexandra said good-bye to everyone, being particularly polite to Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard.

Then Noah and Burton led them into the yard and directed them all to hold hands in a circle.

"I've never seen Side-Along Apparition done like this," Alexandra said.

"Nor I," said Julia.

"It's an older method," said Noah. "Sorta ritual magic, sorta relyin' on the leys between Hollers. Hain't learned about that in yore fancy magical schools, huh?"

"Ley lines?" said Julia. "But those don't actually work for any modern wiz—"

Alexandra wanted to pay attention to the ritual invocation, but she was distracted by Burton's hand wrapped around hers, squeezing it tightly but not hard. He even had the nerve to rub his thumb against the back of her hand!

Then they all spun and twirled through space, and landed in a meadow behind the foreigners' village.

Alexandra and Julia, who had held their breaths, carefully relaxed. No one seemed to have been splinched. Even Charlie didn't complain.

"If you can do that," Alexandra said, "why bother with regular Apparition?"

"Had to prepare that ritual aforehand," Noah said. "An' like I said, it uses leys. Can't do it anywhere. Only on account o' we'uns have no Portkeys and no flyin' mules, 'til we re-enchant everythin' we Unworked, we'uns usually prepare a few trips like that in case o' need."

"Fascinating," said Julia. "It's not a type of Apparition commonly taught."

"No, Miss Julia, it hain't." Noah smiled at her. "Maybe some day I'll teach it to you."

"Or Constance and Forbearance could teach it to us," said Alexandra.

Noah and Julia turned at the interruption. Julia smiled. "Yes, certainly."

"David an' Anna an' Sonja will be waitin'," said Constance.

"G'won, then," said Noah.

"Don't mind us, left to twiddle our thumbs like all we'uns is here for is to provide mule service for our sisters 'n their friends," said Burton. He gestured at Julia's huge pile of luggage.

"Oh, Burton," said Forbearance.

"I reckon you two will find a pack o' mischief to get up to whilst you is here," said Constance. The twins were helping Alexandra and Julia levitate all their bags into the air to follow after them.

Julia walked up to Noah and said, "It has been a delightful week, Noah Pritchard, and I'm so grateful for your family's hospitality and your gentlemanly chaperoning." Her voice dropped, her Virginia drawl lengthening and becoming huskier. "I do hope we shall see each other again."

Noah wet his lips. "I would like that, Miss Julia."

Julia stood on her tiptoes and kissed Noah on the cheek. Then she turned to Burton and said, "And you as well, Burton Pritchard. I know my sister has particularly appreciated your hospitality." She gave him a kiss too, a quick peck in comparison to the one she'd given Noah. Burton was left standing there with a bemused expression, as if uncertain how to react, when Julia turned away from the boys and joined the girls walking toward the foreigners' village.

Alexandra gave Burton and Noah a wave. Then, hanging back a little so that Julia and the others had walked a few feet ahead and couldn't see her, she put her fingers to her lips and, with a sardonic smile, blew Burton a kiss. She turned around to avoiding seeing his reaction.

The Chambridge bus was parked in front of the hostel where the underage visitors to Down Below Holler had stayed. Several JROC students were lined up before Ms. Shirliffe, who was in her Witch-Colonel's uniform. She was giving them instructions prior to their departure; she dismissed them just as Alexandra, Julia, and the Pritchards came around the corner of the building.

"William!" called Innocence. The chubby blond boy's face broke out into a grin.

"Hi Innocence." William nodded to Innocence and her sisters, then his grin widened a little. "Hi Alex. Julia." A blush spread across his face.

"Hello, Mage-Private First Class Killmond," said Julia. "Congratulations on your promotion." Alexandra saw that there was indeed a new rank pinned on his collar.

William stood a little taller in his uniform. "You recognize JROC ranks!"

"Of course I do. My brother was a Mage-Sergeant," Julia said.

William's grin vanished. "Oh, right. I'm sorry —"

Charlie cawed.

A shadow fell over the young man. He stiffened as Witch-Colonel Shirtliffe stood before the group. Middle-aged, with steel-gray hair and a scarred face, she was an off-putting woman even in teacher's robes; in her uniform she resembled a hard blue and gray truncheon.

"Good to see you again, Quick," said the JROC commander.

"Really?" Alexandra asked, pointedly omitting any "Ma'am."

The woman's jaw set. "Yes, really. Why would you think I don't mean it?"

Alexandra, aware of Julia and the Pritchards watching her, said, "You didn't seem sorry to see me go."

Ms. Shirtliffe sighed. "What exactly do you think I should have done, Quick? Blame me if it makes you feel better. I hope you're not neglecting your drills and exercises completely."

"What do you think the odds are that I'll ever wear a JROC uniform again?" Alexandra asked.

"That's not the point." Ms. Shirtliffe hesitated, then shook her head. She nodded to the Pritchards. "I'll look forward to seeing you girls back at Charmbridge this year."

"Yes'm," Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence all answered together.

"Maybe you'll consider going out for the Junior Regimental Officer Corps," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "You might get a chance to ride a dragon, like Killmond here."

She smiled briefly, then turned and strode off toward a uniformed wizard with a Hippogriff on a chain and leather straps binding its beak. Alexandra's eyes followed Ms. Shirtliffe's retreating back, even as William and Innocence excused themselves.

"Constance, Forbearance, you never told me Innocence had a sweetheart," Julia said.

"Oh, they hain't sweet," said Constance.

"They'uns is just friends," Forbearance said.

"Which is good, 'cause she'd surely walk roughshod over that boy," said Constance.

"Also, Ma an' Pa would have conniptions if they'uns knew she's fraternizin' so much with a foreigner, so I hope Noah an' Burton keeps their mouths shut," Forbearance said.

"What, it's okay for Ozarker boys to 'fraternize' with foreign girls, but not the other way around?" Alexandra demanded.

"Well," Forbearance said uncomfortably.

"That is rather the way o' things," said Constance. "But you're right, Alexandra, it hain't fair!"

Forbearance eyed her sister.

"Anna," said Charlie.

"Hi!" called Anna.

"Yo!" shouted David from the porch of the hostel. "You guys gonna stand down there talking or come up and join us?"

"Charlie," Alexandra said, "you wait out here." She knew bringing her "dark" familiar inside wouldn't go over well with the Ozarkers who ran the place.

"Yes'm," said Charlie, and flapped off over the rooftops.

Julia looped her arm through Alexandra's, and the four of them joined David and Anna inside, with bags trailing through the air after them.

They found Sonja waiting for them at a table in the back. Anna said, "Sonja knows."

Alexandra gave them all a dismayed look.

"Just about your... problem," David said. "You did practically shout it out in front of half the Ozarks, how you're cursed and the Grannies have six years to figure out a solution..."

They reached the table, and Alexandra stood over Sonja. Sonja's hair was no longer flaming bright, and she was somber. "I knew you would be

upset," she said.

"You foresaw that, huh?" Alexandra said. "I don't suppose your Inner Eye sees how I'm going to get out of my predicament?"

Sonja gave her a very long, serious look. "No."

"Let's all sit down," Julia said. "We have rather a lot to catch up on in a short time."

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It took Alexandra an hour to catch David, Anna, and Sonja up on everything she hadn't told them, under the protection of a Muffliato Charm. By the time she was done, there wasn't much time before her three friends would have to board the bus back to Central Territory.

She left out everything to do with Burton, of course. She also left out her vengeance against the hill dwarves. It had felt so right at the time, but now she feared she might have gotten a little carried away.

Anna shook her head. "That yew wand is trouble."

"And?" Alexandra was not surprised Anna would say that.

Anna rolled her eyes. "Are you going to ask your father about it, at least?"

"If he doesn't already know, then it means his latest trollop is acting behind his back," Julia said. "That is certainly something he should know."

The Pritchards blushed, while Alexandra looked at Julia in surprise. That was the unkindest thing she'd ever heard her sister say. Julia had never spoken ill of any of the women their father had been with since he left Ms. King.

She wondered if Julia thought of her mother as one of their father's "trollops."

"If Abraham Thorn's girlfriend can go sneaking around giving dangerous artifacts to his daughter without him knowing about it, what kind of Dark wizard is he?" David asked.

Alexandra and Julia both turned sour looks on him.

"It's not dangerous," Alexandra said.

"He's not a Dark wizard," Julia said.

They looked at each other.

"What are you gonna do with the other wands?" David asked.

"I'm going to keep them. Can't hurt to have an extra wand. Or two."

"Well," said Constance. Forbearance bit her lip.

Alexandra sighed. "Granny Pritchard already told me a bit of wandlore. I know, multiple wands are a bad idea. Any more warnings or recommendations from the Alexandra Committee?"

"I am composing a list, which I am going to write down before I leave for Roanoke," Julia said, folding her hands on the table.

"I was hoping the Grannies might be..." Anna darted a glance at the Pritchards. "More helpful."

"Forbearance an' I will continue to applicate 'em," Constance said.

"I do believe they'uns *wants* to help," Forbearance said.

"Sure, now that they need me," Alexandra said. "Your family isn't really going to be pressured by the rest of the Five Hollers, are you? I mean, the Exodans won't try to, I dunno, force me to open the World Away by..."

"Threatenin' us?" Constance and Forbearance shook their heads together.

"Ozarkers do not threaten one another," said Constance.

"Violence hain't our way," said Forbearance.

Alexandra asked skeptically, "How many times have the Rashes or your brothers bragged about how rough Ozarker boys play? And even girls learn to duel. I know you do, even if you don't call it dueling."

"We'uns do *not* duel," Constance said firmly.

"Of course we'uns learn defensive charms an' such spells as we'uns need to know to protect ourselves," said Forbearance. "But it hain't our own kinfolk we'uns're feared of."

"So no one will be pressuring you?"

"Not in the way you mean," Constance said.

"But thankee," Forbearance said, "for bein' concerned for us."

"Can you really do it?" David asked. "If you wanted to, right now, could you just open up another world? Because that seems pretty major. Like, something that the greatest wizards in the world can't do, you can do whenever you feel like it?"

"Not whenever I feel like it," Alexandra said. "I don't even know exactly how to do it." She had not told her friends about her experiment in the creek before Burton showed up, and the blue fireflies. "But I think doing what the Exodans want would take a *lot* of magic. All the magic the Ozarkers have been saving up, all these years."

"Since we'uns first came to the Hollers," Constance murmured.

"But now that they know they have enough," Sonja said, "what prevents them from doing it themselves?"

Alexandra shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe they will." Though she thought it would require someone who had her ability to see the cracks in the world, and she had no idea how the Ozarkers would go about repeating the experience that had opened her Witch's Sight to that. She looked at the Pritchards. "I don't think they will, though. At least, not as long as they think I'm Troublesome."

Constance and Forbearance nodded. "You may reckon it's all silly superstition," Constance said, "but if it's what Troublesome is meant to do..."

"I don't think it's silly superstition," Alexandra said, "though I do think you all are way too stuck on Names and how everyone is supposed to follow a script for their lives."

Constance's eyes became hard and stubborn, while Forbearance looked down at the table.

"Then," Julia said gently, "Alexandra is right that it gives your folk a good reason to wish her well and to do something about her geas."

"Wish her alive, anyway," David said. "I doubt the Rashes wish her well."

"I wish you would not persist in low-ratin' the Rashes, or any of our kinfolk, David," Constance said quietly, without looking at him. David fell silent and folded his arms across his chest uncomfortably.

Alexandra's sympathies were with David, and provoked by her disgruntled feeling of being manipulated since her first conversation with the Grannies, she said, "He's right. I know most of your people are decent and don't wish harm on anyone, but none of them *care* about me. I'm like an artifact, or a key. I had to be a bitch at the Jubilee, right to your Grannies' faces, 'cause otherwise they'd say 'You-uns just fulfill yore destiny, Missy. Oh, we-uns is plumb sorry 'bout that geas.'"

Cold white indignation washed away the red on Constance's cheeks. Forbearance pressed her lips together.

"She's not wrong," Anna said. Alexandra was grateful for the support.

"That was a terrible Ozarker accent, though," said Sonja.

"We care 'bout you," Forbearance said. "An' 'you'uns' hain't never used in the singular."

She sat there, straight-faced, unblinking, serene. Alexandra could read indignation and worry from Constance, but nothing from Forbearance.

Julia laughed. Everyone else did too, except Constance, and even her mouth twitched up at the corners.

"I'll miss you guys," Alexandra said, and the laughter trickled off. "I'm going to be really bored in Larkin Mills."

"Surely not," said Julia. "You will have school — and new friends."

"It won't be the same," Alexandra said.

"Also, you'll find a way not to be bored, probably in the worst way possible," Anna said.

"Thanks," Alexandra said.

"She's not wrong," said David, trying to leaven the somberness that fell over them, realizing they were about to part. "You'll find trouble."

"And what will I do without my friends to help me out of it?" Alexandra asked.

The lump in her throat surprised her. The awkward pause before anyone else spoke suggested she was not the only one so afflicted.

"We'uns will always be available to help you out o' trouble," said Forbearance.

"I will be watching, with my Inner Eye," said Sonja. "I know you're all laughing at me, but you'll see."

"We're not laughing, Sonja. We just wish your Inner Eye saw things that weren't conveniently obvious or in the past," Anna said.

"We really need to work on our communications," said David. "A Floo, a Ouija board, a crystal ball..."

"Maybe you can invent a magic smarty-phone," said Constance. David tilted his head, considering her comment, as if examining it for mockery. Constance could be sharp lately, even sarcastic. But her face was open and ingenuous. She winked at him.

"Maybe," David said. "And it's 'smart phone'."

"Hey," said a young voice from the front of the room. "Um, Colonel Shirtliffe said Mr. Washington and Miss Rackham and Miss Chu should get their butts outside." William was standing in the doorway. At his side, Innocence giggled, and made a show of straightening her face when Constance and Forbearance frowned disapprovingly.

"Well, that's what she said," William said defensively.

Constance said, "Ms. Shirtliffe is a fine lady, but she hain't always... well..."

"Proper," said Forbearance.

Alexandra tried not to laugh at the thought of Ms. Shirliffe conforming to Ozarker notions of propriety.

They stood and moved together outside. Alexandra shouldered her backpack and grit her teeth as she found her basswood wand once more so weak that she could only levitate one of Julia's bags with her.

The Charmbridge students were lining up by the bus. Ms. Shirliffe and Mrs. Speaks stood together watching as Alexandra's former classmates filed aboard.

Sonja just smiled at Alexandra, made a gesture with two fingers at her eyes, pointed with a third finger at a spot on her forehead, then pointed the fingers at Alexandra. Alexandra maintained a serious expression until Sonja boarded the bus.

"Well," David said, facing Alexandra, "bye."

Over his shoulder, Alexandra saw Noah and Burton standing some distance away, waiting for the "foreigners" to depart so they could take their sisters home. She leaned in and gave David a kiss on the cheek. David had always been a little short, but now he was her height.

He blinked at her in surprise, turned his head to look at Noah and Burton, and turned back to her. "You trying to impress someone?"

Before she could react, he threw an arm around her shoulders and drew her into a hug.

"So, are you and Burton a thing?" he whispered.

"Are you and Constance?" she whispered back.

"Jerk," he muttered.

"Dork," she said.

"Jerk!" called Charlie, who had landed silently on the wooden awning overhead.

David turned to the Pritchards. He teased Innocence while saying good-bye to them, but Alexandra's attention focused on Anna, who stood in front of her with her lip trembling and her eyes moist.

"Anna," Alexandra said, "don't worry — I'll be fine, and we'll stay in touch. And maybe you'll get lucky and have a room to yourself this year."

Anna wiped at her eyes angrily. "How are we going to figure out how to save you when you're stuck so far away?"

"I'll be farther away," Julia pointed out. "But dear Anna, we are witches. What is distance to us?"

"Also," Alexandra said, "I've been working on something." She removed one of the charms from the bracelet Anna had gifted her, and handed it to her. "I don't have Nigel anymore, so that gave me the idea of Transfiguring the 'snake' symbol. I had to look up the Chinese character... I hope I got it right."

Anna took the charm from Alexandra, and inspected the dangling silver ideograph. She smiled. "You won't win prizes for your calligraphy, but turning a snake into an owl in Chinese is pretty impressive, even if it is just the hanzi."

"Take it," Alexandra said, pressing the owl charm into Anna's hand. "The charms are connected."

Anna nodded, and tucked it into her sleeve. Then she hugged Alexandra. "I really like your sister," she whispered.

"I do too," Alexandra said.

"Good. You need one person telling you things that you'll actually listen to." Anna lifted her chin and kissed Alexandra on the lips, then turned quickly away with her long red hooded cape flowing around her. She slipped into the line to get on the bus without looking back. Alexandra stood there, staring after her.

Something was going on between David and the Pritchards that she'd missed. Innocence was grinning, and Constance and Forbearance had blushes on their faces.

"See you next week," David said. He turned back to Alexandra and Julia and took Julia's hand. "It was really nice to meet you," he said. "I'm glad Alexandra's got someone else she'll actually listen to."

"Anna said that, too," Alexandra said, with a bit of irritation, while David brought Julia's hand to his lips and kissed it.

"I'm glad you both have such confidence in me," Julia said. "I fear you may be overestimating my influence. It was a pleasure to meet you, David Washington."

Then David and Anna were both aboard the bus, William gave them all a final wave before boarding himself, and finally, Ms. Shirliffe herself got on. Alexandra almost expected the teacher to say something else to her before leaving, and was vaguely disappointed when she didn't.

Foreigners who were not being carried away in wizarding vehicles had been departing all morning by means of Portkeys. Alexandra and Julia had their own Portkey back to Chicago already paid for. They had hours yet before Julia's train would leave from the Chicago Wizardrail Station, and Claudia would pick Alexandra up, but the Pritchards had a lot of work to do back at their homestead. Alexandra understood they would stay with her and Julia as long as they remained here, but no doubt Noah and Burton were waiting impatiently to take their sisters home and put them all to work.

They all walked along with Alexandra and Julia to the Portkey field, while Charlie settled back on Alexandra's shoulder.

"We'uns was chattin' with our neighbors," Noah said. "Seems there's a influx o' hill dwarves in Furthest an' Scotch Ridge."

"Dwarves!" said Constance.

"You don't say," said Alexandra.

"They'uns're telling' tales 'bout a mountain that fell down," said Noah.

"How can a mountain fall down?" asked Innocence.

"You can't take hill-folk tales literal," said Burton. "Everyone knows they'uns is famous confabulators."

"I heard hill dwarves is nasty," Innocence said, wrinkling her nose.

"I wouldn't turn your back on them," Alexandra muttered, running a hand through her hair, over the still-sore bump on the back of her head

"What will happen to them?" asked Julia.

"Well, we'uns can't just drive 'em off. They'd wind up pesterin' Muggles an' that'd be a fine kettle o' fish," said Noah. "An' there's women an' chillun an' elders an' injured 'mongst 'em. So I reckon we'uns'll have to come to an understandin'."

Alexandra looked away, to avoid meeting anyone's eyes.

Unlike the Chicago Wizardrail Station's orderly lines of Portkey booths, the Portkeys in Down Below Holler were sitting in plain sight in a field next to the foreigners' village. There were tires, bottles, an ancient soda vending machine, a horse-drawn carriage missing its wheels, a flagpole, a fishing pole, a box kite, a long rifle that looked of 18th century vintage, and other objects littered about like hillfolk lawn ornaments. A non-Ozarker with a bright blue vest and cap over his wizard robes stood officiously with clipboard in hand, looking up departure locations for each of the foreigners who came to him.

It was time to say good-bye to the Pritchards, and the Ozarks.

Alexandra was glad that no one shed tears this time, though Forbearance looked close to it. Innocence hugged Alexandra most fiercely of all.

"Be good at school," Alexandra said to the girl.

"You are tellin' me to behave?" Innocence said. And before Alexandra could reply, Innocence nodded. "I will," she said seriously.

Noah repeated David's gesture with Julia, kissing her hand. Much more casually, he kissed Alexandra's hand too. "It has been a pleasure, Miss King, Miss Quick. I truly hope you will visit again."

"The pleasure was all ours," said Julia, back to her coquettish self, turning her face to the side and blinking her long lashes in Noah's direction.

"I wouldn't say that," said Burton, winking at Alexandra. She hoped the momentary widening of her eyes wasn't noticed by those around her. She didn't trust herself to speak as he seized her hand and kissed it. He released it and stood up straight. "You did enjoy yourself, didn't you, Miss Quick?"

There was a note of sincerity in the question she didn't quite trust, but Alexandra answered, "Yes, I did." Then added, "Some parts more than others."

She and Julia were guided by the man in the blue cap to an old tin bathtub.

"A two-person Portkey," the man said. "It won't depart until you both get in."

Julia gathered her skirts, stepped into the tub, and sat down in it. She made a comical sight, surrounded by bags and suitcases, but she grinned with good humor. Alexandra looked over her shoulder one more time, taking in the green hills, the diminishing crowds, the tents still dotting this temporary mecca for visitors, and the Pritchards, standing a few yards away waving. Then she stepped into the tub herself, squatting next to Julia in her dark robes over jeans, boots, and a shirt, with her backpack squeezed against her.

She said, "Hold on, Cha —" and they disappeared.

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The arrival at Chicago Wizardrail Station was rougher than the initial journey in the opposite direction. Charlie was stunned, and after they gathered all their belongings and Alexandra put the raven in its cage, she occasionally reached a hand in to worriedly stroke her familiar's feathers.

They sat on a bench waiting for the Roanoke Express to arrive. It did not take long for Julia to pry the details of Alexandra's previous night out of her. In truth, Alexandra rather wanted to talk about it.

Julia listened quietly, with none of her usual jokes or exclamations of delight, amusement, or shock. Alexandra couldn't read her expression, which was serious and composed, with her lips pursed together in a way that suggested deep thought. Did that also suggest judgment, disapproval? Alexandra couldn't tell.

"Okay," Alexandra said, when she was finished and silence stretched between them. "Go on, tell me I was stupid and irresponsible."

"Well," Julia said, "if that's what you believe, then you don't need me to tell you, do you?"

Alexandra sighed. "I don't know what came over me."

"I would say lust, impulsiveness, and more magic than any mortal is meant to have at her command," said Julia. "The latter being not entirely your fault. I daresay anyone might have acted recklessly after escaping death and looking into a world away. My goodness."

Alexandra smiled, her eyes shining as she remembered splitting the mountain. "It was... incredible."

Julia's mouth formed an odd smile beneath an arched eyebrow. Alexandra blushed. "I meant the magic. Not..."

"Oh," Julia said. "Well, that's disappointing."

"It wasn't —" Alexandra's blush deepened. "Were you... I mean, tempted?"

"You mean, with Noah?" Julia considered a moment. Then she sighed. "We were only flirting. Oh, I have no doubt Noah would have been happy to take me into the woods as well. Without ever being less than a gentleman, he was not unclear in his intentions. But Alexandra..." Julia hesitated, choosing her words carefully. "I do not think either of those boys consider a dalliance with a 'foreign' witch to be a serious affair."

"Well, no," Alexandra agreed. "I didn't want a serious affair."

Julia's expression became odd and unreadable again.

Alexandra wasn't sure what to say. She'd been first to lose her virginity, but she didn't feel any more mature or worldly than her older sister.

Julia said, "I shan't lecture you on irresponsibility, dear sister, and I know you don't have a high regard for what others might think of you. But I do have one question — what about Brian?"

"Brian?" Alexandra's mouth fell open. It felt as if she'd been away from home so long, but it had only been a few days. "Um. We haven't —"

Julia raised both eyebrows.

"Do you think I should tell him?" Alexandra asked.

"I don't know. Should you?"

"Well," Alexandra said, "it's not like we actually agreed to only see each other. I mean, I told him last year when he said he wanted to date me that I was going to be gone all year and I didn't really think a long-distance relationship would work."

"But now you're not gone all year," Julia said.

"Right, but we still never really talked about it. I mean..." Alexandra's voice trailed off. "You're saying I cheated on him, aren't you?"

"I'm not saying anything." Julia's voice was gentle, and her expression had softened considerably. "But I think you are hoping I will absolve you of guilt by telling you you didn't do anything wrong, and I shan't. It's your conscience you must address, and whatever understanding you did or did not have with Brian is for you and Brian to work out." She laid a hand on Alexandra's. "Dear sister, I am not judging you. Truly I'm not. But you worry me."

"I think there are bigger things to worry about than whether I cheated on my boyfriend," Alexandra said.

"Indeed there are," Julia said, "and I do worry about those things more. But, since you put it that way, I must point out that some things you actually have control over."

There was a rumble and a rush of air, and the Roanoke Express shot into the station.

Two years earlier, Abraham Thorn had caused the Roanoke Underhill to crash when it failed to magically pass through the solid rock of the mountains to the east. Hundreds had died, and much of the Wizardrail system had been shut down for the next two years. The Roanoke Express had just opened as a replacement for the old line. It wasn't as fast as the Roanoke Underhill, as it didn't pass through the ground, or the Lands Below.

Alexandra hoped no one recognized her or Julia. Some might find it bitterly ironic, or worse, that Julia was taking this train now.

While an elven porter took Julia's bags, Julia spread her arms. "I enjoyed this visit so very much," she said. "I loved meeting Claudia and Archie, and Brian, and all your other friends, and seeing Larkin Mills. I want to do it again."

Alexandra let her sister wrap her in an embrace. "Me too."

"I will miss you so very much," Julia said. "I've spoken to Mother about having you over to Croatoa again for the holidays. Possibly Claudia and Archie might come? And Livia too!"

"Possibly," Alexandra said. She doubted very much that Claudia was ready to visit Croatoa, and she couldn't imagine how they'd bring along Archie, whose understanding of the wizarding world was sketchy at best. "Er, Livia will be due around that time, won't she?"

"Oh, that's true." Julia bit her lip. "Well, we shall see. But certainly another year must not pass without a visit."

"I hope not," Alexandra said.

Julia kissed her on both cheeks. "I love you, dear sister. And the Alexandra Committee will not be idle while we're apart."

"I'll miss you," Alexandra mumbled.

"Miss you terrible," Charlie croaked from the bottom of the birdcage, the first coherent sound the raven had made since their arrival from the Ozarks.

Julia laughed. "Pretty bird. Until next time."

"Pretty bird," said Charlie, as Julia swirled away in a flash of robes too bright and colorful for the dim blue-gray-brown of the station. She stepped onto the train, waved a hand at Alexandra, and disappeared inside.

Alexandra stood there, backpack over her shoulder, Charlie's cage hanging from one hand, until the Roanoke Express shot out of the station with the same speed it had entered.

For a moment, a vision of the train hurtling through the dark to its doom, with metal-crushing, bone-pulping violence, played in Alexandra's mind. She shuddered. Surely not. Their father wouldn't do that again. Certainly not with Julia aboard. He'd know, wouldn't he?



The fear was irrational, but Alexandra knew she wasn't going to relax until she received word when she got home that Julia was safely at Croatoa.

That was just one of the things she'd have to face when she got home. She turned and walked out of the Wizardrail station, pausing only for a moment when she saw a dark red and black-garbed figure lingering near where she and Julia had been sitting.

Was that round, ruddy face one she recognized? Could it have been Richard Raspire? No, the Governor-General's henchman couldn't be following her around personally. It was just some other Auror...

*You're getting paranoid*, she thought. She walked outside into Muggle Chicago, to find the parking lot where Claudia was to pick her up.

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The first thing Claudia told Alexandra was that Bonnie Seabury was still missing.

"You mean she never came home the night before I left?" Alexandra asked, remembering Brian telling her and Julia that his sister had run away right before their trip.

"No. Apparently she's done this before. Jane and Kenneth didn't call the police until late that night, and we didn't find out until after you and Julia had already left."

Alexandra wondered if Brian had ever texted her. She'd left her phone in her room, knowing it would be no use in the Ozarks.

Claudia steered the car out of the parking lot, and went over a pothole that jostled Charlie's cage in the back seat. The Silencing Charm on the cage prevented them from hearing Charlie's comments on her driving.

"Do they know anything?" Alexandra asked.

Claudia shook her head sadly. "She's listed as a runaway right now. There's no evidence of any kind of foul play, but no one has seen her, at all, since she left their house."

Brian was going to ask her to use magic, Alexandra realized. She didn't know any spells offhand that could find a missing person, but Brian would ask, even though he knew he wasn't supposed to.

Claudia asked few questions besides superficial ones about how Alexandra's time had been spent and how her friends were. Alexandra now understood, and felt less anger, about Claudia's lack of interest in the wizarding world, even if it did bother her that all the wonders of the Ozarks and the Jubilee were off-limits. Claudia would probably listen to her speak about them if she wanted to, but with a shifting gaze and discomfort radiating from her clenched hands and tensed shoulders.

Claudia definitely wouldn't want to hear about her wand, or her Quest. Telling her that she'd almost been eaten, several times, would only reinforce her eldest sister's desire to keep them both away from the wizarding world.

The problem was, understanding Claudia's reticence to talk about the wizarding world, and why she had held Alexandra at arm's length her entire life, did little to make up for the lack of closeness. Even before the revelations of the last year, Alexandra would not have gone to the woman she believed to be her mother to talk about her first sexual experience, and she was even less inclined to talk about it with Claudia now. So that took the other major event of her summer off the table as a topic of conversation.

Archie had spent much of the week on the search for Bonnie. Little else had happened in Larkin Mills. As they zoomed south on the Interstate, leaving the towers of Chicago receding behind them, Alexandra thought about the younger girl she'd grown up with. Bonnie had been acting out the last few years — shoplifting, talking back, running away — but Alexandra had just thought she was being a brat. Was there something else she should have noticed? What could she have known that her parents didn't?

Alexandra had been a runaway herself the previous winter. In fact, it had been right after Bonnie's accident that Alexandra had run away to Dinétah. In retrospect, that had been a pretty irrational thing to do, but she'd hardly been thinking clearly. She wondered if Bonnie had experienced a similar shock, or if it was just the misbehavior she'd exhibited all summer taking a tragic turn. She'd have to talk to Brian about it.

She and Claudia lapsed into silence, each occupied with their own thoughts. So much had happened, and yet there was little Alexandra could say to Claudia. And now she worried about what she would say to Brian.

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Brian had never texted her. Alexandra found this a little odd, but she had told him she wasn't taking her phone with her. She texted him immediately to let him know she was back.

She received back only "Ok" in reply. Was he too distracted worrying about his sister, or was he angry at her? Alexandra remembered Julia suggesting they help find Bonnie. *We should have insisted*, she thought.

Julia called that evening from a telephone in the Muggle village on Croatoa. Of course there had been no accidents or disasters.

The daughter of the Enemy had been recognized, however. "I was obliged to move to an empty carriage," Julia said, a little stiffly.

Alexandra wondered how Julia had been "obliged," but didn't ask.

"And there was a Special Inquisitor waiting for me," Julia continued. "Not Ms. Grimm. An obnoxious little man. He asked me all the usual questions, and some additional ones about you, and the Ozarkers, and he was very rude. He was even ruder to Mother."

Julia was glossing over what had undoubtedly been an ugly experience, Alexandra knew.

"So far, no one has come to question me," Alexandra said. "I figure I'll be seeing Ms. Grimm soon." She was not looking forward to her next visit from her Special Inquisitor aunt.

"And... that other matter?" Julia asked.

Alexandra sighed. "Not yet," she said, "but I'm going to talk to him tonight." She didn't tell Julia about Brian's missing sister, as it would only make Julia even more unhappy.

Brian was agreeable but sounded oddly puzzled when Alexandra called him and asked to meet him at the park. If she was going to have this conversation, it definitely wasn't one she wanted to have around her parents or his.

Larkin Mills Park, at the center of town, was two blocks of tree-studded lawns, scattered playgrounds, and barbecue pits, with a large artificial pond in the center. In the winter, it was a spot for ice skating. Now, in the latter days of summer, there were model boats floating around and people casting lines trying to catch the few fish the pond was stocked with, and the grass and benches were crowded with picnickers, strollers, dog-walkers, and other couples.

Alexandra had found a bench near one of the playgrounds, a familiar one where she had once scuffled with Billy Boggleston and his friends. Thinking of Billy made her look around as if her thoughts might summon him, but the bully was nowhere to be seen.

On the playground, children swung and rode the merry-go-round and pushed each other into the sand, with occasional shouts and scoldings from watching parents.

"Hi, Alexandra," said Brian. He had approached from the direction of Sweetmaple Avenue while Alexandra's mind was elsewhere. He wore Dockers and a polo shirt. His hair was neatly trimmed, though the slight breeze blew it into mild disarray. He was cute, in a boyish way that contrasted sharply with Burton. A few years and a beard seemed to cast a yawning gulf between them.

*Stop that!* Alexandra snapped at herself. Burton was exactly who she should not be thinking about right now, and it certainly wasn't fair to mentally compare them. The thing with Burton had been a mistake, a fling, a wild impulse... She still wasn't sure what she was going to say, especially given that Brian now had more important things to worry about.

She patted the bench next to her. Brian shrugged and sat down.

"I just got back," Alexandra said.

Brian nodded, forehead wrinkling. "You were visiting friends, right?"

"Yeah." Something about Brian's posture and demeanor made Alexandra uneasy. She couldn't understand why he was looking at her with such a puzzled expression. "I heard about Bonnie. I'm so sorry. I wish you'd called or texted me that night, when she didn't come home."

A shadow fell over Brian's face. "I guess I didn't think about it," he said. "We were busy calling everyone who might have seen her, and going around the neighborhood."

"No news?" Alexandra asked. She could see now how much this hurt Brian, and it pained her. Sympathy piled on top of guilt.

He swallowed and shook his head. "She's always just gone to a friend's house or run off to the mall, or sometimes hid in the park, before now." Alexandra could see that he was fighting not to tear up. She swallowed too.

She hesitated for a moment, and actually braced for the question she was expecting, about using magic. When he didn't say anything else, she leaned over and put a hand around his neck and kissed him on the lips. It wasn't usually her who initiated their kisses, but she thought he might like it.

Brian's reaction stunned her: he jerked away from her and stared, wide-eyed, as if she'd done something bizarre, even offensive. "What are you doing?"

Alexandra stared back. "I... was trying to kiss you."

Brian's eyes got wider. "Is this a joke? Or are you playing some kind of game? It's not very funny."

Alexandra wondered if it was Brian playing a joke. But this wasn't the sort of joke he'd play, and his expression was too shocked to be insincere. Then she wondered if somehow he *knew* — but how could he?

"Are you... look, if you want to break up, I understand," she blurted out. "I know with Bonnie missing..."

Brian's confusion just seemed to grow. "Break up? *What are you talking about, Alex?*"

Alexandra stared at him for several long seconds, wishing she could read his thoughts. Legilimency would be really useful at a time like this. Then she realized her mouth was hanging open. She closed it. Swallowed.

"Brian, do you... remember what we were doing at my house, a couple of weeks ago? When Claudia came home?"

He shook his head. "When was I at your house recently? We've hardly talked in months. Years, really. And why are you calling your mother Claudia?"

Ice gripped her heart, and almost froze her tongue. "Brian," she said, in a hoarse voice, "do you remember anything I told you about what happened to me at school?"

"You go to some private school, right? Something happened to you there?" He looked baffled, and not very sympathetic.

"It's a *magic* school!" she said.

"A magic school," he repeated. He kept staring at her with that stupid, baffled expression. "I've never liked your pranks and crazy talk, Alex. I don't know what this is about, but if you're just going to bring up that nonsense from when we were kids, I'm going home." He began to get up.

She grabbed his wrist, almost desperately. "When Bonnie was in the hospital, I came to see you!" she said. "Do you remember what happened?"

He glared at her. "Of course I remember that. We didn't think she was going to live. That was a terrible night and I was glad to see you. But that

doesn't explain why you're trying to kiss me."

"The kappa, at Old Larkin Pond! Do you remember that?"

His eyes turned glassy for a moment, as if a memory were struggling to writhe its way free... or as if his mind were searching for something missing.

He pulled his wrist away. "What. Are. You. Talking. About?" Now he sounded angry.

"You don't remember anything," Alexandra whispered.

"Are you on drugs?" Brian asked.

"What?!" Alexandra exclaimed.

Brian shook his head. "You know, you've always been kind of weird. It was one thing when we were kids. But this is creeping me out, and I'm really not in the mood for your games. Whatever you're up to, leave me out of it."

He got up and walked away. At the edge of the sandpit, he paused and looked back at her.

There was confusion, irritation, maybe even a touch of disgust, but underneath that was something else that made it all the more unbearable — a wistful hurt, a dim awareness that something was wrong, something that he didn't quite comprehend. Then he shook his head and turned away.

Alexandra watched his retreating back, too numb with shock and horror to think about calling after him.

## **\*Chapter 24\*: The Pruett School**

Brian had been Obliviated.

Alexandra spent the next week in a state of desolate, righteous, and silent fury. Claudia and Archie could hardly miss that something was wrong. They assumed she was upset about Bonnie's disappearance, but they also noticed Brian's sudden absence.

Claudia asked her if she wanted to talk about it. "This is a terrible time for him," she said sympathetically. "We're all hoping Bonnie turns up, but not knowing... it has to be very hard for them."

For a moment, Alexandra was tempted. She could unburden herself to Julia without censoring herself, but Julia was now back in Roanoke, and sympathy by Owl Post wasn't what she needed.

But she also needed to be angry. And if she told Claudia why she was angry, she'd have to tell her about Brian's Obliviation. For the Confederation to strike so close to home was the nightmare Claudia had lived with all her life, the very reason she had been so distant and evasive with Alexandra all of hers. If the Confederation was Obliviating innocent Muggles now, what might they do to a Squib who they already despised?

And Alexandra had brought that to their neighborhood.

So she let Claudia believe it was just a break-up, and Claudia was a little nicer to her that week, and even Archie walked lightly around her.

Alexandra felt more bereft than she had since losing Max. The loss of Brian as a boyfriend wasn't the most painful part. Combined with Bonnie's disappearance, it felt like the wholesale loss of much of her childhood. And the sense that she had been *punished*.

She supposed she deserved it, but Brian didn't.

Of course she knew she wasn't really being punished for what she'd done in the Ozarks. The punishment was for not taking Diana Grimm's warning seriously. The Special Inquisitor had told her it was dangerous to let Brian know too much, but somehow Alexandra hadn't thought her aunt would actually do *this*.

The thought of Diana Grimm made her fists knot together. Her anger brought her to the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse every day, walking past the Clockwork golems to practice with her basswood wand on the third floor. It felt like funneling her fury through a straw, but she rarely dared to try using the yew wand.

She was angry, more angry than she had been since Maximilian's death. If her father appeared right now, she might well agree to anything he asked if only he would give her the power she needed to strike down her aunt — the very aunt she had *saved* from Abraham Thorn last year. She wielded her wand with a ferocity that would have been impressive if the goat feathers didn't make such a pitiful core.

Right now, she couldn't even face a witch her own age, let alone someone like her aunt. But she would, she vowed.

She spent many evenings walking the streets of Larkin Mills, as summer came to an end, and discovered something in her wanderings: the town was invisibly split in half.

A great crack in the world ran through Larkin Mills, right along Sweetmaple Avenue, coming close to, but not quite touching, her own house, and directly through the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse.

Alexandra followed it to where it vanished into the corn and soybean fields outside town. Then she followed it in the opposite direction. She wandered through the rougher neighborhood of Old Larkin, where trailer parks filled the lots between old houses and cheap apartments, and she became more aware than she ever had been as a child of the looks a girl walking alone got. Even her basswood wand was protection enough, though she never had to use it, but it opened her eyes to how rough some parts of her home town were.

The magical seam crossed the Interstate, invisible to all the drivers driving through it, and Alexandra was unsurprised to find that it followed precisely the small channel through the fields that led to Old Larkin Pond.

Here, at the dirty little pond where so many unusual things had happened, she almost didn't have to use her Witch's Sight to see the breach, where some other world was practically a splash away.

One night, a week later, she stood by the edge of the pond just after sunset, knowing that Archie and Claudia would be annoyed at her for getting home so late. Archie had somehow heard about her strolls through Old Larkin at night, and told her to stop doing that. Alexandra almost hoped one of the creeps Archie was always warning her about tried something, though she knew this was irrational and foolish. She would undoubtedly be punished for using her wand, even in self defense. But she still wanted to curse someone, badly.

She found herself lost in thought, contemplating the crack between worlds. She didn't exactly feel a temptation to pry it open, but she did wonder what would happen.

She heard a voice calling her name. No, it wasn't her name: it was a voice calling "Troublesome!"

She looked around. No one else was in the area. Sometimes other teenagers came to Old Larkin Pond at night, but less often since she'd given it a reputation for being "haunted" a couple of years ago.

"Troublesome!" called the voice again, high-pitched and demanding.

Alexandra walked over to the water's edge. There was a reflection in the water, which was impossible, because the moon wasn't out and the sun had fallen below the horizon, so there was nothing to reflect. And yet the water shined.

Alexandra leaned over, and saw Granny Pritchard staring back at her from the surface of the water.

"Well, it's about time you paid mind to yore surroundin's!" Granny Pritchard snapped. "I have been assayin' to get yore attention for three nights now."

"How was I supposed to know that?" Alexandra asked. "You could have sent an owl."

"I do not rely on critters to convey messages," Granny Pritchard said, "and particularly not wands."

"Have you finished crafting my wand?" Alexandra asked excitedly.

"Aye."

"Are you going to Apparate here?"

"You're a far cast from the Ozarks, girl. Too far for an old woman like me."

Alexandra doubted Granny Pritchard's age had anything to do with it, but she asked, "What am I supposed to do, then, come back and get it?"

"In a manner o' speakin'. You perceive the ley in that little spit o' water you're at?"

Alexandra frowned. "If that's what you call it. I don't understand what you want me to do."

Granny Pritchard's reflection in the pond held up a gleaming, polished shaft of black hickory. It was beautiful. Alexandra reached for it before stopping herself.

"Reach for it, girl," Granny Pritchard said, eyes no longer lidded, but wide open and staring at her. "Reach for it." She held out the wand, as if taunting her, and Alexandra did reach.

She felt Granny Pritchard reaching from the other side. She could feel the wand — *her* wand — almost within her grasp. She knew she shouldn't be doing magic here. But her wand was so close! She reached, and pushed through the crack between worlds to the other side. For a moment her fingers brushed Granny Pritchard's calloused hand, and then they closed around the stick of wood, and she snatched it back. The air glowed as brightly as the pond for a moment. Alexandra held the wand in her hand, and felt it reacting, not just to the hand that held it, but to the yew wand in her pocket.

The yew wand, still secretive and uncooperative, growled in the darkness. The black hickory wand fairly purred a challenge.

Alexandra drew the yew wand to test them both together, then remembered where she was.

"You spoke true," Granny Pritchard said, with something like awe. "You can open the World Away."

"I didn't know I could... reach through it like that," Alexandra said. But now that she'd done it, she knew what it felt like. She could do it again, she thought.

"I did help a bit," the Granny said. "I reckon you couldn't've done it on your own, not knowin' what you was about. But all you needed was a push. Stars Above."

"I'm going to get in trouble with the Trace Office!" Alexandra said.

Granny Pritchard shrugged. "Maybe, or maybe on account o' you bein' by a ley, they'uns won't know better."

"Easy for you to say! You set me up!"

Granny Pritchard said, "I crafted yore wand for you, Missy. An' now you have three. Hain't you pleased?"

Alexandra held up the hickory and yew wands. Her eyes gleamed. "Yes." She looked down at Granny Pritchard. "Thank you."

Granny Pritchard nodded.

"Now I have to go," Alexandra said.

She ran home, hoping she'd beat whatever owl or Howler the Trace Office sent. But none came. Perhaps Granny Pritchard was right, and the crack between worlds that ran through Old Larkin Pond kept the Trace Office from knowing what she'd done. She had done other magic there in the past.

She could barely sleep that night, and almost got up to go to the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse in the middle of the night. She rose at dawn, surprising Archie and Claudia, who were normally up and dressed before she awoke. As soon as she could leave the house, she did, carrying three wands in her backpack.

The black hickory wand was, as Granny Pritchard had told her, solid and reliable. All the spells she'd been struggling to muster with the basswood wand, or which the yew wand would expel grudgingly and violently if at all, the hickory wand allowed her to call forth with the same ease as her old pecan wand of chimaera hair. It was *hers*. It demanded her respect, and she knew so long as she did not fail to give it, the wand would not fail her.

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Livia returned at the end of August. She invited Alexandra and Claudia to the grand opening of the Pruett School, and picked them up at their house.

For Claudia to come along and see wizardry in her own town, blocks from her home, had to require courage, Alexandra knew, and so did Livia. But they cruised through the streets as if they were just going to a movie, until they reached the corner of Third Street and Livia steered into the lot that still, to Muggle eyes, appeared to be the abandoned Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse.

Claudia gasped when Livia drove her car into the chain link fence, right through the big red "NO TRESPASSING" sign.

"It's not real," Alexandra said. "You should've warned her, Livia."

"I'm fine," Claudia said. Then she jumped when a robed figure appeared with a "pop" outside her window.

"There's Madam Erdglass," said Livia. She got out of the car.

Two more figures Apparated onto the gravel lot. Claudia didn't react again, but her hand hovered reluctantly on the door handle.

"You can stay here," Alexandra said, her voice uncharacteristically soft.

"No," Claudia said. She undid her seat belt. "That's what they want, to keep the Squib cowering in the car."

"If anyone gives you any crap at all, I'll light 'em up," Alexandra said. "Literally."

"Don't be ridiculous, Alexandra." Claudia got out.

Livia had taken a robe out of the trunk of her car and put it on. Her condition was beginning to show a little, as the robe draped around the bulge in her middle.

Claudia wore a blouse over jeans. Alexandra was dressed in slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. The three robed figures standing in the gravel lot eyed them with disapproving scowls.

A chill washed over Alexandra, and she stepped closer to Claudia. One of the robed figures was Ms. Erdglass, the ancient, half-asleep crone who'd attended her appeals hearing earlier in the summer. Bent over a long, knotty, polished cane planted on the ground between her feet, it was impossible to tell through the sagging mass of wrinkles that practically hid her eyelids if she was even awake.

But the other two wizards were Franklin Percival Brown and Richard Raspire.

The enormous tented girth of Mr. Brown reduced Ms. Erdglass and Raspire to satellites in his orbit. If a facial expression could be an expletive, his reaction to Alexandra's Muggle garb would have peeled the paint off the exterior of the Regal Royalty warehouse. He held an old teacup in his hand, which he dropped on the ground before waddling over.

"I realize you are accustomed to tramping about like a Muggle in these Muggle surroundings," he said, waving a hand as if to indicate the whole of Larkin Mills, letting his voice catch disdainfully each time he said "Muggle," "but a witch with any breeding whatsoever would at least have the common decency to put on a robe when seen in public in wizarding society!"

He didn't even look at Claudia.

"It's my fault, Mr. Brown," said Livia. "We didn't realize this little ceremony was going to be attended by such distinguished guests, so I didn't tell my sisters to dress for it." Livia's voice was cool and professional, like the way she might speak to a patient having a meltdown, but Alexandra didn't miss her sarcasm. "Speaking of which, why are you gentlemen here? I was expecting only Madam Erdglass."

Raspire, clad only in black robes without his red Auror's vest, said, "I came to determine whether you or your sisters are engaged in activities that might constitute a threat to the secrecy and security of the Confederation, which means inspecting the charms and wards around this... school personally. The Governor-General was not in favor of permitting this institution, as I'm sure you're aware."

"I certainly am," Livia said. "I'm sure if he could have found a legal pretext to forbid it, he would have — but he's not quite an absolute dictator, yet, is he? And the Governor of Central Territory isn't as much in Governor-General Hucksteen's back pocket as his predecessor was."

Raspire smiled thinly. "I suspect it cost the greater portion of your family's fortune to buy his approval. He may regret every Lion."

"Your entire clan takes a perverse delight in degrading and subverting every institution it can touch," said Mr. Brown. "Well I assure you, Madam Pruett —"

"That's Doctor Pruett," said Livia.

"— that no such degradation or subversion will take place under my watch!"

"Your watch?" Livia asked.

Raspire's creased lips opened to show teeth. "We did prevail upon the Governor to make a small change in the Department of Magical Education. Mr. Brown will hold a superintendent's role at the Pruett School. He will be empowered to drop in at any time, and to supervise all student and instructor activities, question students, and ensure that they are in full compliance with the WODAMND Act."

Alexandra's face fell. Mr. Brown was going to be at the school, looking for excuses to bust her and cause trouble, maybe for Claudia too. She seethed.

"I'm sure Madam Erdglass will see to it that all classes are fully in accordance with the law," Livia said. "You aren't questioning her competence, are you, Mr. Brown?"

Mr. Brown glanced at his colleague, who looked as if she might fold into a heap on the ground if given a nudge. "Carmela has a long, distinguished record as an educator," he said, "but I do worry that she might not be prepared for the savage behavior she can expect from these sorts of students."

"What sorts of students?" Alexandra demanded. Claudia put a hand on her elbow. Livia gave her a warning look.

Mr. Brown didn't deign to answer her. Neither did Madam Erdglass, who still showed no sign she was even aware of the discussion going on around her. Alexandra was a bit dismayed at this too — *Erdglass* was going to be her teacher?

"Well, Dr. Pruett, I understand you have the authorization for the Floo connection," said Raspire, "so feel free to perform whatever little ceremony you had in mind. I'll just take a look around." He turned and in a swirl of robes, walked inside.

"I shall also inspect the premises to ensure they meet each and every requirement as stipulated by the Central Territory Department of Education's Day School Regulatory Board," said Mr. Brown. "I can assure you, this school will *not* be opening if it is in violation of a single code!" He followed Mr. Raspire, much less gracefully, robes not so much swirling as flapping where they weren't stretched across his immense back and thighs.

"Those codes, incidentally," said Livia, once the two men were out of earshot, "forbid students living in Muggle neighborhoods from using school facilities for magical practice without adult supervision."

Alexandra thought about the burned, scorched, shattered wood and glass she'd left in the upper floor of the warehouse after her last visit. There were spell-marks all over the place, abundant evidence of her illicit activities.

"I spent last night with the Clockworks, cleaning up after your mess," Livia said, as if reading her mind. "But it ends now. This is no longer your private clubhouse. Understand?"

Alexandra nodded, disappointed but not surprised.

Madam Erdglass cackled, startling all of them. Even with her somnambulist posture, Alexandra was aghast to realize they'd been talking right in front of her about her illegal activities. It was as if the creepy old lady ceased to exist if you stopped paying attention to her.

"Screw all of you,' eh?" Madam Erdglass said. And she turned and doddered into the building.

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The massive boiler that had once heated the building would now serve as a destination for anyone on a connected Floo. Alexandra was excited by the possibilities, notwithstanding Livia's warning. It was a direct connection to Chicago! According to Livia, the Chicago-Larkin Mills Floo was one of the longest connections in North America outside the East Coast.

Mr. Raspire and Mr. Brown were incensed that they hadn't been able to find any faults in the building. Well, Mr. Brown always looked incensed, thought Alexandra, and you could hardly tell with Raspire, but his black coal eyes radiated venom.

Livia removed Goody Pruett's portrait from the wall, and had two Clockworks carry it downstairs for the connecting of the Floo and the dedication of the school. Goody Pruett protested in a steady stream of curses and complaints: "First all manner of wights and gnolls and wretched creatures scurrying about like rats in a place once known throughout the Confederation for its cleanliness and dedication to wholesome pureblood values, then these infernal, lifeless, spring-and-cog daemons, and now every sort of foreign witch and warlock and their miscegenated offspring tromping about poking their bearded faces into every corner like wicked-minded schoolboys hoping to find dirty scribbles —"

Normally Livia would probably have silenced Goody Pruett's diatribe, but the old painting's words enraged Franklin Percival Brown into new swellings of outrage, causing his bearded cheeks to blush purple, so Livia let her ancestor ramble on.

"Floos!" said Goody Pruett. "Floos! Diabolic inventions if ever there were such! In my day we used brooms, Livia Justina Pruett, or for very, very rarified occasions, Portkeys, and not these cobblepots of enchanted cast-off junkyard leavings —"

The big iron boiler rattled, shook, and belched green flames. Smoke poured out of it, instantly coating everyone with emerald soot.

"You might have warned us," Claudia said, but Mr. Brown was coughing and sputtering so volubly that Alexandra could hardly hear her.

"Sorcery!" cried Goody Pruett from her portrait. "Blackest sorcery! I've been blinded! Now look what your Dark Arts have brought upon us, Livia! You've brought darkness and ruin —"

Livia pointed her wand at the portrait and said, "*Tergeo!*" The green powder scattered away from the canvas, leaving Goody Pruett blinking and befuddled.

"Stupid painted old crone," Alexandra muttered, while brushing dust off her clothes. It was no use; green powder covered her from head to foot. And Raspire would probably arrest her on the spot if she took out her own wand and cast a Cleaning Charm.

Out of the iron boiler clambered a small wizard in overalls and a striped shirt and cap, with enormous white muttonchop whiskers. He tipped his cap — which was mysteriously free of green powder, along with the rest of him — to Livia and the others.

"Fenwick P. Farris, Esquire, LFE," he said. "Sorry for the mess, folks. I'll just spin a few dials, adjust a few chokes and screw a few knobs —"

"Oh!" exclaimed Goody Pruett. "Is that what passes for acceptable language in the wizarding world nowadays?"

Livia said, "As Mr. Raspire and Mr. Brown have kindly inspected the premises, I trust we are ready to open on schedule? Madam Erdglass, thank you for agreeing to teach the first class of Pruett School students. I look forward to seeing the Pruett School expand and serve the needs of more wizarding students throughout Central Territory."

"Expand!" Goody Pruett exclaimed, as if the word described some awful indignity she was going to be subjected to in a dimly-lit basement.

"That remains to be seen," said Mr. Brown. "That remains to be seen indeed! I daresay your starting class of thirteen will prove all that Madam Erdglass can possibly manage in this shabby farce of an educational environment, and whatever ambitions you are harboring of rivaling Charmbridge Academy, no doubt fueled by the same megalomaniacal delusions of your father —"

"Rivaling Charmbridge?" said Livia. "Goodness, you flatter me, Mr. Brown."

"Thirteen?" Alexandra murmured. There were hundreds of students at Charmbridge.

While Mr. Ferris made some "adjustments," which seemed to involve hitting the boiler with a wrench the size of his arm that he magically pulled out of a pocket in his overalls, Livia waved her wand. A banner unfurled across the interior of what had once been the main warehouse floor:

**THE PRUETT SCHOOL - Established 2011  
In Memory of Priscilla and Caleb Pruett**

Alexandra glanced at Claudia, whose eyes became cold and shuttered at the sight of the dedication to Livia's grandparents, who had adopted Livia after her mother's death but refused to take in her Squib half-sister.

"Shame, shame! Shame and woe!" cried Goody Pruett. "Oh, Caleb, the last of my descendants!"

"I'm the last of your descendants," Livia said.

"You certainly don't act like a Pruett!" Goody snapped. "Your grandparents would be heartsick to see their legacy 'honored' like this!"

"Would they really?" asked Claudia. Did she sound pleased? Alexandra couldn't read Claudia's expression; remaining impassive with Raspire standing there with his creepy, cold stares must have required most of her energy.

Goody Pruett continued ranting, but her words were drowned out by a thump followed by a cloud of smoke from within the boiler, then a screeching sound that deafened everyone until the diminutive Fenwick Ferris tightened a valve in the mass of pipes and pressure gauges attached to its great iron belly.

"That's enough, Goody Pruett," said Livia, when they could be heard again. She put a hand on her stomach. "There will be another Pruett bearing their legacy, and I told you I will not put up with your pureblood cant. Get it all out of your system now, because if you speak one word of it in front of the students, I'll have cement poured over you in a pit in the basement."

Goody Pruett's painted cheeks turned sallow. Mr. Brown sputtered while turning away from Livia. Raspire just raised one nearly hairless eyebrow.

Mr. Ferris pulled himself out from under the boiler. Alexandra marveled at how he remained as clean as a shirt popped out of the laundry, despite the dirt, dust, and grease he was crawling around in. "That should be it, ma'am. This Floo Station is connected, serviced, and ready to go."

"So, like, can I take the Floo to school?" Alexandra asked.

"It's only four blocks from our house," said Claudia.

"Yeah, but it gets really cold in the winter," Alexandra said. "Of course next year I'll be old enough to drive..."

"No," Claudia said.

"I wish you luck running this school, Dr. Pruett," said Raspire. "We'll be watching."

"Madam Erdglass will be running the school," Livia said. "I'm just paying for it."

"So it's free to attend?" Alexandra asked.

"No, but it's a sliding scale and half of those who've enrolled are unable to pay the full tuition. We're starting with a small inaugural class, but I expect the school to grow, and I've established an endowment to ensure that no one is turned away. *That* was what I spent the last of my family's fortune on, Mr. Raspire."

Goody Pruett gasped, but kept her thoughts to herself.

Raspire smiled. "As I said, we will be watching. Closely. And as for you, Miss Quick —" He turned his attention on Alexandra, who seethed as she noticed Claudia turn rigid. "I am sure I'll be seeing you again, sooner rather than later. Your years of running around like a hellion, free to break the law with impunity, are over. But you won't be able to help yourself. It's only a matter of time."

"You really shouldn't threaten her," said Claudia.

"Why?" asked Raspire pleasantly. "Because your father will strike me down for it? In case it's escaped your notice, Mrs. Green, I've been dealing with the Enemy's spawn for many years now." He stepped closer to her. "You know well that none of you is beyond the reach of the law."

Claudia trembled. Alexandra's eyes blazed, and even Livia turned white with anger.

"You don't say his name," Alexandra said. "Why don't you say his name?"

Raspire turned on her again.

"The Enemy. My father. Why don't you, you know, call him out?" Alexandra met Raspire's dark, unblinking stare.

He sneered, whipped his cloak up over his face, and vanished with an almost inaudible pop.

Fenwick Ferris cleared his throat. "Er, well. I'll be going then. Here's my card." He handed a small white business card to Livia. "Call us if anything goes amiss, but this is a fine piece of 19th century craftsmanship, I'm sure it will almost never cause problems. Toodle-loo!" Hurriedly, he opened the metal grill door to the main boiler chamber and tossed a handful of Floo Powder into it. "Chicago Floo Junction #17," he said, and leaped inside. With a thud and a tumbling sound like someone somersaulting down a slide, he disappeared, leaving another cloud of green dust behind him.

"Well, there is no further need for me to remain in your company," said Mr. Brown, as if he thought he was depriving them of something with his departure. "But I assure you, I will be back often. To make sure all standards of wizarding education are being met and no special allowances are being made in some foolish liberal-minded effort to make life easier for Muggle-borns on the assumption that —"

"Oh my God, would you just shut up and go?" Alexandra said.

The rest of Mr. Brown's speech vanished in one big breathy gasp of outrage. His eyes were white pinpoints of rage nestled in folds of angry red flesh. He actually took a heavy step toward Alexandra. She reached for her wand, but Claudia shoved her back, and Livia stepped into his path.

"Mr. Brown, I've familiarized myself with the Department of Magical Education's regulations on equal opportunity and non-discrimination based on blood status," said Livia, "and you're coming dangerously close to making prejudicial statements indicating an intent to create a hostile educational environment."

"A what?" Mr. Brown sputtered.

"I won't hesitate to file a formal complaint and take you to a Wizengamot," Livia said. "So why don't you take my sister's suggestion, and leave?"



Mr. Brown snarled, "If you think bureaucratic games will intimidate me or prevent me from doing my duties and exercising my authority to the utmost, and that this petty bullying will protect your sister from the consequences of her inevitable misbehavior, then I say Hah! *Hah!*"

Alexandra, Claudia, and Livia all stared at him in amazement. Mr. Brown was casting *himself* as the victim of bullying?

He eyed the big metal boiler suspiciously. "I will not be using that."

"You couldn't fit your fat a—" Alexandra was cut off when Claudia seized her elbow and squeezed.

"But I will have it shut down if anyone misuses it or if it ever fails to pass every single inspection. That would of course be very unfortunate for your school." Mr. Brown withdrew a paper-wrapped bundle from his robes. He unwrapped it, revealing another old teacup. He placed his fingers on it, almost daintily, and disappeared.

Through all this, Madam Erdglass remained motionless, still leaning on her cane, and once again Claudia, Livia, and Alexandra only noticed her now that she was the only one left. She had not said a word, or changed her expression once, during the entire series of arguments and tirades. Alexandra wondered if she was asleep.

"Madam Erdglass," said Livia gently. "I hope everything is to your satisfaction. And I'm sorry about the shouting. Mr. Brown won't really cause trouble for you, will he?"

Erdglass didn't react for so long that Alexandra was tempted to suggest that Livia shake her. Then the old woman cackled softly.

"Franklin won't trouble me. If he does, I'll turn him over my knee." She cackled again. The image this brought to mind almost made Alexandra cackle, but abruptly the old woman turned to her, and for the first time, both her eyes were open and focused. "You, though. He'll cause plenty of trouble for you."

Madam Erdglass shuffled over to the boiler, and rapped against it with her cane. It clanged and echoed. She made a sort of "hmpf" sound. "Need to teach Cleaning Charms. Won't have Floo Powder tracked all over the place. Goody Pruett, you'll help me keep an eye on things."

Goody Pruett, who had been sulking in silence, twisted in her portrait frame. "Oh yes! I certainly will!"

Without looking at Alexandra, Madam Erdglass wagged a finger at her. "Watch your mouth." Then she snapped her fingers. Nothing happened. Her creased face wrinkled up even more, and she snapped her fingers harder.

"Perhaps the Floo..." Livia said.

"Bah!" said the old woman. "You modern witches, born five minutes ago. Won't be seeing me give up my Apparition license any time soon." She lifted her cane. Her shoulders rose and the loose flesh of her cheeks wobbled a bit. Then she brought the end of the cane down on the floor with an anticlimactic tap, as if the strength of her arms had given out just before gravity took over. As the cane touched the floor, she wobbled — her entire body — and then not with a pop but a snap, she disappeared.

Everyone was silent for several seconds.

"Seriously?" Alexandra said. "She's going to be my teacher? Like, for all classes?"

"She's highly qualified," Livia said. "And she was the only one who would take the post."

They cleaned up the Floo Powder. Or rather, Livia cleaned most of it up, and the Clockworks commenced sweeping and dusting. Then they walked out to the car, all of them somber and quiet.

"Class starts Monday," Livia said. "Alexandra, please be on your best behavior. This school isn't just for you."

"I know that," Alexandra said.

"And you aren't the only one Mr. Brown and Mr. Raspire can cause trouble for."

Claudia had not yet spoken. She was completely silent as they all got into Livia's car, Claudia in the front seat next to Livia, Alexandra in back.

Alexandra said in a quieter tone, "I know that too."

Claudia suddenly raised her hands to the sides of her face, and screamed.

Alexandra and Livia both jumped. They turned to her, alarmed, and Claudia just screamed and screamed, one long, agonized outpouring of rage that left her face as red as Mr. Brown's.

After what seemed like a long time, but was only a few seconds, Claudia subsided and seemed to shrink into herself. She breathed in and out rapidly.

Alexandra and Livia sat motionless. Neither said a word.

Alexandra raised a hand and tentatively slid it over the edge of Claudia's backrest, toward her shoulder. Livia opened her mouth.

"Take us home, please," Claudia said, in a perfectly calm voice.

Livia swallowed and nodded. She started the car, and no one said anything during the short drive back to 207 Sweetmaple Avenue.

## \*Chapter 25\*: Young Wands

No one brought up Claudia's outburst again.

Livia returned to Milwaukee that evening. For the rest of the week, Alexandra was sullen, Claudia was subdued, they were both curiously civil with each other, and Archie trod around the house like a man expecting axes to fall from the ceiling.

The police were still looking for Bonnie; she would probably appear on a milk carton soon, for all the good it would do. Alexandra knew of no spell for finding a missing person. She considered trying to use her magic mirror, or even calling upon Quimley, the free elf from the Lands Below who had once tracked down John Manuelito for her. But that had been at considerable risk to the elf, and he had at least had some idea of where to look, in Dinétah. She didn't think Quimley would know any better than her how to find a runaway Muggle. And of course, Franklin Percival Brown and Richard Raspire were just waiting for her to use magic at home, so they could expel her before she even started at her new school.

School started at Charmbridge and Salem a week earlier than the Pruett School's opening, so the phone calls from Anna and Julia stopped, though Alexandra soon received owls from them. Everyone was horrified at what had happened to Brian and Bonnie, but none of them had any ideas.

Julia had already asked her mother about another winter or spring visit to Croatoa. Instead of sending the messenger from the Owl Post back to Julia, Alexandra wrote a new note:

"Bonnie,

*Your family misses you. We are all so worried. I don't know what happened to you, but I ran away once, when everything was too much, and it didn't make anything better. Please come back if you can. If you can't, or you don't want to, send a note back with this owl. It will bring it back to me. I swear on my witch's honor I won't tell anyone if you ask me not to. I promise to keep your secrets. But let me know you're alive. And if you need help, I will find you.*

Alexandra"

"Take this to Bonnie Seabury, of Sweetmaple Avenue," Alexandra said. The owl gave her a quizzical look, but flapped off, first down the street, and then out over town. Alexandra watched, hoping. She was pretty sure owls couldn't find people who didn't want to be found.

*Or who are no longer able to be found.*

She felt a shiver and dismissed that thought.

Anna's letter was delivered by her own owl, Jingwei, who hooted intimidatingly at Charlie while Alexandra read what Anna had written. Anna's father had vetoed their plan to have Anna visit Larkin Mills.

"He's worried that a more serious crackdown is coming," Anna wrote. "At least he hasn't told me to stop associating with you, but that's because you're not even at Charmbridge anymore. He's not worried about himself, he's worried about me. And my mother. I would ask him to investigate what happened to your friends, but that might convince him that you're too dangerous to be around. I really, really miss you, Alex. I want to see you. If I run away this winter, will you hide me in your room?"

Above her signature, a self-portrait of Anna, sketched in pencil, sadly waved at Alexandra. Then the pencil sketch pulled her hood over her head, stepped behind the handwritten words, and disappeared.

Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence also wrote to her. Alexandra was relieved that none of them even mentioned Burton.

Monday, the first day of class for the Pruett School, Alexandra dressed as she would for any other day, in jeans and a t-shirt. As she sat down to a bowl of cereal and some toast, Claudia frowned at her across the breakfast table.

"Shouldn't you dress more... formally?" she asked.

Alexandra answered sarcastically, "You want me to walk across Larkin Mills in robes?"

Claudia thumped her coffee cup down on the table. "Livia has gone to a lot of trouble to open this school. Don't kid yourself — she did it for you. Maybe not entirely. But a little respect and gratitude wouldn't kill you."

Alexandra stared at her. The shifting terrain of her relationship with Claudia, and Claudia's relationship with Livia, remained precarious and uncharted. Claudia had gone from refusing to even acknowledge the wizarding world's existence to stepping into it directly; Livia, who had not long ago declared her desire never to see any of her sisters again, was now a regular part of their lives. And Alexandra's feelings about the older sister she had until recently known as her mother seemed daily in disorder. Deep down, she was still angry at Claudia, but she also pitied and worried about her, and her desire to assuage Claudia's fears warred with the resentment that still lingered at being lied to for so many years.

She asked herself what Julia or Anna would say. It wasn't hard to guess the answer. Julia would urge compassion and making an effort to please. Anna would tell her to stop being a jerk.

Wordlessly, Alexandra rose from the table and went back upstairs. In her room, she changed out of her jeans and t-shirt and put on her nicest pair of slacks and a yellow button-down shirt. She combed her hair, which was beginning to grow long again, and tied it back. She examined herself in her magic mirror.

Burton had called her "plain-faced." Everything he'd said about her was accurate, and she wasn't really upset by it. Yet she kept going over those words in her head.

The mirror helpfully displayed a prettier version of herself, enhanced by charms and makeup. Charms Julia had taught her but Alexandra refused to use, and makeup Julia had given her which she kept in a drawer.

Charlie, sitting in the luxurious self-cleaning cage Livia had given her, preened in front of a tiny mirror hanging next to the cage's water bottle.

"Pretty bird," said the raven.

"Who says I want to be pretty?" Alexandra muttered. She bit her lower lip, glared at the coy moue her green-eyed reflection made as if mocking her, and flipped the mirror around to its usual position facing the wall. She popped open her bedroom window, but left her familiar comfortably perched in the cage and returned downstairs to finish her breakfast. Claudia sipped her coffee with a slight look of satisfaction.

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Walking to school from her house felt odd; she hadn't done it since fifth grade, the last year she had attended Larkin Mills Elementary School. She stepped out of her house with her backpack over both shoulders, thinking she looked like a clerk at one of the mall stores.

It was a sunny morning.

At the bus stop on the corner, Brian was gathered with other teens from the neighborhood. He saw her and nodded. Alexandra gave him a small wave. No remembrance perturbed his expression. Alexandra supposed she was just the girl down the street he used to hang out with as a kid. The weird girl who was always going on about nonsense. Swallowing an unexpected lump in her throat, she walked on in the opposite direction.

She didn't cut through the park, but walked along its perimeter, until she reached Third Street and crossed to what still appeared, to Muggle eyes, to be an abandoned warehouse.

Stepping through the chain link fence, she found kids milling about near the entrance. There was a bus — a short bus, like the one that had earned her so much jeering when the neighborhood kids saw her boarding it for Charmbridge — already headed for the gap in the curb that Alexandra had just stepped over. The bus barely slowed down and swerved only the slightest bit to avoid hitting her, and if she had been in a less melancholy and more self-preserving state of mind, she might have flung herself to one side. Instead she stood there, nonplussed, as the bus's tires rolled within inches of her foot, then flung gravel into her face because she was foolish enough to keep watching as it lurched out onto the street.

"Never a cop around when you need one," she muttered, imagining Archie pulling the bus driver over. That would be amusing on several levels.

She turned back to the school and approached the nine kids who apparently had been the bus's passengers. One, a young boy of ten or eleven with curly red hair, dressed in dark green pants and a collared white shirt, was pulling at the handle of the door beneath the "Pruett School" sign. It was still a steel door, but it had been scoured of rust and grime, polished, and fitted with a curved, sculpted-metal handle bearing the head of some beast Alexandra couldn't make out. That had been added since her visit last week.

The red-headed boy was jerking on the handle, grunting and jumping up and down, and pulling against it with his full, not very consequential weight, to the obvious amusement of the spectators.

Alexandra felt the other eight assessing her as she approached. Most of them were younger kids, like the red-head, but two, a tall, muscular blond boy and a beautiful, model-thin Asian girl in a skirt and blouse, clutching a stylish purse in both hands, were clearly older than her. Another boy, trim and heavily tanned, wearing an open-collared charcoal jacket with matching dress shirt underneath, as if he'd found himself accidentally dropped off at a school instead of the nightclub where he was headed, looked about her age. He flashed brilliant teeth at her from beneath a pair of sunglasses. "Hey, do you actually live here in Smallville?"

Alexandra halted in front of him. "What?"

The boy in the suit waved a hand around. "This place. You weren't on the bus — do you live in this town?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "It's called Larkin Mills."

"Really?" The boy laughed. "That's its actual name? Is there literally a mill here? Do y'all grind corn before the hoedown?" He took off his sunglasses to examine her. He was part Asian and quite handsome, and obviously conscious of it by the way he dressed and gelled his hair. He stepped lightly over the gravel as if trying to avoid scuffing up his polished oxfords. "When I looked on the map, I thought our 'secret wizarding school' was hidden in an underground missile silo or something, not right in the middle of some little town —"

"I can't open the door!" called the red-headed boy, as if they had all failed to notice this.

"Where are all of you from?" Alexandra asked.

The stylishly-dressed boy spread his hands. "Introductions! I'm Freddy DiStefano. I'm from New York City, but now I live in Kokomo — the city, not the island — which is *not my fault!* Man, I thought I was stuck in the boonies when my old man moved us to Kokomo, but *this place...*"

Alexandra, who had never before felt a desire to defend Larkin Mills, bristled at his tone. "This place isn't so bad, and it has a wizarding school, unlike Kokomo."

"Yeah, they must have looked hard to find the exact middle of nowhere to put it. I'll bet this school sits right here in the middle of town and the locals don't even notice it, am I right?"

"It's not moving at all!" called the red-headed boy, still practically hanging off the door handle. "Maybe it takes magic to open it! Who knows magic?"

"What's your name?" asked the tall blond boy. He wore a t-shirt, stretched across a broad chest and shoulders that looked made for wearing football pads, over worn jeans. Alexandra wondered why *his* mother didn't tell him to dress up for school.

"Alexandra," she replied. "Alexandra Quick."

"Pete Venker," he said, and extended a hand. Alexandra shook it. He gripped her hand almost hard enough to hurt, in a way that made it obvious that he could deliver a crushing grip if he wanted to. "And I'm from Boone, Iowa, which is smaller than Kokomo or this place. So ignore Mistah Noo Yawk here. Most of us are small-town kids."

"Excuse me," said the Asian girl, accompanying her haughty frown with an equally haughty toss of her head. "I'm from Kenosha. That's not a *small town*."

Freddy laughed.

"Neither is Columbus," said a blonde girl with pigtails. She wore a dress and held a bookbag clutched to her chest. She had been rocking back and forth on her heels since the conversation began, as if wanting to contribute something but afraid of interrupting the older kids. Like the red-headed boy at the door, who had stopped trying to open it and turned to study the newcomer, she appeared to be among the youngest of the group. Surveying all the kids, Alexandra didn't see any robes or other signs that they were from the wizarding world. Besides Freddy, Pete, the Asian girl from Kenosha, the blonde girl from Columbus, and the red-headed boy, there was a short, fat, goth girl in a black shirt and skirt, with dyed-purple hair and a sullen expression; an equally young black boy with dreadlocks, wearing a light red jacket over baggy jeans and a loose-fitting shirt, not much more cheerful than the fat girl; and a boy and girl who stood together and bore such a resemblance to one another that Alexandra concluded they must be twins.

"We're from Kansas City," said the girl twin. Her orange-yellow hair was so bright it almost looked dyed. "My name is Leah, and this is Taylor."

"I can introduce myself!" Taylor said.

"Miss Kenosha is Rachel," said Freddy, jerking a thumb at the Asian girl. Rachel turned up her nose slightly.

Freddy gestured at the younger kids. "I forgot the rest of their names."

"My name's Silvia," said the little girl with pigtails. "Are you a witch too? Well, you have to be since you're here, right?" She giggled. "I can't believe we're really saying that. I'm a witch, witch, witch!" The kids around her rolled their eyes, except the red-headed boy who'd been trying to open the door. He bounced over to join the twins and Silvia.

"Hi! My name's Chris Naylor. I'm a wizard!"

"I figured," Alexandra said.

"We're all witches and wizards," said Pete. "That's why we're here, right?" He inclined his head at the last two youngsters. "They won't tell us their names."

"You didn't ask," said the black boy. "My name's Jamal. Can any of you actually do magic?"

The last girl remained silent and glowering. Everyone else was nervous but excited, even Rachel, who was obviously putting on a show of being dismayed at finding herself in the company of children, but the nameless fat girl did not appear at all excited to be going to a wizarding school.

The younger kids all looked like sixth graders. What puzzled Alexandra were the older teens — Pete, Rachel, and Freddy — who should have been in wizarding school for years already. Surely they hadn't all been kicked out of their previous schools like her?

"Do you know any spells?" asked Chris.

"Of course," Alexandra said.

"What spells do you know?" he asked.

Alexandra looked at the three older kids. "You've already learned magic, right? This isn't your first time attending wizarding school?"

"Sure," said Pete. "Been going to wizard summer camp every year since I was eleven."

"Summer camp!" exclaimed Rachel. "I've been taking classes at the Sheboygan Magic Academy regularly since eighth grade. Every Friday and one weekend a month, and two weeks every summer." She said this triumphantly, as if she expected the others to be impressed. "I've already passed the eighth grade SPAWN."

Alexandra frowned. "What grade are you in?"

"I just finished my sophomore year," Rachel said. So she was actually a year older than Alexandra. "This will be my first year going to wizarding school full-time. My parents and I talked about it, and decided that since I'm far enough ahead academically, I can catch up —"

"Wait," Alexandra said, "why haven't you taken the tenth grade SPAWN?"

Rachel shook her head as if trying to explain something to a dimwitted younger child. "Because I wasn't going to magical school full-time."

"What's a SPAWN?" asked Chris. "Is it that wizard test I took? That said I'm a hocus-pocus?"

"So," said Freddy, tilting his sunglasses to regard Rachel over the frames, "you haven't ever been a full-time student of the magical arts before." He spoke to her in a smooth voice, like a liquor purveyor on TV, leaning close. "I happen to have been a student at one of the Big Four. I have a full *four* years of magical education. I'll be happy to tutor you." He said this as if he were offering something more intimate. His suave tone, delivered with such a straight face, made Pete crack up, and even Alexandra was tempted to laugh.

Rachel smiled, obviously enjoying the performance without being impressed by it. "You went to New Amsterdam Academy?"

Freddy nodded. "Yeah. I've taken my *tenth* grade SPAWNs."

Rachel's cool indifference didn't crack. "Why aren't you still there?" she asked.

Freddy's expression turned serious. "It kind of got blown up."

"Blown up?" exclaimed Chris, Leah, and Taylor together.

"There's this, uh, Dark wizard, who's been destroying magical schools," Freddy said. "Last year he staged a terrorist attack in New Amsterdam."

"Are you serious?" Rachel asked.

"You're totally making this up," said Jamal.

"Where's New Amsterdam?" asked Chris.

"Nah, I heard about it at wizard summer camp," said Pete. "The Dark Convention is real."

Jamal folded his arms and shook his head skeptically, but Leah, Taylor, Silvia, and Chris all listened in fascination. Even the fat girl seemed to be paying attention.

"Anyway, they've resumed classes in New Amsterdam," Freddy said. "Using other buildings. But my old man had had enough of the wizarding world. So he moved us to Kokomo. He wouldn't let me go away to a boarding school anymore. So I'm stuck getting bused here." He turned to face the front of the school. "Hey, shouldn't they, like, let us in?"

"That's what I've been trying to tell you!" said Chris Naylor. "The door won't open!"

Freddy walked up and tried it. It didn't budge. Then Pete approached. He gave the handle a twist, a squeeze, and a yank, straining his muscles briefly, then released it with a shrug. He thumped on it a few times, producing dull, metallic thuds.

"Great," said Freddy, "Kris Kringle drops us off in the middle of nowhere and they haven't actually opened the school yet."

"Who's Kris Kringle?" asked Alexandra.

"Santa Claus!" shouted Silvia, Chris, Leah, and Taylor all together.

"No," Alexandra said, rolling her eyes, "I mean —"

"Our bus driver," said Freddy.

"Shriveled old guy with white hair. He does kind of look like an oversized elf," said Pete. "Not that I've ever seen an elf. Though I've heard they're real."

"Are we going to see any elves?" asked Chris.

Leah snickered. "Wow, you're gullible. I'll bet next you're going to say orcs and dwarves and trolls are real too!" She shied away as Pete glared at her.

"Well," said Alexandra, approaching the door, "dwarves and trolls are. I don't know about orcs." She ignored the looks everyone else exchanged as she examined the door. To her surprise, the handle — not brass or iron or something more precious, materials she was accustomed to seeing in wizard constructions, but stainless steel — was wrought in the shape of a three-headed beast. A goat, a lion, and a snake, with long serpentine necks twined about one another, leered at her.

She curled her fist under her chin and studied the handle.

"I know what that is!" said Leah excitedly, as the others crowded behind Alexandra. "It's a basilisk!"

"It is not," said Taylor. "Basilisks don't have three heads."

"Like you've actually seen a basilisk!" Leah snapped.

"Of course I haven't, because if I'd *seen* a basilisk I'd be dead, duh!"

"Are basilisks real?" asked Chris.

"It's a chimaera," said Silvia, interrupting the twins' bickering.

"She's right," Alexandra said. "And it's magic."

"No kidding?" said Freddy. "A three-headed goat-lion-snake monster is magic? Go figure."

"I don't mean chimaeras are magic," said Alexandra. "I mean the handle is."

"Are chimaeras real?" asked Chris.

With her Witch's Sight, Alexandra could see the charms wrapped around the metal, and since they were that easy to spot, she suspected they were meant to be. Was this Livia's idea — some sort of puzzle they had to solve to get inside?

"Maybe we have to answer a riddle," whispered Silvia.

Alexandra tilted her head. "Well, how about it, door? Got any riddles?"

The metal heads didn't move.

"Maybe there's a key hidden somewhere," Freddy suggested.

"Maybe the stupid people in charge of this stupid school forgot to unlock the stupid door," said the fat girl with purple hair, speaking for the first time. "Or maybe they forgot that today is the first day of class. I should have known this 'new wizarding school' with 'open enrollment' would turn out to be some kind of fly-by-night dump."

The younger kids looked uneasily at her, but Alexandra suddenly laughed.

"What?" Freddy asked.

Alexandra stepped back and drew her wand. There were gasps.

"You can't do that!" said Leah and Taylor together.

"Ummmm," intoned Silvia, "you're gonna get in trooouble!"

"*Alohomora!*" said Alexandra. It was one of the first spells she'd ever learned. The Unlocking Charm snapped against the steel handle. The metal heads twitched and writhed at the ends of their necks, making everyone but Freddy gasp and step back, and then with a loud "Clack!" the heavy steel door swung ajar.

Alexandra laughed again. They'd been looking for some puzzle or elaborate riddle when the solution was sixth-grade magic. She was surprised at the effect this feat had, even on Rachel and Pete. Only Freddy seemed unimpressed.

"C'mon, you've learned Unlocking Charms, right?" she asked.

They all nodded. "But I've never actually practiced them outside of class," said Rachel.

"We were told if we use our wands outside of class they'll be taken away," said Leah.

"Seriously, you've never used your wands except in the classroom?" Alexandra asked.

"I did a few times, when I first got it," said Pete. "The first time, a swarm of locusts covered our house. The second time, it was a rain of frogs. The third time, a scary lady on a broom showed up an hour later and told me if I ever did it again, she'd turn me into a frog and my dog into a locust." There was a trace of nervousness in the older boy's voice. "Didn't you get the warnings about the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy and the WODAMND Act and how the Aurors will mess with you?"

"Those wizard cops said they'd put a spell on my wand so anything I cast with it at home would hit my grandmama," said Jamal.

"They told me if I used it I'd go blind," said Chris, regarding Alexandra with a hopeful expression, as if she could lift this curse.

"I was told if I ever get caught using magic around Muggles, they'll take my wand away and make me be a Muggle forever," said Silvia. Tears formed in her eyes.

"They can't make you a Muggle," Alexandra said. But she thought about what had been done to Claudia. Was she sure they couldn't? The others' stories unnerved her — she'd been threatened often enough by the Trace Office, and by Diana and Liliith Grimm, but not with blindness or curses on her family!

Freddy nudged past her and opened the door. "Well, lights are on," he said, "or should I say, gas lamps. Man, why can't wizards invent magically-powered electric lights?"

"What's a gas lamp?" asked Chris.

They proceeded into what had once been the central floor of the Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections Warehouse. It was still dominated by the large, cast-iron furnace, though the room it occupied was smaller, with the rest of the first floor divided up into classrooms.

"Hello?" called Silvia. In a smaller voice, she said, "It's kind of spooky, isn't it?"

"I'll bet there are ghouls and ghosts and goblins living in this place," said Pete, directing the comment at Silvia and the other younger children. Silvia shuddered, while Chris looked excited. Everyone else followed.

"Are ghosts real?" asked Chris.

"C'mon, no magical creatures are gonna hang out in this town," said Freddy.

"You'd be surprised," said Alexandra. She wondered where Madam Erdglass was. The other kids were starting to peek their heads through doors to the classrooms. The light from the gas lamps was bright enough, along with sunlight coming through the windows, but long shadows still fell down the corridors and the atmosphere of the school was not much improved from the night she'd entered it to find a hag in residence. She was tempted to take all these Muggle-borns upstairs to introduce them to Goody Pruett.

Abruptly, the furnace rattled and clanged, causing Rachel to stagger into Pete in surprise and the younger kids to scream. Alexandra, who still had her black hickory wand in her hand, pointed it at the furnace. The door banged open and a green cloud of smoke belched out of it. Silvia, Leah, and Taylor screamed louder.

"What the hell?" said Pete, fumbling for his own wand. He slipped a protective arm around Rachel.

"Jeez, it's just a Floo," said Freddy.

"What's a Floo?" asked Chris.

A girl in a starched white blouse and long black skirt, with very straight brown hair cut precisely at her shoulders, stepped out of the furnace's large hatch. She carried a bookbag and had a shawl thrown over her shoulders. She wore thick glasses with pointed frames, and might have been a librarian or a schoolteacher except that she looked about twelve. Obviously surprised at being greeted by ten other kids with various expressions of shock, bemusement, and confusion on their faces, she waved a hand in front of her face to fan away the green smoke. "Hello."

Rachel, realizing she was standing in the middle of the doorway with Pete's arm around her, pushed away from him. "Ew!" she said, and backed into the corridor as green powder settled on everyone.

"Hi," said Freddy to the new arrival. "You don't look like the teacher."

The girl blinked at him. "Excuse me?"

The boiler rattled again. "You might want to move out of the way," Alexandra said.

The girl did so. "Roger was right behind me," she said.

A boy about her age practically jumped out of the boiler, accompanied by another cloud of green smoke. The new boy had short dark hair and glasses, and a white shirt and tie. A backpack dangled from one arm. He crouched and looked around as if assessing the environment for predators.

"Roger, I presume?" said Freddy. "Are you two brother and sister?"

"What? No." The girl shook her head. "We just met."

Roger stood up. "Is this the Pruett School?" he asked.

"No, you took a wrong turn at Narnia," said Freddy. "I'm sorry, this is a dark dimension of endless horrors and no escape. You're stuck here with us forever."

The girl turned to him in alarm. The boy looked skeptical.

"Stop being a jerk, Freddy," said Alexandra. "Yes, this is the Pruett School. What's your name?"

"Rachel," answered the girl.

As the other kids looked at the older Rachel who now half-leaned into the room, Freddy said, "Sorry, we already have a Rachel. We'll have to call you something else. What's your middle name?"

Rachel's mouth set into a very severe frown. "My name is Rachel," she repeated.

"Okay, fine," said Freddy. "You can be Little Rachel, and the other one can be Hot Rachel."

"Excuse me?" said the older Rachel.

"Why did you come by Floo and not by bus?" asked Alexandra, trying to talk over Freddy.

Rachel and Roger both shrugged.

"Where are you from?" asked Pete.

"Chicago," the two youngsters answered together.

The furnace began trembling again. "Oh, yuck!" said the older Rachel. "That's it — I'm going to find the girls' bathroom." She walked off down the corridor, while everyone else backed away from the furnace. This time it shook, rattled, and made coughing sounds for quite a while before it finally disgorged a new person amidst more billowing green clouds of smoke. By now a fine layer of green powder coated the inside of the boiler room and tinged the light coming through the windows a murky emerald.

The newcomer was another girl, this one a couple of years older than Rachel and Roger, but younger than Alexandra. She had dark hair and heavy eyebrows set in a round, pale face. She looked around uncertainly.

She was the first student to arrive wearing wizard robes. As far as Alexandra could tell, she was wearing only a shift beneath her robes, which meant she probably wasn't Muggle-born. She decided to greet the girl before Freddy started talking again.

"Hi," she said, stepping forward. "I'm Alexandra. Welcome to the Pruett School."

The newest girl's face cleared. "My name is Helen Xanthopoulos," she said. "Are you my tutor?"

"Tutor?" Alexandra exchanged looks with all the other kids. "Uh, no. I'm just another student."

"Oh," said Helen. She scanned the group in front of her. Some of the others had already wandered off, and Rachel the younger was in conversation with Leah and Taylor and Roger, the four of them having apparently formed an immediate clique. Chris circled around the room, coming step by step closer to the boiler. He seemed torn between curiosity and apprehension. Helen singled out Pete, evidently because he appeared to be the oldest. "Are you my tutor?"

"I don't think anyone's your tutor," said Pete. "Actually, we're all trying to figure out where the teacher is."

Helen's face clouded with anxiety again. She had a slow, plaintive way of speaking that made Alexandra think Freddy was likely to decide Helen was an inviting target. Freddy, however, had apparently lost interest in the new arrivals. He was exploring the other rooms, and soon everyone was poking around in classrooms, which were mostly bare of anything but desks and tables.

Alexandra walked up to the second floor, and found the Alchemy lab. There was a large stone bench, a single metal cauldron, and racks of empty vials and philters, but no jars or canisters of materials like Alexandra was used to seeing at Charmbridge, and not even a locked cabinet that might hold such things.

"Don't climb into the furnace, Chris," said Silvia from the furnace room. "You might get Flooed to Antarctica!"

"Cool!" came Chris's response. Alexandra walked back downstairs, intending to make sure the eager red-headed boy didn't get himself into trouble, then decided she wasn't his babysitter. He couldn't actually go anywhere without Floo Powder, anyway.

Everyone wandered around on the ground floor for nearly ten minutes, while Alexandra stood by the stairs and thought about going up to the third floor. But she didn't want to bring the others with her. The upper floor, where Goody Pruett hung on the wall and she had practiced spellcasting in peace and privacy over the summer, still felt like her domain, and introducing these kids to what had once been her place, where she had only ever taken Brian, seemed like an invasion.

It was Helen who interrupted her meditation. The younger girl approached her and asked, "Aren't there any grown-ups here?"

"There's supposed to be." Alexandra attempted a smile. "How old are you, Helen?"

"Thirteen," Helen said.

"You've been to wizarding school before, haven't you?"

Helen looked down. "Yes," she mumbled, "but Mother and Father decided I should have a tutor instead. Then they told me I could go to this school. But I thought I'd still have a tutor."

"Um. Maybe they'll let us know who's supposed to tutor you." Alexandra hoped that Helen didn't think it was going to be her. More to keep Helen or any of the other kids, a few of whom were now drifting over to where Alexandra stood, from trying the stairs than because she had a destination in mind, Alexandra walked back down the corridor, and stepped into a classroom everyone had already been in and out of several times. She came to an abrupt halt, almost causing Helen to walk into her, when she found Madam Erdglass sitting behind the desk at the front of the room. The old woman's eyes were only half-open but they shifted in her direction.

The chubby girl in the dark shirt and skirt and purple hair was seated, or rather, slouched at one of the desks. Her feet, with her thick ankles thrust into short black boots, were sticking out in front of her, and her hands were on the seat at her sides. She regarded the old woman silently, with no trace of anticipation or worry. Evidently she had been the first to discover Madam Erdglass in the room and had taken her seat without saying a word to anyone else. Or perhaps she had already been sitting there when Madam Erdglass entered, moving past them unnoticed.

Alexandra wordlessly took a seat in the front row and fixed her gaze on the woman. Helen sat next to her. One by one, everyone else noticed the others walking into the room, so they trickled in, saw the old woman, and sat down. All the while, Madam Erdglass said nothing. Eventually, all thirteen of them were seated in the classroom, and the whispers and questions died in the stillness that settled over them. Madam Erdglass held their undivided attention, without ever speaking or even moving.

Finally, after the silence had lingered just long enough to prompt whispers, Madam Erdglass said, "Is everyone here?"

They all looked around. How were they supposed to know? But everyone they had met so far was in the room, so their heads all turned back toward the front of the room with a collective shrug.

Madam Erdglass pushed open a small rolled piece of parchment, holding it flat against her desk with just two fingers. Without preamble, she said, "Jamal Burns."

Jamal said, "Yeah."

There was a long pause. Madam Erdglass didn't move or say anything. Everyone felt the silence like a weight, sensing they were waiting for something but not sure what.

Finally, Jamal said, "Here." And after another, somewhat briefer, pause, "Ma'am."

"Rachel Cohen," said Madam Erdglass.

"Here, ma'am," said the younger Rachel, sitting back straight and feet together, the very model of an attentive student in her conservative skirt, blouse, and jacket.

"Roger Darby."

The nerdy boy with tie and glasses who'd followed Rachel out of the boiler said, "Here."

The twins, Leah and Taylor Denning, were called next, and then Madam Erdglass said, "Frodo DiStefano."

"Freddy," said Freddy. "Ma'am."

Madam Erdglass squinted, making her eyes disappear again. "Your name is misspelled."

"No ma'am," Freddy said, in a tone indicating this was a conversation he'd had many times. "I just prefer Freddy."

He turned his head and glared at the giggles that erupted behind him.

"Frodo — his name is Frodo!" repeated Silvia. "Like in the mo—"

"Yeah, I know what it's from!" Freddy snapped.

"Rachel Ing," continued Madam Erdglass.

The older Rachel answered, "Here."

Silvia McCarthy and Chris Naylor followed, then Madam Erdglass said, "Penelope Oscar."

The fat girl who had barely spoken until now said, "Penny. I won't answer to Penelope."

"Penelope is Greek," said Helen.

Penny rolled her eyes at the other girl.

Ignoring the exchange, Madam Erdglass said, "Alexandra Quick," as if they'd never met.

"Here," replied Alexandra.



The last two were Pete Venker and Helen Xanthopoulos.

Thirteen students, Alexandra thought, and in different grades, and obviously of widely varying levels of ability. How was Madam Erdglass supposed to teach them all?

"In the back of the room you will find your textbooks," said Madam Erdglass. "Mister Venker and Miss Ing, please distribute them."

Pete and Rachel looked at each other, and both rose from their chairs, Rachel more reluctantly. As everyone else turned around, the two oldest students studied the contents of the boxes.

"They're all different grade levels, ma'am," said Pete.

Madam Erdglass said, "And so are you."

Pete and Rachel frowned. Pete turned back to the other students. "Okay... who's not a first year magic student?"

Alexandra, Freddy, Penny, and Helen raised their hands. Penny was a seventh grader, while Helen was an eighth grader. Pete and Rachel fetched everyone books of the appropriate grade.

Alexandra regarded the book dropped on her desk in dismay: *Young Wands Teaching Series, Year Five*. Freddy had the same volume.

"Everyone begin working on the exercises in your books," said Madam Erdglass.

The younger students all opened their books and examined them with interest, though Alexandra saw disappointment on the faces of Jamal, Chris, and the Dennings, who clearly had been expecting to do something with their wands and not just read a textbook. But even Pete and Rachel Ing only rolled their eyes as they turned to the first chapter in their study guides.

Alexandra did the same. She spent about ten minutes reading it, then raised her hand.

Madam Erdglass sat at the head of the classroom like some ancient taxidermy display, but finally noticed Alexandra's raised hand. "Miss Quick?"

"I already know all this stuff," Alexandra said.

Everyone's attention focused on her.

Madam Erdglass's expression didn't change. "You know everything in the book."

"Well," Alexandra said, "everything in Chapter One. I mean, the basic categories of Transfiguration, and Gamp's Law, and Essential Elemental tables..." Actually, everything in Chapter One she'd known by the end of seventh grade, but she didn't say this.

"Then read the next chapter," Madam Erdglass said.

Alexandra turned the page sullenly. They all spent the next hour reading. Helen, with much embarrassment, asked if she could go to the restroom, and was permitted to leave, causing half of the students to do the same over the next ten minutes. Alexandra stubbornly remained in her seat and skimmed all the way to the end of the *Young Wands* book. It was all basic! There were a few chapters with magical principles she didn't remember very well, and some of the exercises looked like things she hadn't done at Charmbridge, and maybe her Arithmancy was a little weak. But she couldn't believe Madam Erdglass expected her to learn tenth grade magic from a book. Were they really going to just sit and read all day?

They were released for a fifteen-minute break. Madam Erdglass didn't move as everyone filed out of the classroom. With no words spoken or anyone taking charge, they all headed outside, where the gravel lot surrounding the Pruett School presented a dismal setting for any sort of outdoor activities. The sixth graders — Jamal, Silvia, Roger, Chris, Rachel Cohen, Leah, and Taylor — upon realizing there were no activities organized for them, clumped together and watched the older kids. Penny wandered off to lean against one of the non-illusory sections of fence. Helen followed Alexandra, who waited until they were outside before asking Pete and Rachel Ing: "Were your other day schools like this?"

"Well, when I went to summer school, there were more kids, and we were divided by age level," Pete said. "We didn't sit in the same room with sixth graders."

"And we had more textbooks," said Rachel. "I hope we do practical exercises next. I've been waiting for years to do Transfigurations and Major Charms."

Alexandra wasn't sure what "Major Charms" were, but she turned to Freddy. "Do they use the Young Wands series at the New Amsterdam Academy? We hardly used them at all at Charmbridge. They're kind of... simple."

For the first time, Freddy lost his smirk. "You went to Charmbridge Academy? That's one of the Big Four!"

"Oh. Yeah." Alexandra hadn't told any of them that before. Pete was unimpressed, but Rachel Ing suddenly listened with new interest, and Helen's face shined with awe.

"What are you doing *here*, then?" asked Freddy.

Alexandra considered lying, then shrugged. "I got expelled."

Freddy laughed. "You're kidding."

"No." Alexandra met his laughter with a flat, unamused, cold-eyed stare. He stopped laughing.

"For what?" he asked.

"I'd rather not talk about it," Alexandra said.

"Did you flunk out?" Freddy asked.

"No." Alexandra was getting angry now.

"Do you really know everything in your textbook?" asked Pete.

"Pretty much," Alexandra said. She was only exaggerating a little. "You know, I don't see how any of us is going to learn anything if we don't actually practice using our wands."

"Yeah!" said Chris, who with the other youngsters had been listening to the older kids talk. "When do we get to use our wands?"

"Maybe Madam Erdglass is just evaluating us right now," said Rachel Ing.

"Maybe Madam Erdglass is taking a nap," said Jamal. Chris and Roger and the Dennings laughed.

"Anyway, it's better than nothing, I guess," Freddy said.

While they talked, cars drove by on Third Street. None of the drivers noticed all the kids gathered inside the fence of the warehouse on the corner.

A caw drew everyone's attention skyward. Alexandra held out her hand, and everyone surrounded her as Charlie landed on her wrist.

"You've got a pet crow!" Jamal exclaimed.

"Charlie's a raven, not a crow," said Charlie. That silenced everyone, and they all looked at Alexandra with renewed awe. From across the lot, even Penny was watching with interest. Alexandra casually stroked Charlie's head, bemused by the twist of fate that made a raven a mark of coolness rather than the stigma it was among most wizards.

"It's not a *pet*," said Helen, "it's a familiar."

"That's right," Alexandra said. Helen smiled more broadly than such a mild remark merited, but Alexandra smiled back at her.

"How do we get familiars?" asked Chris. "Can you get a basilisk or an elf familiar?"

"No way, man! I want a dragon!" said Jamal.

"No," Alexandra said. "I found Charlie at a familiar shop in the Goblin Market in Chicago."

"They sell goblins too?" Chris sounded delighted. Leah laughed at him, and this caused the children to start arguing again, but Freddy remained unusually quiet, studying Alexandra in that way he had when he was readying some comment she wouldn't like. But whatever he was thinking, he didn't say.

"Go home, Charlie," Alexandra said. The raven cawed and took off.

Alexandra stewed over her first day as they walked back inside. The expectations of the few students who had had magical schooling already didn't seem very high. Pete and Rachel were older than her, but not even as skilled as eighth graders at Charmbridge. Freddy talked a lot, but Alexandra didn't think he actually knew very much. She had no idea how much Penny had learned. And Helen... well, she wasn't sure what to make of Helen.

The Pruett School was not exactly what she'd been expecting.

## \*Chapter 26\*: We're Not Supposed to Learn Magic

Alexandra waited a week before she called Livia. Claudia had accused her of being ungrateful, but Alexandra did know that Livia had gone to a lot of trouble to open the Pruett School, and couldn't believe she'd want it to be so...

"Weak," she said over the phone. She lay on her back on top of her bed, balancing her hickory wand on her finger.

"Weak?" Livia repeated.

"I think Madam Erdglass means well, but she can barely stay awake," Alexandra said.

In a week of classes, most of her lessons had consisted of reading and performing a very few enchantments. Madam Erdglass had everyone practice the same subject each hour, differing only by grade level. The youngest students, the sixth graders, were still learning the parts of a wand and basic wand movements, and much to their disappointment, had yet to cast a single spell. Their eyes bulged with jealousy when the older students performed small charms and transfigurations.

"It's all so *basic*," she said to Livia. "And we've got thirteen students from sixth graders to a senior in one room —"

"Alexandra," said Livia, with a flat tone like a slap, "I'm not running the school. And the worst thing I could do is try to micromanage it from a distance. Madam Erdglass is in charge. She determines the curriculum and the lessons, and she'll be sure to follow all Department of Magical Education guidelines to the letter. I can't believe after one week you're calling me like I'm going to come down there and change things to your liking."

"That's not what I called you for," Alexandra protested. "I'm just telling you, I don't think anyone is learning much."

"*One week* with your new teacher and you're competent to judge her qualifications? Madam Erdglass retired before I was born, that's how long she's been a teacher."

"You mean how long she's not been a teacher."

"Alexandra." Livia's voice was icy.

"I'm just saying —"

"You're just saying," Livia cut in, "that day school is not like Charmbridge Academy, and your new school doesn't have the staff or the resources or the curriculum that you're used to. I'm very sorry that the Pruett School isn't living up to your expectations."

"That's not what I meant." Alexandra could hear her own voice now, and how Livia was hearing her words, and she didn't like it.

"What did you mean, then? What exactly should I do, Alexandra? Fire Madam Erdglass? Or perhaps you were hoping I have some more money I can use to hire half a dozen more teachers? You know, you can always turn in your wand and go to a regular high school, like Mr. Raspire suggested. I'm sure Claudia would approve."

Alexandra said nothing.

"You're complaining after *one week* of classes. Do you know how entitled you sound?"

Alexandra was glad this conversation was not happening in person.

"The school and all its students will be evaluated throughout the semester — stringently, I'm sure," Livia said. "Don't call me to complain like this again. I'm very disappointed that you'd presume on our relationship like this."

"I wasn't —" Alexandra said, but Livia hung up.

Alexandra lay on her bed, feeling horrible. Charlie hopped down from the cage at her bedside and sat on her stomach.

"Alexandra," said the raven.

"I wasn't trying to be entitled and presumptuous," Alexandra said.

"Jerk," Charlie said.

Alexandra tapped the bird's beak.

"Troublesome," Charlie said, and pecked her fingers, not without affection.

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Her mood was not improved the next day. The owl she'd sent looking for Bonnie had never returned. Archie said the police still had no leads, no clues.

In the bathroom at the Pruett School that morning, she faced the mirror and pointed her hickory wand at it. She was angry at resorting to an improvised ritual with doggerel verse, thinking that if Madam Erdglass was a real teacher, she might know something that would actually work.

*"Mirror, mirror, do as bidden,  
Show me where my friend is hidden.  
Bonnie's lost, and I can't find her,  
If she's hiding, I'll remind her,  
That her family wants her back,  
And she needs to end this act."*

*If she can't return, then show me,  
Who's responsible.*" The fist clenching her wand trembled a little. *"Then they'll know me."*

It wasn't a great verse, and maybe that was why the mirror was unmoved. It revealed her own reflection, glowering sullenly back at her, and nothing else.

In the classroom, the younger kids chattered about what they did over the weekend. Pete Venker and Rachel Ing sat in the back whispering to each other. Their faces passed close, like birds twirling about one another in spring flight. Rachel's eyes were lively and focused on Pete; her lips, sparkly with some flavor of lip gloss, curved upward while he muttered in a low voice.

Alexandra found the couple annoying, and turned her back on them before they noticed her scrutiny. She slouched in her seat and waited for Madam Erdglass to show up.

Freddy leaned over to her and said, "Hey, is it true you're Voldemort's daughter?"

Alexandra sat up and exclaimed "What?" so loudly it brought a hush to the room.

"I heard your father is a Dark Lord," Freddy said. Alexandra couldn't tell if he was putting her on with such a straight face. Rachel Cohen turned around in her seat with wide, worried eyes. Helen Xanthopoulos stared with her usual open-mouthed gaze when she struggled to follow along, and everyone else was now listening with interest.

"Voldemort was British," Alexandra said, "and he died, like, the year after I was born."

"So he could be your father," Freddy said.

"Seriously?" Alexandra noted how keenly Chris and Roger and the other youngsters were listening, and gritted her teeth. Freddy was yanking her chain. But he must have heard something. "My father is Abraham Thorn," she said, figuring she might as well get this over with.

No one flinched. Freddy just regarded her with a smirk, as if she'd confirmed something. Besides him, only the Dennings seemed to recognize the name, as their eyes widened.

"He's a bad guy!" said Taylor.

"He's like a wizard Hitler," said Leah.

Rachel Cohen's eyes became even wider.

"He is not!" Alexandra snapped.

"No, Voldemort was the wizard Hitler," said Freddy. "Abraham Thorn is like a wizard Osama Bin Laden."

"He is not," Alexandra said, trying to keep her voice from rising. Freddy was goading her.

"He destroyed New Amsterdam Academy," Freddy said. His voice was no longer teasing, and his expression was serious. "A lot of my friends almost died that day. People did die at the Gringotts he looted. And some goblins."

"I'm not defending what he's done," Alexandra said.

"Aren't you?"

"What do you want, for me to apologize for being his daughter? I didn't even meet him until I was twelve."

"I just wanted to know if the rumors were true," said Freddy. "So what's the Enemy of the Confederation really like?"

"Scary," Alexandra said. "And the rumors about how he knows when you're speaking his name? They're true."

"What's that, Miss Quick?"

Everyone jerked around toward the front. Madam Erdglass was sitting at her desk. No one had even noticed her enter the room.

*I'd like to know how she does that,* Alexandra thought. She decided a change of subject would be the best offense and defense. "Ma'am, when are we going to stop book-learning and start spell-casting?"

"You've been casting spells," the teacher replied.

"I learned the eight basic levitation variations in seventh grade," Alexandra said, "and I mastered Unlocking Charms in eighth grade. All we're doing is practicing right out of the book." She waved her copy of *Young Wands, Level 5*.

"We're following the prescribed curriculum, Miss Quick," said Madam Erdglass. "Are you bored?"

Alexandra was tempted to say "Yes," but she caught a glimpse of something neither sleepy nor kindly flashing in the narrow slits of Madam Erdglass's eyes.

"Just eager to learn, ma'am," Alexandra said. She could never be sure what Madam Erdglass was thinking, but she didn't think the old woman missed the dry sarcasm. Freddy snickered; he definitely hadn't.

"Then open your book to lesson three and, if you please, you and Mr. DiStefano may demonstrate to those students studying from book one the wand positions you are reviewing. Mr. Venker, Miss Ing, you would benefit from paying attention as well."

They continued rudimentary charms and wand movements until lunch. It had become clear in the first week of class that there was no school lunch requirement where day schools were concerned — students were expected to bring their own meals. Several students would have gone hungry if

their classmates hadn't shared food, while Alexandra had walked through the surrounding fence to visit the pizza place in the strip mall down the street. After that, she'd brought her lunch, but Freddy imitated her stunt, as did Penny — who had still barely exchanged three words with anyone.

Today, while Alexandra sat at one of the wooden tables in the former warehouse floor that served as their lunch room, the chubby girl drifted slowly in her direction, moving in a straight line, but gradually, as if trying to sneak up on Alexandra in plain sight. Alexandra watched without saying anything.

Twelve-year-old Penny, with her aggressively sullen attitude and jaded expression, might have passed for a year or two older despite her height. She always wore dark tops and skirts, varying only slightly in color and logo. She had added a single green streak in her purple hair. As far as Alexandra could tell, she'd made no friends.

She slowed to a halt in front of Alexandra, and stared fixedly at some point on the far wall, as if focusing in order to make contact with another world.

"Your raven is cool," she said at last.

Alexandra stopped eating her sandwich. "Thanks." She was aware of eyes on the two of them — Penny had barely spoken to anyone for the past week.

"Do you really know all the spells in our books?" Penny asked.

"Pretty much." Reading ahead, Alexandra had found that the chapters on Alchemy and Arithmancy in *Young Wands*, Book 5, covered a few things she hadn't learned, but at the pace Madam Erdglass was going, she doubted they'd get to any of the spells that she would have learned in her Charms and Transfigurations classes at Charmbridge. She had already decided to steal a copy from the untouched stack of *Young Wands*, Book 6.

Penny fiddled with her wand, which she'd tucked into the waistband of her skirt. "Do you know any hexes?"

"Yes," Alexandra said.

"How about curses?"

"Sure."

"Major curses?"

Alexandra leaned back in her chair. "Is there someone in particular you want to curse?"

"No," Penny said, "but if we're gonna learn magic, we oughta learn something useful. Memorizing the magical properties of three, seven, and thirteen isn't gonna get us a job in the Muggle world. And what good is levitating feathers or turning toothpicks into needles?"

Alexandra was inclined to agree, but she said, "If you can't levitate a feather, you can't do much of anything."

"You know what I mean. I may not be the daughter of some famous wizard, but I could learn faster than this."

"I already complained to Madam Erdglass," Alexandra said. *And the owner of the school.*

"She doesn't care. Muggle-borns and half-bloods aren't supposed to learn anything," Penny said.

Alexandra blinked at that. "Being pureblood has nothing to do with being a better witch."

"Yeah, I read the chapter on Diversity in Our Blood, and the Confederation's Many Cultures," Penny said. "And the Special Contributions of Muggles." She snorted. "'Special' like her." She jerked her head toward Helen Xanthopoulos, who approached carrying her tiny magical purse from which she produced large home-made meals every day. Helen had taken to sitting across from Alexandra at lunch, shyly at first, but now she had decided they were friends. Apparently the Xanthopoulos family owned an Alchemical supply company and a chain of potion shops. Despite their wealth, Alexandra now understood why Helen didn't go to a regular wizarding school.

"Don't be like that," Alexandra said in a low voice.

Penny rolled her eyes. "You know that's what *they* think of us. Well, I mean us. Not you."

"What?" Alexandra shook her head. Helen stopped a foot from Penny and looked at the younger girl curiously.

"You're a pureblood," Penny said.

"I'm a pureblood," said Helen. She had a habit of trying to fit into any conversation without necessarily knowing what it was about.

"Not everyone at Charmbridge is a pureblood," Alexandra said, "and for your information, I thought I was Muggle-born until a few years ago."

Surprise dented Penny's hostility. For a moment, she seemed interested. "Really? Well, maybe they let a few special students go there. Scholarship students, or someone with connections, or a lucky few so they can talk about 'Blood Diversity.'" Penny waggled fingers in the air, pantomiming quotes around the words. "But the rest of us go to day school. The first one I went to? Was just like this. I thought this one would be different because supposedly some rich bitch who became Wandless wanted to make a new school for people like us —"

"Oh, you shouldn't use words like that!" Helen said.

"What's your point?" Alexandra demanded. As annoyed as she was at Livia right now, she didn't like Penny talking about her like that, but she didn't want everyone knowing that the "rich bitch" was her sister either.

"We're not supposed to learn magic," Penny said. "Not real magic. Powerful magic. Moving mountains and turning lead into gold and summoning demons —"

"Are demons real?" asked Chris. The younger kids had begun gathering around them, listening in.

"What's a demon?" asked Helen.

"All of those things are very hard, or impossible, actually," said Alexandra.

"But you know that, just like that." Penny snapped her fingers. "Before you got kicked out of your fancy Big Four school, you actually learned all the things they'll never teach us."

"If I'd learned everything, I wouldn't be here," Alexandra said. Though she had to admit, she wasn't learning much here.

"You could teach us," Penny said.

Alexandra was disturbed at the enthusiasm of the onlookers. Helen held her hands together as if she were about to jump up and down and clap. The Dennings and Chris Naylor grinned. Roger, hanging behind Leah and Taylor, leaned in. Jamal and Rachel Cohen and Silvia were still sitting at an adjoining table, but their conversation had stopped and their eyes were on her.

"I'm not a teacher," Alexandra said. "I'm only in tenth grade."

"Like you don't think you know more than everyone else here put together," said Freddy. He'd been in the restroom, and wandered back into the lunch room in time to hear the last part of Penny's speech.

Alexandra shrugged. She was pretty certain she did know more than everyone else here put together, but she wasn't going to brag about it so Freddy could make one of his snide comments.

"I want to learn what real witches can do," Penny said.

"You want to learn hexes and curses," Alexandra said. "And summoning demons, which I can't do, and wouldn't teach you if I could."

Penny grinned for the first time. "What about hexes and curses?"

"Who exactly do you want to curse?" Alexandra asked, repeating her earlier question.

Penny's grin faded. "No one."

"So how many people have you cursed?" Freddy asked. "Your father teach you any good ones?"

"Want to find out?" Alexandra asked.

"Yeah," Freddy said. "I haven't seen you *do* a whole lot, kiddo. Just talk up your Charmbridge education and your big bad father."

"I haven't talked up anything," Alexandra said.

"Sure you haven't," Freddy said, "just made sure we all know you think we're beneath you."

"Do you think we're beneath you?" Helen asked, hurt.

"No, I don't." Alexandra stood up and faced Freddy. "You know, you remind me of someone."

Freddy grinned. "Who?"

"A big, fat jerk."

"Oh, an ex-boyfriend. Don't flatter yourself, sweetheart."

Alexandra's teeth clenched together. She drew her wand.

"Whoa," said Freddy, holding up his hands. "Is this a duel?"

"I'd flatten you in a duel." With a sweep of her wand Alexandra sent all the tables in the room, except the one Jamal, Silvia, and Rachel sat at, sliding across the floor to thump against the four walls. Everyone became very still.

"You want to see what I can do?" Alexandra asked. "*Accio necktie!*" The expensive, loose-knotted tie around Freddy's neck tightened and yanked him toward her. She grabbed it and turned to her audience. "Want to see me levitate Freddy?"

"Yes!" said Helen. Penny smiled nastily.

Freddy jerked away from her. "I can cast a Summoning Charm too. And push furniture around."

"*Incarcerous*," Alexandra said. She flicked her wand, and cords of rope uncoiled from it and wrapped around Freddy. They didn't bind him very tightly, but Freddy hopped around cursing and struggling while everyone laughed.

"Stop that," Alexandra said. "Use magic to free yourself."

He glared furiously at her. "I can't use magic if I can't reach my wand!"

"Sure you can," Alexandra said. "Your wand is in your pocket, right? It doesn't have to be in your hand."

"It doesn't?" asked Chris. Everyone was edging as close as they dared, without entering the circle between Alexandra and Freddy. As Freddy continued trying to pull himself free of his bindings, Pete and Rachel Ing walked into the room, and stopped before the scene in front of them.

"We spent all week learning the basic wand movements you need to cast spells," said Roger.

"Everyone needs them starting out," Alexandra said. "But some spells you can cast without gestures. Some are easier than others."

"And you can free yourself from magic ropes without even holding your wand?" Freddy's voice was somewhere between a snarl and a gasp as the ropes resisted his efforts.

"Yes," Alexandra said. She'd spent some time practicing that. She'd been tied up too many times. She didn't add that a good wizard could put a binding on her that she wouldn't be able to free herself from so easily — but she was pretty sure no one here was that good. She doubted Freddy could even cast *Incarcerous*. He glowered as the ropes fell to the floor.

"Um, Madam Erdglass is sitting in the classroom waiting for us," Rachel Ing said.

"What are you kids doing, anyway?" Pete asked.

"What were you kids doing?" asked Freddy. Pete smirked. Rachel folded her arms, turning her face aside to hide the color rising to her cheeks.

Alexandra waved her wand and cast the counter-charm; the ropes vanished. Eyes widened around the room.

They filed out of the lunch room. Everyone exchanged glances or simply stared at Alexandra.

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They all gathered in the lunchroom again the next day, this time with Rachel Cohen standing guard. She disapproved, but her curiosity was greater than her apprehension at doing something that might not be strictly following the Pruett School's curriculum. Alexandra pointed out that they weren't actually breaking any rules; privately, she suspected they could be wizard-dueling up and down the corridors before Madam Erdglass would notice anything happening outside her presence. Still, there was an air of illicitness as they set up Alexandra's demonstration.

"*Incarcero*," Pete said, flicking his wand at her. For the third time, nothing happened.

Alexandra sat in a chair with a wand in each pocket. Pete, the biggest and oldest student at the school, was normally quite mellow, but he was becoming vexed. It didn't help his spell-casting any.

"*Incarcerous*, with falling stress on the second syllable," Alexandra said. "And it's really more of a conjuration than a hex. You're trying to cast it like a hex."

"What do you mean I'm trying to cast it like a hex?" Pete demanded. "What does that even mean?"

Alexandra sighed. She wasn't sure how to explain it; she just knew Pete was doing it wrong.

"Let me try!" said Chris, bouncing on his toes.

"*Incarcerous*," Pete said again. Ropes came out of his wand and wrapped around Alexandra and her chair. He looked at his wand in surprise. "Hey! It worked!"

"Better," Alexandra said. If he'd cast it correctly he'd have bound her from head to foot, including a gag, but she didn't mention this. She rocked a little side to side, testing the bonds.

"I don't see what this proves," said Rachel Ing. "Harry Houdini could get out of ropes and he wasn't a real wizard."

"He didn't use real magic," Alexandra said, feeling for her wand. She laid her fingers on the hickory wand through the pocket of her pants. She muttered, then spoke out loud the counterspell. Pete's ropes flew off of her, dissolved to gossamer threads, and vanished.

"Well, dang," said Pete.

"Those ropes were pretty loose," said Freddy.

"You think you could do better?" Pete asked.

"Yeah." Freddy swaggered over and turned a profile to Alexandra, winking at Rachel Ing. The pretty girl rolled her eyes.

"I want to try," said Helen.

"Me too!" said Silvia.

"Me too!" said Chris.

"I'm not making myself target practice for all of you," Alexandra said. "I'm just showing you that you can cast spells without wand gestures. Freddy, you'd better cast it right." She half-expected him to cast something else, and was silently preparing a counter-jinx, though she was less certain about managing that without her wand actually in her hand.

Freddy smiled and said, "*Incarcerous*." Ropes whipped out of his wand and around Alexandra from head to foot. Cords filled her mouth, and her ankles were lashed together. Her arms were pinned tightly to the back of the chair.

Alexandra hadn't expected that. Freddy was better than she thought.

"You look surprised," Freddy said. "What, you think the New Amsterdam Academy of Witchcraft and Wizardry didn't teach real magic?" He sauntered over to her, and put a hand on the back of her chair and tilted it back until she was forced to look up at him.

"I think you should untie her," said Helen worriedly.

"Do you want me to untie you?" Freddy asked.

She was sure she could still undo the binding. She gave Freddy a glare and shook her head.

"Well then, let's make it even more challenging," said Freddy. Over protests from the other students, ignoring Alexandra's furious squirming, he grabbed the hickory wand sticking out of her pocket. "Let's see you do it without a wand."

"Freddy!" exclaimed Silvia. "That's cheating!"

"You shouldn't touch someone else's wand," Leah said. She glared at her brother, as if this particular infraction had come up before.

"Give it back," Rachel Cohen said.

"I'll give it back when she asks me to," Freddy replied. "This'll teach her not to be so arrogant."

Rachel Ing laughed. "Arrogant? You should talk."

"How can she ask you with her mouth gagged?" asked Silvia.

"Just blink twice for 'Uncle'," Freddy said.

They were all arguing. Alexandra closed her eyes and ignored them. She'd left the basswood wand in her backpack, but no one knew about the yew wand in her other pocket.

Helen said, "I don't like this. Let her go."

"Let her let herself go," said Pete.

"I'm going to get Madam Erdglass," Helen said.

"Don't be a snitch," said Freddy.

The counterspell was simple, but the contested wand still challenged Alexandra every time she tried to call upon magic through its core. She wordlessly fought to master it.

"This is bullying," Rachel Cohen said.

"How is it bullying?" Freddy asked. "This was her idea! She told me not to untie her."

"Just because someone does something on a dare doesn't make it right," said Rachel.

"Is that what your rabbi told you?" Freddy asked. "What does he say about you being a witch?"

"Leave her alone, Freddy," said the other Rachel.

The ropes around Alexandra burst into flames. The girls shrieked. Alexandra squirmed and tried to refocus her counterspell through the obstinate yew wand. With a sulfurous flash, the ropes flew off of her, trailing smoke. She flung her arm outward, and the flames wrapping around her rolled down her arm and became a fireball in the palm of her hand. She grimaced as the heat burned her skin. She flung the fireball away from the others; it splashed against a far wall and left a black charred mark.

Alexandra rose to her feet, shaking her hand, eyes fixed on Freddy. His eyes darted from her wand, still in his hand, to her. Alexandra thought about all the ways to make an example out of him. Helen and Rachel Cohen had the wide-eyed look of children who knew someone was about to get in trouble. Silvia put her hands over her mouth.

Alexandra held out her hand. "Give. Me. My. Wand."

Freddy handed it to her. The smugness drained out of his face.

Alexandra said, "Don't ever take my wand again."

"Okay." Freddy swallowed, too rattled to attempt a suave comeback.

To everyone's surprise, Madam Erdglass appeared in the doorway.

"What in Merlin's name is going on here?" she asked.

The students all exchanged looks. Helen looked like she was about to say something. Jamal spoke up first and said, "We're practicing Light Spells."

Madam Erdglass didn't turn her head, though the black mark Alexandra's fireball had left on the wall was clearly visible, and everyone could still smell smoke.

The remains of the ropes that were still lying on the floor burst into flames again. Everyone jumped. In seconds, they disintegrated into dust.

"Clean this up," Madam Erdglass said. She turned and shuffled away.

"Scaaary," said Leah. It wasn't clear if she was talking about Madam Erdglass or Alexandra.



## **\*Chapter 27\*: You Can't Join the Resistance Without**

They gathered in the lunch room again the next day.

"Are you sure we should be doing this?" Rachel Cohen asked nervously. She studied the row of padlocks Alexandra had arranged on the table, then checked over her shoulder in the direction of Madam Erdglass's office.

"The Trace Office can't even see what we're doing here," Alexandra said.

"How do you know that?" Freddy asked.

Alexandra smiled. Freddy's mouth pursed but he didn't say anything else.

The collection of locks was nothing that would challenge a student at Charmbridge, but Alexandra suspected that Penny was right — the Department of Magical Education didn't want them to learn anything useful.

"I saw Unlocking Charms in our book," said Roger. "But Madam Erdglass said we won't be ready to practice them until next semester."

"That's stupid," Alexandra said. "Anyone with a wand can learn basic Unlocking Charms in a day. Heck, I was doing it with doggerel verse — er, spontaneous magic — before I even went to Charmbridge."

Freddy said, "I know Unlocking Charms. You keep forgetting I went to a Big Four school too." He tilted his wand forward to point it at an old padlock, and said, "*Alohomora!*" The padlock popped open.

Alexandra leveled her wand and swept her arm over the entire table, without saying anything. All the remaining locks popped open.

"Now you're just showing off," Freddy said, while the others goggled at the locks.

"Since you're so great, Freddy, I'll give you a challenge." Alexandra cast a Locking Charm on the padlock Freddy had just opened; it snapped shut. "Everyone else, choose a lock and open it."

Everyone went to work. Freddy, Pete, and Rachel Ing all knew the basic incantation and wand movements for an Unlocking Charm, as did Penny and Helen. Only Pete opened his on the first try. Rachel Ing opened hers on the second. Penny was the only other person to open her lock, after some struggling.

Freddy's lock refused to open. He glared at her. "You cheated."

Alexandra touched his lock with her wand, wordlessly. It popped open.

"You can only counter a Locking Charm if you're better than the witch or wizard who cast it," she said.

"Fine!" Freddy snapped. "You're like the greatest witch ever."

"I'm not the greatest witch ever," Alexandra said, meeting his resentful glare with an arrogance to match his. "I'm just better than you. Everyone at Charmbridge is better than you. Madam Erdglass is teaching us 'A-B-C's. Locking and Unlocking Charms and minor transfigurations. By-the-book spells and one-brew potions and basic charms. Only what whoever designed this curriculum thinks we should learn. But magic can do so much more. It isn't like those spell lists in your game books, Roger."

The sixth grader reddened and closed the book he'd been consulting, a wizardly grimoire for a game about slaying trolls and dragons and taking their treasure. "So how do we level up?" he asked.

"How do you 'level up' in history or math?" Alexandra scanned her audience. Freddy was sullenly attentive. Rachel Ing and Pete tried to maintain an air of superiority, but they couldn't hide their interest, even if it did mean taking instruction from a sophomore.

"You want to get better at magic, you have to practice," Alexandra told them. "You have to play with it. You can't just follow things from your book by rote, you have to mess around." *Like we did at Charmbridge.* She had never properly valued her education at Charmbridge Academy, not realizing how superior it was.

"We'll get in trouble," said Rachel Cohen.

"You can't join the resistance without breaking rules!" said Roger.

Rachel frowned at him.

"We're not going to break any rules," Alexandra said. "We're just going to practice outside of class. If you don't want to, go eat your lunch."

Rachel sniffed.

"Does this mean you're going to tutor us?" asked Helen.

Alexandra surveyed the faces of the day-school students in front of her. The younger ones — Silvia, Jamal, Roger, Chris, Rachel Cohen, and the Dennings — were possibly as talented and full of potential as she'd been when she first went to Charmbridge. The older teens, Freddy and Pete and Rachel Ing, all regarded her with mingled disdain and admiration. Helen radiated hopefulness. Behind her, Penny was a sullen shadow.

"Yeah," Alexandra said. "I'll be your tutor, Helen. And you other losers too, if you'll listen to me."

"Cool! We're joining the resistance!" said Chris.

Helen beamed and clapped her hands. The younger kids grinned, except Penny, who snorted, and Rachel Cohen, whose serious expression

never changed. Rachel Ing and Pete exchanged glances, then Pete grinned and raised a pair of fingers in a "V" symbol.

*What am I doing?* Alexandra thought.

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Madam Erdglass waited longer than usual before dismissing them for lunch the next day. Alexandra waited, ignoring the tense glances her classmates directed her way. Did the old woman somehow know what she was up to? But what could she do about it? Using magic outside of class was the point of learning magic.

"Next month," said the teacher, "we will have a field trip."

That got everyone's attention.

"We will be going to Chicago to visit the Central Territory Headquarters Building," Madam Erdglass said, "so as to provide you with a thorough understanding of Confederation government and the law."

Her tone was drier than usual. In two gnarled fingers, she held a rolled piece of parchment, the type delivered by an owl.

The younger kids were interested, as was Pete. Freddy folded his arms and adopted a bored expression; much too cool for Central Territory and Chicago. Rachel Ing applied lip gloss while studying her reflection in a hand mirror.

"After lunch we will continue our wand drills," Madam Erdglass said. Several students stifled groans. They slid out of their seats and made their way to the cafeteria, where they waited for Alexandra.

She had no idea how to tutor anyone. She started by practicing the spells she'd learned well: Unlocking and Levitation charms, Summoning spells, lights and glamours, and minor transfigurations. Most of them were at least a little familiar to the older students, but they hadn't had much practice. The younger kids were awed.

Alexandra couldn't always remember how old she'd been when she learned a particular spell. When the younger Rachel objected that Summoning Charms weren't in the sixth graders' book and she found them in *Young Wands*, Year Four, Alexandra shrugged.

"If you want to wait until you're a freshman, stick to Light Spells," she said.

Rachel's smooth forehead creased with disapproval. She wasn't uninterested, nor was she untalented, but learning things randomly and unsystematically, the way Alexandra practiced, seemed to perturb her orderly mind.

Madam Erdglass remained seemingly oblivious as all the students filed out of the class during each break and lunch recess. Even when Jamal conjured a tongue of green flame in class and moved it across his desk, Madam Erdglass told him to put it out, but didn't seem to notice that this wasn't a spell from any of his lessons.

Alexandra wrote to her friends and told them what she was doing. They wrote back that they were proud of her. Anna sent notes from her classes, but it was a letter from David that turned Alexandra moody and thoughtful.

*"So guess which Old Colonial asshole is going to represent Charmbridge at the Central Territory Dueling Championship next month? Naturally, your old buddy Larry 'Six-Fingers' Albo."*

Alexandra winced and read on.

*"Whoever wins the Championship gets to represent Central Territory at the Junior Wizarding Decathlon. Any chance you can make it to Chicago and whup him, Alex?"*

She checked the dates. The Pruett School's field trip to Chicago would in fact be taking place during the Championship. Then she looked up the rules for the Championship. Every school in Central Territory could send a representative. *Every school!*

Alexandra approached Madam Erdglass the next day in her office during lunch. The teacher, after hearing Alexandra's pitch, sat still for many long moments, which was what she had come to expect from the old woman.

"Dueling is not part of our curriculum," Madam Erdglass said finally.

"Why not?" Alexandra demanded. "Is it because day school students aren't expected to actually be part of the wizarding world?"

Madam Erdglass was unruffled. "Is that what you think magic is for, Miss Quick? Fighting duels? That's certainly not what we teach day school students."

"Of course not! Everyone knows day school students aren't taught magic like students at a real school!"

This outburst provoked no change in the old woman's flat expression and opaque, half-closed eyes.

Alexandra attempted a more placating tone. "We could do it before or after school."

"I can't have students getting hurt," Madam Erdglass said.

"No one will get hurt," Alexandra said.

For a moment the teacher seemed to either be thinking it over or nodding off. Then she said, "Is that what you told Dean Grimm?"

Alexandra stepped back as if from a slap. She stared at the ancient witch, then turned and stalked out of the room.

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Every lunch period became extracurricular magic practice for the Pruett School students. Alexandra began arriving a little earlier in the morning, when Helen, Rachel Cohen, and Roger came through the Floo from Chicago. The four of them sat in one of the open classrooms. Alexandra

checked Helen's homework, then made all three of the younger students practice simple charms and transfigurations. After two weeks, even Helen was beginning to manage a couple of spells that Madam Erdglass hadn't taught in class.

During lunch, Peter and Rachel Ing barely paid Alexandra more attention than they did Madam Erdglass. But Freddy, without dropping his grudging, superior attitude, followed everything Alexandra did closely.

"When are you going to teach us how to duel?" asked Chris one day. "I heard that real wizards can duel! With hexes and curses and death spells and everything!"

"Yeah, that would be awesome," said Jamal. "But she can't teach us that stuff."

They were practicing moving furniture around the room. Alexandra was the only one who could make the chairs and tables actually walk, though Penny, Freddy, and both Rachels had proven surprisingly strong when it came to pushing. Alexandra froze a wooden chair back into straight-legged immobility with a flick of her wand and eyed Jamal. "What makes you say that?"

Jamal rolled his eyes. "Like a girl knows how to duel."

Alexandra tapped the end of her wand on the table in front of her. It lunged at him.

Jamal backed away from the table. "Okay, I know you're good at Charms 'cause you went to a fancy school. But you ain't no Harry Potter!"

Alexandra laughed. "Where did you even hear of him?" Madam Erdglass's lessons in wizard history, taken from the *Young Wands* teaching series, barely mentioned the wizarding world outside the Confederation at any grade level.

"He's a great wizard and he defeated a Dark Lord when he was just a kid," said Jamal. "But that was another country where they have dangerous wizards and monsters and stuff. All our magic is stupid — turning straw into needles or making furniture dance."

Leah and Taylor nodded. "When we found out we were wizards, we thought we'd have adventures and go to magical places and meet all kinds of fantastic people. But this school is boring."

Alexandra's brow furrowed and her face darkened. The others blanched as the table she was resting her wand on began to smolder.

"Okay, fine," she said, "I'll teach you how to duel. But stop talking about death spells." She fixed her gaze on Chris. He swallowed and nodded.

The rest of that lunch period was spent practicing Stinging Jinxes. The next day, the younger students were throwing them at each other before and occasionally during class. Madam Erdglass looked up, twice, as Jamal or Chris or Taylor yelped or sat up straighter. Stinging sparks of light shot around the room when the teacher's eyes were closed or her head tilted toward her desk or her view was blocked by a book.

The hijinks continued during lunch. None of the sixth graders could cast a jinx strong enough to deliver more than a mild sting, but they practiced throwing them gleefully, until Jamal stung Pete. The senior advanced on him like an angry giant and threatened to shove the smaller boy up the Floo.

As Jamal scrambled away from him, Alexandra said, "That's enough!" and Summoned all the combatants' wands, yanking them out of their hands and pulling them through the air into her fist with an incantation and one sweep of her own wand.

"WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?" bellowed a nauseatingly familiar voice.

Everyone in the room jumped and spun toward the door, which was now blocked by the enormous robed girth of Franklin Percival Brown.

The thirteen students of the Pruett School exchanged glances, looked sheepishly away, or just stared at the impossibly broad, bearded man, whose face was already as red as Alexandra remembered from her appeals hearing.

Mr. Brown pointed a finger at Alexandra. "I might have known! A person would have to be a fool — a damned fool, I say, and I say it even before an audience of children — not to expect this very sort of behavior from the likes of you!"

"I'm sorry?" Alexandra said, with an icy, unapologetic tone.

"Return those wands to their rightful owners!" Mr. Brown shouted. "Immediately! Or I will have you charged with wand-theft!"

"Excuse me, sir," said Rachel Cohen, "but Alexandra didn't steal anyone's wands. She just took them away because they were using them to hex people."

Everyone looked away and stifled groans.

"Merlin's ghost! You ill-bred pagans were hexing each other?" Mr. Brown spoke the word "hexing" as if it had some secondary, obscene meaning.

"We were just practicing," said Chris. "We need to learn how to duel."

Even Silvia put a hand over her face at this. Freddy hung his head and shook it.

"Duel?" bellowed Mr. Brown. "*Duel?! You are here to learn proper magic and how to conduct yourselves as marginally less dangerous members of society despite your breeding. Dueling is not a part of that curriculum — I saw to that myself and I am sure that Madam Erdglass has not done anything so irresponsible as to teach day school students from outside proper wizarding society to cast hexes!*" His baleful gaze once again settled on Alexandra. "I would be shocked, shocked to the bottom of my soul, if Alexandra Quick is not behind this!" He made Alexandra's name sound even dirtier than "hexes."

"Hey, mister," said Pete. "What exactly do you mean by 'proper wizarding society'?"

"Or 'breeding'?" muttered Rachel Ing, not looking directly at Mr. Brown.

"He means Mudbloods," said Penny, just loud enough for the word to carry.

Helen and Leah gasped. Silvia and Taylor's mouths dropped open.

"What's a Mudblood?" asked Jamal, eyes narrowed.

"It's you," said Penny. "And me, and everyone else here except Alexandra and Xanthy-poo."

Helen blinked and looked at Penny with a puzzled frown. Alexandra watched with alarm as dark purple rage rolled up Mr. Brown's neck and across his face in response to the kids' defiance. His fists trembled.

Alexandra stepped in front of him. "You're right," she said. "I taught them Stinging Jinxes. I undermined your curriculum because it stinks. And I took their wands, too." She held up the fistful of wands.

She wondered if the man would actually strike her. He looked like he wanted to. He took in a great, snarling breath that made him swell even larger as he stepped within reach. This close, his massive bulk was formidable. Alexandra didn't back away. She was prepared for whatever he had in mind, unless he went completely mad.

He reached out and closed his large fingers around her wrist. It didn't actually hurt — his grasp was surprisingly limp — but his mass made it impossible for her to pull away.

"Give me those!" he said in the same loud, outraged voice.

Alexandra hesitated, then loosened her grip and allowed him to take the wands from her.

"Yours, too," he said.

"Excuse me?" Alexandra said.

Mr. Brown shook her wrist, jerking her arm and shoulder back and forth. "Do not attempt to play games with me, Miss Quick! I do not think your powers of comprehension are as lacking as your sense or decency! Give! Me! Your! Wand!"

Alexandra considered telling Mr. Brown where he could put the wands. But with a glower, she handed over the hickory wand in her hand.

"Oh, Franklin," said Madam Erdglass, appearing in the doorway. Alexandra wondered how it had taken her this long to hear Mr. Brown's bellowing. "What brings you here?"

"Madam Erdglass, you really must keep a closer eye on what these students of yours are getting themselves up to when your back is turned," Mr. Brown said. "I found them hexing each other like unschooled pagans! They openly admit to practicing magic outside their curriculum, right under your very nose!" He shook the wands clenched in his fist for emphasis.

"Really," said Madam Erdglass. "Dear me."

"I'm not a pagan," Rachel Cohen said suddenly, lips trembling. She seemed about to cry, but she spoke with determination. "I'm Jewish."

Mr. Brown's eyes bulged.

"Franklin, you haven't told me why you're here," Madam Erdglass said.

Mr. Brown cleared his throat. "I came to inspect the school and to ensure that standards are being met and regulations strictly adhered to. I'm sorry to say that I find myself grievously disappointed in your laxity, Madam Erdglass. Something must be done about these children waving their wands about without the least understanding of what they're doing."

"How about teaching them?" Alexandra said.

Mr. Brown's face began to mottle scarlet again. Madam Erdglass turned her opaque, sleepy eyes in Alexandra's direction for a moment, then said, "Yes, yes, I'll see to it, Franklin."

Mr. Brown shook his head. "That will not be satisfactory, Madam Erdglass. Clearly allowing these students to possess wands in an unsupervised environment is dangerous. I believe wand controls are necessary."

Madam Erdglass's face wrinkled impressively. "What sort of controls?"

"Wand-locks," Mr. Brown said. "And they shouldn't be allowed to take their wands out of this building. They can store them before they leave each day and retrieve them when they arrive for class —"

The students erupted in indignation. Pete clenched his fists and Rachel Ing went white with anger. Mr. Brown's face turned an even deeper red, but Madam Erdglass spoke first.

"Franklin," she said mildly, "we can't take all their wands without a good reason. Collective wand seizures, especially of Muggle-borns, looks very bad in the papers."

"Then I will charge them!" he said. "Every student who cast a hex is guilty of magical assault!"

"For hexing?" Alexandra exclaimed. "You'd have to charge every single student at Charmbridge Academy!"

"Listen to this sorceress!" bellowed Mr. Brown. "Do you see what a contemptuous creature she is? She flaunts every law like the shameless, uncivilized Bellatrix she is! She's already corrupting other juveniles with her wickedness! If this isn't the illegitimate spawn of a Dark wizard showing her true nature, may I be thrice-cursed by morning!"

For once, Alexandra was too outraged to say anything, but her own face was beginning to turn as red as Mr. Brown's.

"Whoa," said Pete. "Excuse me, mister, but even if we were breaking the rules, I don't think you get to talk to us like that."

Mr. Brown didn't advance on Pete as he had on Alexandra, but his face rippled with fury and he brandished the wands clutched in his hand. "Young man, the Confederation, the Department of Magical Education, and Franklin Percival Brown, III, will not be mocked! I am going to have each and every one of you —"

"Franklin," said Madam Erdglass, "confiscating Miss Quick's wand seems adequate. Charging her with magical assault would require an awful lot of paperwork."

Mr. Brown looked at the elderly witch, face twitching, and seemed to be debating with himself. He was obviously prepared to keep bellowing threats, but Madam Erdglass's sleepy imperturbability seemed to have a calming effect on him.

He turned on Alexandra with a snarl. "You will turn over your wand every day at the end of class to Madam Erdglass."

"Whatever," Alexandra said.

"YOU SPEAK RESPECTFULLY TO ME!" Mr. Brown bellowed.

"Whatever, *sir*," Alexandra said. With one hand behind her back, she made a finger gesture visible to those standing behind her. Silvia gasped, and Leah and Taylor giggled.

Mr. Brown's eyes flickered their way, then turned back on Alexandra suspiciously. She stared him down wordlessly, until he turned and said, "Madam Erdglass, I need to discuss certain matters with you, and inspect the students' records."

Madam Erdglass made a tiny movement like a shrug, and shuffled back toward her office without speaking. Mr. Brown followed, filling the hallway behind her.

For the rest of the day, Mr. Brown sat in the office Madam Erdglass usually occupied while the instructor presided over the students. Occasionally he would stomp over to the door of the classroom and glare at them, as if expecting to find them committing lewd and immoral acts. Then he scribbled in a small notebook.

At the end of the day, as the students from Chicago lined up to step back into the furnace and the others filed outside to wait for the bus, Alexandra strolled casually to the door with the rest of them, but was brought to a halt by Mr. Brown's angry roar: "MISS QUICK!"

She stopped and sighed. She shrugged at her fellow students, then turned and walked back up the corridor to where Mr. Brown waited, with Madam Erdglass at his elbow.

He held out a hand. "Your wand!"

"I thought I'm supposed to give it to Madam Erdglass," she said. "Sir."

His eyes bulged. Madam Erdglass opened her own hand. "Let's not trifle here, Miss Quick."

Alexandra placed the basswood wand in Madam Erdglass's hand.

Mr. Brown said, "I will personally observe your securing of this witch's wand, if you don't mind, Madam Erdglass. I do not mean to suggest that I have anything but full confidence in you —"

"My Anti-Theft Charms are quite adequate," Madam Erdglass said.

"Certainly, madam," said Mr. Brown. "However —"

"And Goody Pruett will keep her eyes on the room where it's stored," Madam Erdglass said. "Would you like to question her reliability?" Without waiting for an answer, she shuffled toward the stairs, with Alexandra's wand dangling loosely in her hand. "Come along, Franklin. I'll show you where we put things off-limits to students."

Mr. Brown, harrumphing and hawing, followed Madam Erdglass up the stairs. Neither looked back at Alexandra.

Alexandra stood in the empty hallway outside Madam Erdglass's office, feeling smug about the hickory and yew wands still in her pocket but also annoyed and aggrieved on principle. Madam Erdglass and Mr. Brown had dismissed her without so much as a word — they'd taken her wand, treated her like a criminal, and assumed her powerless and subject to whatever authoritarian whims they felt like inflicting.

And they'd left the door to the office open. On the desk inside sat the little notebook Mr. Brown had been carrying around.

It was probably some boring records book, or maybe just where the big bully wrote nasty notes about kids he hated, Alexandra thought. But the temptation to take a look, just because she could and because she knew it would piss him off, and because the two adults had been stupid enough to leave her unsupervised after telling her she was too untrustworthy and dangerous to leave unsupervised, was overwhelming.

She crossed the threshold before it even occurred to her that it might be a trap. *Stupid!* She looked around, opening her eyes with Witch's Sight, but saw no alarms, no wards, nothing suggesting that Madam Erdglass was so foresightful, or paranoid.

Alexandra drew her hickory wand and cast a spell for finding wards, locks, and Bars. No tell-tale green fire glowed, though she knew a skilled witch's wards wouldn't be revealed so easily. She wasn't sure whether Madam Erdglass was in that category.

The notebook was old and stained. She considered setting it on fire, or perhaps using a slime spell, or covering it with biting insects. With more time she could even make the insects burst out of it when opened — that was a trick she'd been wanting to try, even if she'd only worked it out in theory. But she told herself not to be more stupid. She should get out of here as quickly as she could, without leaving traces.

She opened the cover and flipped through the pages. Each one contained a list of names, dates, and grade levels. Some names were written in black, some in red, and a handful in blue. The earliest names were from several years ago. The last non-blank page was nearly halfway through the book. On it, Alexandra read:

*Lila Hill — 3/24/2000. Grade 6.*

*Forrest Fleming — 5/23/2000. Grade 6.*  
*Roger Darby — 7/12/2000. Grade 6.*

All three names were written in black.

She was not sure what to make of this. What was Mr. Brown's interest in Roger, the nerdy Muggle-born boy from Chicago who had shown up the first day of class wearing a tie? Who were Lila Hill and Forrest Fleming — students at another day school, perhaps? Mr. Brown couldn't be harassing only the Pruett School's students.

Stuck between the pages was a small, stiff, discolored business card. It resembled the card Diana Grimm had once given her. Alexandra took it out and examined it. Franklin Percival Brown, III's name was stenciled below the Seal of the Confederation, which caught her eye, being much brighter than the card on which it was printed.

In much smaller letters below Brown's name was printed: "Accounting Office."

Mr. Brown's vibrating tenor, drowning out whatever Madam Erdglass was saying, grew louder as the two of them descended back down the stairs. Alexandra hesitated, then tucked the card in her pocket and hurried out of the office. By the time she got outside, the bus had come and all the other students were gone.

## **\*Chapter 28\*: The Accounting Office**

In the last week of October, as they were preparing for the Halloween festivities that the wizarding world celebrated with as much pageantry and spectacle as Muggles celebrated Christmas, Roger Darby failed to arrive one morning. Neither Helen nor Rachel had seen him at the Floo stop when they left Chicago.

When he didn't show up the next day, or the day after that, everyone assumed he was sick.

Except, Alexandra thought, wizards didn't get sick. At least, hardly ever.

When Roger didn't return by the end of the week, she asked Madam Erdglass about him.

"I haven't received a note," Madam Erdglass said.

"Don't you even ask when a student doesn't show up to class for a week?" Alexandra demanded.

Madam Erdglass said, "I submit a weekly attendance report. The Department of Magical Education will investigate any Muggle-borns who aren't attending day school."

"To take away his wand, you mean?"

Madam Erdglass's face was a blank mask, as if she didn't understand the question, or why Alexandra would be concerned about it.

Everyone else seemed indifferent to Roger's absence, but to Alexandra, the boy's disappearance seemed like a dark portent, and it made her feel a little sick. It was too much like Bonnie's disappearance all over again, except she didn't think that Roger had run away. She remembered his name on Mr. Brown's list and watched Madam Erdglass with cold suspicion, wondering how much the old woman knew.

She didn't know exactly where Roger lived, only that he was from the Chicago area. She asked Rachel and Helen, but both girls shrugged. They only ever met him in the morning at the Floo station.

That evening, she looked up every Darby in Chicago. There were a lot. She started calling them, one by one, but of those who answered, none had an eleven-year-old son named Roger. She did speak to a Professor Roger Darby who was quite irate with her. He believed her to be one of his students until she explained that she was in tenth grade and not a student at the Moody Bible Institute, whereupon he hung up. Another Roger Darby was bemused at being called by a teenage girl. She hung up on him when he asked what she was wearing. After two hours, she hadn't gotten through half the Darbys on the list, and those were just the ones who lived in the city of Chicago, not the greater metropolitan area. She wasn't going to find him this way.

She wondered if an owl would find him. That hadn't worked with Bonnie, but Roger was a wizard. She also wondered if she was unnecessarily imagining dire significance in Roger's absence when there might be some entirely mundane reason. Was she just determined to find Roger because she hadn't been able to find Bonnie? But whether or not something had happened to him, she meant to find out why he and Lila Hill and Forrest Fleming were written in Mr. Brown's notebook.

The following week they would be going to Chicago, and visiting the Territorial Headquarters Building. Years earlier, Alexandra had snuck off to the Census Office during a sixth grade field trip to the same building, and started to unravel the secrets of her parentage. Could she do the same thing again, and discover what happened to Roger by finding the Accounting Office?

She could already hear her friends scolding her about taking risks and getting into trouble. But she knew something was wrong here, and she intended to find out what.

*I'll have a plan this time, she told herself. And maybe I'll even have a little help.*

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"I don't know," Pete said dubiously. "This seems awfully sketchy. Especially asking Helen to steal from her old man's shop for you."

Instead of drilling them on spells and dueling techniques that morning, Alexandra had gathered everyone around her in the Pruett School cafeteria and told them about Mr. Brown's notebook, with Roger's name written in it.

This had proved less convincing than she'd hoped.

"I'm not asking her to steal anything!" Alexandra said hastily, as Helen's face clouded over with anxiety. "I'm going to pay." She smiled reassuringly at Helen. "I just need you to buy them secretly."

Helen's involvement was, in fact, the weak part of her plan, but she was hoping the girl could manage to acquire what she needed, in the week they had left.

Helen nodded slowly, but still looked worried. "I'll help you, Alexandra. But I don't know where Papa keeps Polyjuice and Hasten Potions."

"Don't worry. I'm sure you can find them." Alexandra patted Helen's hand, ignoring the disapproving stares she got from some of the other kids.

"Hasten Potions? Those take a year off your life!" Freddy said.

"No they don't," Alexandra said. "That's just a rumor." She didn't actually know if this was true.

"Aren't you just going to get yourself in trouble again?" Rachel Ing asked.

"If I get in trouble, it'll be on me," Alexandra said. "All I need you to do is give me a chance to get away."

"And get ourselves in trouble," Silvia said.

"How can you get in trouble?" Alexandra asked. "All you have to do is say nothing."

"We can get in trouble for that," Rachel Cohen said.

"You can get in trouble for being a snitch, too," Jamal said.

"What do you mean?" Rachel asked.

"I mean, bad things happen to snitches," Jamal said, slowly wiggling his wand back and forth as if to suggest some horrible curse. Rachel Cohen, who was bigger than Jamal, stuck her lip out defiantly.

Alexandra said, "If I'm wrong, and I get in trouble, I'll swear none of you knew anything. But if it was you who disappeared, you'd want someone to care, wouldn't you?"

"You don't know he's disappeared, Alexandra," said the older Rachel. "All you know is he's dropped out of school. It happens. Maybe he moved. Maybe his parents decided they don't like the wizarding world. Maybe —"

"Maybe he just stopped coming to class one day, without saying a word to anyone, and it's purely a coincidence that his name was on a list carried by a Confederation goon who hates Muggle-borns and wants the school shut down," Alexandra said. "And maybe you're just afraid to find out."

"You're crazy," Freddy said. "You're just a sophomore. Let's say there is some sinister reason for Roger disappearing. What do you think you can do about it?"

"Maybe nothing," Alexandra replied. "But all you have to do is let me slip away when we're at the Territorial Headquarters Building."

"You act like you've done this before," Rachel Ing said.

"I have." Alexandra gave them her most convincing smile, the one that had always worked with Brian. "Look, all I'm asking for is your silence."

"And a distraction, and for Helen to steal — sorry, *secretly buy* — restricted potions for you," Freddy said.

Alexandra stopped smiling. "When you disappear," she said, "I hope someone helps me find out what happened to you."

Freddy stared back at her, then looked away. "Man, you are one crazy witch," he said.

Rachel Cohen said, "What if she's not crazy?" She adjusted her glasses. "Sometimes... sometimes you have to break the rules, when things aren't right."

Everyone looked at her, then at Alexandra.

"Welcome to the resistance," Penny said with a smirk.

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Helen brought Alexandra a silvered glass flask four days later. She handed it to her furtively when she arrived in the morning, but there was an unmistakable look of pride on her face.

"I had to be sneaky," she said. "I wasn't sure how. I'm sorry, Alexandra, I could only get Polyjuice Potion. Papa doesn't carry Hasten Potions, because they become inept... inedible..."

"Inert? Ineffective?" Alexandra said.

"Yes, that. They don't keep." Helen chewed her lip anxiously.

Alexandra took the flask and smiled gratefully at Helen. "That's fine, Helen. The Polyjuice Potion is what I really needed. The Hasten Potion would have been useful, but I can do without it. You did great. I knew you could."

Helen beamed.

Now it was Alexandra's turn to be sneaky, but fortunately, Madam Erdglass's office still appeared to be unwarded. Alexandra crept into the office after lunch, while she was supposedly using the restroom.

Mr. Brown had been in here often enough that he'd left physical traces of his presence. Beard follicles, skin flakes, and to Alexandra's disgust, fingernail clippings all swirled through the air when she cast a modified Summoning Charm. The residue gathered on a piece of glass she'd prepared for the purpose, and she pressed another piece of glass over it before hurrying out of the room, feeling a powerful urge to wash her hands.

Brewing the final stage of the potion required undisturbed access to a cauldron. The next morning, Alexandra arrived early, borrowed a cauldron and a jar of lacewings from the Alchemy lab, and crept upstairs.

"Who's there?" demanded Goody Pruett.

Alexandra pointed her wand and said, "*Pictogel*." The spell she had learned at Charmbridge from the Mors Mortis Society froze Goody Pruett in her frame. Alexandra proceeded to the third floor loft.

She'd never brewed Polyjuice Potion, and even the final step was supposed to be difficult and tricky. With the contents of the flask Helen had obtained for her bubbling in the cauldron, and other kids arriving downstairs, Alexandra added the lacewings to the mixture, completed the necessary stirrings and wand gestures, and with a grimace, produced the detritus she'd pressed between two glass plates. She scraped these into the mixture.

"This is going to be so gross," she muttered.



The brew thickened and turned pinkish-white. Bubbles formed on the surface and spattered goo. The potion resembled lard boiled in bacon grease, and smelled like rancid oil and sweat. Alexandra let the cauldron cool and poured its contents into a single bottle. The thought of having to drink the concoction made her gag. She was going to have to get over that before next week.

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On the day of their trip, each student from the Pruett School threw a handful of Floo Powder and declared, "Chicago Floo Stop!" before entering the old boiler. Alexandra wondered how Madam Erdglass meant to chaperone twelve adolescents with wands about Chicago. The old woman hardly seemed able to step into the boiler unassisted.

Alexandra, uncharacteristically dressed only in plain witches' robes and underwear beneath, was the last to enter the Floo before the teacher. She tumbled and spun through space, feeling as if she were about to hit something, before stumbling out into a large chamber in an annex of the Chicago Wizardrail Station. There were square iron Floo furnaces lining the walls on either side of the room, with witches and wizards stepping in and out of them amidst a constant swirl of green smoke.

A bubble of silence surrounded her, despite the commotion all around. The other kids were not talking at all. She saw that Madam Erdglass had somehow preceded her here, but that wasn't the reason everyone was silent.

A misshapen woman loomed over Madam Erdglass like a giant, twisted reflection of the smaller witch, dressed in the same shade of black and purple and wearing a wide-brimmed black hat in the style of a witch, but with a short, rounded peak. The huge nose, protruding teeth, and greenish skin marked Madam Erdglass's companion as something other than a witch, however.

Alexandra stared. All the other kids stared.

Alexandra was the first to speak. "You're a hag."

Rachel Ing said, "Wow, Alexandra. That was pretty rude even for you."

"No, she's really a hag!"

"Yeah, I think we can see that," said Freddy.

"Quite so," said the hag cheerfully. "Your friend is right. My name is Anya, and I have been assigned by the Central Territory Juvenile Welfare Office as your escort."

"I feel like a cow that's been assigned an escort from Burger Barn," Freddy whispered, not very quietly. This was greeted with nervous titters from the other kids. Anya smiled indulgently and folded her hands.

"Young man," she said, "you have obviously been influenced by pernicious lies and half-truths told about my sisters and me. I hope you're aware that Central Territory is a participant in the Confederation Campaign for Awareness of Non-Homo Sapience. 'Jokes' like that are not only offensive and hurtful, but actively harmful to innocent Beings living as peaceful, law-abiding members of wizarding society."

"Are you kidding?" Alexandra said. "Every hag I've ever met wanted to eat me."

"Really? Every one? Wanted to eat a scrawny little girl like you?" Anya's yellow-orange eyes widened. "What a high opinion you must have of your own scrumptiousness. I hope the rest of you will appreciate your visit today to the offices that administer our laws and protect our rights and combat the sort of unthinking bigotry advocated by your ignorant, speciesist friend here."

"What?" Alexandra snorted. "I am not a... a 'speciesist.'"

"*Every hag I've ever met wanted to eat me,*" Anya repeated, mimicking Alexandra's voice with startling accuracy. "What sort of person says that about a Being they've just met?"

"That was kind of a nasty thing to say," Rachel Cohen said.

"How many hags have you met?" asked Jamal. "Like, just standing there on the street they tried to eat you?"

"No, of course not," Alexandra said. "Okay, maybe not every hag literally tried to eat me —"

"Ah," said Anya. "So in fact you have met hags who were minding their own business and did not try to eat you, but you thought it was appropriate to make a figurative statement about every one of us being monsters who devour children."

Alexandra flushed. "Look, I know some of you are supposedly law-abiding. I read the literature from HAGGIS."

"Supposedly," crooned Anya. "Oh, dear. Well, all of you had better keep an eye on one another, just in case someone disappears." Her yellow eyes fixed on Alexandra as she said that. "Also, if anyone takes their wand out or uses any kind of magic, I'll eat you." She bared her teeth and clacked them together. Helen squealed and the youngest kids flinched away.

Throughout this exchange, Madam Erdglass remained silent and unmoving. Now, like a Clockwork suddenly brought to life, she lifted a hand. "Please follow Anya to the Territorial Headquarters Building. Do not fall behind or take any side trips."

As they walked through downtown Chicago, Alexandra stared hard at Anya's back. The hag forged ahead, trailed by the twelve students and Madam Erdglass. Muggles veered out of her way as if avoiding a runaway SUV, but no one gave her a second look. No one registered shock at her approach. They couldn't really see Anya, or what they saw was something mundane, an image charmed to deflect their interest and attention. Which made Alexandra wonder how the hag accomplished this without a wand. Did Anya wear an enchantment that let her walk among Muggles, or had some other witch put a spell on her? And how many hags walked secretly among Muggles?

She was a little stung by Anya's accusations, but not convinced. All right, maybe hags weren't all cannibalistic thugs, loan sharks, and dealers in Dark Arts. Just the ones she'd met. She'd read HAGGIS's pamphlets, and even joined the hags' rights organization last year — albeit mostly as a gesture of spite toward Mrs. Middle, her Wizarding Social Studies teacher at Charmbridge.

She didn't say anything else as they wended their way through the crowded streets. Nor did she dart away on a mission of her own, as she had during previous school trips to Chicago, though she was tempted, just to see if Madam Erdglass, slowly shuffling along at the tail end of their procession, would notice.

Anya stopped in front of the Territorial Headquarters Building and waited while the students gathered around her. Other pedestrians detoured around the group of students, scowling with annoyance at the impediment to sidewalk traffic.

"This is it?" Leah asked. "It looks empty."

"It's got a Muggle-Repelling Charm on it," said Rachel Ing.

"What keeps non-magical people from just walking inside?" asked Chris.

"What part of 'Muggle-Repelling Charm' do you not understand?" Freddy asked the younger boy.

"Now, first we're going to visit the Trace Office," Anya said.

"Those are the jerks who send owls when we try to practice magic at home?" asked Taylor.

"They monitor the use of underage magic in Muggle communities for everyone's protection, wizard and Muggle alike," said Anya.

"Right... that's why purebloods can get away with it but we can't," said Penny. "For everyone's protection."

Anya smiled, then ushered the kids inside. Alexandra trailed behind, with only Madam Erdglass behind her.

It was almost a repeat of her sixth grade field trip. They took the elevator up to the Trace Office on the seventh floor. The woman who greeted them was a middle-aged witch who showed little enthusiasm for being their guide. She led the students around the large chamber where robed clerks peered at crystal balls and scribbled notes on parchment. In the center of the room, wizard technicians adjusted a pair of large, gleaming brass tripods that mounted lenses and carved rods above a ceramic-tiled pool of water, next to a pit with steam rising out of it.

These latter features aroused Alexandra's curiosity, and the other students too began to press forward. But as everyone gathered around the scrying devices that dominated the Trace Office, Alexandra realized that this was her best chance to slip away. Anya's gaze was fixed on the magical equipment, their guide wasn't paying particular attention to any of them, and Madam Erdglass's back was finally to her.

Her absence would be noticed, of course — eventually. But what could they do? Expel her?

Alexandra shuffled behind Pete and Rachel Ing, as if hanging out with the two older teens. Pete looked over his shoulder and winked. In no hurry, and without looking back, Alexandra took three steps toward an unmarked side door and stepped through it.

She paused after closing it behind her. No one called out and she heard no sounds of anyone coming after her. She stood in a hallway decorated only with a series of stark duo-colored posters, animated with minimalist line drawings.

"WHO WATCHES THE WATCHERS WHO WATCH YOU? WE'RE WATCHING ON YOUR BEHALF!" announced a red and white poster with a wide unblinking eye set in a stylized Doric column. The logo at the bottom read: "Office of Magical Over-Sight," with eyes in each of the capital Os. As Alexandra walked past, the eye in the Doric column followed her.

"Creepy," she muttered. The eye did not waver or blink.

A blue and yellow poster reminded Trace Office workers that "Magic and Muggles Don't Mix!" The graphic showed a young, fat, stupid-looking boy with a wand standing amidst the wreckage of a living room with a forlorn expression on his face. As Alexandra paused in front of this poster, a hand weakly pushed its way through the debris that the boy had brought down upon his home. A dead dog lay crushed beneath a gigantic television set of the sort manufactured decades ago.

"Seriously?" she said. This carnage was the implied consequence of allowing Muggle-borns to use magic at home?

The yellow-outlined boy looked at her with sad, slack-jawed incomprehension of what he had wrought.

Knowing she didn't have time to waste studying the Trace Office's "motivational" posters, she hurried down the hallway. If she could just reach the elevators outside without running into anyone else —

She turned the corner into the juncture of corridors emanating from the elevator, and almost ran into Madam Erdglass.

"Why Miss Quick, you seem to be lost," Madam Erdglass said.

Alexandra stopped dead and stared at the old woman in frustration and confusion. How had she gotten out here? The ancient witch stood there as if she'd been dozing on her feet, just waiting for someone to bump into her. But moments ago, she'd been inside the Trace Office with everyone else.

"I had to go to the bathroom," Alexandra said.

"You shouldn't wander off without telling someone," Madam Erdglass said.

"I told Pete and Rachel to let you know."

"Did you?" Madam Erdglass's face shifted beneath her aged skin, a wrinkled echo of amusement.

"Well," Alexandra said, "um, I'll be back."

"Yes. Hurry back," Madam Erdglass said.

Alexandra walked down the hall, now forced to go to the lavatory instead of the elevator. She looked over her shoulder. Madam Erdglass still stood

there, watching her. Unless she was asleep — it was hard to tell.

Alexandra rounded the corner and went to the men's room. She opened the door and peeked inside, waiting for someone to shout at her, but it was empty. She quickly slipped inside and locked herself in one of the stalls, and set the bottle of Polyjuice Potion on the back of the toilet while she cast an Enlarging Spell on her robes and shoes.

Several wizards entered while she sat in the stall, with her now-enormous robes draped over her like a tent, bracing herself to drink the contents of the bottle she held on her lap. She waited until she was alone in the bathroom again, then closed her eyes and with a deep breath, tilted the bottle back and poured the Polyjuice Potion down her throat.

She almost threw it and everything else in her stomach back up. It went down like chunks of half-melted fat, congealing in her mouth and throat and forcing her to swallow repeatedly. Heedless of whether anyone else was in the bathroom, she burst out of the stall and ran to the counter, stumbling in her enormous shoes and almost tripping over the robes that now wrapped around her legs and feet and practically fell off of her before she reached the sink. She thrust her head under a faucet to drink directly from the stream of water and wash down the rest of the potion. Her stomach lurched, rolled, and rebelled. She felt her entire body bloat and turn squishy as nausea seized her and almost forced her to her knees. With the greatest effort of will, she closed her mouth and kept from vomiting only by claspings her hands over her throat.

In the mirror, she watched with horror as her face swelled and seemed to explode. Her entire body bubbled and rippled grotesquely. Her head blew up like a balloon, then took a somewhat more solid form and began sprouting hair all over her neck and jaw and cheeks. Her hair writhed and turned stiff and greasy; her scalp crawled unpleasantly. Her feet grew ten sizes larger. Her arms and legs became enormous things attached to her body like dead weights, and her chest and stomach felt as if lakes of lard had been pumped beneath her skin. Everything jiggled and shook when she moved. For almost a full minute, she staggered comically about, bumping into walls and sinks and feeling sick and disoriented. No one else entered the bathroom, so she wasn't forced to stumble back into a stall, but she would have been completely incapable of speech or coordinated movement.

At last her flesh stopped twitching and rolling, and she was able to take several heavy, ponderous breaths. Air seemed forced by a great bellows in her chest past constricting pipes that constantly threatened to choke it off, and she remained dizzy even when she was able to stand straight and lift her head, and stare into the mirror at the face of Franklin Percival Brown.

"Mr. Brown" looked shabby, disheveled, and unkempt. Her Enlarged robes and shoes fit him poorly. Her Polyjuiced form looked like Mr. Brown had just thrown something on and Apparated to the Territorial Headquarters Building in a panic.

"Miss Quick!" she said, testing her transformed voice. It rumbled out of her an octave lower than she could ever manage naturally. She coughed, and it was a shattering, phlegmatic sound. Her entire body shook and she felt rolls and bumps moving in places she didn't think humans were supposed to have rolls and bumps. The effort of moving at all seemed like a trial; how did Mr. Brown heave himself around all day? She was still unsteady on her feet, and nothing felt normal or moved naturally. Everything was *wrong*.

Two men in formal robes entered. They stopped and stared at Alexandra. For a moment she felt wild-eyed panic at being caught in the wrong restroom. Then she cleared her throat, which almost made her double over.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen," she said, in Mr. Brown's voice. It came out a little bit squeaky.

"Afternoon," said one of them. "Are you lost?"

"NO!" she boomed, causing both of them to flinch. She took another breath. Her body seemed to convulse internally, but as far as she could tell, nothing unnatural happened externally. "I AM ON MY WAY—" She stopped, and tried speaking more softly. "I am on my way to the Accounting Office. I just had to use the mens' room. Because... you know."

The two wizards stared at her.

"Are you all right?" asked the first man.

"OF COURSE I AM ALL RIGHT!" she bellowed. They flinched again, and looked at each other. "Excuse me," she said. "I have in fact not been feeling well. I may have eaten something that disagreed with me at Goody Pruett's. Yes, I am not feeling entirely well. After I conclude my business here, I shall go home. Your concern is duly appreciated. Thank you, gentlemen, and good day!"

She waddled to the door, pushed it open, and stepped outside. There were three people in the hallway, and they all looked at her oddly as she walked in an awkward side-to-side gait, arms swinging clumsily, so they were forced to press themselves against the walls as she squeezed past.

"Excuse me," she said. "Forgive my, uh, size."

She wasn't doing a great job of pretending to be Mr. Brown, but so far no one had challenged her.

When she entered the elevator, she said, "Accounting Office."

"Please identify yourself," said the elevator.

Alexandra said, "I am Franklin Percival Brown, III!"

"Please show your Seal," said the elevator.

"My seal?" Alexandra blinked, then remembered the card. It was difficult to reach into her pocket with those enormous hands, but she fumbled for the business card she'd taken from Mr. Brown's notebook. She held it up, showing the Seal of the Confederation, and the elevator began moving.

The dial went all the way up to the 13th floor before the doors opened, and Alexandra found herself looking down a very dim corridor. She stepped out of the elevator.

There were doors to her right and left, two on each side, and one at the far end of the corridor. None of them were labeled.

The first two she tried were locked. The third was a lavatory. The fourth door opened into a dark storage room. She was about to close the door,

but caught a glimpse of stacked books with shiny gold lettering. Curious, she cast a Light Charm and stuck her head inside.

Three long, metal, multi-level shelves filled the room, one against each wall to the right and left of the door, and one down the center. To the right, Alexandra saw piles of neatly folded dark cloaks and red vests. Sitting on the center shelves were rows of intriguingly heavy, dark, hardwood chests, and there were some glass boxes against the far wall. To the left were stacks of pressed vellum, rolls of parchment, and closest to the door, the stacks of books. Impulsively, Alexandra grabbed one and saw an Auror Authority seal on the cover, and the words, "Field Training Grimoire."

"Whoa," she said. It sounded like a groan, coming from Mr. Brown's throat. *Auror spells!* She bet this would be a lot more useful than her stupid Young Wands textbook.

She realized belatedly that this was exactly the sort of book that might have a Thief's Curse cast on it. She hesitated, then decided that if the book was cursed, she'd probably already triggered it. She dropped it into the voluminous pocket of her oversized robe and shut the door.

She turned to the last two doors just as she heard the elevator chime. Making a quick decision, she stepped to the door at the end of the corridor. She turned the handle and it opened into a neat, brightly-lit office lined with cubicles. Piles of paper sat on every desk, and scrolls and vellum ledgers filled all the shelves Alexandra could see. A pair of house-elves staggered about balancing books on their heads, but unlike many of the other offices in the Territorial Headquarters Building, there were no Clockworks.

She stepped quickly inside and almost tripped over her own feet, which were too large and clumsy. She caught herself by grabbing the doorframe, and wondered how Mr. Brown managed things like running or jumping. Probably he didn't.

She was wondering how to ask whether this was the Accounting Office without seeming too suspicious when a witch in robes that looked more like a tunic approached her. Dark gray and brown, a dull ensemble that seemed to fit in with this clean, dull, orderly place. "Mr. Brown? We weren't expecting you here today."

Alexandra coughed again. She could still taste the Polyjuice Potion and feel the sensation of little globs of fat and slime trickling down her throat. Her stomach burbled. This time it wasn't her imagination: the other witch wrinkled her nose, just a little.

"I am here for some files," she said, staring at the witch and wishing they wore name tags in this place.

The witch blinked rapidly. She was perhaps Livia's age, but her face was more lined, her blonde hair on the verge of gray. "What files, Mr. Brown?"

Alexandra thought she heard a tremor in her voice.

Alexandra gave the names of the three children: Lila Hill, Roger Darby, and Forrest Fleming. "Would you be good enough to fetch them for me?" she asked. "The files, I mean. Forgive me, I'm not feeling well." Her stomach made another, louder noise, and it was echoed in her bowels. She was actually beginning to feel very unwell. She knew that Polyjuice Potion could last anywhere from minutes to hours, and suspected she was running out of time. "I will be leaving immediately once I have taken care of this business."

The witch cleared her throat. "Yes, sir. Wait here." She walked around a corner, still clutching a sheaf of papers to her chest. Only one of the other workers looked up at her, an older wizard with pudgy, drooping cheeks.

A few minutes later, the witch returned. She seemed to have gone a shade paler.

"Those files have been *relocated*," she said, with a peculiar emphasis on the last word.

"Relocated," Alexandra repeated. She made it a statement rather than a question at the last moment.

The witch said nothing. Alexandra tried to think of a way to pry an explanation out of her without blowing her ruse.

"Are you sure they're gone?" she asked. "I really need to see them."

"They've been *relocated*," the witch repeated. "You can try to retrieve them from Storm King Mountain, but — I don't understand why you need them? You — shouldn't you be aware of this?" A crease formed between her brows.

"Indeed," Alexandra said. "I was just verifying. Making sure everything is proper and as expected. There have been some irregularities lately. You know, dealing with Muggle-born children."

The other witch blanched.

"Thank you for your assistance, my dear," Alexandra said. The woman's face twitched in what Alexandra thought was a barely-suppressed expression of disgust. "I shall be going now." A gaseous sound erupted from her, and the other witch couldn't help backing away with a distressed look on her face. "Pardon me!"

Alexandra retreated through the door, closing it behind her. She waited to see if the witch pursued her, but she didn't.

She felt her body roiling and shifting as she took the elevator back to the seventh floor. She barely made it to the mens' room again as flesh seemed to slough off of her, leaving a noxious cloud behind. A man standing at the urinals had his back to her as she staggered into a stall, already mostly transformed back to her normal self, with her oversized robes and shoes once again nearly falling off of her.

It took several minutes before it was safe for her to emerge and creep out of the mens' room, once again in her actual body and with her clothing restored to its proper size. The book she'd taken from the storage closet barely fit in the pocket of her shrunken robes.

*Relocated*, the witch in the Accounting Office had said. The ominous significance of that word was not Alexandra's imagination, she was sure.

*Storm King Mountain*. She didn't know where that was, but she was going to find it. For Roger.

## **\*Chapter 29\*: The Central Territory Dueling Champion**

Alexandra almost ran into her classmates coming out of the Trace Office. Led by Anya, the eleven other Pruett School students were speaking in hushed voices until the hag plodded to a halt to stare at her wayward charge. Behind her, the other kids stopped and grew silent.

"Oh, there you are," said Alexandra. "Rachel told you I was going to the bathroom, right?"

Anya didn't even glance at either Rachel. Her brows lowered ominously and her eyes turned redder.

"You've been straying," she said.

"No, I haven't, honest," Alexandra said. "I just—"

Anya leaned forward and said in a deceptively sweet voice, "I can smell the lies curdling on your tongue." She sniffed, for emphasis.

"That's kind of creepy," Alexandra said, very conscious of the book bulging in her pocket.

Anya seized Alexandra's arm. Her grip was iron, but she didn't squeeze quite hard enough to hurt. Alexandra only resisted for a moment, and considered drawing her wand for a moment more, then just glared at the hag.

Behind all the other kids, Alexandra finally spotted Madam Erdglass's white head. The teacher made her way to the front and said, "Miss Quick... since you're so interested in dueling, I suppose you would like to see the Central Territory Junior Dueling Championship today."

Alexandra stopped struggling against Anya. "Yes, I would."

The other students brightened as well. Even Penny seemed interested.

"Well, stay with Anya. We wouldn't want you wandering anywhere else and getting into trouble." Madam Erdglass walked into the elevator. Anya followed, forcing Alexandra to keep up or be lifted by one arm and dragged along like a doll. The teacher and the hag waited for everyone else to crowd inside, until Alexandra was squeezed between the solid black-clad bulk of the hag and Freddy. The hag smelled like pumpkin spice and Bengay.

"So where'd you go?" Freddy asked in a whisper that was audible to everyone in the elevator.

"The bathroom," Alexandra whispered back, equally audibly.

"That was sure a long bathroom visit," Freddy said.

"Yeah," Alexandra said. "It got pretty messy."

Several of the other kids giggled. Helen watched nervously. Madam Erdglass, squeezed into the back of the elevator, might have been nodding off again. Anya directed the elevator back to the ground floor.

They proceeded across the lobby of the Territorial Headquarters Building and out onto the street. Alexandra's resentment and annoyance grew as Anya maintained her grip on her arm.

"I thought we're going to see the dueling championship," Silvia said.

"So we are," replied Anya.

"But this isn't the way to the wizarding part of Chicago," said Silvia, with great assurance. She fancied herself an expert on the Goblin Market, having been there twice.

"There are several wizarding parts of Chicago," said Anya. "You've only ever seen the part that children and Muggle-borns see."

Alexandra almost stopped at that to stare at the hag, except that Anya continued to drag her along. Anya went on: "We're going to the Quodpot stadium."

"Chicago doesn't have a Quodpot team," said Taylor.

"Chicago sucks," said Jamal.

"You suck!" Helen responded indignantly.

"Tsk," Anya said.

"Why does Chicago have a Quodpot stadium, then?" asked Chris.

"Just because it doesn't host a team doesn't mean it can't host games," Freddie said. "Also, it's Chicago, so it was probably part of some corrupt construction deal."

"My, you're a cynical one," said Anya.

Alexandra, meanwhile, realized that they were walking toward the baseball stadium where her sixth grade class had also gone after their field trip to the Central Territory Headquarters building.

Rachel Cohen realized this also. "That's not a wizard stadium. That's Wrigley Field!"

"So it is," said Anya.

"I thought you said we're going to see the dueling championship," said Alexandra. She couldn't imagine them holding the dueling championship in the middle of the baseball stadium — how many Muggle-Repelling and Obliviation spells would that take?

"So we are," said Anya.

Realizing that Anya enjoyed this condescending game, Alexandra kept her mouth shut until they reached the stadium. As before, none of the Muggles on the street noticed the huge woman with green skin, enormous teeth, and a wart-covered nose. There was no baseball game that day, so when they arrived at a locked gate, Alexandra thought the hag would have to wait for Madam Erdglass to cast a spell to unlock it. Instead, Anya said to Alexandra, "Since you're here, you can let us in. It's been charmed to open with the tap of a wand."

"I see," Alexandra said. "It must be awfully inconvenient, not having one yourself."

Anya's smile didn't waver, but for a moment, Alexandra saw rage burning in those wide, yellowish eyes, and knew she had hit a nerve. Perhaps foolishly, but then, it wasn't as if Anya was going to be her friend anyway.

"Go ahead and open the gate, dear," said Anya, the words coming through a smile that did not extend beyond two rows of teeth locked together.

Alexandra drew her basswood wand and tapped the gate. With a slight metallic ring, like coins jingling together, it flickered and vanished.

Anya moved forward, jerking Alexandra just a little harder than before, and the other students and Madam Erdglass followed.

The tunnel to the ballpark passed by a women's restroom. Anya changed course and pushed open the door, then held it open with one hand while still holding Alexandra with the other.

Helen and Rachel Cohen and Leah filed past, but Leah's twin stopped at the doorway, with Jamal and Chris halting behind him.

"We can't go in there," Taylor said. "That's the girls' room!"

"This is the way to the Quodpot stadium," said Anya.

"In a girls' restroom?" demanded Chris. "Why not a boys' restroom?"

"Then we couldn't use it," said Silvia, annoyed at being unable to enter herself because of the boys blocking the entrance.

Anya made an imperious gesture with her black-nailed hand. "This is not a potty break, children! Now come inside and stop being bratty."

Even Freddy, Pete, and Rachel Ing looked a little cowed as they followed the younger girls and boys into the restroom. Madam Erdglass entered last of all.

With the girls standing around amused and the boys folding their arms and looking uncomfortable, surrounded by sinks and stalls, Anya marched over to the farthest mirror, still dragging Alexandra across the floor with her, and pounded on it. When nothing happened, she turned to Alexandra again.

"How do you normally get around without a wand?" Alexandra asked.

"I manage," Anya said sweetly, and this time Alexandra could feel the bones of her wrist grinding together in Anya's grip.

Alexandra tapped the mirror with her wand. Suddenly all the mirrors — the entire wall on which the mirrors were mounted — turned dark, and then like wisps of smoke, the wall and everything on it dissolved.

They stood at the top of a tier of stone benches that surrounded a stadium at the bottom of a huge, concentric pit. The benches were not full, but several hundred witches and wizards sat on them, particularly at the lower levels. Alexandra recognized Quodpot equipment stacked up at either end of the field, but the grass had been cleared and then chalked with circular runic designs. Above, a black rubbery ceiling loomed over the stadium, lit by long glowing tubes that might have been fluorescent lights except that they sagged, bent, and rippled, like living organisms, or the luminescent digestive tract of some gigantic beast, eviscerated and invisible in the shadows above them.

"There's a Quodpot stadium... *under* Wrigley Field?" exclaimed Rachel Cohen.

"Cool!" said Chris.

They descended the stairs. As Alexandra's eyes adjusted to the dimmer light, she realized there was something vaguely familiar about this place. It was gloomy despite the artificial wizardly illumination, and had an oppressive, brooding air. The stone steps also looked ancient, as if worn smooth by many feet over a period of... how long? When was Wrigley Field built? How old was Chicago? Alexandra wasn't sure, but this Quodpot stadium reminded her of something.

"This place looks like it's missing an Aztec temple," said Freddy.

"There weren't any Aztecs in Illinois," said Penny. Alexandra was surprised to hear the gloomy goth girl speak up, but somehow not surprised that she knew about Aztecs.

The reference made her realize why this place was giving her an uneasy feeling. They might not have actually entered the Lands Below, but it was much like descending into the sub-basements beneath Charmbridge Academy, and she did not think the Generous Ones would be out of place here.

More than that, she now felt something that had not been present beneath the Territorial Headquarters Building: cracks in the world, like the one running through Larkin Mills, and those she'd seen in the Ozarks. They were at the nexus of several of those magical fissures. Alexandra could feel them radiating out into Chicago. Did one run to the Goblin Market? Did they touch the Chicago Wizardrail Station? She didn't remember feeling that when she and Julia had arrived in the station from the Ozarks, but she hadn't been looking for them, either.

There may have been no temples here, but the field at the bottom of the steps resembled an arena, and the dozen young men and women standing before the spectators, could have been gladiators come to die. As the Pruett School students approached, Alexandra saw standard

dueling platforms erected between the runic outlines.

One of the competitors was Larry Albo.

He wore a fine cloak of green so dark it reflected color only where the light fell upon it directly, over emerald and blood red robes. He stood in a relaxed yet staged posture, silver-fingered hand dangling at his side, wand held loosely in the fingers of his other hand, listening to a wizard with an absurdly long black beard and mustache. The wizard was going over the rules of the competition, though all the competitors must have memorized them by now.

"Take your seats," Anya told her charges in a hushed voice. "I believe the duels are just about to start."

She finally let go of Alexandra's wrist, pushing her ahead. She stayed so close Alexandra had to keep moving lest the hag tread on her before she reached an empty spot on the third bench from the top row. She wound up seated between Anya and Freddy. Penny sat down on the other side of Anya. Everyone else arranged themselves successively further from the hag, except for Madam Erdglass, who sat on the bench behind them. Alexandra could practically feel the old witch's eyes on the back of her neck.

Judges and coaches joined the competitors on the field. Ms. Shirtliffe was there, and so was Mr. Grue, which surprised Alexandra since the Alchemy teacher had never been involved in the Dueling Club. Neither of the Charmbridge teachers seemed to notice Alexandra sitting with her day school classmates among the spectators.

"Are they going to have a full wizarding decathlon?" asked Rachel the elder.

"No, they only do duels to qualify," said Freddy.

"What's a full wizarding decathlon?" asked Chris.

"Hush," said Anya.

Alexandra knew the events of the Junior Wizarding Decathlon: Arithmancy, Alchemy, Apparition, Charms, Transfigurations, Divination, Brooms, Beasts, Mysteries, and Dueling. But each school selected its candidate by whatever means it saw fit, and the Territorial Championships selected only the best duelists to go on to the decathlon.

She thought it was dumb to send someone who might be a good duelist but terrible at everything else. She wondered if Larry had practiced all the other events. She doubted he had a fraction of her experience with Beasts and Mysteries.

One of the judges spoke to the spectators in a magically amplified voice, explaining the rules of the competition, which Alexandra mostly knew already from her interest in the Junior Wizarding Decathlon last year. The championship was conducted by simple single-elimination rounds. The first round would reduce the twelve competitors to six, the next to three, then one of the three remaining duelists would be randomly chosen to sit out the next duel and face the winner for the championship. Four rounds to decide who would represent Central Territory at the Confederation Junior Wizarding Decathlon.

Round one, with six duels at once, was the most spectacular. The nearest duel was between two boys, both of whom looked like Old Colonials, possibly Palatines. They conjured fire and lightning in a colorful lightshow that Alexandra recognized as displaying impressive power but almost no control. The way they tried to shock and awe each other was foolish. But she was trying to focus on the duel on the far side of the stadium, between Larry and a skinny witch wearing pants and a faded print blouse. She was probably Muggle-born or half-blooded, since she wasn't wearing traditional robes. Alexandra wondered how she'd made it to the finals, and how Larry would feel being defeated by someone of such obvious Muggle birth.

He wasn't. Larry Stunned her in less than three seconds. Alexandra was disappointed, and yet had the feeling she'd have been more disappointed if Larry had lost.

"I think that tall kid cheated," Jamal said, pointing at another match that had been going on while Alexandra watched Larry.

"How'd he cheat?" asked Chris.

"He couldn't with all those judges watching them," Rachel Cohen said.

Alexandra thought Rachel was probably right, but having managed to slip more than a few unauthorized charms past the eyes of authority figures herself, she watched carefully as the tall kid Jamal referred to, a gangly blond in faded orange and blue robes, took up position across from Larry for his next duel.

The three duels that made up the second round took a few seconds longer. Besides Larry and his opponent, there were two girls and two boys. One of the girls lost to a fat boy who battered against her Shield Charm with a storm of hexes until she grew impatient and tried to counterattack, then was hit by a much more precise curse that struck her exposed hand, turning it orange with inflamed pimples that quickly ran all the way up to her neck and face. She screamed in fury and discomfort, while the victor waved his wand to the hooting acclaim of friends in the stands.

The other girl, a pale witch with dark robes and a traditional pointed hat, defeated her adversary with a Transfiguration, which Alexandra didn't see used in duels very often.

"Eww," said Leah. "Did she turn his clothes into... bacon?"

"Can we learn that spell?" Chris asked.

She'd also turned her opponent into a piglike humanoid. It was injury added to insult; he shook a fist and shouted at her, which came out as a series of squeals. Even one of the judges had a hard time stifling his laughter. The defeated boy hobbled, cloven-footed, off the dueling platform to the healing station where the Transfiguration could be reversed.

Meanwhile, Larry was still exchanging hexes with his opponent, an Old Colonial in long, gold-trimmed black robes. The two of them seemed nearly evenly matched in basic wandwork. Larry had better finesse, Alexandra thought, but his speed was a shade less than the other boy's — she wondered if his silver-fingered hand slowed him down at all.

Then, just like that, he disrupted the timing of their exchange. Larry's opponent had made the mistake of falling into a pattern of hex, counterhex, as if they were taking turns, lured into that pattern by Larry's slight delay in reacting. When Larry broke it, he slipped a jinx right past the other duelist's guard, and before he could deflect it, he was on the ground, breathing heavily. Larry coolly turned away, and scanned the other two victors who would go into the final matches with him.

The fat boy and the girl who'd used the porcine curse on her opponent were all called before the chief referee, who flipped a coin. It stood on its edge. The girl walked a few paces away to sit out the next duel, while Larry faced the fat boy.

"Kind of puts them at a disadvantage, since she only has to win one more duel while her opponent has to win two," observed Pete.

Freddy shrugged. "Wizard rules aren't always fair," he said.

*That's for sure*, Alexandra thought. She heard whispering, and glanced to her right. Anya was leaning toward Penny. Chris was asking Madam Erdglass something, but Alexandra didn't hear if she answered.

The girl sitting out the first final match waved her wand over the stadium floor. A stone seat rose out of the ground. The girl sat on it as if taking her throne.

Before that summer, Alexandra would have been impressed; conjuring that much stone was a difficult feat, let alone shaping it with a single Transfiguration. After her adventures in the Ozarks, however, she knew more about transcending the limits of magic she'd learned in class. Perhaps she hadn't yet learned how to conjure a stone throne from the ground, but she'd made a mountain tremble with a stomp of her foot. What this girl could do, she could do.

Larry and his opponent squared off across the dueling platform nearest the Charmbridge spectators. Larry raised his wand in a sardonic salute, fist clenched near his forehead. His silver hand hung at his side, its fingers slowly curling and uncurling.

The other boy didn't react; he posed motionless, absolutely fixed on Larry's every motion and gesture.

When the referee signaled the start of the match, both remained locked in their starting stances, like statues.

Everyone else watched the duelists, but Alexandra watched their wands. She knew before either of them moved that Larry's opponent was going to break first. The boy's wrist snapped up, and the tip of his wand flicked in Larry's direction.

Larry was ready to deflect the jinx, and then he relied on superior timing — deflect, counterattack, deflect, counterattack — while his opponent, having lost control of the tempo, had more trouble defending than attacking. Larry pressed his small advantage relentlessly, and once again, Alexandra knew the end before it came. A bright yellow bolt flashed from Larry's wand and past the other boy's, striking the bigger boy square in the chest. All his limbs spasmed straight out from his body before he toppled backward. His hand remained clenched around his wand in an unbreakable grip, but he couldn't seem to do anything with it, or even to lift his head once he hit the ground.

"That guy's from Charmbridge, isn't he?" said Freddy. He looked over to Alexandra. "That's where you went, right?"

"Yes," Alexandra said.

"Do you know him?" asked Rachel Ing.

"Yes."

Everyone waited expectantly, but when Alexandra didn't tell them anything more, they turned their attention back to the field.

The girl in the pointed hat stood serenely opposite Larry. Alexandra wondered where she'd gone to school — had the judges said something about homeschooling?

Larry wasn't looking at his opponent. His eyes were on the audience in the stadium, and for a moment his gaze swept over the Pruett School students. Alexandra couldn't tell whether he'd seen or recognized her. Then his attention turned back to the dueling platform. Ms. Shirliffe was on her feet to get a better view of the final duel, while Mr. Grue remained seated, arms folded and hands invisible beneath the overlong sleeves of his dark robes.

Larry had beaten most of his opponents with superior timing, Alexandra realized. He took their measure and disrupted their pattern, but his spells weren't particularly creative. Of course, one of Ms. Shirliffe's first lessons had been that a well-timed Stunning Charm, the first offensive spell most young wizards learned, beat the elaborate and spectacular Earth and Sky Triple-Forked Lightning Spell (the spell every young duelist wanted to learn and few could actually cast) in almost all instances, because simple and fast was better than fancy and late.

The witch who now challenged Larry for the title of Central Territory Junior Dueling Champion had used fancy Transfigurations in most of her duels. If she didn't change her style, Alexandra thought, Larry would flatten her.

"Five pigeons says Miss Pointy Hat wins," said Freddy.

"I'll take that action," said Jamal.

"My money's on the girl," Pete said. "She got to sit out the last duel and study the tall kid."

"What do you think, Alexandra?" asked Rachel Ing. "He's your friend, isn't he?"

"No," Alexandra replied. "I said I know him. I didn't say we were friends."

Larry and his opponent bowed to one another. The judge held his wand out, stepped back out of the line of fire, and dropped his hand.

Larry lashed out with a spinning vortex of fire that swept down his arm and roared through the air. Alexandra was startled to see that he was holding his wand in his silver-fingered off-hand, and it glowed with a yellow-orange aura that seemed to reflect the heat Larry was projecting.

It was a spell just barely legal for dueling — if it caught his opponent unprepared to shield herself, she could be badly burned even if he wasn't



using the full power of the curse. Members of the audience, including many of the Pruett School kids, sucked in startled breaths at such a ferocious spell being used in a duel that was supposed to be merely sporting.

The witch in the pointed hat stood unmoving. Flames licked at a blackened silhouette, tracing her outline in a brilliant corona of fire that didn't touch a hair on her head or one thread of her garments.

"A Flame-Freezing Charm," said Freddy. "Everyone knows that one."

"Can we learn it?" asked Chris.

Freddy was right, Alexandra thought. Larry's impressive attack was easily countered by anyone who knew the right charm, as he should have expected his final opponent would.

Her first few counterattacks were tentative — too tentative. Curses and jinxes which Larry countered easily, and retaliated with glass balls hurled at concussive velocity, boiling green goo that would blister and transform on contact, and a bolt of lightning that made Alexandra narrow her eyes in recognition.

"I want to learn that one, too," said Chris.

"Dayum," said Jamal. "I thought you aren't supposed to hurt each other in these duels?"

Indeed, the referee halted the exchange, and spoke severely to Larry. His opponent had gone entirely on the defensive, deflecting the glass balls and warding the blistering green slime with an effective Shield Charm, but the lightning almost overwhelmed her. She looked a little shaken.

With a warning to Larry, the duel resumed. Alexandra wondered if he'd lost control — his natural bullying tendencies getting the better of him — or if he'd been deliberately trying to intimidate his opponent.

"That was pretty scary," said Leah, apparently thinking along the same lines.

If the witch in the pointed hat was scared, she didn't show it. She continued to cast spells calmly, now throwing hexes to force Larry to defend himself. He wasn't able to regain the dominance of his initial assault, and red flashes of light, starbursts of yellow flame, and bilious green streams from both directions crossed the dueling platform, amidst cheering and roars from the now-excited crowd.

Alexandra remained still, willing herself not to root for either opponent, telling herself she was indifferent to the outcome — but when Larry suddenly struck the girl with a Stunning Charm, anticlimactically and so quickly that she was on her back before anyone realized the duel was over, what Alexandra felt was not indifference but wildly mixed emotions. She could not bring herself to cheer for Larry, but he was representing Charmbridge Academy, which was a source of bittersweet pride.

Larry raised a hand, which curled into a shining silver fist held high in the air, reflecting the hundred magical lights illuminating the stadium. His silver hand dazzled and gleamed. Ms. Shirliffe led the applause, while the referee declared Larry Albo the winner of the Central Territory Junior Dueling Championship, and Central Territory's champion at the Junior Wizarding Decathlon in New Amsterdam in July.

"So he has like eight months to train for the Decathlon," said Taylor.

"He'll be toast," said Freddy. "He may be top dog in flyover country, but when he goes to the Confederation championships, he'll be facing the top students from New Amsterdam, Roanoke, Louisiana, and California."

Pete turned in his seat, with a belligerent expression. "Flyover country, huh? You figure us hicks couldn't possibly produce a real wizard because we're not from Nyew Yawk?" His sentence trailed off in an exaggerated Midwestern drawl.

"Chicago isn't a hick town," said Rachel Cohen.

"Neither is Columbus," said Silvia. "It's the largest city in Ohio!"

Freddy ignored the younger girls and shrugged at Pete. "Ask Alexandra. Charmbridge has a good academic reputation, but duelists and Quodpot teams? They suck."

"I could take you," Alexandra said.

"But you couldn't take him." Freddy pointed down at the field where Larry was shaking hands with his defeated opponents. "And he's going to face the best in the Confederation. Not just from the other Big Four schools, but the best from the smaller academies, from private covens, from home-schooled druids who have their own curriculum. I hear some Cultures have pretty wicked competitors too, like the Majokai and the Travelers."

"Yeah?" said Jamal. "Well pay up the five Pigeons you owe me."

Pete smirked as Freddy handed over the coins, though Pete had lost his own bet as well.

Alexandra, however, was no longer concerned with trying to rebut Freddy. Something else he'd said was of greater interest.

"Cultures can send their own champions?" she asked.

Freddy shrugged. "I think so. They're semi-autonomous, right? Not all of them do. No one from the Indian Territories goes. The weird pagan ones, and the *Old* Colonials, like the Ozarkers and the Plymouth Traditionalists, don't send anyone. Guess they think competing in a decathlon is too modern, or the Confederation is too wicked."

"I'll bet they do," Alexandra said thoughtfully.

She watched Larry strutting about like the king of the world, as if he'd never been in doubt about his victory, as if the champions of Baleswood, Blacksburg, New Amsterdam, and whoever the Majokai and the Radicalists and the Travelers might send against him would be no challenge at all.

*We'll see about that*, she thought, a plan forming in her mind.

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Alexandra found three Storm King Mountains when she got home and searched online. One was in Colorado, one was in Washington, and one sat in the middle of the Hudson River, not far north of New York City — or as wizards called it, New Amsterdam.

She wrote to Anna, and while waiting for a reply, began studying the book she'd stolen from the Territorial Headquarters Building. The Auror Authority's *Field Training Grimoire* contained more spells in fewer pages than any textbook Alexandra had ever seen. Age Lines, Slow Lines, Wards and Alarums, Incarcerous and Body Freezing spells, counter-curses, anti-jinxes, first aid spells, and even instructions for the Patronus Charm! There were pages of offensive spells she'd never seen in wizard-duels. Some she knew already, but most were new. She also realized quickly that they were all very difficult. The Grimoire was just a basic primer, issued as part of Auror training. The introductory text warned against attempting any spells without appropriate instruction and supervision.

"Appropriate instruction and supervision" was something Alexandra knew she wasn't going to get at the Pruett School. She bookmarked a few pages for further study.

Anna's answer came back a few days later, in a letter carried by Jingwei.

*"Storm King Mountain near New Amsterdam is the location of the Confederation's records repository. It's where they keep all the really old and important documents, and probably secret stuff too. What are you up to, Alex?"*

She checked the *Field Training Grimoire*, and found a section on "cryptic communications," which described something like the Editing Ink Charm she and Anna were using to encrypt their letters. The Grimoire's version was far more sophisticated, and included counterspells. Alexandra realized with dismay that the "encryption" she and Anna had been using would be easily reversed by a trained Auror.

She wrote back: *I'm not up to anything. Don't worry, I won't do anything reckless without telling you first.*

She sent Jingwei back to Charmbridge carrying notes to all her friends. She scolded Charlie for hiding while the owl was present, then studied a map of the Confederation.

The disappearance of Roger Darby was a gnawing, unsettling mystery. Whatever Mr. Brown was up to had to be bad. Storm King Mountain, sitting on a bluff in the Hudson River, was where the Accounting Office had relocated the census records of Roger and two other children. Would she find answers there? Would she learn that Lila Hill and Forrest Fleming had disappeared as well? She suspected she would.

She couldn't just visit Storm King Mountain on her own. But the Junior Wizarding Decathlon was in New Amsterdam — just down the river. Unfortunately, she doubted she could talk Livia into sending everyone at the Pruett School there for a week-long field trip.

"Well," she said to Charlie, "I got myself to Dinétah. I'm sure I can get myself to New Amsterdam, somehow."

"Fly, fly," said Charlie.

## **\*Chapter 30\*: Assault**

Alexandra was excited by the spells the Field Training Grimoire offered, but it was very difficult to study from. Since she couldn't show it at school, and she couldn't practice spells at home, its terse and rudimentary instructions were extremely frustrating. The Patronus Charm instructions told her to "clear your mind of all doubt, fear, and despair" and "focus on your happiest memory," but there was no guidance on how to do that. Did Aurors learn how to just feel whatever they wanted to feel? She persisted, in the mornings before class at the Pruett School, but day after day, her "*Expecto Patronum*" failed to produce even a faint wisp of silver.

The week after the field trip to Chicago, Franklin Percival Brown stormed into the Pruett School during their morning Charms lessons.

"You!" he bellowed, pointing at Alexandra.

"Excuse me, Franklin," said Madam Erdglass.

"Madam Erdglass," said Mr. Brown, "your inability to control this witch borders on negligence! Have you any idea what she was up to while on your recent excursion to the Territorial Headquarters Building?"

There was a long silence. Mr. Brown finally gave up on waiting for her to respond.

"She wandered away from your group, didn't she?" He barely suppressed the volume of his voice in Madam Erdglass's calm, half-awake presence.

"I recall she might have," said Madam Erdglass.

"I had to use the bathroom," Alexandra said.

"*Bollocks!* Blazing bollocks by God!" bellowed Brown. "Do you think I am a complete and utter fool? An absolute idiot? A hapless, cretinous simpleton?"

Alexandra silently congratulated herself for exemplary self-control by keeping her mouth shut.

Mr. Brown addressed the class. "I'm here to interrogate all of you about your activities, and Miss Quick's, in Chicago."

"Why don't you just talk to Alexandra if your problem is with her?" Rachel Ing asked. "I don't think it's fair to keep accusing all of us."

"I'm not even sure what he's accusing me of," Alexandra said.

"Sneaking about unsupervised, entering offices that were off limits to the likes of you, illegally assuming my identity, and no doubt pursuing nefarious wickedness you were put up to by your father!" Brown said.

"Assuming your identity?" Freddy looked between Alexandra and Mr. Brown. His expression was a theatrical display of astonishment. "Wow, that must have been some disguise." When his face was turned away from Mr. Brown, he winked at Alexandra.

"My father didn't put me up to anything," Alexandra said, suppressing a grin.

"I will get to the truth of that and uncover whatever scheme you and your sire concocted!" Mr. Brown said. "And all future field trips are canceled!"

"I don't believe we had any scheduled," Madam Erdglass said.

"You are not to leave this town without notifying the Trace Office!" Mr. Brown said, pointing a finger at Alexandra.

Alexandra raised her eyebrows. Did Mr. Brown really have that kind of authority?

"Answer me, girl!" Mr. Brown snarled. "I expect you to say 'Yes, sir!'"

Alexandra sat back in her chair and glared at him. Mr. Brown turned redder and redder. The silence stretched as everyone else in the room watched the two of them.

Finally, Madam Erdglass said, "Was there anything else, Franklin?"

"Yes," said Mr. Brown. "I'm going to speak to each student individually in the office, starting with Miss Quick."

Alexandra shrugged and rose to her feet. "If I don't return, remember what I told you," she said.

Mr. Brown's red face mottled with splotches of purple. "Enough of your slanderous insinuations, you brazen little brat!"

Alexandra found it amusing how easy he was to push around, except that he also seemed dangerously unstable, and she wasn't sure he wouldn't lose his temper and do something violent. She walked ahead of him out of the classroom and into Madam Erdglass's office, where he slammed the door behind himself.

"Maybe you should leave the door open," Alexandra said. "You know, so there are witnesses."

"Witnesses to what?" Mr. Brown nearly knocked her aside trying to squeeze past her and around the desk.

"Well, who knows what you might do in a closed room?" Alexandra said. "Since I'm the illegitimate spawn of a Dark Wizard, a brat, a sorceress, a Bellatrix, whatever that is, and everything else you've called me, you might decide you can get away with practically anything." She widened her eyes just a little, as if to convey fearfulness, but she suspected even Mr. Brown could detect the sardonic twist at the corners of her mouth.

He fell onto Madam Erdglass's chair so hard that it shivered, and for a moment Alexandra thought he would wind up on the floor. He glowered at her from a face like a stewed tomato with two dark eyes beneath bristly black brows.

"What were you doing on the thirteenth floor?" he demanded. "And where did you get Polyjuice Potion?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Alexandra said.

Mr. Brown slammed a fist on the desk in front of him. "You think you can get away with anything you like, don't you? You think you can be disrespectful, disobedient, and deceitful and no one can do anything about it, don't you?"

Alexandra met his seething glower with a flat, cold stare of her own. "What is the Accounting Office?" she asked. "And how can you be working for them *and* the Department of Magical Education?"

"Keep your nose out of things that don't concern you. If you think being confined to this Muggle burg and having your wand locked up is the most severe discipline I can invoke upon you, insolent, impudent child, you are egregiously mistaken!"

"It does concern me when one of my classmates disappears," Alexandra said. "What happened to Roger Darby? Or Forrest Fleming or Lila Hill?"

Mr. Brown's face drained of much of its color. He slammed both of his palms on the desk, and used the impact to half-launch himself from the chair, rising to his full height with a strained groan that brought the reddish color back to his cheeks and forehead.

Leaning over her from across the desk, he made almost as if to topple over onto Alexandra, and said, "So! You have been poking around into the affairs of others! What did you steal? Who did you bribe, coerce, or seduce into blathering about matters they don't understand and have no business talking about?"

"Maybe it was you," Alexandra said. "Maybe I'll claim you tried to do something inappropriate to me behind closed doors. Just why are you harassing kids while pretending to be some important official? Your grandfather was a *janitor*."

She didn't know where her rage came from — Mr. Brown angered her in a way she hadn't felt since Dean Grimm's first attempts to cow her as a sixth grader. Worse, because even when she hated Ms. Grimm as only an eleven-year-old can hate an adult, long before she'd learned the Dean was her aunt, she had on some level realized that the Dean was acting in what she believed to be her best interests. Mr. Brown, however, was a bully and, she suspected, a monster. She was tired of adults demanding respect and deference while hiding behavior a hundred times worse than anything she'd ever been accused of. She was almost an adult herself. She'd stood toe-to-toe with grown wizards trying to kill her. Being hectored and lectured by some self-important minion of evil bureaucrats had pushed her past her limits.

They'd expelled her, painted a target on her, blackened her name and inked her record in red, taken her wand away and marked her as the Enemy's daughter. What else could they do to her?

"I'm going back to class," she said.

Mr. Brown's mouth had fallen open in disbelief. Now his eyes bulged, and as if in slow motion, his hand rose toward her. She saw it coming, yet couldn't quite believe it was happening — his thick arm swung around and his knuckles clipped her across the side of the head, knocking her off her feet and sending her crashing into the book boxes stacked against the back wall. She lay on the floor, not quite dazed, but quivering in shock and fury.

Mr. Brown stood over her, his face registering equal amounts of shock and fury of his own.

Shakily, Alexandra stood back up, rubbing her face. It was tender. She'd have a bruise. It took all of her self-restraint not to draw her wand. Either wand.

"I'll see you broken, imprisoned, and wandless," Mr. Brown said. His voice quavered a little. Was he worried about getting in trouble? He'd hit a student, but Alexandra doubted the rules would apply equally where she was concerned. Maybe he was realizing that he'd just hit the daughter of Abraham Thorn, the Enemy of the Confederation, who had done terrible things to other men for lesser slights to his daughters. Alexandra enjoyed the thought of Mr. Brown being afraid, but threatening him with retribution would mean admitting that she relied on her father's protection. She didn't want Abraham Thorn to avenge her. She wanted to avenge herself.

"You'll pay for that," she said, and something in her tone made him flinch, then quickly clench his teeth in fury.

"Go back to class," he said. "And send Miss Ing in here."

"Screw you," she hissed, and she ran out the door before he could react.

Slamming the door behind her, she leaned against the wall, pausing in case he stormed after her. He didn't. She took a deep breath and put her hand to her face again.

She didn't know what to do. So she went back to class.

Everyone stared at her when she sat down. Madam Erdglass paused in her lesson, and after a moment, said, "Would you like to go to the lavatory, Miss Quick?"

"No," Alexandra answered quietly. She realized she was trembling, and clenched her fists. Everyone probably thought she was terrified, or on the verge of tears, when in fact she was shaking with rage.

Mr. Brown came to the door of the classroom. "Miss Ing," he said, "I would like to speak to you."

Rachel looked at Alexandra, then at Mr. Brown. "I don't think so," she said.

Mr. Brown's face turned another shade darker. Madam Erdglass cleared her throat. "Let's take a break. Franklin, you and I can chat with Miss Ing together."

The class broke up, and Alexandra retreated to the lunch room with everyone else. Rachel and Pete stood at the front of the room, Pete arguing with Madam Erdglass and Mr. Brown, until finally Rachel made calming gestures, and Pete reluctantly let her go with the two adults.

He stomped into the break room and asked Alexandra, "What did that fat bastard do to you?"

The younger kids gasped. Helen held her breath. Silvia said, "You shouldn't use words like that."

"Shut up, Silvia," Pete said. Silvia's face clouded over.

"Calm down," Alexandra said. "Rachel will be all right. It's just me he hates. Well, actually, he hates everyone. But it's just me he's after."

Pete sat down across from her. Freddy slid onto the bench next to him.

"If he hit you, he should be arrested," Pete said.

"Really? You're going to call the cops on a wizard?" Alexandra asked.

"Even for wizards, it's illegal for adults to hit kids," Freddy said.

"Probably," Alexandra said. "But I'm pretty sure he's not going to hit Rachel. And I'll take care of this myself."

"What do you mean you'll take care of this yourself?" Freddy asked.

Pete said, "We can't let him get away with this."

"He won't get away with it," Alexandra said.

"What are you gonna do, curse him?" Freddy asked. "That's a great plan. What do you think will happen then?"

"You sound too much like my friends," Alexandra said, rubbing her face.

"Aren't we your friends?" Silvia asked. Alexandra looked at the girl in surprise.

Freddy smiled. "Yeah, aren't we?"

Alexandra didn't know what to make of Freddy's apparent sincerity.

"Anyway, nobody should be abused like that," Pete said.

Alexandra said, "I've suffered worse."

Everyone fell silent, with appalled expressions.

"That's not what I meant," Alexandra said.

Penny walked over, face set in a grim little scrunch of tightened features. "He wants to talk to all of us, doesn't he?" she asked.

"He wants to know what you know about what I did while we were in Chicago," Alexandra said. "And you don't know anything."

"I say we need to file a complaint," Pete said.

"You should tell your parents," said Rachel Cohen.

Alexandra sighed. She didn't know how to explain the situation. Sure, she could tell Claudia and Archie — heck, she wasn't even sure what she would tell them when they saw the bruise on her face — and they would want to file a complaint. And who would read that complaint? Did the Department of Magical Education even care when day school students were abused? Maybe they'd use it as an excuse to shut down Livia's school. Maybe Mr. Brown would claim he was defending himself. Alexandra was sure people would believe almost anything about the Enemy's daughter.

She was still in shock, still outraged, and still ready to attack Mr. Brown in a blind fury, which was why she had walked away and didn't want to talk about this now. Why were Pete and Freddy suddenly so concerned? Well, Pete was obviously worried about his girlfriend.

Rachel returned to the break room after five minutes. Pete went over to her immediately, and she smiled and patted him on the arm. Rolling her eyes, she walked into the room and said, "It was no big deal. He just wanted to know what Alexandra was doing in the Territorial Headquarters Building, and if she was doing anything illegal or against the rules here, and if we ever saw her dancing with black goats in the woods."

"Dancing with *what*?" Alexandra exclaimed.

Rachel laughed. "Just kidding." Her face turned serious. "Don't worry. No one's going to tell him anything." She looked around, as if to confirm this with all the younger students, who all nodded their heads.

"Are you all right?" she asked, turning back to Alexandra.

Alexandra nodded.

"He wants to talk to you next," Rachel said to the other Rachel.

Rachel Cohen bit her lip, then straightened her collar and tugged at the long sleeves of her dark jacket before exiting the room.

"Madam Erdglass said the rest of us should keep reading our lessons," Rachel Ing said.

With a few glances at Alexandra, they all returned to their seats in the classroom.

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Alexandra used a Wound Relocating Charm to move the bruise from her face to her back, where Claudia and Archie couldn't see it. She didn't tell them about what had happened at school, nor did she call Livia. She was afraid Claudia and Archie would want to do something; she was afraid

Livia wouldn't.

Mr. Brown returned the next day, and the next. He was there early in the morning, preventing Alexandra and the other students from practicing dueling. He watched Madam Erdglass's class, and interrupted frequently when he saw students whispering or passing notes or not paying sufficient attention. He raised his voice, sometimes to a yell, but did not physically threaten anyone. He lectured them pompously on their behavior and breeding, with words that made Alexandra seethe, brought Silvia and the younger Rachel to tears, and frightened Helen and the Dennings, while the older kids turned slowly more hostile. Penny continued scribbling blackly in her notebook.

Madam Erdglass endured this all with apparent equanimity.

Sometimes Mr. Brown sat in the lunch room while the students ate. He didn't say anything, but scratched notes with a large quill pen. Alexandra stole glances at his book, but it wasn't the same one he'd used to record the names of the disappeared Muggle-borns.

When Alexandra asked the other students about their closed-door meetings with Mr. Brown, they told her that he had grilled them about her, just as he had Rachel Ing — he was certain Alexandra was up to something nefarious, and he wanted to know what.

He tried to flatter Rachel Cohen. He tried to scare Silvia. Chris said he got angry quickly and told him to stop asking questions.

Penny wouldn't speak about her interview with Mr. Brown, but shrugged and turned her back, doodling in her notebook with furious stabs of her marker.

Every day, Mr. Brown returned.

Alexandra waited until the end of the week to try snooping again.

Mr. Brown was upstairs, supposedly making sure students couldn't trespass there. The class was broken up into groups by age level in two different rooms to practice Charms, and Madam Erdglass was in the other room. Alexandra got up from the table and said to Freddy, Pete, and Rachel Ing, "I'll be right back."

"Where are you going?" Freddy asked.

"The bathroom."

Freddy rolled his eyes. Alexandra exited the room, checked to make sure no one else was in the hall, and went quickly to the little office that was now effectively shared by Madam Erdglass and Mr. Brown.

When she opened the door, Penny jumped and spun around.

"What are you doing here?" Alexandra whispered.

"What are you doing here?" Penny whispered back.

Penny had been leaning over a large brown cloak — Mr. Brown's, carelessly draped over the chair behind Madam Erdglass's desk.

"You're supposed to be in the other room," Alexandra said.

"So are you," Penny countered.

Penny was holding a vial of dark reddish liquid in one hand, and a tiny metal ball dangling from a silver chain in the other. The metal ball was perforated with holes, like a spherical sieve. Seeing Alexandra eyeing them, Penny put her hands behind her back.

"What the heck are you doing?" Alexandra asked.

Penny shrugged, but there was an ugly scowl on her face. "Big Boy has been interrogating me all week, calling me a Mudblood, threatening to visit my house and scare the parental units..."

"So you're, what, sprinkling some kind of potion on his cloak?"

Penny curled her lips, but said nothing.

Alexandra tried to reach around the fat girl, but Penny backed away and stared her down with stubborn defiance. Alexandra shook her head and grabbed Mr. Brown's cloak.

"No!" Penny said, her voice too loud.

Alexandra's hand *burned*.

Biting her lip to keep from screaming, Alexandra dropped the cloak and shook her hand. The skin of her palm bubbled, and the pain was nearly the worst she'd ever felt. Her flesh felt as if it were on fire. Horrified, she whipped out her wand with her other hand and tried a counter-curse, then a first aid charm. She knew the recipes for several anti-poison potions, but there wasn't nearly enough time to prepare one, even if she could get all the materials out of the school's storage room.

Her spells barely diminished the agony in her hand, but the bubbling stopped. With tears of pain stinging her eyes, she turned furiously on Penny. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Teaching the fat fuck a lesson," Penny snarled. Her features twisted into something hateful and disturbing, boiling away her usual sullen, taciturn demeanor.

Alexandra gestured at the robe. "What did you think would happen when he puts that on?"

Penny laughed. The laugh died in her throat beneath Alexandra's wrathful stare, but Alexandra thought about the last time she'd heard a laugh like

that, on the lips of John Manuelito.

"You're out of your mind," Alexandra said. "Are you trying to kill him?"

Penny sobered. "I diluted it."

Alexandra held her hand up. "This is diluted? What is it?"

Penny pressed her lips together. Her eyes glittered defiantly.

"Look at my hand," Alexandra said, almost hissing. "Spill it, or else." She pointed her wand at Penny, whose self-assured, maniacal look vanished.

"Hydra blood," Penny whispered fearfully.

It took Alexandra a moment to absorb this. "Hydra blood? That's supposed to be the deadliest poison there is!"

"I said I diluted it. The original solution was just a single drop in a whole bottle of oil, and I mixed one drop of that into a bathtub full of water."

Alexandra clenched her teeth. "Where did you get hydra blood? Nobody would sell that to a kid. I think even professional alchemists need a license for it."

Penny fell silent again. Alexandra remembered seeing her whispering to Anya in Chicago, and her mouth dropped open. "Oh. My. God. You traded with a hag?! What did you give her?"

Penny's eyes widened, but she said nothing.

"You're crazy!" Alexandra said, and grabbed Penny's wrist, then almost immediately released it, hissing with pain. Penny winced and immediately tried to wipe her wrist off on her dark skirt. Her wrist was already an angry blood-red, and smoke curled from the fabric of her skirt. Alexandra felt light-headed, and wondered if the hydra blood had already penetrated her skin. She cast a counter-curse on Penny, not sure how much had gotten on the other girl.

The door abruptly flew open. Mr. Brown stood in the entrance, filling almost every square inch of it. "WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?" he bellowed.

Penny stepped back, her bravado dispelled. Mr. Brown stared at his cloak, lying on the floor. "What —?!" He moved toward it.

Alexandra pointed her wand at it and said, "*Incendio!*"

The cloak ignited, burning brighter than usual with ugly green flames licking around the edges. A horrible, acrid smell filled the room, and Alexandra immediately cast a Breeze Charm to blow the smoke out through the doorway. Unfortunately, this sent it directly around Mr. Brown. He coughed and swayed; for a moment it looked as if he would topple over. Alexandra continued blowing the smoke away.

Mr. Brown grabbed the doorframe on either side to steady himself, and his eyes burned malignantly as he stared down the two girls. "How dare you?" he yelled. "I'll see you both wandless for this!"

The other students were now gathering in the hallway behind him. Madam Erdglass was nowhere to be seen.

Alexandra said, "There was a spider on your cloak."

Mr. Brown grabbed her by the collar. "No more of your foul, black lies! You are a snoop, a sneak, a saboteur, a thief, and a liar! And you!" He turned on Penny. "A black-hearted heathen child! Raised by Muggles to wallow in modernism! I am not surprised at all to see you following the siren song of this Dark sorceress's damnable bidding!"

Penny's cheeks colored and she opened her mouth.

Alexandra said, "Shut up, Penny."

Penny and Mr. Brown both jerked their heads in Alexandra's direction.

Mr. Brown's face glowed like an ember. "You admit it! You practice Dark Arts and seduce others into your foul practices!"

"I didn't seduce anyone," Alexandra said.

"I knew it was you who stole that list of Dark artifacts from the Juvenile Magical Offenses division," Mr. Brown said. "And those curses in the witches' lavatories! Oh, the Aurors thought it was this spawn —"; he pointed a finger at Penny; "— but I knew it was you!"

Alexandra cast a sideways glance at Penny. The girl was really an idiot, she thought.

"Where is it?" Mr. Brown demanded. "Where is the list?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alexandra said.

"Under the WODAMND Act, minors can be subjected to inquisitorial questioning if suspected of practicing Dark Arts," Mr. Brown said.

"You aren't an Inquisitor," Alexandra said. "You're an Accountant."

Mr. Brown froze. His flushed cheeks turned pale. Then he grabbed Penny and practically hurled her out the door. He slammed the door shut, leaving Alexandra alone in the room with him.

"Tell me about the Dark artifacts," he demanded.

"I don't have any Dark artifacts," Alexandra said.

"Don't lie to me! Tell me where you hid the list!"

"I don't have it."

"Liar!" He looked down at the charred remains of his cloak, and kicked it aside with an angry growl. "Tomorrow," he said, "I will bring Veritaserum and question you with that."

"You can't do that," Alexandra said. She didn't actually know if he could, but she couldn't let Mr. Brown question her with a truth potion. She might not know about the list of Dark artifacts Penny had stolen, but she knew too many other things.

Mr. Brown sneered. "You're not at Charmbridge anymore. You are not protected by your meddling aunt. Don't you know what powerful enemies you've made, brat?"

"I know," Alexandra said. "I know you're making some powerful enemies too."

This provoked another furious look of rage. Mr. Brown raised his hand, and Alexandra steeled herself not to flinch. "Go ahead," she said. "Hit me again."

There was a soft tapping on the door, and then it opened.

"Franklin?" Madam Erdglass stood in the doorway. Mr. Brown blinked at her, then lowered his hand.

"What is going on?" Madam Erdglass asked.

"I was questioning this sorceress about theft, vandalism, and Dark Arts, all of which I am certain she is guilty of," Mr. Brown said. "It's just a matter of time, and not very much time, I should think, before I extract a confession from her."

Madam Erdglass stood still a moment. "I think it would be appropriate for me to be present when you question students, Franklin."

"With all due respect to your classroom authority, and deference to your age and position, Madam, I am entitled to audit, supervise, and question all activities and students at this school." He stomped toward the door. Madam Erdglass stood aside.

"I *will* discover the truth about what you were up to in Chicago!" he said to Alexandra, and stormed out of the building.

"Please take your seat back in the classroom, Miss Quick," Madam Erdglass said.

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Alexandra came to school the next day prepared for a fight. She had a bandage on her left hand.

She didn't arrive early. Since Mr. Brown began skulking around, they had stopped their before-school dueling practice on the third floor, though Alexandra still tutored Helen and any of the other kids who were willing when she arrived in the morning. But today she got to the Pruett School just as class began. She took her basswood wand from Madam Erdglass, relieved that Mr. Brown had never noticed the black hickory wand she'd actually been holding.

"Where's Mr. Brown?" she whispered to Silvia, though she suspected she could shout without Madam Erdglass hearing her.

"In his office with Penny," Silvia whispered back.

Alexandra saw then the empty desk on the other side of the room. So, Mr. Brown was working on Penny again. She clenched her fists. Madam Erdglass was copying formulas from an Alchemy textbook onto the board, waving her wand from her desk to guide the chalk. Alexandra knew them — she'd learned them in seventh grade. More anger bubbled up inside her.

She did the tedious drills and read from their book throughout the morning session. Penny did not reappear. When it was time for their mid-morning break, Alexandra stormed into the hallway outside and went directly to the office that Mr. Brown had virtually commandeered from Madam Erdglass.

The door was closed. She rattled the glass with her fist.

There was no answer, though she could hear movement in the office. She opened the door. Inside, Mr. Brown sat behind Madam Erdglass's desk, writing something in yet another large notebook with a black leather cover.

"Where's Penny?" Alexandra asked.

Mr. Brown finally looked up. He scowled. "Go back to your classroom. I will call you when I am ready to deal with you in turn."

"Where's Penny?" Alexandra repeated.

Mr. Brown rose to his feet. "Get out of this room and begone!" he bellowed.

Alexandra gripped her wand, and refrained, just barely, from drawing it out of her pocket, though Mr. Brown's eyes followed the movements of her hand. He took a half-step back and fumbled for his own wand, turning a deeper crimson as he realized how he'd been provoked into reacting, and that Alexandra had noticed it.

"What did you do with her?" Alexandra said, keeping her voice low and even. She suspected he hadn't brought Veritaserum after all.

"I'm allowing her to rethink her unwillingness to answer questions put to her. Your turn is coming, you insolent little sorceress. And DON'T YOU DARE THREATEN ME!"

She backed away from him as if from a madman — his last outburst startled her, betraying fear along with anger, and some instinct told her that Mr. Brown might be even worse to deal with when he was afraid.



Rather than continue shouting back and forth — already the others were coming up the hallway, and behind them, Madam Erdglass — Alexandra slammed the door shut. Then she spun on her heel and walked to the stairs.

"Alexandra, where are you going?" asked Freddy.

"She's crazy," said Taylor.

"Alexandra!" Helen called plaintively.

Barely audibly, Madam Erdglass also called her name.

Alexandra ignored them all and ascended to the second floor. Goody Pruett looked surprised when Alexandra appeared at the top of the stairs. Lamps were lit, so Alexandra knew someone had been up here.

"Where did Mr. Brown take Penny?" Alexandra asked.

The portrait stammered. "I... he told me she was dabbling in Dark Arts."

"*Where is she?*"

Goody Pruett shrank away from her, or at least gave the impression of trying to, trapped as she was against her canvas. "I don't know, child! One of those offices going unused..."

Alexandra turned. "Penny!" she shouted.

Pete and Freddy followed up the stairs. None of the younger kids were with them, and Madam Erdglass either wasn't attempting the stairs or was too slow to keep up.

"Hey, kiddo, what are you flipping out about?" asked Freddy.

"Didn't you notice Penny's been gone all morning?" Alexandra said. "That fat bastard locked her in a room up here."

Freddy and Pete looked at each other.

"Maybe you should come back downstairs —" Pete said.

"WHAT ARE YOU LITTLE HEATHENS DOING?" roared Mr. Brown from the first floor. "Madam Erdglass, why are your students not in the classroom?"

Freddy said, "Seriously, are you trying to get yourself in more trouble?"

Alexandra walked further into the nest of offices and corridors on the second floor of the former warehouse. She pushed open doors, calling Penny's name, until she reached one in the far corner where barely any light fell. The door didn't open. When she rattled the knob, she heard a whimpering sound from the other side.

"Penny?" she said.

There was no answer, but she heard indistinct noises... including a sliding sound, like a legless, leathery body dragging itself across rough wood. Goosebumps crawled up her spine.

"Alexandra, Madam Erdglass is telling us to bring you back," called Pete, from down the corridor.

And behind him: "GET BACK DOWN HERE IMMEDIATELY, YOU WRETCHED, IMPUDENT, INSOLENT LITTLE WENCH!"

Alexandra cast an Unlocking Charm and then a Light Spell. She pushed the door open, holding her lit wand before her.

At first she saw nothing in the circle of radiance cast by her Light Spell. It was as if darkness itself choked the room, grudgingly yielding to Alexandra's spell but reluctant to give up the corners and far spaces.

Then, something emerged from the shadowy depths. A tall figure, a familiar, grinning face.

Alexandra's throat suddenly became so dry it nearly closed around the breath she sucked in, and she stumbled backward.

John Manuelito leered at her from the stark threshold of the room's shadows.

"Barak!" Alexandra shouted, just as Pete and Freddy reached her. They both flinched and ducked as a lightning bolt crackled from Alexandra's wand. Badly aimed in her panic, it blew a hole in the wall next to the door, showering bits of wood and brick on the cringing boys, and adding an ozone smell to the fetid odor already pouring out of the room.

John Manuelito continued grinning maniacally, his eyes alight with murderous glee.

"You're dead!" Alexandra shouted. "You're dead, you're dead, I saw you die — I'm not afraid of you!" She knew the last was a lie even as she spoke it, was furious at herself for being afraid of him, and in a flash of heightened, heart-racing awareness, with her throat closing up and all her instincts screaming at her to fight or flee, she realized what she was actually facing.

Freddy cautiously raised his head. "What. The. Hell?"

"Who's that?" asked Pete. He peered at the figure of John Manuelito, dimly visible from the hallway.

"Stay back!" Alexandra shouted. She pointed her wand again, but her hand trembled. "R-r-ridikkulus," she said.

John Manuelito laughed at her.

"Wait, what are you casting now?" asked Pete.

"Get back!" Alexandra shouted. "He'll kill you!"

"What?" said Pete.

"Isn't that spell for banishing boogeymen?" asked Freddy.

"Boggarts, you idiot!" Alexandra said. The anger focused her. Her fist tightened on her wand and she waggled it contemptuously. "*Ridikkulus!*"

John Manuelito sprouted feathers and beads. Suddenly he was decked out in full "Indian" regalia: a rainbow-colored war bonnet, bone and bead ornaments hanging over his bare chest, Halloween costume face paint, and fringed leather chaps and moccasins. In one hand, he held a large, cartoonish tomahawk; in the other, a peace pipe. His skin tone became a bright maroon. Like a living cigar store Indian, he was an absurd caricature of no actual tribe.

Alexandra forced laughter at him, while Freddy and Pete finally reached her side and gawked.

Pete said, "Wow, that's —"

"Really racist," Freddy said. "Seriously?"

With a final scowl, "John Manuelito" vanished.

"Henry Tsotsie really will turn me into a snake if he ever finds out about this," Alexandra muttered.

"Who's Henry Tsotsie?" asked Freddy. "And who the hell was that?"

"That was a Boggart." Alexandra extended her wand and pushed the door open a little further. The room didn't seem quite so dark now, and in the light cast by the tip of her wand, she could see a small, dark figure huddled in the far corner. "Penny?"

The girl made a small, pitiful sound.

Alexandra moved into the room, and Penny scooted away from her. "Go away," she whispered.

"It's okay," Alexandra said. "The Boggart's gone."

"Wait, so she was trapped in here with a Boggart?" said Freddy, following Alexandra through the door, with a nervous look around. Other than Penny, the room was empty.

"You should've taught us that Ridiculous Spell," Pete said.

They all paused as they recognized the odor tingling beneath the musty stench of the Boggart.

"Oh man," Freddy said. "She, uh, she —"

Penny had been left alone in a dark room with a Boggart all morning, without the ability to defend herself. Trapped with her worst fear and unable to escape. Had she screamed for help? Begged? How long had she pounded the door, or tried to cast hexes at whatever form the Boggart had taken? Alexandra imagined being trapped helplessly in the dark with John Manuelito... or the bony, mummified monster John had sent after her, and shuddered. She didn't know how long it would take for her nerves to break.

Penny whimpered in shame and terror as Pete knelt next to her. "Hey," he said gently, though he wasn't completely able to keep his face from registering disgust. "Are you all right? You weren't actually hurt, were you?"

Freddy said, "What kind of a sick —"

A roar shook the air. "HOW DARE YOU? Get out of there immediately!"

Franklin Percival Brown filled the hallway, heaving with exertion after coming up the stairs. His robe dragged on the floor.

Alexandra turned slowly in place. Her eyes reflected the glow of her wand like green ice.

Mr. Brown stumbled to a halt. Alexandra stepped toward him and raised her wand.

"Uh, Alexandra..." said Freddy.

Brown stammered, "Y-you've overstepped yourself and then some this time! I'll have your wand for this —"

Alexandra said, "*Barak!*"

Freddy and Pete both flinched as the lightning bolt crackled down the corridor. The brilliant flash seared everyone's vision, and the sound of the discharge drowned out Mr. Brown's screams.

Long moments later, Freddy raised himself from a crouch. Still inside the room, Pete, who'd nearly fallen over, raised himself to one knee while keeping a hand on Penny's shoulder.

"Oh, mama," said Freddy.

Mr. Brown was on his hands and knees. He cowered as Alexandra, shaking with fury, advanced on him. The lightning bolt from her wand had struck the ceiling behind him. Smoke poured from a charred hole.

Alexandra herself could not have said whether she'd missed intentionally or not. She was as blinded by rage as by the after-image of her lightning

bolt, and she didn't even hear Freddy. Franklin Percival Brown filled her vision like a bloated symbol of all the power and oppression of the Confederation, and every hindrance, humiliation, and injustice that had been inflicted upon them. She didn't care about consequences — he represented everything and everyone she wanted to strike down, from John Manuelito to the Governor-General, whose toady he no doubt was.

Mr. Brown squealed as her Levicorpus spell yanked him feet-first into the air. He hung upside down, his unkempt hair almost brushing the wooden floor and his body thumping side to side in the confines of the corridor. He fumbled in his cloak, maybe to find his wand, but Alexandra followed her first spell with a spray of black quills that embedded themselves in his body from head to foot. Mr. Brown screamed in pain.

"Yo, have you lost your mind?" Freddy shouted.

"Alexandra, what are you doing?" asked Pete.

Alexandra waved her wand again and set Brown's robes on fire. He howled.

"Holy crap!" Freddy said. "Stop it! You're gonna kill him!"

Alexandra dropped Brown on his head, with a terrible thud that cut off his screams. She cast another spell that sent him rolling down the corridor ahead of her as she advanced. His flaming clothes were mostly snuffed out as he rolled, but small tongues of flame licked at his robes and trousers, leaving a burnt, smoking trail behind him. He bounced against the wall with another thud, and groaned. Blood trickled to the floor from the dozens of quills still sticking out of him.

"Stop... stop..." he gasped.

Alexandra bared her teeth as she bore down on him. As he frantically tried to crawl away, she bombarded his enormous behind with hexes that split his trousers and made him gibber in agony. She afflicted him with boils, blisters, rashes, and swarms of stinging insects that turned his exposed flesh into raw meat. Ignoring Freddy's pleas, she followed him around the corner, where the sight of the crawling, burnt, blistered official made Goody Pruett stiffen in shock. Alexandra cast another spell that sent him flying head over heels down this corridor too, once again slamming into the far wall. He hit his head and went limp, still surrounded by buzzing gnats and smoke.

Freddy clapped his hands over his mouth. He looked nauseous. Alexandra held her wand lightly between her fingers, still thinking about spells to cast on Mr. Brown. It was slightly disappointing that he was no longer moving. The red cloak of rage that blotted her thoughts was beginning to fall away; she felt the first gnawing tinges of regret.

She turned to look at Freddy, who stared back at her wide-eyed, then stepped back with a fearful expression. Even Pete, running up the corridor, blanched and jerked to a halt.

Hanging above Mr. Brown, Goody Pruett's mouth opened in horror. "Stars Above, what have you done?"

## \*Chapter 31\*: The Accused

"You'd better not leave, Miss Quick," Madam Erdglass told her as Alexandra walked to the door leading outside.

Upstairs, Freddy and Pete were with Mr. Brown. Rachel Ing had brought Penny downstairs, where the other girls, appalled and disgusted, took her into the lavatory to help her clean up. Penny kept her eyes on the floor and didn't say anything.

Alexandra paused, without turning around. "Why not? It's not like they don't know where to find me."

Madam Erdglass sighed. "You've made things very difficult for yourself, I'm afraid."

Alexandra rounded on her. Madam Erdglass didn't move, but there was a sudden clarity in her gaze as the usual sleepiness in her eyes vanished.

Alexandra's flash of temper dissipated almost as quickly. With more frustration, she said, "You should have prevented this."

Madam Erdglass blinked once, slowly. "I should have prevented Miss Oscar's fascination with Dark Arts?"

"That's not why Mr. Brown locked her in a closet with a Boggart. He did it to get at me. He thought she knew something about me."

"Nonetheless," Madam Erdglass said, "she brought her troubles on herself... just as you have."

"You think Penny deserved this?"

Madam Erdglass's expression didn't change. "Sometimes we get what we ask for, not what we deserve."

Alexandra shook her head and pushed her way out the door. Chris, Taylor, and Jamal watched her go without saying anything. Madam Erdglass didn't try to stop her.

She walked through Larkin Mills, ignoring the crisp bite of the early November afternoon. It looked like it might snow.

*What will they do to me?* she wondered.

She'd crossed a line that in either the Muggle or the wizarding world was a sure way to exit childhood forever: she'd attacked an adult. Not just attacked, but seriously injured.

She hadn't really intended to kill Mr. Brown, but she couldn't say it would have bothered her when she let loose her wrath. She supposed she must have been holding back on some level. (A voice from her memory said: *If you wanted someone dead, they'd be dead.*) But that wouldn't matter.

Walking past Brian's house caused a twist in her stomach. He'd be at school right now. She wondered if she'd see him again.

*Stop being so dramatic,* she told herself. *So you'll be kicked out of another school.* She hoped this wouldn't be used against Livia.

She walked through her front door and found Claudia watching TV, home from a swing shift at the hospital.

"I think I'm in trouble," she said.

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It was listening to Claudia and Archie talk that made Alexandra realize she had to leave.

"What do you mean, the police won't be involved?" Archie demanded. Her brother-in-law, when he got home and was given an edited version of events, had made one comment about Alexandra being an idiot and out of control. Then he'd displayed a more practical side, suggesting that if someone did call the police, it would be better if he brought her in himself.

"After we call one of those ratbag defense lawyers," he said. "And you keep your mouth shut right now, Alex. They can use anything you tell us against you."

Alexandra's expression was blank as she regarded Sergeant Green, the man she'd known as her stepfather most of her life, whose role as a father figure had always been a complicated one, a difficult relationship for both of them. Now, as she hit what was probably for him the bottom, proof of his most dire warnings about where her reckless, disobedient attitude would take her, he exhibited impotent fury and protectiveness, as if he actually thought he could shield her from the consequences of her actions. She hadn't really expected that.

The problem was, he couldn't. If he tried to get in the way, he was only going to get hurt himself.

"Okay, Archie," she said. "You call a lawyer. I need to go put some stuff away. I'll come down when you call me."

She glanced at Claudia, wondering if her sister realized what she did. Their eyes met, and Alexandra read concern and fear, but she couldn't tell whether Claudia really understood or approved of what Alexandra was about to do.

She went up to her room and placed her yew wand on her desk. She opened Charlie's cage.

"I need you to go far away, Charlie," she said.

"Never, never!" Charlie said.

She stroked the raven's head. "Maybe just for a little while. I don't really know what's going to happen yet. But I think they'll probably take my wand, and I don't know what they'll do with you."

Charlie croaked a weak protest.

With her hickory wand, she cast an Attraction Charm on the yew wand and Charlie. The wand stuck to Charlie like a magnet. She positioned it in

the raven's talons.

"Go to Croatoa," she said. "Take this to Ms. King. She'll keep you and the wand safe."

Her cheeks were damp as she opened her bedroom window. She could only trust in her familiar's cleverness and magical luck to bring it to Roanoke Territory and the island where the Kings lived.

"I'll send for you when it's safe to come back," she whispered. "You'll know."

"Alexandra," Charlie said.

She kissed Charlie's beak. "Go, Charlie."

The raven sat on her desk, balanced a little awkwardly with the wand stuck to one claw, inscrutable judgment in its black, bird eyes.

"Fly," she said.

"Fly, fly," Charlie repeated, and was gone.

Alexandra wiped her eyes, then took out her magic backpack and her broom. She waited as long as she dared, wanting Charlie to have a good head start in case Aurors or Special Inquisitors were already closing in on her. Then, as quietly as possible, she crawled out the window and closed it behind her. Hoping no neighbors were watching, she ascended straight up into the air until she was high enough that from the ground, she'd look like a bird to anyone not looking closely. She pointed her broom toward the edge of town and flew away from Sweetmaple Avenue.

It was cold; she hadn't dressed warmly enough. She flew so fast that the air chilled her through her clothes, but it only took her a few minutes to cross Larkin Mills and reach Old Larkin Pond, on the other side of the Interstate.

From above, she saw no one around the pond. She dropped like a stone, and briefly considered not stopping at all. At the last moment, she decelerated and came to a halt, hovering inches above the muddy ground at the edge of the water.

Alexandra had been to this place so many times. It was where she'd first encountered magical creatures, where she'd first used magic to defend herself, where she'd almost lost Brian and Bonnie. A beginning point — and maybe an ending point.

She checked her backpack, with all of the artifacts and items she'd collected over the years: her Lost Traveler's Compass, the knick-knacks and potions she'd kept from Charmbridge, her magic mirror and cosmetics from Julia, her Seven-League Boots and her JROC boots, the animated wizard photographs of Maximilian, the glass globe from the Roanoke Magibotanical Gardens that Payton had given her, the magical handwarmers and lucky socks from the Pritchards, the raven charm bracelet from Anna, her magic books, including the Auror Field Training Grimoire, and all the other physical accouterments of witchcraft. It was all inside.

She added her broom. She had cast many spells over the years, and seen so many incredible things, and yet watching the entire length of her broom slide into a pack that it couldn't possibly fit into never failed to delight her. A part of her would never stop marveling at magic.

Finally, she carefully put her black hickory wand in the wand sheath in the pack's inner lining, and then tied and sealed the pack shut.

Alexandra held the pack in her arms for a long time, lost in thought but always keeping an eye on the horizon. No one appeared. Charlie was still winging a long, lonely way to Croatoa, and the dead brown field between Old Larkin Pond and the Interstate, with rushes and weeds still tall enough to conceal anyone inclined to hide there, remained undisturbed as far as Alexandra could tell.

Finally she sighed, and with a twist of her body for extra momentum, she hurled the backpack into the center of the pond. It landed in the icy water with a splash and bobbed there.

Alexandra pointed her basswood wand at it and said, "*Feordupois*."

With the department store wand's stubborn goat feather core, it took two more castings of the Deadweight Spell before the backpack vanished beneath the surface of the pond.

The water was dirty and muddy, and while teenagers came here occasionally to drink or make out or set off fireworks, it was not heavily trafficked, and nobody swam or fished in the pond. Alexandra figured that until the town got around to its plans for cleaning up the pond and developing the land, the backpack should remain undisturbed.

Now she cast a Warming Spell, which helped a little in the fading sunlight.

There was a "pop" and Alexandra felt air puffing against the side of her head as someone appeared in her peripheral vision. She still held her wand in her hand, but it was at her side, and she was careful not to raise it as she slowly turned toward whoever had just Apparated.

"You," she said. "I'm not surprised."

Diana Grimm sighed. "You make things so very hard on yourself, Alexandra."

Alexandra shrugged.

"Give me your wand," her aunt said, almost gently.

Alexandra handed it over.

The Special Inquisitor put a hand on her shoulder. It wasn't exactly a consoling gesture, but it wasn't the hard, unsympathetic clap of a law enforcement officer seizing hold of a suspect either. "Is there anything you'd like to say to me, Alexandra?"

"Do I have the right to remain silent?" Alexandra asked.

"No. But you don't have to talk to me."

Alexandra kept her face turned away from her aunt, toward Larkin Mills, whose lights glowed on the opposite side of the freeway. "What happens now?"

"We go to the Office of Juvenile Inquisitions. Mr. Brown has already demanded charges."

"Of course he has."

Diana's fingers tightened slightly on Alexandra's shoulder. "You could have killed him, you stupid girl. No, don't tell me he picked on you and your friends and made you seethe with the unfairness of it all. Stars Above, Alexandra!" The older witch spun her around to face her, and Alexandra was surprised to see that the usual icy disdain that masked her aunt's face had turned to fury. "How long have you been butting your stubborn head against the wizarding world and its walls of indifference? How long have you known that powerful people are out to get you? You are not the foolish, naive little girl you were when you first arrived at Lilith's school. You've survived worse than this, and you've been warned — over and over. Do you have any idea how much trouble Lilith and I have gone to...?" Diana shook her head.

Alexandra didn't trust herself to speak. She just stared at her aunt, not blinking. A tightness in her throat and heat in her chest made words difficult.

"You brought this on yourself," her aunt said. "How many times do you think you can escape the consequences of your actions? Do you expect someone will always intervene on your behalf?"

Alexandra swallowed. "I never have. I never asked for anything special. I never asked to be treated differently. I never asked to be Abraham Thorn's daughter."

Her aunt's fingers dug in a little deeper. "None of us have a choice about how we're born. But you knew you were special. And now, because you're Abraham Thorn's daughter, you're going to be treated differently. Come along, Alexandra."

With a twist that seemed to tie her insides in a knot and then yank them up her throat, Alexandra was pulled away from Larkin Mills via Side-Along Apparition. With her head swimming and the feeling that her joints might have arrived not quite attached right, she registered that she and Diana Grimm were standing in a troll booth on the Automagicka. A large, reddish troll was leaning on the hood of a bright yellow convertible while its driver frantically looked for change. The troll did not turn around before Diana Grimm Apparated again. Several more times Alexandra was yanked out of one space and into another. She had never seen this kind of rapid, repeat Apparition before, and she definitely didn't want to ever experience it again. She wondered how her aunt was able to stand it — the Floo or a Portkey seemed much easier.

Without warning, they arrived in an austere gray office dominated by a robed man behind a desk. Alexandra swayed, disoriented after the series of Apparitions. Diana Grimm gripped her elbow tightly enough to bruise, but Alexandra was thankful for it; it kept her standing erect.

Black-robed portraits of wizards and witches hung on the walls, all regarding her with disapproving scowls above folded arms. Now Alexandra felt an almost comforting familiarity — it was like being in Dean Grimm's office.

The floor was cold, gray stone and there was only a single chair, behind the dark red-brown desk. The balding man sitting in it was vaguely familiar. Without looking up, he scratched something across a scroll with a large, black quill pen.

"This is the accused?" he asked.

"Yes," Diana Grimm said.

Alexandra read the plaque on his desk. *Carlos Black, Chief Inquisitor*. She'd met him before, on her first visit to the Territorial Headquarters Building.

Carlos Black leaned back in his chair. His expression didn't change, but there was satisfaction in his easy, reclined posture as he laced his fingers over his belly.

"Alexandra Octavia Quick, you are charged with assaulting a Confederation official with grievous intent, inflicting grievous harm upon a Confederation official, impersonating a Confederation official, theft of Confederation property, traffic in Dark Artifacts, unlicensed instruction, illicit transmission of witchcraft, moral corruption of juveniles, intercourse with hags —"

"What?" Alexandra's face contorted. "I haven't had *intercourse* with —"

"It means you've had illicit dealings with them," Mr. Black said. "Commerce and bargaining. Do you deny it?"

Alexandra closed her mouth.

He continued. "Illegal practice of underage magic in a Muggle neighborhood, violating the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, illegal use of Polyjuice, possession of an unregistered wand, use of an unregistered wand, and truancy."

"Truancy? Seriously?"

Mr. Black waved his hand dismissively. "Let's just focus on the primary charges — your assault on Franklin Percival Brown. I'm dropping everything else."

"Okay," Alexandra said. That sounded unusually reasonable.

"I find you guilty as charged," Mr. Black said.

"What?!" Alexandra almost twisted her arm free of Diana Grimm. "What kind of trial was that? What about hearing my side of the story?"

"This isn't a trial. I don't need to hear your side of the story," Mr. Black said. "You do have the right to request a formal trial."

"I request a formal trial!" Alexandra said.

"Fine. You'll be informed when a date has been set. In the meantime, I sentence you to imprisonment on Eerie Island until the age of twenty-one."

"What?!" After everything else that had happened, Alexandra found herself surprised that she could still be shocked.

"Are you hard of hearing, or merely slow-witted?" Carlos Black asked. "Do you not understand the sentence?"

Alexandra opened her mouth a third time, then closed it, and used her anger and indignation to keep her eyes fiery-hard and her mind focused so she didn't allow the pronouncement of her sentence to overwhelm her, to let the Chief Inquisitor reduce her to tears and despair.

"Can I appeal?" she asked.

"You have to be tried first," Mr. Black said.

Alexandra shook her head. "This is bullshit."

"Take this vulgar little sorceress away," Mr. Black said to Ms. Grimm. The Special Inquisitor did not Apparate away with Alexandra, but led her by the arm out of the office, into a familiar corridor leading to the elevators of the Central Territory Headquarters Building.

"This isn't right, and you know it," Alexandra said.

"You brought it on yourself," Diana said. "Lilith and I have tried so hard on your behalf, you have no idea —"

"You said that." Alexandra was in no mood to hear more about her ungratefulness toward her aunts, who seemed to have devoted the last few years to making her life miserable. "Sentenced to wizard prison until I'm twenty-one? Seriously, just like that? Is this how things normally work?"

"It is now," Diana Grimm said. Alexandra glanced sideways at her. Her aunt was staring straight ahead, now that they were in the elevator. If there was any pity or compassion in her, it didn't show on her face.

"What about my par— Claudia and Archie?" Alexandra asked in a hoarser voice.

"What about them?"

"Is anyone even going to tell them what happened to me?" Alexandra asked.

Diana Grimm finally looked at her. "I'll see that they're informed."

The elevators opened again, to a dark stone hallway that Alexandra didn't recognize, though it was similar to the basement level she'd gone to to speak to Mr. Bagby in the Census Office. Here, however, she was immediately confronted with a troll, holding chains. The reality of the situation felt like a leaden ball in her stomach. Suddenly she had difficulty swallowing.

Ms. Grimm thrust her forward. The troll clapped a collar around her neck and manacles on her wrists, attached to a heavy chain. Then the troll grabbed the end of the chain and Alexandra was nearly jerked off her feet.

Just like that, she was going to Eerie Island. She wondered if she'd be allowed to write and receive letters. She wondered if they would ever give her an actual trial. She wondered what they did to witches incarcerated on Eerie Island. She wondered if she'd even get clean underwear. She turned to look at Diana Grimm, unwilling to plead for anything but still hoping somehow her aunt would offer an alternative, an out, or at least some acknowledgment, but Diana Grimm was staring fixedly at a point past her head. The troll yanked on her chain again, and Alexandra stumbled after the creature, helpless, wandless, and hopeless.

## \*Chapter 32\*: Eerie Island

The troll dragged Alexandra through a long, dark tunnel to a metal gate that opened onto a brick causeway running along the edge of an underground river. It smelled of garbage and dead fish.

The troll did not speak. Alexandra wondered if Carlos Black never meant to send her to Eerie Island. If the troll ate her and threw her remains into these fetid, black waters, who would know? Would her aunt even care about her fate?

Feeling desperation, and stifling panic, Alexandra began composing verses in her head, knowing that doggerel verse while chained to a troll probably wouldn't help her. She looked about with her Witch's Sight. Maybe there was a crack in the world, something she could pry open. She saw nothing, until a pair of lights bobbed ahead of them in the darkness, like large, ghostly fireflies.

Will-o-wisps, Alexandra thought. *Ignis fatuus* — magical concentrations of ill will and bad fortune. Certainly appropriate for this place.

But as she stumbled closer, yanked by the troll and trying not to slip on the wet bricks, she saw that they were lanterns hung from poles attached to a boat. The boat was a small wooden dinghy with two occupants. As they came close enough for Alexandra to see the lantern light falling on their faces, she recognized the greenish, leathery countenances of goblins.

The troll said nothing to the goblins, merely tossed the end of the chain it was holding onto the boat. One of the goblins grabbed it and said, "Step aboard." He yanked on the chain almost before Alexandra could react, so she half-jumped, half-fell onto the boat and landed hard on her side, barely avoiding hitting her head.

"You didn't have to jerk me onto the boat like that," she said.

The goblin aimed a kick at her side, and the tiny, sharp toe of his boot jabbed her ribs hard enough to make her flip over with a gasp of pain. "Silence! Give us guff and we'll drag you in the water behind us. See if we don't!"

Alexandra pulled herself slowly into a sitting position and glared at the goblin.

While he held the end of the chain attached to her manacles, the other goblin untied the rope holding the boat to the side of the causeway and then grabbed a single oar and pushed off. A sluggish current took hold of the boat, and it drifted downstream, away from the troll and further into the darkness.

They floated for several minutes, with the goblin at the stern occasionally dipping the oar in the water. Light from the lanterns barely reached the sides of the underground river. Alexandra only knew they must be somewhere beneath Chicago, until she heard a distant horn, and felt a cold breeze blowing past her. The darkness became dim gray fog, with more light penetrating into the murk from some point ahead where the river must emerge from its underground channel.

Would this tiny boat take them all the way to Eerie Island? She thought the fabled wizard prison was far away on the Great Lakes. She wondered what would prevent her captors from simply dumping her over the side. She studied her manacled hands, which were shaking a little. She clenched her fists to stop the trembling.

They emerged from the blackness of the underground tunnel, but not from the fog. Around her, Alexandra could now hear the sounds of Muggle vessels blowing their horns, and from not far away, vehicular traffic. They had to be near Chicago's waterfront, yet in this dense fog, the goblin dinghy was invisible.

The goblin holding Alexandra's chain wrapped it around a small central mast, and said, "Any guff and overboard you go, you just see."

Alexandra said nothing. She was becoming chilly. Lake Michigan in November was cold, the bottom of the boat was damp, and while she'd put on a jacket before leaving her house, it wasn't her thick winter coat, nor was she wearing her magical waterproof boots.

The goblin unrolled a small sail from a bundle near the bow and attached it to the mast. Once raised, it was a puny thing that barely seemed to catch a breeze. Yet they continued moving across the water, now at a greater rate of speed, passing between the looming shadows of much larger ships in the fog. Soon they left those behind.

Cold seeped into her. The damp chill matched her mood, and her initial wild notions of using doggerel verse or improbable threats faded as she realized that she was truly bound and helpless. As Diana Grimm had said, no one was going to intervene on her behalf. She was all alone.

After an interminable hour on the boat, Alexandra felt a familiar presence. A layer of fog still covered the water and the sky was overcast, so seeing anything out in the surrounding grayness was impossible, and there had been no more ship sounds since Chicago. But now she was sure she could hear an occasional flapping overhead.

*Oh no.*

Seagulls occasionally swept past them, but some other bird was pacing the boat, and Alexandra felt joy and grief suffusing her: a desperate desire to see her loyal companion, and dread that the goblins or someone else might.

*Go away, Charlie,* she thought. **Go away.** *You were supposed to fly to Roanoke. What are you doing here?*

She couldn't reach the raven with her senses, but she knew Charlie was out there. Her familiar knew very well what she wanted — and was refusing.

It was cold and a wind was blowing across the lake. The goblin at the mast angled the sail. Alexandra realized Charlie was fighting against the wind to keep up, and through the connection they shared, she knew the raven was tiring. There was nowhere around here to rest —

A black shape materialized out of the mist, flapping loudly. Alexandra could see the wand and scrolled parchment still attached to her familiar's leg. Charlie landed on top of the boat's mast and sat there, regarding Alexandra and the two goblins with an imperious air, as if the boat had been conjured as the raven's personal conveyance across the water.



"Yikyak zataq!" yelled one of the goblins, and threw something. Alexandra couldn't tell whether it was a bread roll or a stone or some random piece of wood clattering about on the bottom of the boat, but it missed Charlie by a wide margin, and the raven barely stirred.

"Get out of here, Charlie!" Alexandra yelled.

"Alexandra," Charlie said.

"You idiot," she half-whispered, half-sobbed.

The second goblin approached the mast, holding the long oar.

"Charlie, fly away!" Alexandra screamed.

"Never, never!" Charlie said.

The goblin swung the oar, trying to reach the bird at the top of the mast. It smashed against the wooden pole and Charlie flapped out of the oar's reach.

Alexandra rolled onto her side, and with her manacled hands placed against the floor of the boat, she kicked with both legs together, sweeping the goblin's legs out from under him. He dropped the oar, which fell with a clatter and almost hit Alexandra in the head before bouncing off the goblin's shoulder hard enough to make him yelp in pain.

*Charlie — fly*, she thought, making it a command, with all the force of her will behind it.

"Fly, fly," Charlie said mournfully, and flapped off into the mist.

Alexandra's relief was brief — the heavy oar came down on her head, and she saw stars.

"Give us guff, you little witch!" said the goblin with the oar.

Dazed, Alexandra didn't realize she was being lifted by the two goblins until she went over the side of the boat. The splash was an icy shock that paralyzed her. The water was only a few degrees above freezing and for a moment she lost all thoughts and sensations.

She sank beneath the surface and almost gulped water, before she kicked out with the same instincts that had saved her when she jumped into Old Larkin Pond the previous year. She was helped by the chain attached to her manacles, which the two goblins were using to pull her back to the surface. But when she grabbed the side of the boat and tried to haul herself back aboard, one of the goblins placed a rough, scaly hand on her face and pushed her back down. She was so dizzy and cold, she didn't have the strength to resist him.

"Warned you about giving us guff," the goblin said. "Now you can swim the rest of the way." The two goblins laughed.

"I'll f-f-freeze to d-death," Alexandra said, teeth chattering. The cold was terrible. Weakly, she tried to pull herself up again, and one of the goblins brought a fist down on the top of her head, exactly where the oar had hit her earlier. The pain exploding against her skull made her forget the cold, and she fell back into the water and almost lost her grip on the boat entirely.

After a minute, she realized that she couldn't actually swim, because the goblins had cinched the chain up so that even if she let go, she would hang by her wrists with her head just out of the water. But the cold water clamped its icy jaws around her and was beginning to numb her to all other thoughts and sensations.

"You... you're going to k-kill me," she said. Already the thought of closing her eyes and slipping away was tempting. A flicker of outrage kept her from giving up entirely — these goblins were worse than the hill dwarves, and even more sadistic than the Generous Ones!

"You're a witch," said one of the goblins, with a touch of bitterness. "You're harder to kill than that." But they hauled her back aboard and let her curl up, wet and freezing, at the bottom of the boat.

She managed to half-open her eyes, and through narrow slits where icicles threatened to form on her lids, she shot the goblin a venomous, hateful stare.

"I'll..." She shivered violently. Anger felt good. To her surprise, it warmed her. She clamped her jaws shut to keep her teeth from chattering, and through her clenched teeth she said, "I'll m-m-make you reg-g-gret t-this."

The goblins, surprisingly, did not jeer or insult her in response, but grew quiet. Then the one who'd hit her with the oar said, "They all say that. But we're protected."

The other one said, "Wizard justice consigned you to us. The blame is not ours."

Alexandra shook her head and mumbled, "T-t-they all s-s-say that-t-t."

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Alexandra had been cold before. She had jumped into Old Larkin Pond when it was frozen over. She had been to the Lands Beyond. And she'd been tied up and abused by hill dwarves. But sitting in the bottom of the goblins' dinghy, soaked to the bone, chained and beaten, was a new and different kind of torment.

She suffered, on the trip across the lake, until she became nearly mindless with the cold. Her body began shaking so violently that the goblins finally threw a blanket over her, which did little to warm her but at least kept the icy wind off her.

To her surprise, she did not freeze to death. Her awareness faded in and out, as all she could concentrate on was the horrid, life-draining cold. After a while, memories of warmth and muscles that didn't shiver uncontrollably felt like a distant dream.

But the goblins must have been right — despite the chill that penetrated her body right into her bones, Alexandra neither died nor became delirious. At no point did she forget where she was or why she was there, or who had done this to her. Her anger and hatred burned, sometimes bright and sometimes more dimly.

She shivered, in her wet clothes, until at last a large, dark shape materialized out of the mist. It grew larger and larger, a shadow drawing the water and mist toward it, until it was identifiable as an edifice looming up in the middle of the great lake. Alexandra forced herself to sit up and try to take in her surroundings. The effort of will it took to move was nearly the greatest of her life.

The island itself, at least what she could see of it, must have been tiny. The stone foundation built on a tiny plot of wet rock dominated it entirely, stretching from one edge of the waterline to the other. It resembled a grim, blocky castle with barred windows. The goblins pointed the dinghy toward a small dock.

The boat bumped into a short wooden pier. The impact was slight, but jarring enough to shake Alexandra, shivering and tired as she was. One of the goblins jerked on her chain and said, "Stand up."

Slowly, Alexandra dragged herself to her feet. With her wet clothing still clinging to her frozen skin, she shivered so hard she didn't trust herself to speak. But she stared at the goblin with a look of such intense ferocity that it backed away and muttered in Gobbledegook, tugging less violently on the chain attached to her manacles as it stepped toward the front of the boat.

Alexandra knew that without magic, she would probably have died of hypothermia. She shouldn't still be conscious. She *felt* half-dead, and continued to nurture the flame of her rage to keep herself from collapsing, or sinking into a gray fog of despair. She stared at the back of the goblin, and her lips moved in soundless incantations as she wished hexes on her tormentor. She imagined a black, smoking hole of charred skin and leather blossoming on the back of the goblin's neck. Then the skin of the back of its head sloughing off in poisonous green strips. Then hundreds of biting insects swarming and stinging inside its clothes.

She knew spells that could do all those things, but chained and wandless, wishing did not invoke them. The other goblin stood by alertly, holding the oar as if ready to knock her back into the water. Alexandra kept her eyes fixed on the back of his companion's head, hoping that at least her stare might cause an itch or something.

Something stirred in the back of her mind. It was nothing she could see with Witch's Sight, but this place was definitely more than just a stone keep.

They stepped up onto the damp planks of the pier. At the end of the pier a spiked portcullis rose as they approached, making the sort of grinding, clanking sound Alexandra associated with old movies about castles and dungeons. On the other side of the portcullis was a short, dark tunnel. Beyond that Alexandra could see a patch of gray light, and a dark figure waiting there.

She half-walked, half-stumbled forward, trying to keep the goblin from yanking on the chain, as every time he did, the manacles rubbed against her wrists, cold and hard against skin already chilled, soaked, and reddened.

They walked beneath the iron spikes of the portcullis, down the dripping stone tunnel, and into an open air courtyard that was nothing more than a tiny square of paved stone on the other side of the entrance. Stone walls rose high above them on all sides, and there were two other exits besides the tunnel they'd entered through.

The dark figure turned out to be an enormous beast with the body of a lion, large black wings folded against its furry haunches, and a man-like face staring down at Alexandra and her goblin escorts from within a coarse, reddish mane. Its head was eight feet off the ground. The creature was nearly the size of an elephant.

The goblins came to a halt before it. Alexandra looked up into the broad, human face with considerably less interest than she would have under other circumstances. Its paws were large enough to take her head off with one swipe, but she was feeling something deeper, something beneath her feet, something in the air — no, in the ground...

"What is your name?" the beast asked, in a deep, surprisingly pleasant voice.

Alexandra was silent a moment, not out of obstinance, but because it took her that long to think, and decide on a response. Demands, questions, even pleas, ran through her mind, and the thought of defiance did too, as pointless as it seemed, but she answered, "A-Alex-andra Q-Q-Quick-k-k."

"Not Alexandra Octavia Thorn, the daughter of Abraham Everard Thorn?" asked the beast.

"Yes," Alexandra said. "T-That's the n-name I was b-b-born with. But I ans-s-swer to A-Alexandra Q-Quick."

The great shaggy head nodded. "So be it. Do you wish to go home, Alexandra Quick?"

Alexandra blinked and stared into the creature's eyes. The name finally came to her — *sphinx*. The creature was a sphinx. She'd heard of them, of course, but they were one of those beasts she'd never quite been sure about. So many magical beasts she'd read about as a child turned out not to actually exist, while others were nothing like those in the books she'd read. The sphinx, however, appeared quite real.

Was it taunting her? What sort of trick question was that? The thought of going home made Alexandra's heart beat faster and a different kind of heat fill her chest and her throat, and for a moment her vision blurred. If this was a joke, it was a cruel one. But she said, "Yes-s."

The sphinx grinned. Inside its almost-human mouth, it had rows of sharp teeth and a pair of leonine fangs. "If you can answer a riddle, I will let you leave with these goblins, and they will take you back to Chicago."

Alexandra blinked again, and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hands. The chains slapped against her. It was so cold, even here, sheltered from the wind. She was still wet, freezing, and shivering. She managed to say, without stammering, "What's the catch?"

The sphinx's grin broadened. "If you fail to answer the riddle, I will eat you."

Thinking was hard, and thinking fast was harder. This wasn't a fair contest. She was hardly at her sharpest and most alert. The evil creature probably had nothing better to do all day than think up impossible riddles. But what the hell? Imprisoned until she was twenty-one — the seven years she'd been given to live by the Generous Ones would elapse by then anyway. Maybe this was her best chance to escape, one way or the other.

Somewhere in the back of her head a voice was screaming "No!" at her, advising her that this was a bad idea, but she said, "All right."

The two goblins stepped away, the one dropping the chain so it lay loosely on the stone pavement.

The sphinx sat up straighter, and its face assumed an expression of stern majesty. "What does a man have in his pants that you can also find on a pool table?"

Alexandra scrunched up her brow. A tiny blush of color appeared on her frozen cheeks. She half-opened her mouth. "Wha— s-s-seriously?"

"I am very serious," the sphinx said.

She shook her head, and glanced at the goblins, who were looking at each other expressionlessly. She looked back at the sphinx.

"Do you know the answer or not?" demanded the sphinx.

Alexandra sighed. "Balls," she said, in a small voice.

"HAH!" the sphinx roared. It slapped a massive paw on the stones and bellowed laughter. "No, you wicked child! POCKETS!"

The goblins began laughing as well.

Alexandra was more indignant than afraid. Her cheeks burned hotter. Of course she should have realized the real answer wouldn't be the obvious one. But who expected dirty riddles from a sphinx? If she weren't barely able to stand for the shivering cold, she would have gotten it immediately and the sphinx would never have tricked her so easily.

The sphinx stopped laughing and grew still, except for its tail. The goblins continued laughing.

"Are you g-g-going to e-eat me n-now?" Alexandra asked.

The sphinx laughed again. "Of course not. Let me tell you a secret, little girl: your kind doesn't actually taste very good. And I'd have to ask you to take your clothes off first, and that would be a violation of the International Prisons, Châteaux, Towers, and Dungeons Guild's Code of Ethical Conduct."

"Wow," Alexandra said. "So m-making me s-s-strip would be agains-s-st the r-rules, but b-b-beat-ting me, d-d-dunking me in a lake, l-letting me f-f-freeze for hours, and t-then t-t-threatening t-t-to eat-t-t me is-sn't?"

The sphinx turned its head. Its unblinking expression made the goblins shrink back against the dank stone behind them.

"She struggled," said one of the goblins.

"She tried to escape," said the other.

"I d-d-did not," Alexandra said.

"Their word against yours. You're a prisoner, therefore assumed to be a liar," said the sphinx.

Alexandra clenched her fists, or tried to. Her fingers were still too stiff. "Would-d you r-really have l-let me go if-if I'd ans-swered the riddle c-c-correctly?"

The sphinx laughed. "Of course not."

Alexandra's lip curled. "S-so you're a l-l-liar, t-t-too."

"And you're a vulgar little girl and a convicted Dark Sorceress," the sphinx said. "So watch your mouth and don't sass me, child. Your time here on Eerie Island can be hard, miserable, or excruciating." It inclined its head toward her. "Take off her manacles."

One of the goblins approached, holding a long brass rod, like a key without any projections. He walked behind her and tapped the collar around her neck. It snapped open. He circled in front of her, and Alexandra raised her wrists. The goblin touched her manacles with the brass rod, and they fell open. Alexandra slid her wrists out of them and threw them on the ground. The goblin bared its sharp, pointy teeth at her.

Alexandra kept her mouth shut, but her eyes radiated malice and vengefulness.

"You deserve to be sent here," said the goblin. It backed away from her before turning and scampering down the tunnel with its companion.

The sphinx said, "Just to be clear, I *am* allowed to eat you if you try to escape, or assault any member of the prison staff. Insolence and disobedience will be punished severely. Do as you're told, keep your mouth shut and your head down, and serve your time and perhaps you will someday leave here with all your bones intact."

Alexandra said nothing, but watched the sphinx from beneath her bangs, plastered to her forehead and clinging to her eyelids.

The sphinx's tail stopped swishing to and fro and stiffened, pointing at one of the exits behind it. "Go through that doorway. My wife will explain the rules to you in more detail, and send you to your cell."

Alexandra walked in the direction indicated. Distantly, she sensed Charlie still flying around outside.

*Stay away Charlie*, she thought. She had no idea what sort of defenses, magical or otherwise, Eerie Island might have, but she doubted inmates were allowed familiars, and surely they were prepared for aerial rescue attempts or escapes.

She walked through yet another dark tunnel into a stone chamber that resembled a dungeon cell. Torches flickered in stands in all four corners, and exits, gated with iron-barred doors, were embedded in each wall.

It was warmer here. Alexandra still shivered in her wet clothes, but the trembling was becoming less violent.

Along one wall stood a huge four-level wooden bookcase lined with books, scrolls, crystals and statuettes, silver ornaments and an old Russian matryoshka doll, carved African wooden masks, an urn, several wands, a stack of jigsaw puzzles, a Chinese vase, a jewel-studded tortoise, a stuffed owl, stacks of playing cards and tarot decks, a Rubik's cube, a flute... The long row of decorations, knick-knacks and artworks stretched off to the far wall.

A large polished table of what looked like petrified wood dominated one corner of the dim space. Someone reclined on a pile of cushions behind it, so Alexandra approached, stepping onto a large Oriental rug.

The figure behind the table lowered the crossword puzzle book she was perusing, and leaned forward. No, not leaned. She *tilted* forward as the lower half of her body uncoiled.

From the waist up, she was a woman — a woman of ageless, eerie beauty, with long, black hair that fell about her shoulders in a wild, uncombed tangle. Her eyes, heavily-lidded, and her lips, thick and full, were alluring, almost sensual, despite a greenish tint to her skin. There was something ancient and wise about her... ancient, wise, and inhuman.

She wore no clothes or jewelry. Beneath her bare breasts, her stomach stretched down to a scaly lower half right where her belly button should have been, and from there down, she was a snake — bigger around than Alexandra, and perhaps thirty or forty feet in length, though it was hard to tell with the lower half of her body coiled beneath her.

"So," the snake-woman said. "Our newest guest. Speak your name."

Alexandra took a moment to absorb the heat in the room; it was much warmer than those torches could account for. The sense of arcane power tingling at the edges of her senses was stronger than ever.

"Alexandra Octavia Quick," she said.

"Ah," said the snake-woman. "You may call me Edna."

She snapped her fingers, and the nearest gate swung open. Something stepped out of it with a clank. Alexandra turned to face the thing that approached her: a towering figure in black plate armor. Walking with mechanical precision, the armored form stopped directly in front of her and stood motionless. The visored helm didn't tilt in her direction or move at all. Its mailed gloves hung loosely at its sides, the right one near the hilt of a long sword.

"This is your personal Doomguard," said Edna. "It will follow you everywhere. It will stand outside your cell at night; it will stand just outside the privy and the shower, but never out of arm's length. It will stand at your back when you eat in the common areas, and it will accompany you should you be granted exercise or library privileges. In time you will get used to it. They don't speak, they don't breathe, they don't sleep, they don't fatigue, and they will not stop following you — ever."

Alexandra stared up at the Doomguard. "So there's no one inside?"

Edna chuckled, a hissing, raspy sound. "They are soulless, bloodless, mindless, pitiless. Such marvelous toys." She snapped her fingers again to bring Alexandra's attention away from the Doomguard and back to her.

"The Doomguard's purpose is very simple. If you attempt to escape, it will kill you. If you attempt to cast any spells, it will kill you. If you attack it, or another prisoner, it will kill you." Then she said something in a language Alexandra didn't recognize, and with a sudden, smooth motion, the Doomguard drew its sword, seized Alexandra by the hair, and yanked her around so that she was facing the snake-woman across the table with the Doomguard at her back and the sword against her throat. She could feel the edge touching her skin, and stopped breathing because she could sense its sharpness. If she hiccuped, she was sure she'd lose her head.

Edna spoke again, and the Doomguard released her.

"See how strong and fast they are?" The inhuman woman smiled, and the pupils of her eyes compressed into slits. "My husband, dear Typhie, probably told how you horrible Eerie Island can be? In fact, we impose very little punishment on humanfolk. Stay in your cells after curfew, and don't cause trouble, and you're free to wander about and do as you please... mostly. If you have family or friends willing to send you reading and writing materials or games and toys, or, oh, craft supplies, let me know. I am not an unreasonable being. Gifts are always appreciated." Her eyes had taken on a yellow gleam in the torchlight, and one winked.

"It's really not so terrible here. But we lose so many guests, often within the first few weeks, because they don't believe me when I tell them that their Doomguard will kill them the very first time they test the rules." She shrugged her bare shoulders, in a gesture more serpentine than human. "Some decide, later, to commit suicide in much the same way."

Alexandra shivered, now not just from the cold.

"Anywhere that says 'Off-Limits' is off-limits. If you touch a door or gate that says that, your Doomguard will kill you," said Edna. "And the outer wall of this prison, which you can see when you go into the outer courtyard, is off-limits. You can walk up to it and touch it — but don't. Because —"

"My Doomguard will kill me," Alexandra finished.

Edna smiled. For the first time, her tongue flicked over her lips, reddish-black and forked. "Exactly."

"I'm waiting for a formal trial," Alexandra said. "They're supposed to let me know when the date will be."

Edna's laugh was sibilant and liquid. "I'll be sure to let you know."

Alexandra found the laugh un reassuring. Was everyone sent here without a trial, promised they'd get one eventually?

"Can I ask a question?"

Edna nodded.

"Does anyone ever really leave here?" Alexandra asked.

Edna leaned slowly back against her cushions, and her long tail arched and then coiled up beneath her, sliding against the stones.

"Everyone mortal leaves here eventually," she said. "There is no cemetery on Eerie Island."

She snapped her fingers again, and a different gate from the one the Doomguard had come through opened. "Go find yourself a cell. Any empty one will do. Make sure you like it, because you don't get to change your mind later. And really, truly, don't try to run, or attempt some pathetic wandless magic, or hide outside your cell, or anything foolish like that. Your Doomguard *will* kill you."

She picked her crossword puzzle book back up.

"Do I get dry clothes?" Alexandra asked.

Edna raised a greenish eyebrow. "That's another question. But yes, the goblins will bring you prison robes in the morning. If you'd like something more comfy..." She smiled again, showing gleaming white teeth. "That too can be... negotiated. Do you happen to know an eleven-letter word for an inability to express feelings, ending in 'a'?"

"No," Alexandra said numbly.

"Ah, well." Edna waved a hand, dismissing her. Alexandra walked through the open gate, and her Doomguard clanked along behind her.

There was a row of cells on the other side of the gate, with torches set in the wall opposite them. All of the cell doors were closed. About half had Doomguards standing motionless in front of them.

"I don't suppose you talk?" she said to her Doomguard as she walked down the corridor.

"They don't," said a gravelly male voice. Alexandra stopped, seeing a cowed face looking at her through the unbarred window of his cell door. His Doomguard stood just to the side, directly in front of the door latch.

"Is there a women's cell block?" Alexandra asked.

The man laughed. "You must be a Muggle-born."

"What if I am?" Alexandra said.

"Do you have Muggle relatives?" asked the cowed wizard, sounding interested. He leaned forward, thrusting his face a little further through the window. "Muggle friends? You must know a lot of Muggles." There was something very creepy about his voice.

More voices filled the stone corridor — hoots, jeers, male and female, calling her "princess" and "fresh blood."

A woman shouted, "Do you sing, little girl?"

"You're *very* young," said the man in the cell. "You must have done something *awful*." He leered. Alexandra could only see his nose, which was large and wrinkled, but she stepped back as he extended a hand toward her. She almost bumped into her Doomguard.

"I killed a man without a wand," she said.

Without waiting to see his reaction, she marched on, not glancing at the other cells. The shouting continued, so she kept walking until she found an unoccupied cell around a bend and nearly at the opposite end of the corridor from where she'd entered. The cell before it was also unoccupied, its door hanging open, while the last cell, on the opposite side, had a Doomguard in front of it, but whoever was inside was quiet, at least. No catcalling or whistling or taunting came from within.

The cell she entered was spartan. There was a threadbare mattress on a wooden frame, a blanket and a pillow, a table and chair, a dresser, and a stone pedestal with a sink and a piece of reflective metal hung on the wall above it, and next to that, a primitive commode that was just a hole cut in a wooden bench, like an outhouse.

"It's really not so terrible here," Alexandra mumbled sarcastically to herself. She walked through the open door.

The door swung shut and the lock clacked. She heard her Doomguard settle into position on the other side. The shouting and jeering soon died down. Alexandra stared at the door for a long time, but eventually cold and fatigue won. She peeled off her still-wet clothes and slid under the stiff, scratchy blanket on the bed. She turned her head away from the cell door.

## **\*Chapter 33\*: Cracks Beneath Your Feet**

Eerie Island was not like any prison Alexandra had heard of or seen on TV. Her only previous knowledge of wizard prisons came from Anna, whose father had been imprisoned for several months beneath Mt. Diablo in Northern California. Mr. Chu had not told his daughter much about the prison, though — only that he spent most of his time in solitary confinement and had been permitted a few things to read and nothing else.

Alexandra's first morning in her cell, she woke up to find her clothes had disappeared and been replaced by clean, plain robes, several layers of them, suitable for winter, and stockings and thick slippers. She had been so exhausted, she'd never heard anyone enter her cell. She shuddered. It was cold, and she could still feel the freezing water of the lake.

The wizard in the cell next to hers, an old man named Oren, emerged in breeches, a high-collared long-sleeved black shirt, and a pilgrim-style black hat. He sniffed with more dignity and condescension than any prisoner had a right to, Alexandra thought — it wasn't as if he were any less a prisoner than her.

Oren told her that the witches generally showered at dawn, and since she'd slept in, she'd just have to wait until the next morning if she wanted to join them. He didn't smell as if he showered very often.

The somber presence of her neighbor seemed to stifle most of the jeering this morning. Alexandra followed behind him and his Doomguard, assuming he would lead her to breakfast.

All the prisoners headed into a long room with open tables. They filed through the doorway one by one — prisoner, Doomguard, prisoner, Doomguard, prisoner, Doomguard. Everyone seemed accustomed to this procession and nobody got jammed up, blocked the way, or even jostled one another. The pairing of animated armor golems with prisoners was a very efficient means of maintaining order. Alexandra guessed that those inclined to cut in line or otherwise cause trouble quickly fell prey to what Edna had warned her about.

Remembering the way someone had efficiently replaced her clothes with clean ones during the night, she wondered if she would see food simply materialize on the tables like in Charmbridge. Perhaps the prison was served by house-elves?

Instead, all the prisoners lined up to collect bowls full of oatmeal from a large cauldron. There was also a pile of dry, stale-looking doughnuts. Serving the oatmeal, and periodically bringing out more bags full of doughnuts which they dumped on the pile, were not elves, but goblins. At a separate table, a goblin in a hooded jacket ladled watery pumpkin juice into glasses.

Alexandra watched them with a neutral expression, trying not to make her scrutiny obvious. The goblins were a weathered, black-eyed, surly lot, and there were no words exchanged between them and those they served; indeed, the goblins didn't even talk to each other much.

She carried her bowl of oatmeal, a spoon, a doughnut, and a glass of pumpkin juice to the end of a table that hadn't filled yet. Her Doomguard came to a stop behind her. She could feel it looming over her as she ate. Ready to yank her head back and slit her throat if she tried to cast a spell, or bolted for the exit, or maybe if she threw her doughnut at someone.

"Ah, our newest guest," said a man with handsome, swarthy features and a gleaming grin beneath a thick handlebar mustache. He stood on the other side of the table holding his own bowl. "Greetings. My name is Pasquale Mercurio. I take it no one has welcomed you to our private island community yet?"

"Actually, a sphinx and a lamia did," Alexandra said. She felt little apprehension about any of these people, even with so many eyes on her. Hoots and whistles floated across the tables when the man sat down across from her, but if what Edna had told her was true, there wasn't much anyone could do to her. The Doomguard at Mercurio's back, like the one at hers, meant all he could do was talk.

He nodded. "Our wardens will have told you what not to do to avoid —" He jerked a thumb over his shoulder at his Doomguard, then drew a hand across his throat and made a "kk-kk-kk" sound. "But you don't know how things work here."

"No," Alexandra said warily.

"There are really only two rules. First, don't do any of the things Edna told you not to do. The Doomguards will kill you. The first time you see it, you'll be convinced."

This had been repeated often enough that Alexandra already believed it, but she nodded.

"Second, the primary punishment inflicted upon those of us confined here is boredom and discomfort. You can alleviate this, if you are lucky enough to have friends or family on the outside."

Alexandra remembered Edna saying something about getting books and writing materials. "And if I do?"

Mercurio's grin broadened and he leaned toward her a little. "Our beloved wardens are eminently influenceable — to a point. You saw Edna's collection of objects d'art? All 'gifts.' She also has a fondness for crossword puzzle books and something called seppuku."

"I think you mean sudoku."

Mercurio waved a hand. "Muggle puzzles. She and Typhon get bored too, you see."

"So, assuming I can get my family and friends to send me stuff..."

"Then you can get better food, better clothes, library privileges, furnishings for your cell..." He sighed. "Life is much better here for those who have friends."

Alexandra sampled the oatmeal. It was thin and almost tasteless. "Do you have friends?"

Mercurio's handsome mustache drooped slightly. "Ah, you see the cause of my grief. Sadly, it turns out that loyalty and honor among thieves is rare, and my friends have proven to be the sort who forget their friend Pasquale once he's been sent across the lake."

"That sucks. Why are you telling me this?" Alexandra asked.

Pasquale Mercurio shifted in his seat and squared his shoulders. Speaking gravely, but now in a much lower voice, he said, "You are the youngest prisoner I've ever seen here. You may be taken advantage of by older, predatory rogues who see a naive young witch, an easy mark —" He glanced to his left, where other prisoners filled the other end of the table. They had given Alexandra and Pasquale a little space, but not enough not to be overheard.

"Not like you," Alexandra said.

"I would be pleased to offer my experience and protection."

"Protection from what? If everything you've told me is true, no one but the Doomguards can hurt me."

Mercurio hesitated. "It is useful to have friends on the inside as well as on the outside."

"What do you want?" Alexandra asked flatly.

The mustached wizard leaned forward and whispered, "I want to join the Dark Convention."

Alexandra stiffened. "What?"

"Don't worry about the Doomguards. They are automata without intelligence. Isn't that right, you rusty, hulking piece of mindless junk metal?"

Neither his Doomguard nor Alexandra's reacted, which she did not find terribly convincing.

"We know about your father," Mercurio said, lowering his voice to a whisper again.

"Everyone knows about my father," Alexandra said. "It pretty much stopped being a secret when I was twelve. And who's 'we'?"

Looking put off, Pasquale Mercurio studied her a moment. "Why would the daughter of Abraham Thorn allow herself to be imprisoned here? Why would *he* allow it?"

Alexandra studied him back. Did he think she could just send Aurors and Inquisitors blowing away in the wind? Or that she was only here on some secret mission for her father and could leave any time she liked? His question did make her wonder whether her father knew she was here. Well, of course he did. Could he get her out of here? And did she want him to? She definitely wanted out of here, but she didn't want to discuss her father with Mr. Mercurio.

"That's a pretty personal question," she said, hoping she sounded sarcastic and not defensive.

"Perhaps," Mercurio continued, still whispering, "you are being used as bait. I'll wager the charms and wards have been increased seven-fold since your arrival." His mustache sagged slightly while he pondered this.

Alexandra pondered this also. Was it possible that she had been sent here because the Confederation hoped her father would try to rescue her?

If so, surely he wouldn't fall for such an obvious trap. Which brought her back to the question of whether she wanted to believe her father would, in fact, take action to free her. She had renounced him and his war against the Confederation. It was too late for second thoughts, and she couldn't go begging for his help.

She still wasn't sure what Pasquale Mercurio wanted, though.

"We thought —" Mercurio whispered, and he stopped. His expression drooped. "Well. I apologize for interrupting your breakfast." He started to get up.

We. Was there some gang here in the prison after all? A secret coven? What use did they have for her? Alexandra thought quickly. It might be foolish to get caught up with criminal warlocks, but was it worse than being dismissed as a hapless teenager?

"I'm sure you would like to join the Dark Convention, if it means getting out of here," she whispered. "Just like everyone else. What's in it for them? Or me?"

Mercurio settled back into his seat, his eyebrows rising.

"I don't expect my father to break me out of here," she said. This was easier to say with assurance, since it was true.

Mercurio frowned.

"That doesn't mean I don't have... connections," she said. "But I'm not telling you anything more until I have some reason to believe you're worth talking to."

If Pasquale Mercurio and whatever compatriots comprised his "we" thought she was valuable enough to befriend, maybe they were valuable enough to let them befriend her. Alexandra had no idea where this might get her, but after one day on Eerie Island, she was ready to pursue any possibility of not spending the rest of her short life here.

"Then get yourself library privileges," said the mustachioed wizard. "If you can do that, we'll meet there."

"How did you get yourself library privileges, without friends?" Alexandra asked.

He grinned. "Simple. I won a riddle contest." He placed both hands on the table, pushed himself to his feet, and walked away, his Doomguard clanking behind him.

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Eerie Island was mostly run by the inmates. As far as Alexandra could tell, the only staff consisted of Edna, Typhon, the Doomguards, and a

handful of goblins. The goblins served food and did the laundry. They were a poor and surly substitute for house-elves, and their attitudes didn't suggest their service was any more voluntary.

Everything else was done by the prisoners, and this seemed to be mostly a self-organized effort. Everyone cleaned their own cells, and some system had evolved to assign the jobs of sweeping common areas and courtyards and scrubbing the showers. The prison was small and Alexandra didn't think there were more than a hundred people here, so there wasn't that much work.

Some of the inmates didn't work at all. Alexandra suspected a few of them had gone mad.

An old woman in tattered robes whose hair stuck out from her head in stiff, gray strands like a bush walked around muttering, but sometimes she waved her fists at the sky and cursed the Stars Above. Someone told Alexandra that Mad Haddie claimed she could summon Powers. Obviously she hadn't, as she was still here and the Doomguards hadn't killed her.

The wizard down her cell block who'd greeted her on her first night began following her around. He was tall and extraordinarily thin under his cowl robe. He ignored her when she told him to leave her alone. She knew he couldn't do anything to her, but she couldn't do anything to him either.

When not doing chores, most of the prisoners strolled or sat around all day, played wizard chess or Witches' Whist or whatever other games they'd managed to acquire, or read books. One wizard spent his days assembling odd sculptures from rocks and bones and feathers. The more privileged inmates had quills, and they wrote or drew. There was a tiny garden, which Alexandra was told had only a few plots, which were rarely available.

They were all expected to return to their cells after dinner; Alexandra was told those who didn't found themselves facing Typhon or Edna, and sometimes never returned to their cells at all. The cell doors locked magically, and unlocked in the morning. Goblins, apparently, could enter and leave their locked cells at will, and brought laundry and occasionally things sent from friends or family on the outside.

Other than the ever-present Doomguards and the silent, scurrying goblins, there was little sign of their overseers. In her first week after arrival, Alexandra didn't see the lamia or the sphinx again.

On her seventh day on Eerie Island, as she sat on a bench in the prison courtyard, depressed and beginning to despair of ever receiving word from the outside, a hush fell around her. She looked up, expecting to see Typhon or Edna. Instead everyone's attention was focused on the inner wall of the courtyard.

A bald man in the same prison-issue robes most of them wore had scaled halfway up the wall. His hands and feet stuck to the stone as if he were a spider. He was moving quickly, already out of reach of the Doomguard below him, and Alexandra watched with everyone else, silently rooting for him though she had no idea who he was or what he'd done to be sent here.

Standing a few feet from the wall, his Doomguard raised its sword and flung it with one arm. The sword spun through the air and skewered the wall-climbing wizard.

There was an awful moment of silence, and then the man fell to the ground, struck it with a thud, and lay there, lifeless.

The Doomguard bent over, grabbed his ankle, and dragged his body away, smearing a trail of blood along behind it.

Everyone in the courtyard returned to their conversations, card games, or silent brooding, treating the death of a fellow prisoner like just a moment's distraction.

"What happens to the bodies?" Alexandra asked the creepy, cowl-wizard with the gravelly voice, who was, as usual, only a few yards away.

"The goblins take them away," he said, grinning as if he found the whole thing very entertaining. "It's the only way most of us leave here."

Alexandra received no letters. She finally asked her neighbor, Oren, about owls. He snorted and said that no birds were allowed to land on Eerie Island. This made Alexandra worry about Charlie again. She knew the raven was still out there, though never close enough to heed her command to fly away. Or perhaps her familiar simply continued to refuse to hear it. There must have been islands nearby where the raven could take shelter. Seagulls sometimes flew overhead, though she'd never seen any land.

Letters, Oren said, came with the weekly goblin packet. He told her not to be surprised if most of her correspondence never made it to her.

During the time she spent wandering the small courtyard and dining commons that were the extent of her world outside her cell, she studied Eerie Island with her Witch's Sight. She wasn't able to see much that was magic, aside from the Doomguards, which she could now sense even with her eyes closed.

It was on her eighth day on the island, in which she paced back and forth along an X-shaped path, forming doggerel verses in her head just for the practice while wondering how long it would take before she'd go mad with boredom, that she jerked to a halt. Behind her, her Doomguard stopped instantly.

She'd been unconsciously tracing a path she sensed with something other than her Witch's Sight. Once she realized what she was looking for, she saw it. Like the lines of magic beneath the Ozarks and Chicago, and the one that ran through Larkin Mills, there were cracks in the world beneath Eerie Island. Two cracks, and they intersected beneath her feet. They were deep — much deeper than the other ones, down below where the island rose from the bottom of the lake. That's why it had taken her a while to sense them... but they were there.

She looked up at her stalker, the cowl-wizard, and gave him a creepy smile of her own. He tilted his head, bemused.

The next day, letters came flying down the rows between the locked cells in the predawn hour. Alexandra leaped to her feet when one sailed past the Doomguard and between the bars of her cell. She almost cried with eagerness as she opened the envelope, hoping it was from Anna or Julia or even Claudia — really, anyone she knew in the outside world, someone who knew where she was and had not forgotten her.

Instead, it was a one-line note, unsigned. Alexandra thought the handwriting looked familiar, but she barely had time to read it —

*The wardens are prisoners too.*



— before it burst into flames.

Alexandra dropped it and shook her fingers, and watched as fine black ash drifted to the floor. The Doomguard did not stir.

She thought about the note for the rest of the day.

Just before sunset, she went to the arch at the front of the main courtyard that led to the entrance, where prisoners knocked on the gate if they wanted to speak to the wardens. The cowed wizard followed her, as usual, but held back when she walked directly to the gate.

Many eyes followed her. Pasquale Mercurio watched her, sitting next to a thin, weasel-faced woman with short hair and hard, knotty hands. Alexandra hadn't spoken to Mercurio since their first conversation, but she had seen him and the woman and another wizard walking in and out of the library. From what she could tell, fewer than a dozen prisoners had library privileges.

The courtyard beyond echoed with a dull clonk when she knocked against the gate. There was an immense yawn, followed by heavy, padding footsteps, and suddenly a human face surrounded by a lion's mane descended into view upside down, peering at her between the bars of the gate. The sphinx was leaning over from the level above hers.

"What is it?" asked Typhon.

"I'd like to request library privileges," Alexandra said.

Typhon snorted. "See Edna. She handles those things."

"I understand you can grant them too."

Typhon snorted again, and showed his triangular teeth in a grin. "I can, but I don't think you want them that badly."

"You like riddles," Alexandra said.

Typhon's head disappeared. Then the massive leonine figure fell from above, landing on the stone courtyard on the other side of the gate with almost no sound despite his size. He walked in a tight circle, as if pursuing his own tail, until he stood before her looking down at her through the iron bars.

"You failed the first challenge I gave you," the sphinx said, "and that was an easy one."

"I was starving, frozen, and barely awake," Alexandra said. "I'd just been dragged away from home, hit over the head, dunked in a freezing lake, and hauled off to prison all in one day. It was hardly a fair contest."

"I really will eat you."

"I thought we don't taste good."

"You don't. But traditions must be observed." The sphinx's tail swished across the stones of the front courtyard lazily. "Also, I need an occasional meal of manflesh. Or girlflesh. It's part of my nature, and thus part of my contract."

Alexandra smiled slightly at the tiny confirmation. Typhon was in some way bound here.

"I want library privileges," she said.

The sphinx opened his mouth and startled her with a roar that silenced all noise in the prisoners' courtyard behind her.

"You're a slight thing and too young to throw yourself into my jaws," said the sphinx. "There's no one here sentimental. Whatever tragic part you've cast for yourself, abandon it. I don't care if you are the daughter of a great Dark Wizard, I fear him not, and your wit is no match for mine. Go back to your dreary days scratching things on the walls of your cell, and have your father send Edna something nice in gold and wormwood."

"I challenge you to a riddle contest," Alexandra said, in a loud, carrying voice. "For library privileges."

The sphinx's expression didn't change, but his eyes, in the long silence that followed, were embers that lit ancient terrors in her brain, as if she'd just recalled a thousand generations of hiding from things that ate young girls.

The gate before her grated upward. When it was fully raised, Typhon said, "Enter."

Alexandra stepped through, trying not to shake, followed by her Doomguard.

"Little fool," Typhon said. "But a monster must eat." The gate dropped behind her with a clang.

Alexandra glanced over her shoulder. Behind the Doomguard and the closed gate, the prisoners she'd left behind in the common courtyard moved toward the arch, wanting to see the spectacle. Alexandra wondered if they'd be taking bets, and how many times they'd watched Typhon devour someone. Her creepy, cowed stalker stared at her.

"The first to miss a riddle loses," Typhon said, "and I always go first."

"Fine." Alexandra tried to ignore the thudding of her increased heartbeat. She was pretty good at riddles. There were books of them in the Charmbridge library. But the sphinx had nothing better to do all day than lie around and think up new riddles. How old was he, anyway?

Typhon said, "A maiden can slip her finger inside it, and fiddle with it when she's bored. But though a bride has the same one forever, the best man always has it before the groom. What is it?"

Alexandra crossed her arms and screwed her face up in disgust. "Dirty old monster. The answer is a wedding ring."

Typhon grinned sharply. "Your turn. This is just a warm-up round."

"What?" Alexandra dropped her arms to her side and clenched her fists. "That's not fair!"

"First round doesn't count." The sphinx lowered his head until his teeth flashed before her eyes and his hot breath was in her face. "My game, my prison, my rules."

*He plays dirty too*, Alexandra thought. Fine. She had thought of a number of hard riddles, figuring that she might have to go more than one round. She said:

*"A man who was not a man,  
Saw a bird that was not a bird,  
On a branch that was not a branch,  
And hit it and did not hit it,  
With a stone that was not a stone.  
How is this possible?"*

Typhon tossed his head back and roared laughter.

"By Plato's beard, girl, what sort of fool are you to test me with such an ancient riddle?" He shook his mane. "A near-sighted eunuch threw a pumice stone at a bat on a reed and missed. Pathetic!"

Alexandra clenched her jaw. "Your turn. This one counts."

"So be it." Typhon nodded.

*"The beginning of sorrow, but necessary for happiness,  
Always in risk, never in danger,  
Seen in sunlight, but always in darkness,  
What am I?"*

Alexandra closed her eyes and ran through the words in her mind.

"Well?" Typhon demanded.

"Do you have to be so impatient?" Alexandra opened her eyes and gave him her most fearful look. "Best two out of three?"

The sphinx slowly extended a paw, and it settled on the ground in front of her. He moved forward until he loomed over her, casting a shadow over her and her Doomguard, and his eyes glowed faintly, eerily red.

"No," he growled, in a voice that came from somewhere very deep, and Alexandra thought she could actually hear him salivating. It raised gooseflesh on her arms.

He was not playing now.

"Well then," she said. "The letter 's'."

The sphinx settled back on his haunches. He growled.

"Your turn." All pretense of humor was gone now.

Alexandra took a breath. Now for the real thing.

"What's directly beneath your feet, but farther than you can ever reach?"

The sphinx looked down, thought a moment, then looked back up at her with a smile.

"The center of the Earth," he said.

"Wrong," Alexandra said.

The sphinx blinked. "What do you mean, wrong? It's a perfectly good answer!"

"It's not the right answer," Alexandra said.

Typhon almost lunged at her this time, and once more loomed over her threateningly, with his clawed forefeet on either side of her and his hot breath stirring the hair on her head. "You don't get to disqualify answers, girl! If a riddle has more than one answer, it's a poor riddle!"

"Like the riddle you gave me when I first got here?" she said. "You cheat!"

"My game, my rules," said Typhon. "And you'll recall I didn't eat you, even though you didn't give the right answer."

"Well then, you don't get the real answer," Alexandra said.

The sphinx glared at her and growled. His tail lashed.

He was a riddling beast. She was counting on his curiosity.

Finally he said, "Very well. Tell me your answer, and I'll decide if it's a valid one and better than mine."

Alexandra glanced back over her shoulder again. Witches and wizards were pressed against the metal bars behind her, listening to the exchange. Their Doomguards formed a solid armored line behind them. She turned to Typhon, and gestured for him to come closer.

"I'll whisper it in your ear," she said.

The sphinx narrowed his eyes, but lowered his head.

Alexandra cupped a hand to his ear and said, "The World Away."

Typhon pulled away and looked down at her with an expression of confusion and suspicion. "What?"

"You know what I mean," Alexandra said. She smiled, and spoke in a whisper, so that the sphinx once more had to lower his head to hear her.

"You're a prisoner here too," she said. "There are cracks beneath your feet, cracks in the world, but you can't reach them."

She closed her eyes and concentrated, and with all her will, focused on the lines that stretched across the great lake to intersect at this one place.

Far below, in the ground beneath the island and below the water of the lake, the cracks fissured open, like lips parting, and where they intersected, magic shot out into the world, until the pulse of disturbance subsided.

The island did not shake, as if with a tremor, but it seemed to *tilt*, just for a moment, or slide sideways. Not an inch, not even a fraction of an inch, but a movement one would never sense without magic. She felt it, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw that the sphinx had too.

Now if only she didn't get cut down by the Doomguard — could it sense what she had just done? Would Typhon stay it? The air had a peculiar smell to it. The sphinx's nose wrinkled as if he smelled it too.

"How...?" he asked. His voice was a growl from somewhere deep, the word almost hidden in the sound of his wonder, and she saw lust and longing in his eyes, but not for her flesh, or the answer to a riddle.

She said, "I want library privileges. And mail and lighthouse privileges. And something besides these rough robes to wear."

The monster's eyes pulsed blood-red. Alexandra dared to lay a hand on his great mane and lean closer, even as his claws scoured the stones by her feet.

"Not yet," she whispered, so softly that the sphinx's ear had to twitch in her direction even though her lips were only inches away. "But soon — give me what I want, and both of us will be free."

## **\*Chapter 34\*: The Plan is Not Without Its Risks**

Alexandra met Pasquale Mercurio the next day in the prison library. They sat together at one of two old, cracked tables, joined by two other people: the weasel-faced witch Alexandra had seen with Mercurio earlier, and a bearded, dark-skinned man with a broad, flat nose, dark eyes, and a suspicious glare that never faded but seemed most intense when turned in Alexandra's direction.

"That was nicely done," Mercurio said to Alexandra. "Of course you realize that Typhon decides before the contest begins whether or not he's going to let you win. For library privileges or other trivial boons, he rarely eats anyone, unless you've annoyed him or you're simply an idiot. But the occasional loser keeps people from pestering him too often."

"He didn't let me win," Alexandra said.

Mercurio shook his head ruefully, with a pitying smile. "I'm sure you are a clever girl, but Typhon is ancient. He probably knows every riddle ever told."

The "library" was just another old building, not much bigger than a couple of their cells, which contained the two tables and some beaten old shelves full of books and scrolls. The books and scrolls were weathered, faded, and mostly on the verge of falling apart from age and repeated handling. As small as the selection was, Alexandra didn't doubt that everything in the library was heavily read; there wasn't much else to do on Eerie Island. She had spent her first hour in the room looking at every single title. Naturally, there was nothing in the way of magical content, instruction, or education. Histories, memoirs, biographies, long-forgotten political treatises, rants about the social issues of wizards living in previous centuries — and, Alexandra was bemused to discover, half a shelf containing the complete works of Jerwig Findlewell. *The Darkness That Threatens Us All*, *Squibs Among Us*, *The Wicked Will of Witches*, *Beware Dark Wizards!*, and *A Call to Crusade*.

Also by Jerwig Findlewell: *Wand Tips for the Collector*, *A Collector's Guide to Old World Wand Tips*, and *Early Hellenic Wand Tips*. Apparently, besides warning against modernism and the Dark Convention, her father's old nemesis had been an authority on wand tips.

There were also Muggle books. These were mostly old paperback Westerns and romance novels, but there were a few discarded elementary school textbooks, a microwave oven user's manual, and the third and fifth volumes of the 1943 Encyclopedia Britannica.

There was no librarian. One simply signed one's name in a box of cards kept for each book. Alexandra didn't know what prevented books from disappearing or being destroyed. Like much of the prison, it appeared that prisoners could do what they wanted as long as they didn't do violence to each other or annoy those who ran it.

No one else was in the library this morning, just Alexandra, Pasquale Mercurio, and his two associates. And their Doomguards, of course.

"You all know who our young friend is," Mercurio said to the other two. He turned his smile on Alexandra again. "This is Elisabet Todd. One of the finest potioners you'll ever meet."

The hard, thin woman nodded minutely, eyes fixed stonily on Alexandra as if she were measuring ingredients in her mind for some fatal concoction.

The other man spoke before Mercurio could. "Cygnus Nero," he said. "I'm a great admirer of your father."

"Really? Why?" Alexandra asked.

Nero clearly didn't expect that question. "Well, he's... very accomplished. And a formidable wizard."

"Cygnus thinks when Abraham Thorn starts his revolution, we will all be freed," Elisabet Todd said.

Alexandra started to tell them she didn't know anything about that, but then remembered that she wanted these people to think she was useful, at least until she figured out what they were up to. "I see."

Elisabet Todd said, "So, the question is, why are you here?"

Alexandra said, "I hexed a Confederation bureaucrat."

"They send juveniles to prison for that nowadays?" asked Cygnus Nero.

"They do when you're the daughter of an 'accomplished' and 'formidable' wizard and rumored to be a member of the Dark Convention," Alexandra said. "Also, I might have almost killed him."

"You speak oddly," said Nero.

"I was raised by Muggles," Alexandra said. "Got a problem with that?"

Nero's nostrils flared. Then he shook his head. "Don't care about Muggles. Not like your friend."

"My friend?" Alexandra asked.

"The Gaunt Man. The tall fellow who's been following you around," said Mercurio.

Alexandra grimaced. "That's what people call him?" One of the benefits of library privileges was that the creepy cowed wizard didn't have them, so she now had another place besides her cell to avoid him.

"That's what Muggles called him. He killed quite a few of them before the Aurors caught him."

Alexandra's eyes widened. The cowed wizard was a serial killer? "He's not my friend," she said. "He'd better not be yours."

"Not at all," said Mercurio. "We have no interest in his vile practices, and speaking for myself, I find Muggles quite entertaining. Why would I want to

hurt them?"

Alexandra leaned back in her chair and folded her arms. "So, you wanted to talk to me after I proved I could get something from Typhon or Edna."

The three adults looked at each other.

"First," Mercurio said, "are you with the Dark Convention?"

"It's not like the Dark Convention has a membership card. They don't even have a leader. Not even my father." This was her understanding of the shadowy network of Dark Wizards and malcontent warlocks, practitioners of unapproved magic, and various other Beings who chafed beneath the Confederation's laws. She hoped she wasn't revealing her ignorance to someone who knew better.

Mercurio said, "You know what we mean. Are you affiliated with them? Do you have friends among them? Do you represent your father?"

"Maybe," Alexandra said.

"Maybe you're playing games," Elisabet Todd said. "Maybe you're a little girl pretending to have contacts and influence that you don't."

"Maybe I have no reason to trust you," Alexandra shot back. "You could be snitches for all I know." She started to push her chair back, as if to leave.

All three of them frowned at that.

"What would you say," asked Mercurio, "if I said we have a way of getting out of this place?"

Alexandra stopped moving her chair. "I'd ask why you're still here. Also, are you *really* sure these things aren't eavesdropping on us?" She gestured at the Doomguards.

"We've tested that, many times," Elisabet Todd snapped. "If Typhon or Edna knew what's said and done in their presence, we would not be here."

Mercurio said smoothly, "Knowing how to get away is not the same as being able to do it. There are... obstacles."

Alexandra couldn't help laughing. "No kidding. That's kind of the point of a prison, right?"

Nero and Todd responded with humorless flat stares, but Mercurio nodded. "Indeed. What I mean is that there are certain obstacles preventing us from executing an otherwise viable departure."

"Obstacles like bars, walls, Doomguards, no wands, and a sphinx and a lamia?" Alexandra said.

Mercurio's smile was forced now. Nero and Todd still listened silently. "Miss Quick, I have been here for almost four years now. Cygnus has been here for seven, and Elisabet, seventeen. We have spent all that time observing, thinking, and planning. We know far more than what you have managed to glean in your few days here."

"What he's saying," said Elisabet Todd, "is that you should shut up and listen. Assuming you have anything to contribute, which I doubt. Cygnus and Pasquale are overly impressed by your father, despite the fact that he's done nothing in all the time he's been the great Enemy of the Confederation except wreck a train and destroy some schools."

"So you've been here since before I was born," Alexandra said to her. "What have you done?"

Shadows thickened around the older witch's features. "I've gotten rid of more than one annoying pest," she said in a low voice. "Despite the Doomguards. You have a smart mouth. You might want to watch what comes out of it."

"Ladies," said Mercurio, "this is not constructive."

Cygnus Nero said, "Let's stop dancing around the maypole. If you have joined your father's cause and are with the Dark Convention, Alexandra Quick, then we want you as an ally. If not, let us not waste each other's time."

Alexandra considered all the things she could say, truthful or otherwise. She wasn't convinced that these three weren't just desperate cons. On the other hand, she might have convinced Typhon, but she still hadn't worked out a way off the island yet. Jumping into the World Away with an ancient monster might be worse than staying on Eerie Island.

"The Thorn Circle watches over me," she said. "As for the Dark Convention, I don't think much of them one way or the other. I'm loyal to my friends."

"Will your father help you?" Nero asked eagerly.

"If he were going to get me out of here, I think he'd already have done it," Alexandra said. "But once I'm out of here, yes, he will." *If I ask him*, she thought.

Mercurio said, "There are two immediate obstacles to leaving Eerie Island. The first is the Doomguards; we can do practically nothing until we escape them, and without wands, that is difficult. The second problem is getting off the island, which is also difficult without magic."

"But you have solutions to both problems," Alexandra said.

Mercurio smiled. "We do. The problem we do not have a solution for is Typhon and Edna. Getting off the island is one thing. Fleeing them is another. No one knows how formidable they truly are, but I wouldn't like to challenge them even with a wand. We have a plan that could get us on a boat off the island, but if Typhon and Edna pursue us, we'll be lucky if we only drown."

Alexandra almost laughed. It was like discovering someone who had the other half of a puzzle. She allowed a slow smile to stretch across her face.

"You need a distraction," she said. "You were hoping maybe my father, or the Dark Convention, has some way of dealing with the wardens of Eerie

Island?"

"Yes," Pasquale Mercurio said.

Alexandra let her smile become a grin, radiating confidence. "If we can get away from here, I can deal with Typhon and Edna."

"You can?" Nero asked.

"You're asking us to just take that on faith?" Elisabet demanded.

"I didn't come here unprepared," Alexandra said. "I *am* the daughter of Abraham Thorn. He has a plan. And the Dark Convention has known about this prison and its wardens forever. If you want to get past them, you need me. But I have to get outside the walls first."

The other three looked at each other. Alexandra held herself erect, chin arrogantly tilted upward, assuming the role of the Dark sorceress they imagined her to be, while hoping they didn't have some additional test for her. Or that they didn't turn out to be a bunch of losers who had no plan and were only going to get her in worse trouble.

No words passed between the adults, but finally Mercurio nodded.

An old Asian man with a white beard down to his waist shuffled through the door, followed by his Doomguard.

"Let's talk tomorrow," said Mercurio.

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"The goblin boat comes every week, but not on a precise schedule," Mercurio told her the next day. "It also comes when there is a new guest, such as yourself. But the only time it can be relied upon to come immediately is when someone dies."

They sat cross-legged in the courtyard playing wizard chess, with their Doomguards standing sentinel behind them. Alexandra didn't know how Pasquale Mercurio had obtained the magical pieces for a wizard chess set, but she assumed he'd had something to bribe Edna with at some point. He was a better player than her, but she still had hopes of rescuing her bishop from between a pair of dagger-wielding pawns.

"Your plan is to escape on the goblin boat?" Alexandra said. "I guess we might be able to overpower the goblins, even without wands." She didn't think she'd feel bad about jumping the goblins who'd dragged her behind their boat across the lake. "But what about the Doomguards?"

"Ah," said Mercurio, moving his rook. It raised an iron-capped mace and smashed one of her knights off his horse. She grimaced at the loss of the piece she hadn't seen threatened. "As I said, the goblin boat comes immediately when someone dies, to remove the remains. The goblins here would mutiny if they had to spend a single night on the island with a deceased wizard. They have a terrible fear of ghosts, you see."

"Okay," Alexandra said. She directed her bishop to smite one of Mercurio's pawns. The pawns in this set were quite belligerent; the bishop prevailed, but was left with his peaked hat askew and his cassock slashed. "So we wait for someone to die?"

"No. We don't wait." Mercurio began using his pawns to wear Alexandra's material down. "That is the solution to both the boat and the Doomguards. Someone has to die."

Alexandra looked around. Since she'd begun hanging out with Pasquale Mercurio, Elisabet Todd, and Cygnus Nero, the Gaunt Man didn't follow her constantly, but she could see him across the courtyard.

She wasn't sure she was willing to murder someone, even a murderer.

Mercurio grinned. "Check." While his pawns had been dragging down her second knight, his queen had moved closer to threaten her king. She could see that this game wasn't going to end well for her.

"What does a Doomguard do when the prisoner it's guarding dies?" she asked.

"It returns to the armory, until it is reassigned," Mercurio nodded. "You begin to see the outlines of the plan."

"I think so." Alexandra was not actually sure she saw it any better than she'd seen his stealthy check of her king. She moved her king, who was immediately confronted by a knight's horse rearing before him. "Even if Elisabet can make a Death Draught, it seems like there are some holes in this plan before we even get to the boat and Typhon and Edna."

"Checkmate," Mercurio said.

Alexandra sighed. Mercurio gathered his set and dropped the pieces into a wooden box, then rose to his feet. "Shall we take a walk?"

"Sure." Alexandra accepted his hand up. There weren't very many places to walk to. As always, the Doomguards followed them.

"Elisabet cannot brew potions," Mercurio said once they were out of the main courtyard and walking along the high wall surrounding the small inner complex that defined their world. "She has no wand. She does, however, possess an impressive knowledge of poisons."

"So your plan is to actually kill someone?"

"Not quite. She'll only be mostly dead."

Alexandra stopped to turn that over in her mind. "She — *mostly* dead?"

"Keep walking," Mercurio said. Alexandra didn't know why it mattered, since the Doomguards just stopped and then followed again to match their pace, but she did. As they rounded a corner that took them out of sight of the nearest prisoners, he said, "She believes her poison will give her the appearance of death, enough to fool the Doomguards and the goblins."

"How about Typhon and Edna?"

"They don't generally inspect corpses."

"What if they do?"

"Then Typhon will probably eat Elisabet. The plan is not without its risks."

Alexandra snorted. "And nobody has ever tried this before? The goblins would have to be pretty stupid not to think a witch might try to fake her own death."

"Oh, it has been tried. That's why the goblins stab corpses through the heart and then cut off their heads."

Alexandra stopped again. "What's your plan for that?"

"We — that is, Cygnus and myself — will volunteer to carry Elisabet's body to the boat. The goblins don't like to do that themselves, and they can't get a Doomguard to do it once it has been sent back to the armory. Before the goblins begin their grisly task, we will overpower them and steal the boat."

"What about the Doomguards?" Alexandra wasn't sure about the goblins being easy to overpower, but the Doomguards certainly weren't.

"We have a plan for escaping our Doomguards," Mercurio said. "But you must get away from yours on your own." He looked over his shoulder at the two armored golems following them. "Can you do that?"

"Yes," Alexandra said confidently, though she wasn't sure how. "But this relies on all of us making it to the boat at once, with Elisabet in a coffin. And then we have to fight goblins."

"As I said, the plan is not without its risks."

"The plan sounds terrible," Alexandra said.

Mercurio smiled. "I assure you, I have escaped from more impossible situations. Cygnus and I both, in our own ways, are master escape artists. We have been planning this for quite some time. Trust on your part is required. The Doomguards and the goblins are obstacles, but the Doomguards are mindless and do only as commanded. The goblins are lazy and complacent. If it were only them we had to worry about, we would both be long gone. What has kept us on this island, checkmating our every scheme, are its wardens. The accursed sphinx and his lamia wife, we cannot outrun, overpower, or escape. Even had we wands, I am not sure I'd take the chance. They are exceedingly powerful Beings, and I suspect their powers and their traps are even more extensive than we know." He turned to Alexandra and regarded her with an expression that was at once fervent, hopeful, and greedy. "That's where you come in. Tell me, Miss Quick. You say your father will intervene on your behalf. You can call upon assistance from the Dark Convention. How will they secure our escape from those two?"

Alexandra said, "You'll have to trust me."

Mercurio's expression darkened. "Trust you? We're putting our lives in your hands, girl. If you — or your father — don't come through, we all get eaten, or worse."

"Including me," Alexandra said. "So either you trust me or you don't. Just like I'm trusting you'll somehow get past the Doomguards and the goblins."

The wizard didn't seem satisfied by this, but Alexandra didn't think he had any right to object when he was keeping his own part of the plan hidden. Finally, he nodded. "Very well. We're all in this together. You realize, of course, that should you betray us or prove unable to deliver as promised, we will do our very best to make you suffer before we're caught."

Alexandra tried a grin she hadn't used before, one that showed teeth and no mirth. Imagining herself to be the daughter of a Dark Wizard, just as she had when she was in sixth grade, before she'd learned she really was the daughter of a Dark Wizard. "Likewise."

She thought about adding something about crossing the daughter of Abraham Thorn, but she would rather be intimidating in her own right, so she just met Pasquale Mercurio's gaze until he blinked.

"Very well then," he said. "I will tell you when to expect something."

The two of them walked back to the courtyard, their Doomguards clanking along behind. The other prisoners had observed their walk, and Alexandra realized as a few of them wagged their eyebrows at Mercurio that they had gotten the wrong idea. Mercurio grinned and wagged his eyebrows back.

"You —" she hissed.

"Shh," he whispered, running a hand through her hair. "Would you rather they believe we are conspiring to escape?"

He left her at the edge of the tables in the fading sunlight, fuming and trying to ignore Mad Haddie and the Gaunt Man, the one's interest judgmental and the other's creepy.

## \*Chapter 35\*: What Have You Set Free?

The next day, Alexandra left her cell as soon as she heard the lock click open. Skipping breakfast and even her morning shower, she went straight to the lighthouse. She feared the way might be barred, or her Doomguard would stop her, but she climbed the steps unimpeded in the predawn light, with the Doomguard clanking unhurriedly behind her.

"They really should have made you things smarter," she said.

The Doomguard didn't answer.

If the armored guardians had any brains, it would make plotting among prisoners a lot more difficult, so Alexandra was suspicious of how easy it had been to plan an escape right in front of them.

It was cold at the top of the lighthouse. The sun wasn't yet even a sliver on the horizon. Alexandra stood and listened to waves lapping against the island's rocky abutments, and very far away, the occasional blast of a horn out on the water, a ship sounding its way through the fog.

*Charlie*, she thought.

It didn't take long before she felt an answering presence. Charlie was aware of her. Charlie was coming to her.

*Don't come too near.* She still wasn't sure if Charlie understood her thoughts directly, but she received strong impressions, and knew her familiar felt her own non-verbal messages. So she filled her thoughts with prohibition against landing on the island.

She only wanted the raven to fly overhead. She was filled with trepidation even at encouraging that much of an approach. She was risking Charlie's life. But if her familiar couldn't do this much, then what she had in mind for when they executed their jailbreak had no chance of working, so she had to know. She had seen gulls and other birds fly over the island, even if they never landed on it, so there didn't seem to be any magic that repelled flyers entirely.

She bit her lip, hoping there wasn't any magic around the island that could distinguish between an ordinary bird and a familiar.

She heard wings flapping, and forced herself not to look up. Not that she thought the Doomguard would react, or that anyone else was watching her. But just in case, she pretended that whatever was flying overhead was just another creature, not her beloved Charlie.

Charlie hung suspended in the breeze coming off the lake, too high to be seen through the pre-dawn mist even if Alexandra did look up, but for a moment she could feel the wind beneath Charlie's wings and the chill of the air around them both. Her familiar was so near, for a moment she felt a strong desire to raise her arm as she had so often in the past, for Charlie to descend and land —

*No!*

She shook her head violently. Charlie cawed mournfully and flapped away.

She brushed a tear away from her eye, only realizing after Charlie was gone that the raven had not spoken — had known not to speak — even without her consciously forbidding it.

*Good Charlie*, she thought. *Clever bird.*

Much farther away, she heard a caw.

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Days passed.

Pasquale Mercurio, Cygnus Nero, and Elisabet Todd no longer sat together in the dining room or library. Mercurio told Alexandra to avoid him and their fellow conspirators until he spoke to her again. It wasn't clear whose observation they were trying to avoid, since the ever-present Doomguards kept their silence, and if the goblins paid attention to any prisoners' activities, they did a good job of hiding it.

Perhaps it was the other prisoners she was meant to be wary of. Alexandra supposed there might be rats among them, bribed with privileges by their wardens. Was Mad Haddie really mad, or was it an act? Perhaps the Gaunt Man was more calculating than she thought. Did her quiet neighbor, Oren, observe more than he let on?

Paranoia could drive her crazy, she realized. She spent the next few days in the library, or occasionally climbing the steps of the lighthouse tower. She was surprised at how few other island residents wanted to see the lake, or just get away from their fellow prisoners. Not everyone had tower privileges, but now and then she saw an older wizard and one of the gray-haired witches who spent most days rolling knucklebones in the courtyard ascending the steps. Sometimes Elisabet Todd went up there too. Once Alexandra saw her with Pasquale; another time it was Oren. This made her suspicious, but she forced herself to keep her paranoia in check.

On those days, she stayed away from the lighthouse, but she never ran into anyone else there.

She received a letter from Livia, nearly a month after she'd been sent to Eerie Island. It was brief and anodyne:

*"Dear Alexandra,*

*Claudia and I have been doing our best to get you a proper trial and legal representation, such as it exists in the wizarding world. We've been assisted by other family members, but so far, the WJD just cites the WODAMND Act to keep you detained on Eerie Island. Don't lose hope; we have not forgotten you. Neither have your friends.*

*Everyone here is fine, and you don't need to worry about anyone else. Please be wise and stay safe.*

*Sincerely,  
Livia"*



It was good to know she hadn't been forgotten, but Livia's note could have been written to someone who'd been sent away to summer camp. Alexandra supposed it was better than an outpouring of emotion that would do neither of them any good, or more detailed mention of "other family members," but her first contact in weeks from the outside world left Alexandra feeling more melancholy and alone than ever, and she wondered if Anna or Julia had sent letters that hadn't made it through the Confederation's censors.

As time passed, her sisters and her friends would turn back to their lives. They had to. Alexandra would be remembered, but she would become an ever more distant problem. If they could do nothing for her, wouldn't it be better just to forget about her, a sad memory of someone they'd once known? She couldn't expect Anna or David or the Pritchards, or Claudia, Livia, and Julia, to think about her every day and spend all their time trying to free her.

If she wanted to get out of here, she was going to have to do it herself.

"Be wise and stay safe," Livia had said. Like all her sisters, Livia wanted Alexandra to stay out of trouble. Maybe she was supposed to place her hope in the Pruett name and Pruett money eventually proving powerful enough to gain her special privileges. But Alexandra was pretty sure the name she'd been born with would prove much more powerful.

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Halfway through December, cold mist poured off the lake and permeated their cells and the common areas. Fires were lit at the ends of corridors, but these did little to warm the cell blocks, so everyone huddled under blankets and shivered, and when let out each day, congregated around the fireplace in the common hall or the handful of small braziers that the goblins grudgingly brought out. Alexandra saw that a few of the more privileged prisoners had braziers in their cells, and wondered whether she dared push her luck by seeking another audience with Typhon or Edna to ask for one.

The weather was turning frigid, approaching the freezing temperatures they could expect all winter, so when Pasquale Mercurio sat down next to her one morning and whispered, "The goblin boat comes tomorrow," Alexandra's excitement was mixed with dread, thinking about how cold it would be should they actually make it out onto the water. But she nodded.

The goblin packet came once a week, but if Mercurio was telling her about it now, he meant that it was time. Whatever preparations he and Cygnus and Elisabet had made, they would make their attempt the next day.

"You are ready?" Mercurio asked. Alexandra nodded again.

"If the assistance you have promised does not materialize —"

"Then we'll all be just as screwed as I'll be if you don't do your part," Alexandra retorted.

Mercurio searched her face. Then he laughed.

"Tomorrow," he whispered, "Cygnus will find you very early in the morning. Get to the boat launch with him."

"Wait, Cygnus will find me? Why doesn't he get there himself? Won't you need help against the goblins?"

"Yes, I will. So you should hurry. Cygnus needs to evade his own Doomguard before he can reach you, and he'll need your help reaching me — assuming you can escape your Doomguard?"

Alexandra frowned. "That wasn't part of the plan. I don't know how I can bring someone else with me."

"Ah," Pasquale grinned. "Well, Cygnus will be easier to bring along than you think." He lowered his voice to an even softer whisper. "Cygnus is an Animorphmagus."

Alexandra's eyes widened. "Why didn't you — never mind." Of course they wouldn't have told her that earlier. She shook her head. "I don't suppose he turns into a swan? Because it would be really helpful if he could fly."

"He also wouldn't need your help getting away, would he? Alas, no." Pasquale stood. "Be ready and do not falter." Before Alexandra could ask any more questions, he walked away.

Alexandra lay awake all night, going over her part of the plan, and the blank spots the other wizards had not seen fit to share with her.

Assuming they could board the boat, it would be up to her to secure their escape from Typhon and Edna. They had placed a remarkable amount of faith in her — but really, it was faith in her father. And she was placing a lot of faith in them, since if any of them failed, screwed up, or betrayed them, she would likely get devoured with everyone else.

*Charlie*, she thought, *be ready*.

The next morning, as all the witches lined up for their turn under the meager hot water they were apportioned for showers, they were forced aside by a goblin yelling, "Stand back! Clear the way!"

The goblin was not particularly intimidating, but he was accompanied by two Doomguards. The Doomguards assigned to each prisoner stood next to them along the wall, witch and Doomguard alternating up and down the cold stone corridor on either side, so two more Doomguards marching down the center were barely able to fit between the files. Their fellow automatons did not move as those accompanying the goblin maneuvered between them without so much as a scrape of metal on metal. The witches, however, had to press themselves flat against the cold stone walls; some inhaled for fear of being struck in passing.

Soon whispers ran up and down the ranks: Elisabet Todd had died in the night.

No one expressed sorrow. The notorious mistress of potions had had no friends, as far as Alexandra could tell, and some of the other witches actually cackled. But in a small and unchanging place like Eerie Island, any news was big news, and if nothing else, a change in the tedium of their routine. Speculation was rife.

"She poisoned herself," said a witch whose face and arms were a mass of red scars and burns.

"There's justice, then — she'll be meeting all the others she poisoned soon enough," commented a grim old dame with weathered skin and fading gray hair.

Alexandra almost skipped showering, but feared drawing attention to herself. The other witches, who had been just as stand-offish toward the youngest inmate as everyone else, even in these all-female gatherings, tended to watch her and whisper behind her back, and Alexandra thought if she suddenly ran back to her cell, there would be talk. Maybe they would think she was upset by Elisabet's death, but if there were snitches among them, who knew who might whisper a word that would get to the ears of their jailers before she was ready?

She wolfed down breakfast, then headed outside. Her heart was beating so fast, she barely noticed the chill of the air. Now where was Cygnus Nero?

Something came scurrying across the courtyard, a dark shape that she would have missed in the shadows if she hadn't been looking for an animal of some sort. It ran directly toward her. With a nervous glance at her Doomguard, which didn't react, she stooped and held out her arms, and then bit back a yelp as a very large rodent leaped into her arms. A very large, spiny rodent.

"Holy crap!" she exclaimed. "You're a porcupine?"

The Doomguard still didn't move. The porcupine's quills were flattened against its body, but it bit into Alexandra's arm and made a high-pitched squealing sound.

"Ouch! I'm going!" Alexandra moved quickly to the base of the tower, followed by her Doomguard.

She climbed the steps of the tower, hoping today wouldn't be the day she encountered someone else enjoying the view from the top of the lighthouse. When she got to the top, she was alone as usual — except for her Doomguard, and the transformed porcupine in her arms.

"You're heavy, and spiky," she complained. The creature also didn't smell very good. She wondered if that was its natural smell, or the result of Cygnus not bathing much in human form. He bared his teeth at her and chittered angrily.

She alternated her gaze between the dark horizon and the small bobbing glow that was a lantern hung on the goblin boat down below. The porcupine squirmed in her arms.

"Stop it! I have a plan!" she said.

Slowly, she climbed up onto the parapet, watching the Doomguard as she did so. It didn't move, but Cygnus started squealing, and she winced as the porcupine ejected quills into her arm. "Knock it off!" she said, as she stepped to the edge of the stone cornice. Her Doomguard stepped closer to maintain the same distance to her, but otherwise did nothing. There was no railing to prevent anyone from jumping. Evidently neither the wardens nor the Doomguards were concerned about suicide attempts.

The breeze carried the sound of wings. Alexandra closed her eyes to steady herself and focus. Cygnus continued squirming, and she hissed. "Hold still, dummy."

A raven cawed.

"Not you, Charlie," Alexandra whispered. She held out her hand. "Now."

The next few moments would determine just how mad her plan was, and then she'd find out how mad the others' plan was.

The Doomguard didn't move, even when Charlie appeared out of the mist, directly overhead. But when the wand fell from the raven's talons and Alexandra snatched it out of the air, the Doomguard lunged forward with frightening speed. Its sword practically flew into its gauntlet.

"Fly, Charlie!" Alexandra yelled, and she leaped, clutching Cygnus to her chest in her other arm. The porcupine's scream was almost human.

She had hoped to cast her Falling Charm before jumping, but the Doomguard's sword nearly went through her neck. She could feel the air stir with the hiss of its passing. Then she was plummeting from the top of the lighthouse, and by the time she invoked the charm, the ground had almost risen to meet her. She landed with a thud, face-first on top of Cygnus, who squealed again. A moment later Alexandra cried out in pain as she realized that the porcupine's quills were embedded in her flesh from her chest to her belly.

The ground beneath her shook with the impact of a loud metallic *BANG!* Raising her head, Alexandra realized with horror that the Doomguard had jumped from the top of the lighthouse after her. It rose from a squat, unharmed.

She dropped Cygnus, who ran away from the Doomguard and made useless chittering noises. She shouted "*Barak!*" and whipped her wand at the suit. The yew wand sparked, burning her hand, then grudgingly unleashed its power. Lightning crackled and arced into the suit of armor, but the Doomguard only paused a moment as electricity flickered over it. Then it raised its sword overhead for a cleaving blow to her skull.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" she said.

With a horrible grinding sound, the armor stopped moving.

"Yes!" Alexandra exclaimed, and then it began moving again.

"Crap!" She threw herself to the ground as its sword slashed in an arc where her neck had been. The quills stabbed her painfully, but she pointed the yew wand and said, "*Expelliarmus!*"

The sword jerked in the Doomguard's mailed fist. Its arm shuddered, as if someone inside the suit of armor were suffering from muscle spasms. But the sword did not leave its grasp.

Alexandra tried to cast a Deadweight Charm on the Doomguard, then jumped to her feet. The Doomguard kept coming after her. She cast another Deadweight Charm, then turned and ran. Cygnus scurried ahead of her.

Between the lighthouse and the boat dock was a hard gravel path along the outer wall of the keep. Running was painful, with the porcupine quills stuck in her flesh bouncing up and down with each step, but she was just barely keeping ahead of the Doomguard. It would be her death if she

stopped to cast one more spell and failed.

The portcullis in the small gate to the boat dock was raised, and Alexandra charged through it. A few paces past it, the gravel ended and became a damp stone walkway only a few feet above the water line. Ahead, she saw another Doomguard and — Cygnus?

She almost stumbled to a halt, but her Doomguard was still right on her heels. Cygnus yelled at her. Beyond him, she saw a casket and four goblins goggling at the girl and the porcupine chased by a Doomguard.

She turned and threw everything she had into a spell she had only cast before on unmoving things. "*Mobiliarmor!*"

The Doomguard staggered and teetered on the edge of the walkway. Alexandra cursed. The yew wand still didn't acknowledge her as its mistress, and what should have been a shove was merely a nudge.

"*Feordupois!*" she said.

The Deadweight Charm, like all her other spells, was weaker than it should have been, but it was enough — the Doomguard toppled into the water and sank with barely a splash.

"She's got a wand!" shouted one of the goblins.

"How did you get a wand?" asked Cygnus.

"Never mind!" Alexandra turned on the goblins, holding her wand out. Cygnus's Doomguard stayed where it was, ready to strike Cygnus but ignoring Alexandra.

If she were more confident in her wand, Alexandra would have tried casting Incarcerous Charms on all of the goblins, but she doubted her ability to cast such a difficult spell four times before they began fighting back. So instead she said, "Make another sound, and I'll boil your brains inside your skulls and expel your entrails and turn you into fishfood."

The goblins opened their mouths, then closed them.

"Well?" she said, out of the corner of her mouth. "What's the deal with Elisabet? And where's Pasquale?"

"Elisabet is... sleeping," Cygnus said. Then his face rippled and flowed like wax. In a moment, Cygnus's beard disappeared, he became smaller, his dark skin lightened, and Pasquale Mercurio turned to face the Doomguard. It didn't move.

"Dear me," he said, "you seem to have lost your prisoner."

Alexandra's eyes darted between the wizard and the goblins. Her arm with the outstretched wand was beginning to tremble a little, and she almost shook visibly when Charlie landed on her shoulder.

"Alexandra!" cried the raven.

"You are awesome, Charlie," Alexandra said.

"We haven't much time," Pasquale said. "Even if no one has noticed the commotion yet, my Doomguard will be discovered any moment. No, don't attack this one — it won't react to you as long as you don't do anything to it. Help me get Elisabet on the boat." He gestured at the casket.

Alexandra eyed the casket, and the goblins, then cast a Levitation Charm on the casket. It rose into the air with a wobble, and with some help from Pasquale, it floated onto the dinghy, past the four goblins.

Alexandra pointed her wand at them. "You four — into the water. Now."

They shivered, looked over their shoulders at the black lake water, and back at her.

"It's cold!" one protested.

"We'll drown!" said another.

Alexandra gripped her wand more tightly. "Do you remember me?"

She recognized two of the goblins. In the dim light from their lantern, their leathery green faces turned a paler shade of avocado — they remembered her.

"You threw me into the water," she said. "Then you left me in the bottom of the boat, with wet clothes in freezing temperatures, and nothing to warm me, for hours. It was the coldest I've ever been in my life, and I've been really, really cold. I felt like I was going to freeze to death, and you did it just because you could, you miserable little creeps." Her voice rose in fury. "Now jump, or die, and hope I don't cast a Deadweight Charm on you!"

With strangled sounds, the goblins jumped into the water, making much bigger splashes than the Doomguard had. They continued splashing around, wailing and moaning. One screamed that he couldn't swim.

Alexandra told herself she didn't care. Then she walked to the side of the wharf and kicked one of the crates the goblins had been unloading. It only budged a little. She kicked it again, and it tumbled into the water and bobbed there. The goblins paddled desperately toward it.

She turned to Pasquale. "What now?"

The porcupine at her feet made a high-pitched squealing sound.

"Can you do something about the other Doomguard?" Pasquale asked, gesturing at the suit of armor. It still stood motionless where it had been since he stopped looking like Cygnus Nero. "Take care — it will turn on you when you use magic on it."

"You switched places," Alexandra said. "Cygnus's Doomguard was following you around. So once it no longer recognizes you as its prisoner, it just stands there?"

"As I told you, they really aren't very smart," Pasquale said. "But we could really use Cygnus in his proper form."

At her feet, the porcupine squealed urgently.

The Doomguard had its back to the water. Alexandra steeled her will, trying to force the yew wand to cooperate, and said, "*Mobiliarmor!*"

This time, with no forward momentum to resist her spell, the Doomguard scooted backward off the pier, and sank beneath the surface of the water before it could even raise its arms.

The porcupine stood on its hind legs. Its body stretched and its quills flattened against its body, and in no more time than it had taken Pasquale to transform from Cygnus's shape, the porcupine became Cygnus.

"That was quite a heartstopping escape," Cygnus said. "You could have warned me you were going to jump from the top of the tower."

"You could have warned me I was going to be carrying a porcupine," Alexandra said. The small quills embedded in her arms and torso were beginning to hurt a lot, but she hadn't had time to do anything about them. She pulled at a couple of them, and winced as they ripped free with a trickle of blood.

"I hope you have something even more spectacular up your sleeve," Pasquale said, looking over her shoulder.

Alexandra turned, and swallowed hard as an immense shadow descended toward them from the island keep. With great black wings spread wide and claws outstretched, Typhon fell upon them with a roar.

Alexandra held her wand aloft, pointed straight above her head rather than at the fearsome sphinx, and she closed her eyes.

"Where is our aid?" demanded Pasquale. "Where is the Dark Convention?"

"Where is your father?" asked Cygnus.

"They aren't coming," Alexandra said. "There's just me."

Before they could digest this, she felt for the crack running beneath Eerie Island, and pried at it.

The island shook. Water sloshed against the dock and the stones rising out of the waves.

Typhon did not land on Alexandra or either of the wizards. His four massive paws settled with a thump on the near end of the dock, blocking the way back to land, and his eyes glowed with unearthly fire.

"I WILL DEVOUR YOU ALL!" he roared.

"Not if you want to leave this place," Alexandra said, opening her eyes. She was astride a current flowing from a world away, and her breath felt like sparks. There was too much light in her eyes. Her voice crackled.

"Oh, Merlin's drawers," said Pasquale.

Typhon rose above her on his hind legs, his forepaws poised to strike, but they didn't move. A black shadow against the dark stone walls behind him, his eyes were red windows into a furnace. "Can you do that, little girl?" he asked. "Can you break wards placed by mightier wizards than you, in the time of your great-great-great-grandfather? Wards that even such as we cannot break?"

"Yes," Alexandra said.

The crack in the world became a rift, and the sea glowed with green and white fire.

The goblins, who'd been crying to Typhon for help, abruptly fell silent.

The ground shook again, and eerie Saint Elmo's fire lit up the entire prison, outlining the enormous sphinx and revealing Edna as well, who had slithered up the gravel path and was now coiled as if to propel herself forward while her own eyes glowed green and wild. She turned her head this way and that, taking in the sight. She held her arms out as if not sure whether to grab something or protect herself, though she was, as always, naked to the waist, and still unbothered by the cold.

"Stars Above," whispered Cygnus.

Alexandra said:

*"I fear not the Lands Below,  
I fear not the Lands Beyond,  
I fear not the Most Deathly Power,  
I fear not the Stars Above,  
I fear not you."*

She pointed her finger, rather than her wand, at Typhon, and said, "Begone." And she opened the World Away

Spirals and eddies and chords of light and sound, smells and colors that did not exist on Earth, all cascaded out of the rift, engulfing Typhon and Edna and washing over Alexandra as well.

"Do you think to banish us?" Typhon said. "Once free of this place, we can move between worlds. We can find our way back."

"I'm sure you can," Alexandra said. "But I freed you. You were held prisoner here just like I was — by the Confederation. You can do what you

want now."

Typhon didn't move. "I could still eat you."

"You could," Alexandra said.

Typhon's face split into a terrible smile. Rows of teeth reflected red and yellow and green and blue light against the background of his dark mouth, making them look like jagged triangles of glass swirling in an oil slick.

He roared, and leaped into the crack between worlds. A moment later, Edna hurled herself after him, her long snake's body uncoiling and writhing behind her. In the moment in which they passed between worlds, the light shone around and through them and outlined enormous, fearsome silhouettes, as if their physical forms had merely been shadows of their true selves. The things they had been, the shapes they really wore, were vaster than could ever have fit into the stone dungeon of Eerie Island, and Alexandra marveled that they had ever been confined there in the first place.

She trembled as the crack in the world continued lighting up the lake and the small, dark island, and then, summoning an effort she wasn't sure she was capable of it, she closed it again. After the spectacle of a moment before, the sudden silence and darkness was shocking, and Alexandra nearly collapsed on the spot.

"Alexandra," said Charlie.

She rose from where she'd almost doubled over, not quite placing her hands on her knees, and turned to face Pasquale Mercurio and Cygnus Nero. Her hair blew wildly even though the wind had died down, and her wand still shed sparks that spun off into the water or bounced and glowed against the damp wood at her feet.

"Stars Above," Cygnus said. "What have you set free?"

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Cygnus and Pasquale wasted several minutes getting the sail freed from the mast. Then Cygnus took the rudder, and with a great deal of bumping against the wharf before they cleared it, they headed out onto the lake.

It was obvious none of them had sailed before. Alexandra sat on the stern with Charlie on her shoulder, watching the two wizards while they struggled to keep the boat aimed west. The wind wasn't strong, but with the sun breaking over the horizon, Alexandra could see black clouds coming their direction.

Behind them, Eerie Island lay quiet and dark. Alexandra wondered if the other inmates had noticed that their wardens were gone. How long would it take for whoever was in charge back in the Confederation to realize that the prison was now unsupervised? The Doomguards would continue serving their purpose, but would other prisoners take advantage of their lack of direction?

None of it mattered right now. What mattered was getting away. Surely someone would be pursuing them soon.

"So what's the plan?" Alexandra asked, as she pulled quills out of her arm and tossed them in the water. "And what about Elisabet?"

"My plan is to get to the mainland," said Pasquale. "I can disappear easily enough."

Cygnus glared at Alexandra. "So your allies in the Dark Convention will not be helping us?"

Alexandra shrugged. "I never promised they would. My job was to keep Typhon and Edna from eating us."

"I cannot mingle with Muggles like you and Pasquale," Cygnus said.

"Maybe you can hide in the woods and find a fine porcupine bride," Pasquale said. Cygnus did not look amused.

"You haven't answered my question about Elisabet," Alexandra said.

"Ah, yes. The poison she took only gave her the appearance of death. She should be waking up soon. Or so she claimed." Pasquale shrugged. "We could always pitch her casket over the side — I'm sure she'll float to shore eventually."

Alexandra wasn't sure if he was joking. Clearly there was not a great deal of camaraderie in this little band. Their association was an alliance of convenience, fated to end as soon as they no longer needed each other.

*Which might be sooner for some of us than others*, she thought. Cygnus glowered at her, irritable and resentful, which she thought was pretty ungrateful considering she was the one pulling his quills out of her flesh.

A scraping sound came from within the wooden casket. Charlie fluttered off Alexandra's shoulder and landed on it, then cawed loudly. Alexandra noted with satisfaction that Cygnus backed nervously away from the raven.

There was a thump, then a series of thumps. Charlie remained on the casket, and said, "Wicked! Wicked!"

"Indeed," said Pasquale, who was fumbling with the sail again. "Merlin's beard, girl, why don't you use your wand to conjure us some wind?"

"She's only a child," Cygnus said. "A student. She probably doesn't command such advanced magic."

"You wouldn't have gotten this far without me," Alexandra said. "Who got us away from the Doomguards? Who got us away from Typhon and Edna?"

"You lied to us about your connections," Cygnus said.

"Actually, I didn't," Alexandra said. "You believed what you wanted to believe."

A hard rap emanated from beneath Charlie's feet. The raven cawed and flew back to Alexandra's shoulder.

Alexandra gestured. "Maybe you should open that."

Sullenly, Cygnus pried at the lid of the casket, and it popped open. Elisabet Todd lay there, blinking and taking deep breaths. She looked exactly like a vampire, Alexandra thought. Except sunlight was falling on her and she wasn't catching fire. Actually, Alexandra didn't think vampires really caught fire if exposed to sunlight. But she was pretty sure they didn't like it. Elisabet, however, seemed just fine.

No one moved to help her, so she placed two gaunt hands on either side of her casket and slowly lifted herself to a sitting position. She looked around. Her normally cruel expression was washed out by groggy surprise.

"We made it, I take it," she said. "Either that or this is a tedious and bitter afterlife."

"We made it," Pasquale said. "But now we have the problem of getting to shore." In fact, their boat seemed to be drifting in a circle.

Alexandra sighed. "Fine. I'll see what I can do."

Her first attempt at a wind charm nearly threw Cygnus overboard. This didn't improve his attitude. The yew wand seemed particularly uncooperative when it came to commanding wind, and after several minutes of conjuring, Alexandra succeeded in almost blowing the boat onto its side, then carrying them forward with a roar at a good few knots for several minutes, before Pasquale bellowed, "We're going the wrong way!"

Elisabet said, "Since you didn't think to enslave the goblins to our purpose, I suppose we will have to do this the hard way." She gestured at the two heavy oars lying on either side of the boat. "And by we, I mean you two."

Pasquale and Cygnus glowered at her. "What do you mean, we two?"

"I am too weak to be any help, and you can't think this skinny girl is going to row better than two big, strong men?" Elisabet smiled and batted her eyelashes. Her mocking coquetry was about as charming as a spider's. But she was right, and the two wizards realized it. With groans, they picked up the oars, set them in their hooks, and began rowing.

## \*Chapter 36\*: The Gallows Path

Several hours later, the shore was close enough that they could hear waves washing against it, and more distantly, vehicles. The day was overcast, but Alexandra could see a city on the horizon, gray and blurry, far from where Pasquale and Cygnus were trying to steer the boat. She had no idea if it was Chicago or somewhere else. She didn't think they could have rowed themselves that far, but then, she didn't think the boat could have gone unnoticed by the Muggle ships that passed them by without magic.

Charlie periodically took off from her shoulder and flew around in wide circles. Alexandra tried to focus on what the raven saw, but it was mostly just water — which she supposed was good. Charlie was trying to spot danger, and none had presented itself so far.

Unless she counted her companions. Pasquale and Cygnus were increasingly tired and their tempers frayed by having to do all the work. Alexandra thought about trying to conjure winds again, but decided she was as likely to anger them more as to accomplish anything useful. Her first aid charms had stopped the bleeding from her wounds, but as if to punish her for using it in such a manner, the yew wand made each one sting before closing it.

Elisabet just watched her, her lips turned upward.

"So, your father really isn't going to help us?" Cygnus asked.

"And there will be no coven of Dark Convention warlocks coming to our assistance either," Pasquale said.

"Sorry," Alexandra said.

"I don't think you're sorry at all," Cygnus said. "You spun tall tales about your influence —"

"And you believed her, because you wanted to believe her," Elisabet said. "As if any of us wouldn't lie, cheat, or murder to get off that island. And here we are, so quit whining."

"Says the one who's not rowing," Cygnus grumbled.

Pasquale sighed and wiped his brow. "Elisabet has a point. We are free, and Miss Quick did her part, even if it wasn't exactly as she told us." He grunted as he pulled at the long oar. "How do goblins manage these things when they're difficult for men twice their size?"

"That wand is fascinating," Elisabet said. "You don't see that sort of crafting nowadays, and I don't recognize — might I take a look at it?"

"Sure," Alexandra said. "Look all you like." She laid it across her lap, with the tip pointed at the other witch.

One corner of Elisabet's mouth twitched, as if to say "*You can't blame me for trying.*"

The land they were approaching became visible. It was a long stretch of beach at the bottom of a wending cliff-lined shore. At the top of the cliffs were pines, with no sign of human habitation. Alexandra didn't think they could be too far from the nearest town or highway, but at least they hadn't drifted into a harbor or some lakeside resort. She was not sure what her three fellow escapees would do if dumped into the midst of a Muggle community, but she was definitely glad they didn't have wands.

She had been thinking about what to do next during the hours they'd been on the water. She didn't like or trust Cygnus Nero, Pasquale Mercurio, or especially Elisabet Todd, but she couldn't betray them to the Wizard Justice Department. She had decided that the best thing to do was end her association with them as soon as possible — preferably before they anticipated her.

So when the gravelly beach was close enough to make out individual waves washing against it, and Alexandra judged the water not too rough, she stood up.

"Well," she said, "it's been great. Actually, it's really sucked, and I hope I never see any of you again. But for what it's worth, good luck."

"What are you doing?" Cygnus asked.

"Stop her!" Elisabet said, and lurched toward Alexandra. Pasquale hesitated, and in that moment, Alexandra cast a Water-Walking Charm and stepped over the side of the boat.

Her feet splashed into the waves. She found that it was like trudging through snow. Very wet snow.

*Still uncooperative*, she thought sourly, feeling the magic in her wand curling and twisting beneath her will. The Water-Walking Charm might be less effective on rough waves than a pond, but she shouldn't have been getting her legs wet up to her knees.

"Where are you going?" Cygnus demanded as she splashed away from the boat.

"You couldn't wait to abandon us," Elisabet said.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," Alexandra said over her shoulder. "But like you said, I did my part, and there's nothing more I can do for you. My advice is to avoid Muggles, and don't do anything stupid."

If they did do something stupid — especially if it involved Muggles — Alexandra was afraid she'd bear some responsibility for that. But short of putting a Body-Bind spell on them all and leaving them for the Aurors, she didn't know what else she could do about them. Maybe they would go straight, or at least stay hidden and out of trouble. Somehow she doubted it.

She left the three of them still yelling threats, pleas, and insults, and waded through water much too deep to wade in until she reached the beach.

While there were no structures visible and it looked mostly wild, soda cans littered the shore, and a faint trail led through the shrubs growing where the pebbles gave way to hard-packed dirt. So this was definitely not some remote wilderness.

Alexandra turned to look out at the goblin dinghy, still bobbing a hundred yards offshore. She wasn't sure if Pasquale and Cygnus were having trouble maneuvering it closer, or if they were debating what to do next. But she didn't wait to see what happened. She ascended the beach, found the trail — really just a narrow strip of dirt beaten between tall, scratchy grass and scraggly bushes — and began walking. She was enormously tired and her shoes were the cheap slippers she'd been given on Eerie Island. Her feet would be sore if she had to hike far. But she was free. She meant to stay that way.

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Two days later, after a few uses of her wand that she was not proud of, she arrived in Larkin Mills with new clothes and a little bit of money.

She came on a late-night bus from Chicago. She didn't sleep at all on the long trip. When she wasn't shushing Charlie, who stayed nestled underneath her stolen coat where her fellow passengers (hopefully) couldn't see, she was looking out the window, watching for Aurors or Diana Grimm to come hurtling after the bus, perhaps stopping it right on the highway.

*I shouldn't be doing this*, she thought. The Wizard Justice Department had to be watching the town. Her aunt was probably watching her house personally. Alexandra had no doubt that if she showed her face anywhere near Sweetmaple Avenue, she would be apprehended immediately. Going to the Pruett School was also out of the question. And, she thought, if Diana Grimm was at all smart — and she was — she would expect Alexandra to arrive by public transportation and monitor Larkin Mills' small bus terminal.

Which was why Alexandra got off at the town before Larkin Mills, and then walked to the nearest on-ramp to the Interstate and held out her thumb.

She sent Charlie ahead. However vigilant the WJD might be, they couldn't watch every raven in town, could they?

She was no longer a green hitchhiker, but Archie might have been gratified to know how much she'd actually taken in his warnings, even if she pretended otherwise. When a middle-aged man in a shiny Honda pulled over to let her in, Alexandra kept her hand inside her shoulder bag, which she had acquired at the same store where she'd bought her clothes, with money she had procured by means that were illegal in both the Muggle and wizarding worlds.

If the man thought it strange that she kept her hand in her bag all the time, he didn't comment on it. He also didn't hit on her or attempt anything inappropriate, though he did ask a lot of questions about her age and why she was hitchhiking at midnight out in the middle of nowhere.

Alexandra had a story prepared for this: a more polished version of one she'd used before, involving a boyfriend, a breakup, and being left abandoned miles from home. It got better with retelling, and her ride accepted it and nodded with sympathy. She fended off suggestions that he call her parents, but he insisted that he had to take her directly to her house.

She led him to a neighborhood on the other side of town from Sweetmaple Avenue, where the houses were more expensive. The people who lived in them were hospital administrators and bank presidents, rather than cops and nurses. She cheerfully pointed out "her" house, one that had cars in the driveway but darkened windows, indicating that everyone was asleep and surely he wouldn't want to wake them up? Yes, she had a key.

She thanked him sincerely as she got out and waved to him as he drove away. Then she walked to the corner, turned left, and headed toward the Interstate again. Her destination was Old Larkin Pond, approaching it from the opposite direction she usually did.

Charlie descended silently to land on her shoulder, then took off again when she reached the Interstate, which she had to cross on foot rather than taking the tunnel that she and Brian had used so often. Even late at night in the middle of nowhere, there was traffic, but she got across the highway without appearing in anyone's headlights.

She could avoid her house and the school and everywhere else where she might be expected, but she couldn't avoid Old Larkin Pond if she was to get what she came here for. She opened her eyes to the world through her Witch's Sight. If there were wards or barriers around the pond, they were too subtle for her to see them. Diana Grimm's spells would probably be that subtle. If her aunt anticipated her coming here, she was screwed. But she could only get so far with a contested wand and petty theft. So she continued through the brown grass, glad that the temperature was cold but not yet freezing. Having been out on the Great Lakes, winter in Larkin Mills seemed much less harsh.

The pond was the dirty little puddle it had always been. Alexandra held her breath, released it, and extended the yew wand over the water.

*"Finite Incantatem,"* she said.

Out in the deepest part of the pond, the water rippled, and then her backpack bobbed to the surface, no longer held down by the Deadweight Charm she had cast weeks ago.

*"Accio backpack,"* she said.

Water splashed as the pack came flying across the surface of the pond, almost skipping as it reached the water's edge, and then bounced over the mud and shot past her into the grass.

"Thanks," she said sarcastically to the yew wand, and put it away. She dragged her backpack out of the grass.

She knelt and tore the pack open, and retrieved her black hickory wand. Compared to the yew wand, the hickory wand felt like an old friend in her hand, even though she'd had it for only a couple of months.

Then she pulled out the one thing she wanted more than anything else next to her wand: her Seven-League Boots. Hastily she kicked off her shoes and put on the boots, then slung the pack over her shoulders, ignoring the mud and water.

"Let's go, Charlie!" she said, and took a step away from the pond. It carried her halfway across the field, and the next took her almost to the highway. She stopped then, and looked behind her. Once again, no wizards Apparated out of thin air, no one descended on a broom, no creatures emerged from the pond, and no Howlers or magical alarms or other traps triggered. As far as she could tell, her visit to Old Larkin Pond had gone completely unnoticed.

"Fly, fly!" Charlie said, passing overhead.

Alexandra spared a glance in the other direction, where the lights of Larkin Mills glowed in the darkness on the other side of the Interstate. Claudia was there, and Archie, probably worrying about her. Would they have been told about her escape from Eerie Island? Interrogated by WJD agents?



Were Freddy and Pete and Helen and the two Rachels and all the other kids still coming to class at the Pruett School?

Brian...

She blinked. Tears stung her eyes. She didn't dare venture further into town. She'd taken a large enough risk. Claudia must never know that she'd been here. She'd try to get a message to her friends and family once she was safely out of reach.

She didn't know if any place was truly out of reach, so she headed toward the only refuge she could think of, a place where she might hide and not be given up to the Confederation, and not endanger the people around her. She hoped.

She ran, flying alongside the highway faster than the cars she blurred past, until she reached the hidden exit onto the Automagicka. She ran past the trollbooth, having no idea whether the troll registered her passing. She did not toss a coin into its basket.

Miles down the Automagicka, she slowed down and waited for Charlie to catch up. She sat on the slope below a shoulder of the magical highway, where traffic was even lighter than on the Muggle Interstate at this time of night, and took out everything in her magical backpack, carefully inventorying it and verifying that it did not seem to have been tampered with while it lay hidden at the bottom of Old Larkin Pond.

Now she had her wand, her boots, her broom, and her magic backpack, with its books and potions and charms. And she had clean clothes, and her familiar. Charlie reached her half an hour later — she hadn't realized how far she had outpaced the raven — and landed on her knee.

"Alexandra," the bird said reproachfully.

"You're gonna have to get in my pack, Charlie," she said. "Because once I leave Larkin Mills, I'm not slowing down until I reach the Ozarks."

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Even flying part of the way on her broom, it took Alexandra many hours to reach the Ozarks. Her unfamiliarity with the territory didn't help. The Ozarkers didn't put signs out, and Alexandra had only been here once.

Furthest was appropriately named. Alexandra was deep in the Ozarks when she finally reached the A&W stand and its lonely gravel road. She'd left Larkin Mills after midnight, and it was nearly dawn. Exhausted, she stumbled across the lot and into the trees, wandered deep enough into the woods that she could see no sign of human trespass, and proceeded to set up the tent that she'd carried in her backpack ever since inheriting it from Maximilian.

She cast Muggle-Repelling Charms around the tent, then crawled into it. Charlie was tired too. Not being nocturnal, the raven sat in the cage at her side until she sank into sleep, and then Charlie too nodded off.

They were both awakened by a cracking sound. Alexandra lay with her eyes shut, but listening. Then Charlie cawed, ruining any hope she had of staying quiet and unnoticed. She sighed and opened her eyes partway, glaring at Charlie in the dim light seeping into the tent. "Good going, birdbrain," she whispered.

"Well, you can lay about all day if that's yore intent," said a sharp voice from just outside the tent, "but I reckon you'd best haul yer lazy bones outter there if'n you don't want to be found by some woodsman or a hide-behind."

Alexandra dragged herself out of her sleeping roll, pushed open the tent, and squinted at the old woman standing over her with arms crossed and a wand held in one blue-veined fist.

"Good morning, Granny Pritchard," Alexandra said.

"Don't you good morning me, Missy!" Granny Pritchard said. "What in tarnation are you doin' here?"

Alexandra rose to her feet, resisted the impulse to stretch and yawn, and glared at Charlie, who had somehow remained on her shoulder during her entire exit from the tent and now squawked cheerfully at the old woman.

She decided there was no point in delaying or dissembling. "I'm a fugitive."

Granny Pritchard arched an eyebrow. "Do tell."

"I don't know if you heard anything from Constance and Forbearance..." Alexandra paused, but Granny Pritchard's face betrayed nothing, so she continued. "I was arrested by the Wizard Justice Department and sent to Eerie Island."

"Arrested for what?" Granny Pritchard asked.

Alexandra studied her feet a moment. They were bare — she hadn't put on her boots before crawling out of the tent. Then she raised her head and met Granny Pritchard's level stare.

"I assaulted a bureaucrat from the Department of Magical Education," she said. "Except I don't think he actually works for them. He works for —"

"Why'd you assault this feller?" Granny Pritchard demanded. "I reckon you must've done somethin' purty awful for them to send you to Eerie Island."

"I didn't kill him," Alexandra said defensively. "Or maim him. But he was tormenting another girl, and I — kind of lost it. I hexed him six ways from Sunday, as y'all might say."

"Don't mimic Ozarker speech," Granny Pritchard said. "It don't sit well on yore tongue."

Alexandra nodded. "So anyway, I kind of messed him up, and they used that as an excuse to send me to Eerie Island without a trial, after declaring me an adult. I escaped, but I couldn't go home, so here I am, because it's the only place I could think to run to."

"That's a heap o' misadventure in a few words," Granny Pritchard said. "You escaped Eerie Island?"

"Yes."

Granny Pritchard stared hard at her, then shook her head. "And you conceived we'uns'd be pleased to offer a hidey-hole?"

"No, I didn't exactly think you'd be pleased." Alexandra was beginning to shiver. In her magically-warmed tent, she hadn't noticed how cold it was outside, but without spells protecting her, her toes were getting numb. The Ozarks were now as chilly and damp as they had been hot and humid in the summer. "If you don't want me here, I'll leave. But I thought you wouldn't turn me over to the Confederation, especially since you seem to think I'm supposed to do something for you. And anyway —" Alexandra faltered, and her words caught in her throat. "I didn't know where else to go."

Granny Pritchard studied her long enough for Alexandra's chills to become visible, then she said, "Get dressed proper, girl. That fancy tent roll up?"

"Yeah, it's magical. I mean, yes ma'am," Alexandra said, flinching away from Granny Pritchard's glare as Charlie squawked on her shoulder.

"Gather yore things, then," Granny Pritchard said. "We'uns is gonna have a pow-wow."

Alexandra hastily packed up the tent with a charmed word and put it back in her backpack. She followed after Granny Pritchard, who maintained a surprisingly brisk pace for such an old woman. Alexandra wore her weatherproof JROC boots instead of the Seven-League Boots, and a jacket, hat, and gloves in the December chill. Charlie flew ahead, chattering from the branches of the trees and ignoring Granny Pritchard's admonitions to shush.

"You wasn't near far enough from Muggle byways," Granny Pritchard said, without pausing or looking back. "Some damfool Muggle mighter shot you for a deer."

"Hunters come out when it's this cold?" Alexandra asked. Just then, as if to answer her question, the crack of a gunshot echoed through the woods. Charlie cawed and flew to a higher spot in the trees.

"Folks 'round here is poor, Missy — Muggle 'n magical alike. They'uns hain't huntin' to put a trophy on a wall, they'uns is huntin' to put food on the table."

"What keeps them from encountering magical creatures?" Alexandra asked.

"Some of 'em do. But we'uns has put charms 'round our Hollers, to ward off them who don't know better. There's more o' them every year. Used to be, we'uns was surrounded by Muggle kith who knew to stay away. Now there's blessed few of 'em who 'member the old ways. Half them folks livin' in town hain't Ozarkers atall."

"Is that why you want to leave this world behind?" Alexandra asked. "To get away from Muggles?"

Granny Pritchard stopped and turned to face her. "You don't understand us atall."

"I try," Alexandra said. "But it doesn't help when you're either cryptic, or you give me dirty looks for asking questions."

Granny Pritchard cackled. "Alright, that's fair." She resumed hiking up the wooded slope. Alexandra had no trouble keeping up, but she was growing tired after all her traveling.

"We'uns hain't never despised Muggles the way some Colonials do," Granny Pritchard said. "But we'uns don't mingle with 'em neither."

"You don't hate them, you just want to stay segregated," Alexandra said. "That doesn't sound so different from the Old Colonials."

Granny Pritchard's voice sharpened. "We'uns don't mingle with 'em because it keeps magic in this world. Muggles can't abide in a world o' magic, an we'uns can't abide in a world without it. Our intention is to leave this world to the unwizardly, takin' all our magic with us."

"Benjamin and Mordecai Rash, they sure don't like Muggles. They've called me Mudblood. And I heard some other Ozarkers say things about Muggles during the Jubilee."

Granny Pritchard sighed. "Benjamin and Mordecai Rash hain't the least bit couth. They'uns grow thistle-like in that family. It weren't allus that way 'mongst us, but it's more common nowadays, in the long years that's passed since we'uns went west an' found ourselves surrounded by ignorant Muggle folk on one side and Colonials on t'other."

"And those two are supposed to marry your great-granddaughters," Alexandra said.

"I did not recommend that match," Granny Pritchard said, "brace o' twins notwithstanding. But it hain't up to me, and in the end, it's up to Constance an' Forbearance, an' Benjamin an' Mordecai, an' I reckon they'uns will make the decision that suits them."

"Really? It seems to me Constance and Forbearance don't want to marry them at all, they just think you all expect them to."

"An' it seems to me you conceive you know what's best for yore friends an' don't trust 'em to know their own minds."

"I do! I mean, I don't. I mean —" Alexandra blew out a frosty breath. "I still don't understand your plan to leave for a world away from this one. Even if all you Ozarkers leave, the rest of the wizarding world will stay here. This world is never going to be without magic."

"That's as may be," Granny Pritchard said. "But we'uns can only mind our own patch."

Alexandra spread her arms. "How do you figure it's bad for there to be magic here? I mean, there are bad wizards, and bad spells, but magic by itself isn't good or bad."

"I din't say magic is bad," Granny Pritchard said. "I said Muggles can't abide in a world with it. Magic does 'em no good, and they'uns'll never accept it. It's a thing they can't have and can't control. They'uns can only see it as miraculous or terrible. Them who marvel at it would pester us for miracles, an' turn bitter if'n we'uns don't oblige. Them who see it as terrible... well, Muggles who think all witches 'n wizards is wicked, I reckon you know how that goes."

Alexandra shook her head. "So you just want to run away so you can live all by yourselves, without having to deal with anyone else, Muggle or wizard."

"An' if'n that is our preference, what's so terrible 'bout it?"

Alexandra said nothing. She supposed the Ozarkers had a right to isolate themselves — even withdraw from the outside world, or go somewhere else, if they wanted to. But it seemed like running away to her, and the thought that her friends would leave with their kin hurt. The Ozarkers expected her to open the way to that other world, and she wasn't sure she wanted to, even if she could.

They ascended a slope that was slippery with wet leaves, so that Alexandra had to check her balance more than once, yet Granny Pritchard never seemed the least bit unsteady on her feet. In her own boots, with their surprisingly high heels, she tromped on, and Alexandra followed until they crested the little rise and arrived on a level sward of grass occupied by a small wooden cabin and a goat.

Alexandra continued following after Granny Pritchard. They walked past the goat, who watched them with an insolent expression as it chewed grass. Charlie, after circling the little clearing, landed on Alexandra's shoulder and said, "Wicked!" Alexandra paused as Granny Pritchard reached the door.

"Hain't nothin' wicked in here, 'ceptin' maybe you an' that bird after you cross the threshold," Granny Pritchard said.

Alexandra rolled her eyes, and followed Granny Pritchard inside.

The rest of the Grannies were waiting there. Granny Ford, the oldest of them, sat in a large stuffed chair, almost swallowed by it, with her hands curled around the armrests and her wand lying across her lap. Granny Morrison and three other Grannies played Witches' Whist around a wooden table, while half a dozen more sat in rocking chairs, all knitting or embroidering.

It was very crowded, because the cabin was not larger on the inside than it was on the outside. The Grannies hadn't wizard-spaced it. It was warm, and Alexandra's nose began to run after the cold air outside.

"Well, well, lookee who come back like a bad Pidge," said Granny Morrison.

Alexandra bit back the sharp retort that came to mind. She was in need of their help, after all.

"Miss Quick is on the gallows path," said Granny Pritchard. "An' so she come here, conceivin' we'uns would aid an' abet her."

"Gallows path?" Alexandra asked.

"An Old World sayin'," said Granny Pritchard. "Means you is runnin' from the Sheriff or the Ministry or the Confederation — whoever the law might be."

"How do you find yourself in such a predicament?" asked ancient Granny Ford, without opening her eyes.

"I'm Troublesome," Alexandra said.

All the Grannies looked at her then. A couple of them chuckled.

"Just so," said Granny Ford.

"Also, I was kind of set up," Alexandra added.

Granny Ford let out a sigh and moved in what Alexandra presumed to be a kind of shrug. "Do you feature livin' 'mongst us?" she asked. And to Granny Pritchard, "Might yore kin take her in, Dorcas?"

"I don't want to live with the Pritchards," Alexandra said quickly. When Granny Pritchard raised her eyebrows, she added, "I mean, that isn't what I had in mind. It wouldn't be fair to them."

"So what did you have in mind, child?" Granny Ford asked.

Alexandra sniffled loudly, and wiped the back of her hand across her nose. She hoped the Grannies didn't think she was crying — it was just so warm in here after the cold outside! She took the moment to compose herself. During her flight from Eerie Island to Larkin Mills and then the Ozarks, she'd spent little time thinking ahead, always worried that the WJD's Aurors or Special Inquisitors would be on her heels.

"I just need sanctuary," she said. "Somewhere where I don't have to run."

There was a long silence. Alexandra was conscious of her nose still dripping, and cast a non-verbal Drying Charm, which helped. The soft clack of knitting needles, and Charlie ruffling feathers, were the only sounds.

"S'ppose we'uns did give you sanctuary," Granny Ford said. "You feature spendin' the rest o' yore days here?"

Alexandra shook her head. "No, ma'am." Her next words were almost unexpected even to herself. "I have to go to New York."

"New York?" Granny Ford expressed her puzzlement by adding a few creases to her face. The other Grannies also gave her befuddled looks.

"New Amsterdam," Alexandra said. "I have to go to New Amsterdam... and Storm King Mountain."

This brought another long silence.

"What purpose have you there?" asked Granny Pritchard at last.

Alexandra shook her head. "I don't know exactly." She couldn't lie to the Grannies, but she wasn't willing to tell them everything. "But there's something there I have to find out."

"So yore fixin' to head right back into trouble," Granny Pritchard said. "I reckon my great-granddaughters would be pleased to see you here for Christmas. You reckon you might stay that long?"

Alexandra nodded. Her vision blurred and her throat felt rough, not just because of the temperature in the room. "Yes, ma'am. I wouldn't mind staying that long."

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Alexandra didn't know exactly what arrangements the Grannies made, or who they talked to, or whether they were the only ones in the Ozarks who knew she was here, but in the end, they told her they reckoned she could stay a while.

When most of them left that night, Alexandra learned that the little cabin actually belonged to one of them, Granny Mahnkey, a tiny bespectacled woman with straight silver hair tied back in a tight bun. Alexandra had not heard her say a word during any of her previous encounters with the Grannies, but after all the other witches left, Granny Mahnkey said to her in a bright voice, "You'll do yore share of chores — cookin' an' cleanin' an' sweepin' an' mendin'! I keep my home spotless an' I will not abide mess or mischief."

"Yes, ma'am," Alexandra said.

"You'll also dress proper," Granny Mahnkey said, her round face scrunching up in disdain at Alexandra's jeans, boots, and Muggle apparel.

Alexandra sighed and shook her head. "No dresses. No bonnets. I'm not an Ozarker —"

"You come here figurin' to lay low with us and accept our hospitality, you can blessed well dress like us and mind our ways," Granny Mahnkey said firmly.

Whether she conjured them or had clothes stored away in a chest somewhere, perhaps for daughters or granddaughters long gone, Granny Mahnkey produced a pair of calico dresses and bonnets and insisted that Alexandra try them on. They were the right length, though they hung loosely on Alexandra's bony frame, and the bonnets were too large for her head. Nonetheless, Granny Mahnkey told her that as long as she stayed under her roof, she would dress like an Ozarker gal.

In the days that followed, Granny Mahnkey did put her to work. It was all manual labor, tedious and mundane and exacting according to the Granny's requirements. Alexandra cleaned out every last corner of the cabin until she could swear not a mote of dust was left in it. She hauled a little wheelbarrow full of stones up from the creek, and then laid them along the path to the cottage door, but only after Granny Mahnkey had personally inspected each stone, tossing some aside as displeasing to her eye. Alexandra climbed up on the roof to mend it, and cleared weeds and shrubs away from the cabin. At night, Granny Mahnkey insisted on teaching her how to knit, sew, and cook.

Alexandra accepted all of this stoically. She wasn't sure if Granny Mahnkey normally did all this work herself, with or without magic, or if the old woman was determined to turn her into a proper Ozarker, but Alexandra had nowhere else to go, so she performed her tasks and complied with the Granny's demands. She didn't see anyone else for three days, and had no one but Granny Mahnkey and Charlie to talk to.

When Granny Pritchard returned on the third day, Alexandra was glad to see her as much because she was going stir crazy as because she wanted news. Granny Pritchard found her outside, trying to fix the pulley to Granny Mahnkey's well.

"Well, child, the Confederation wants you back a'certain," Granny Pritchard said.

"Do they know I'm here?" Alexandra asked.

"Aye. I 'spect they'd a known it even if we'uns hadn't told 'em," Granny Pritchard said.

"You told them?" Alexandra exclaimed. Her eyes darted to the trees behind Granny Pritchard, and the corner of Granny Mahnkey's cabin, as if Special Inquisitor Grimm might step into view at any moment.

"Now settle yoreself," Granny Pritchard said. "We'uns hain't about to hand you over to the Aurors no matter how they'uns squawk. This hain't their Territory, an' they'uns got no authority to meddle in our Hollers. Not without a by-your-leave from us."

"Really?" The idea that the Ozarkers could simply defy the Confederation surprised her. But Granny Pritchard went on.

"That don't mean all is peaches 'n cream," she said. "They'uns are demandin' a convocation, an' we'uns hain't got no choice but to call one. That's as we'uns agreed back in the days when the Confederation agreed to leave us be."

"A convocation? About me?" Without even thinking about it, her wand had found its way into her hand.

"You feature they'uns is gonna send someone to snatch you right here an' now?" Granny Pritchard asked dryly.

"I wouldn't put it past them," Alexandra said. "Maybe Aurors need permission to enter the Hollers, but according to the WODAMND Act, Special Inquisitors can go anywhere."

Granny Pritchard shook her head. "Put yore wand away. They'uns reckon you can't run without them knowin' it, and they'uns won't break our covenant without a reason a blessed sight more powerful than one troublesome girl-child."

"I'm not actually as egotistical as you think I am," Alexandra said. "This isn't really about me. It's about my father. They only care about me because of him."

"Aye, I can't help noticin' that he don't seem fixed on doin' much on yore account," Granny Pritchard said.

"I kind of told him to stay out of my life," Alexandra said. "I guess he listened."

Granny Pritchard studied her a moment, then said, "That's as may be. But our old men is meetin' with the warlocks from the WJD tonight."

"What if they agree to hand me over?" Alexandra asked.

"I don't feature that happenin'," Granny Pritchard said.

"I'm glad you're so confident. It didn't seem to me that your old men liked me too much."

"You stop yore frettin', Missy. They'uns hain't gonna turn you out without our say-so."

"I'm not fretting," Alexandra said. "I'm deciding whether I should just get out of here. Even if you don't intend to give me up, the Confederation plays dirty. You're harboring a fugitive, and I don't want them putting pressure on your family, or —"

"Don't you reckon you oughter thought of that 'fore now?" Granny Pritchard asked.

Alexandra huffed in frustration. "I haven't had much time to think."

"I figured you'd've had plenty o' time to think right here, stitchin' an' mendin' and cookin' with Granny Mahnkey. Hain't you been puttin' this gal to work, Beulah?"

"I surely have," Granny Mahnkey said, emerging from her cabin wiping her hands on a dish cloth. "Hain't had near 'nough time to put proper calluses on them soft foreign fingers."

Alexandra looked at her hands. Charlie, sitting in the eaves of the cabin, made a rude cackling sound.

"Where you fixin' to run, child?" Granny Pritchard asked, a little more gently.

"I don't know. I have some ideas." Alexandra did have some ideas, but none of them were particularly good ones. Fleeing to Croatoa would only expose the Kings to the same danger she was trying to save the Pritchards from. The thought of hiding out in Dinétah had occurred to her. With the help of magic, she might be able to survive in the unforgiving desert, and maybe Henry Tsotsie wouldn't hunt her down and turn her in...

"You hain't goin' nowhere," said Granny Mahnkey. "Now finish mendin' that rope if'n you want drinkin' water tonight!"

"I get why you don't create a magic well, I guess," Alexandra said. "That takes a lot of magic and you'd have to unwork it every Jubilee. But I don't see why you can't just levitate the bucket with your wand."

"Just keep workin'," Granny Mahnkey said, "whilst Dorcas an' I confer."

The two Grannies went inside. Alexandra glared at Charlie. "It's not like *you're* doing any work."

Charlie cackled.

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Granny Pritchard departed soon afterwards, with another admonition to cease frettin'. Alexandra sat outside Granny Mahnkey's cabin for the rest of the evening, practicing charms and hexes cast from the front porch at the lightning bugs and other insects until Granny Mahnkey told her to come inside and have some supper.

The next day, Granny Pritchard returned.

"Them Confederation fellers was madder'n a granny goat hitched to a porkypine," she said.

"You're going to let me stay?" Alexandra asked.

"Course we is. We'uns don't never turn out guests."

"But don't you still have to obey Confederation laws? They'll get a warrant or something. They'll extradite me."

"Can't," Granny Pritchard said. "You is only wanted in Central Territory. We'uns hain't obliged to Central Territory."

"But the Confederation —"

"The Confederation, the Confederation, the Confederation!" Granny Pritchard repeated in a mocking tone. "Child, do you know what a Confederation is?"

"Of course I know. We had to learn about it in school."

"So you know every Territory is responsible for its ownself. They'uns can make agreements an' treaties 'mongst themselves, but laws in one hain't bindin' in t'other."

"My father is wanted all over the Confederation."

"That's 'cause the Guv'nor-General declared him an Enemy of the Confederation," Granny Pritchard said. "An' even that just gives authority to his Special Inquisitors. The Guv'nor-General can't give orders to a Territory's Aurors; he needs the Territorial Guv'nor to do that. 'Course most of 'em'll sit up 'n bark when he says boo."

"But Ozarkers don't have Aurors or a Territorial Governor."

"Zactly!" Granny Pritchard nodded. "Hence, nothin' the Guv'nor of Central Territory or even the Guv'nor-General himself — not that he'd actually show himself directly in this affair — can do 'cept bark an' bluster."

"Or bribe an' threaten," Granny Mahnkey said. Alexandra had almost forgotten her, as she sat quietly knitting in her rocking chair.

"Or that," Granny Pritchard said. "Our men hain't immune to such cajolery, but they'uns is also proud an' not about to have no lickspittle Colonial tellin' 'em what to do. So they'uns told those wizards from Central Territory to go back home an' they'uns would decide 'mongst themselves what to do 'bout one troublesome gal who's caused such consternation."

"What about the Special Inquisitors?" Alexandra asked.

"Well..." Granny Pritchard's expression became more serious. "We'uns can't ban 'em. But they'uns'll be cautious 'bout trespassin' in our Hollers

without a proper invite. Confederation law may say they'uns is authorized to go wheresoever they please, but Ozarker custom is different."

Alexandra thought about her aunt Diana. "I don't think they're going to be scared of you."

"Now why would they'uns be scared of us?" Granny Pritchard said, as if the thought had never occurred to her. "But it would be just unmannerly for them to act like trespassin' blaggards, 'specially to snatch one little girl."

When nothing happened the next day, or the day after that, Alexandra began to think that maybe Granny Pritchard was right. Any temptation towards complacency was disrupted by the arrival of a large horned owl that night.

"Jingwei!" Alexandra exclaimed, as Charlie disappeared into the rafters of Granny Mahnkey's cabin. The enormous owl, seated on the sill over the little bed Alexandra had been sleeping in, hooted solemnly at her.

"If you can find me, I don't see how the Office of Special Inquisitions can't," Alexandra said. She untied the long scroll that was wrapped to the leg of Anna's familiar. "I'm sorry, I don't think Granny Mahnkey keeps any owl treats."

Jingwei's golden eyes blinked, then the owl swiveled her head to stare into the shadows where Charlie hid.

"Stop that." Alexandra poked the big bird with one finger. She knew Jingwei was capable of removing a finger with one snap of her beak, but the owl hooted indignantly and backed away.

"The woods around here are full of mice and other things," Alexandra said. "Why don't you hunt yourself a snack? I assume you're going to take my reply back to Anna?"

Jingwei hooted and took off with a majestic flurry of wings, leaving behind a single small owl feather. Alexandra unwrapped the scroll and began reading.

Her friends had heard of her escape from Eerie Island. Apparently it was the talk of Charmbridge Academy, and Alexandra was either an outlaw hero or a mad Dark sorceress. Anna didn't say which way the majority of her fellow classmates leaned.

*"I've asked my father if he can do anything for you," Anna wrote, "but you know he doesn't have much influence outside of North California."*

Anna didn't mention that this was pretty much exactly what Congressman Chu had been afraid of. Anna's father had warned Alexandra not to get his daughter in trouble — now Anna's best friend was a fugitive. She suspected Mr. Chu wouldn't even approve of Anna writing to her.

According to Anna, David was researching wizard laws. He claimed sending a juvenile to wizard prison without a trial was illegal. Alexandra imagined David poring through legal texts, possibly with help from Bran and Poe. The idea of him entering wizard court wearing black robes and an attitude was amusing, and it was heartwarming to think of him actually trying to help her, but she could only shake her head at his naiveté. David, for all his rebellious talk and animosity toward the system, still believed the Confederation was basically law-abiding. Maybe he believed the whole world could be made to follow the rules.

*David, you don't get it. They do whatever they want. Anything you can get away with is legal.*

## \*Chapter 37\*: The Unfinished Quest

Over the next few weeks, Alexandra exchanged more letters with her friends. On a whim, she sent postcards to the students c/o the Pruett School, telling them she was alive and free. To her surprise, several wrote back. Chris Naylor told her the school was much more boring without her, and wrote a long list of questions about Eerie Island, Boggarts, what it felt like being Polyjuiced into Mr. Brown, and how to talk to girls. Freddy DiStefano wrote a long and surprisingly thoughtful letter, admitting that he almost dropped out after the incident with Mr. Brown, and that he wasn't sure he wanted to stay in the wizarding world. He reported that Rachel Cohen, Silvia McCarthy, and Penny Oscar had quit, and the Denning twins said they were arguing with their parents weekly about staying.

Helen Xanthopoulos sent Alexandra a package by Owl Post. It was a potions handbook called *Quirrel's Quick Potions Guide*.

*"I bought this from our store with my allowance," Helen wrote. "I hope it is still useful for you. We miss you and I'm sorry you went to wizard prison and Mr. Brown was terrible. That wasn't fair."*

Alexandra laughed ruefully, and sent Helen a heartfelt thank-you note.

After her first week in the Ozarks, when no Special Inquisitors arrived to haul her back to Central Territory, Alexandra began to feel a little less paranoid, though she still kept her hickory and yew wands constantly within easy reach, even when she was in the outhouse or taking a bath. Accepting that at least temporarily she had a safe refuge, she was faced with the question of what she was meant to do with her time. She still felt a strong conviction that she needed to visit Storm King Mountain, though the means to get there, let alone get inside, were beyond her. In the meantime, she practiced spells, studied from her books, and did chores for Granny Mahnkey.

Granny Mahnkey was never satisfied with the way Alexandra performed even the simplest of tasks. She was finally allowed to use magic, but the scouring charms and levitation spells she'd learned at Charmbridge were "noisy 'n full'er fuss," and Granny Mahnkey made her dust and clean and patch holes in the roof while standing in place, invoking cleaning and mending charms wordlessly. Alexandra found this difficult and pointless; it went against all the lessons she'd learned in Charms and Transfigurations. She knew it was possible to cast spells non-verbally — she had done it herself occasionally — but it was like trying to climb a ladder wearing skis. Granny Mahnkey made it even harder by forbidding her to wave her wand around.

Alexandra climbed up on the roof to recast waterproofing charms. She learned to animate brooms and feather-dusters. She learned a bit of sewing, mostly the old-fashioned way without the assistance of magic thread or charmed needles. Granny Mahnkey also tried to teach her to cook, before declaring her "purely hopeless" beyond the most rudimentary tasks, like boiling water and peeling potatoes. At least this Alexandra was allowed to do with her wand, as long as she was quiet and kept still while doing it.

Granny Mahnkey was not impressed when Alexandra blamed the burned water on her yew wand.

Besides household chores, Alexandra was sent on numerous errands, fetching tea and chocolate and yarn and butter churns from other Grannies.

"Why don't you just Apparate?" she asked Granny Mahnkey. "You're a witch! Why do you do everything the hard way?"

The old woman smiled. "That's why we uns keep young gals about, for fetchin' 'n carryin'."

Alexandra learned more about the topography of the Hollers, as the Grannies were scattered widely between them. Most of the Grannies lived like Granny Mahnkey, in cabins and cottages by themselves, but two lived with their extended families. When Alexandra descended out of the sky on her foreign broom, wearing boots and a barely-decent dress, with her hair straying from beneath her half-tied bonnet, her hosts were hospitable enough and never failed to offer her refreshments, but children were sent to do chores or work on their "grammars" rather than stare at the strange visitor. Ozarker girls covered their mouths — in shock or amusement, Alexandra could not tell which — and Ozarker boys squinted at her, contemptuous and fascinated. She felt like a strange weed that had erupted in their yards.

Everyone was civil. The Grannies would tell her tidbits of meaningless gossip and give her something else to carry to the next family over, or ask what the weather was like on the other side of the mountain, as she'd been "waftin' about takin' in the breeze like a wild gull."

Alexandra realized that the errands were meant to keep her busy and out of the way when the Grannies wanted to talk. Often she would return from one Granny's house to find Granny Mahnkey in animated conversation with another. Alexandra didn't believe for a second that they'd been talking about the weather and Granny Mahnkey's lovely new rocker embroidery. Once she heard a "pop" as she left Granny Mahnkey's house to borrow some wand wax from Granny Goodman, and turned to see Granny Ford entering the cabin.

The Grannies were talking around and about her, and Alexandra knew little about what was going on in the outside world, or even here in the Hollers.

Letters arrived from Anna and the Pritchards, and then from Julia and Livia. All of them reassured her that they were doing what they could. Julia hinted that Alexandra should sneak her way to Croatoa and live with the Kings, but even Julia had to realize how infeasible that was. It would be the first place the Office of Special Inquisitions would expect Alexandra to go.

She began taking longer on her little errands. Granny Mahnkey didn't seem to mind, or notice, when Alexandra went out to fetch a salt shaker and didn't return until evening. She roamed all over the Hollers, and sometimes into the deep, dark woods. With her broom and her magical boots, she could cross ravines no Muggle hiker could reach, or land in black and rotting swamps that were only steps from a highway, but leagues and centuries away once she was past the tree line. She had the sense here in these wild patches that still filled the spaces on the map between the ever-expanding zones of Muggle habitation that the Ozarks were a timeless and untouched place. Sometimes she felt eyes on her from deep in the woods. She was never able to spot her unseen watcher, even with Charlie's help, but brandishing her wand always made it go away.

The Ozarks were beautiful and wild and inhospitable and scary. Alexandra began to appreciate how the Ozarkers might want to keep it that way. She could lose herself for hours in the untamed wilds hiding between homesteads and highways. Then a truck horn or the distant thunder of a jetliner would stir her and remind her that even in the deepest Hollers, the Ozarkers couldn't completely escape the Muggle world.

She sympathized with them, seeing how they valued their isolation and their pristine Hollers, but she didn't see how they could expect to stay untouched forever.

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It grew colder. In the winter the Ozarks were covered in bitter frost, and Alexandra continued running around the Hollers on errands. Warming Charms kept her from freezing on her broom, but sometimes she stayed on the ground. In her Seven-League Boots, she could run sure-footed even through snow and ice.

In mid-December, Granny Mahnkey sent Alexandra to the Markle farm, which lay in Furthest Holler, across the river and on the other side of a forest from the Pritchards' homestead.

It was the first time Alexandra had set foot in Furthest since returning to the Ozarks. With Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence still at Charmbridge, she saw little reason to visit the Pritchards, though she knew the real reason she avoided their Holler.

The Markles were to give Alexandra a box, which she was to bring back to Granny Mahnkey. Granny Mahnkey had strictly enjoined her against opening it.

The Markles were polite and hospitable, like most Ozarkers. They offered her coffee and a piece of persimmon pie, and then hurried her out the door before any of their children could engage her in conversation.

With the Markle farm about a quarter of a mile behind her, Alexandra set the box down and inspected it with scrying charms and her Witch's Sight. There were no charms on it, and it wasn't even locked. She stood there contemplating it, her chin resting on her fist, wondering why Granny Mahnkey would set such an obvious trap for her. What sort of test was this? A test of her curiosity or her honesty? Maybe her willpower? The box probably contained nothing more than coffee or persimmons.

She had nearly resolved not to open it, just to spite the Granny and her expectations, when she heard a chopping sound, followed by the crack of a tree snapping and falling.

Curious, she picked up the box and walked through the icy woods until she came across a wooden palisade surrounding a compound of low-roofed log cabins. Through the open gates of the palisade, she saw dwarves pushing wheelbarrows and dragging sleds piled high with stacked cordwood.

To her left, the chopping sound echoed through the trees again, this time from much closer. It was followed by the crack of wood splitting, and then a series of snapping, rustling sounds and a crash. Alexandra followed the sound and found a pair of Ozarker men, dressed in winter coats and familiar wide-brimmed hats, standing over a large, fallen tree.

Alexandra walked closer as one of them yelled, "*Diffindo!*" and waved his wand. A Severing Charm sliced all the way through the trunk of the tree.

"One Charm, one cut," said Noah Pritchard.

"Tadwork!" scoffed Burton Pritchard. He raised his wand and said in a sonorous voice, "*Diffindo!*" making three quick gestures. In rapid succession, the trunk was chopped into three more segments. "You know hain't no one in the Five Hollers whose Severin' Charm's a match for mine!"

Alexandra clapped her hands together slowly, with the box tucked under one arm. Noah and Burton looked up. Noah pushed his hat back and stared at Alexandra much the way the Markles had. Burton's eyebrows went up, and then a grin spread across his face.

"Miss Quick," said Noah. "I din't 'spect to see you hereabouts."

"We'uns heard you was about," said Burton. "I wondered if you'd come callin'."

He said this in a polite way, without any innuendo that Alexandra could detect, and when she glanced at Noah, he just continued to stare at her, nonplussed, with no knowing winks or smirks exchanged with his brother.

"I've been busy," she said, not entirely truthfully.

"Heard that too," Burton said.

"What else have you heard?" she asked.

"That you is a rucksome outlaw an' a fugitive, on the gallows path, an' up to more devilry an' trouble than could be credited to one gal," said Noah.

"Troublesome!" said Charlie from a nearby branch.

"Also heard you is perambulatin' 'bout on Granny business," said Burton. "Now that can't be true, can it? The Grannies is known to occasionally take under their wings a maid who's got no mind for marriage, if she's fearsome powerful in some witchy way, but..."

"I'm pretty sure making me a Granny isn't what they have in mind," Alexandra said. She could not resist adding, "And I don't think I qualify."

Burton put the back of his hand to his mouth and coughed, turning away from Noah, who just nodded. "'Course not. A furriner as a Granny? What plumb nonsense." He looked at Burton, then back at Alexandra. "What're you doin' here, Miss Quick?"

"What are *you* doing?" she asked. "What's with the dwarves back there?"

"Ah, they'uns been buildin' settlements here in the Hollers since they'uns lost their homes, and we'uns are choppin' wood for 'em, to be neighborly. They'uns need a lavish o' fuel for their forges."

As he spoke, a pair of dwarves came trudging through the light snow toward them, pulling an empty sled.

"We'uns get along purty civil," said Burton. "But they'uns don't talk much, even to say thankee." He raised his voice at this, as the dwarves drew near. They both looked at him sourly but said nothing, just began stacking the wood Noah and Burton had chopped. Then one looked Alexandra's way, and dropped his armload of wood.

"You!" he cried.

"Asshole!" Alexandra said, and drew her wand.



"Asshole!" Charlie repeated from the branches, and the other dwarf dropped his wood as well.

"Merlin an' Arthur!" Noah exclaimed. "Wash yore mouth, what's wrong with you, girl?"

The dwarf glaring at Alexandra was wrapped in furs and heavy scarves, but his face and hands, where they were visible, were pink and scarred.

"Murderous witch!" he cried. "The angry witch, the slaying witch, the raven-haired ravager! Promised you hospitality and safety from such as she!" This last was addressed to the befuddled Pritchards.

"How are Nasty and Grabby and the rest of your creepy buddies?" Alexandra asked. "Still ambushing hikers and threatening to cook them?"

"Ask you so you can inflict more terrible retribution?" Asshole demanded. "Strike me down will you now, terror and trouble, as failed you before to kill us all?"

"If I'd wanted to kill you, you'd be dead, you stabby sadistic little shit!" Alexandra said.

"Alex!" said Burton, sounding genuinely shocked. Alexandra looked at him sharply, but Noah didn't seem to notice the sudden familiarity.

Asshole held up his hands. "In the ruins of our halls, set on fire was I, left for dead like so many of my kin! Reaver and ruiner, smasher and slaughterer!"

"Mugger, molester, and would-be murderer!" Alexandra retorted.

"Miss Quick!" Noah thundered. "An' you, Mister Dwarf! What's this about?"

"He's one of the seven dwarves who jumped me on my Quest," Alexandra said. "They hit me over the head, tied me up, dragged me underground, put their grabby little hands all over me, stole my stuff, and were going to feed me to the jimplicute!"

Noah and Burton's mouths dropped open, but Asshole raised his scarred fists and shook them at Alexandra. "Is she the reason dwell we now in hovels of wood instead of halls of stone! Refugees and beggars are we now because of her!"

"You! Threatened! To! Eat! Me!" Alexandra punctuated each word with a jab of her wand. The pieces of wood at the dwarves' feet began to smoke. "And Charlie!"

"Asshole!" said Charlie.

"We do not eat Beings," said the dwarf with Asshole, who had until now been silent.

"Tell that to this asshole!" Alexandra jabbed her wand in Asshole's direction again. His hat went flying off his head in a burst of flames. The dwarf screeched and dropped to the ground, cringing.

"STOP THAT!" Noah bellowed. "Miss Quick, reg'lare yoreself or I'll relieve you of yore wand! You will not abuse Ozarker hospitality, whatever grievance you got with the hill-folk an' however unmannerly they'uns might be!"

Alexandra was breathing rapidly. She glared at Noah, and almost dared him to try relieving her of her wand, but the expressions on the Pritchards' faces, and his words about Ozarker hospitality, put a damper on her fury. Shaking, she lowered her wand.

"Miss Quick," said Noah, "the hill-folk been tellin' tales 'bout a witch who destroyed their mountain, but we din't hardly credit it."

"Never believe us do wizard-folk!" said Asshole, slapping his hat against the snow.

"I knowed you was there on that Quest foolishness the Grannies sent you on," said Burton. "But you couldn't possibly bring down an entire mountain."

Alexandra said nothing, and continued to glare at Asshole.

Burton cleared his throat. "Um, you din't, right?"

"It's a long story," Alexandra said.

Noah and Burton looked at one another.

"It is true," said Asshole's companion. "Stands before us the earth-shaker and mountain-quaker. She who spilled wrath and fire upon us, and threw us into the harsh daylight. Can we not even rebuild our homes underground, because unleashed you the jimplicute."

"What do you mean, I unleashed it? It was already unleashed!" Alexandra said.

"Oh, Merlin, not this again," Noah groaned.

"Usually does it slumber between Jubilees," said the second dwarf. "But now it stalks us still and preys upon our folk when wizards are not about. Caused you this as well, home-wrecker and lair-despoiler."

"You can't blame the jimplicute on me!" Alexandra protested.

"T'ain't no jimplicute!" said Burton. "It's an old witch's tale we'uns tell tads to scare 'em."

"Are our tads and elders who have disappeared no doubt witch's tales as well," said the dwarf. "For wizards, what see you not happens not."

"Forget tall tales an' hill-folk fabulations," Noah said. "Did you really do what they'uns say you done, Miss Quick? Did dwarves flood into our Hollers 'cause you drove 'em here?"

"They assaulted me!" Alexandra said.

"I did not," said Asshole's companion. "Neither did my wife and babes, on whose heads you tumbled stones."

Asshole still stood cringing at his companion's side, glaring at Alexandra when not glancing nervously at Noah and Burton. But the other dwarf, despite trembling a little, looked steadily and accusingly at her.

Alexandra looked away.

Noah said, "Miss Quick, I reckon maybe you oughter go."

"I'm going," Alexandra said. She leaped seven strides in her Seven-League Boots, almost reaching the edge of the woods, and from there she ran back to Granny Mahnkey's cabin, fleeing the glowering, accusatory dwarves and the judgmental looks on Burton and Noah's faces.

---

Usually Alexandra slept until either Charlie or Granny Mahnkey woke her, but the next morning, she was up well before dawn. Granny Mahnkey came into the kitchen to find *Quirrel's Quick Potions Guide* open on the table, a fire beneath the kettle on the stove, and another fire lit in the fireplace. Floating in the fireplace was a cauldron Alexandra had dragged out from the cupboard she'd found it in while cleaning and dusting, and now she was mixing ingredients in a bowl with her wand while waiting for the water in the kettle to boil.

Granny Mahnkey took in the jeans and long-sleeved shirt Alexandra was wearing instead of an Ozarker dress. She looked over the ingredients and the book on the table, then sniffed at the steam rising from the cauldron in the fireplace. She turned to face Alexandra, who had just taken the kettle off the stove and was pouring boiling witch-hazel tea into a cup of crushed dragonfly wings and quicksilver.

"I do not recall you askin' permission to appropriate my potion stock," Granny Mahnkey said.

Alexandra eyed her without saying anything, and cast a charm on the concoction in the cup.

Granny Mahnkey frowned. "Alright, girl, I'm piqued. What're you brewin' a Hastenin' potion for?"

"I'm going jimplicute hunting," Alexandra said.

Granny Mahnkey blinked.

Alexandra carried the cup to the cauldron and poured its contents into the brew.

"I don't know where that notion come from, girl, but hain't no one ever seen a jimplicute," said Granny Mahnkey.

"I have," Alexandra said.

Granny Mahnkey's frown deepened. "Girl, if'n you are bored and in need of occupation for your time, I can oblige."

"Do you have any chores or errands for me today?" Alexandra asked. "I'll do whatever you want, but then I'm going to hunt the jimplicute."

"An' if I forbid it?" Granny Mahnkey asked.

Alexandra sighed. "Why would you do that? If the jimplicute is mythical, why do you care if I'm just wasting my time?"

Granny Mahnkey gestured at the cauldron. "That's a dangerous draft even when brewed perfect. Don't you know it'll take a year off'n your life with every swallow?"

"Isn't that an old witches' tale?" Alexandra asked. "The book says no one's proven that." Actually, what it said was that no one had ever measured how much it would shorten your lifespan, but it was a restricted potion for a reason.

Granny Mahnkey said, "Do not scoff at old witches' tales."

"Like jimplicutes?"

Granny Mahnkey threw up her hands. "How's this worth a year off'n your life?"

Alexandra's mouth set in a firm line. "Is one year off my life really going to matter?"

Granny Mahnkey stared at her. "You are a grim child." She watched as Alexandra continued her preparations.

"Do you have wolfsbane?" Alexandra asked.

Granny Mahnkey scowled. "You add wolfsbane to a Hastenin' potion, it'll Hasten you 'til your heart bursts."

"I know. It's called a Heartsploder. But you just have to take the antidote." Alexandra flipped the page in her book. "Do you have Calabar beans?"

"No," Granny Mahnkey said. "I can't stop you from chasin' kingdoodle tales, but I won't help you do yourself in."

Alexandra stood still for a moment as if prepared to argue the point, then shrugged and dispelled the fire under the cauldron. She poured the potion into a small bottle, which she attached to her belt with a Sticking Charm.

"You din't answer my question," Granny Mahnkey said. "Why're you suddenly all-fired eager to hunt jimplicutes?"

Alexandra said, "Apparently, I didn't quite finish my Quest."

Granny Mahnkey didn't call her back as Alexandra walked out the door into the frozen pre-dawn.

---

She did not find the jimplicute that day.

She flew on her broom to the mountain where the Ozarkers' Unworked magic was stored. It was now, as the dwarves had told her, smashed and tumbled down, a much smaller mountain with enormous slides of rubble strewn down what had once been steep, rocky slopes. It was more of a massively uneven, jagged hill, too rough and broken to climb over, and from the air, there was little to see but dirt and boulders under a layer of snow.

She landed and ran all around the mountain on foot. The cavern that had once been the entrance to the jimplicute's lair had collapsed with the rest of the mountain. She ran through the woods, stopping frequently to stand still and listen, waiting to feel that sensation of being watched. But as far as she could tell, the only thing watching her was Charlie, flying overhead.

Granny Mahnkey was sitting in a rocking chair holding a very old book with tattered pages when Alexandra returned. The old woman shook her head and tsked as Charlie flew up to a rafter.

"You did not find the jimplicute, I take it?" she said dryly.

"It's out there," Alexandra said. "It's just too fast, and it can smell my wand, and I'm not sure where it is now that I sort of destroyed its lair."

"Like you sorta drove the hill-folk outter their homes and made us 'sponsible for 'em?" Granny Mahnkey asked. "An' you sorta come close to murderin' some blaggard, an' sorta escaped from wizard prison, and the Stars Above know what else you sorta done?"

Alexandra scowled. She suppressed the urge to snap a bitter retort, and instead threw herself into the old worn chair opposite the rocker. She slouched disconsolately, until she noticed the box sitting at Granny Mahnkey's elbow.

She'd been so upset the night before, she'd slammed the box she brought back from the Markles on the table before storming off to her room and forgetting about it. Now she realized the box was about the right size for the book Granny Mahnkey was holding.

Granny Mahnkey noticed her scrutiny and smiled wryly. "I'm right 'stonished you didn't open it, to be honest."

"You told me not to," Alexandra said, with exaggerated sincerity. "Wait — how do you know I didn't open it?"

"I'da known. The box was charmed, 'course."

"No it wasn't," Alexandra said immediately.

"Hah!" Granny Mahnkey chuckled. "You wicked child."

Alexandra held her tongue until her curiosity got the better of her, then asked, "So what's so important about that book?"

"It's Ozarker genealogy. Granny Markle kept the record of our family histories. Now it's passed on to me."

"Oh." This was not interesting to her. Alexandra turned her thoughts back to the jimplicute. "Maybe I should set a trap. I could use a Slow Line..."

"Hain't never heard of a Slow Line," said Granny Mahnkey.

"It's from one of my books. It uses magic similar to an Age Line, but —"

"How much good's your book learnin' done you, child? You study them fancy spells, but everythin' you do's still a calamity, even boilin' water. What you need is some mule sense."

Alexandra frowned. Granny Mahnkey's words stung more than she wanted to admit. She tried to ignore them. "I'll need bait."

Granny Mahnkey snorted. "What do jimplicutes eat?"

"Dwarves, apparently."

"I do not feature the hill-folk cooperatin'."

Alexandra knew the old woman was being sarcastic, but she smiled. "Actually, I think they will." A plan began to take shape in her head. "But I'm going to need some extra help."

"Charlie!" said Charlie.

"Not from you, Charlie," Alexandra said. "From the elves."

"Elves?" exclaimed Granny Mahnkey.

"One elf in particular," Alexandra said. *And also one Ozarker in particular.*

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The next day, she trudged through the snow around the mountain where the jimplicute had once laired until she found what she was looking for: a laurel bush, still hardy and flowering despite the cold, with frost clinging to its branches.

She sent Charlie to sit on a nearby branch, and squatted next to the laurel bush, holding her wand before her.

Once, she would have used doggerel verse, but now that she could see the cracks in the world that ran through the Ozarks, and knew that one led directly to the place beneath the mountain that the elves guarded, she reached out and tugged, making it ripple. She wasn't entirely sure of the effect it would have, but she used a light touch, hoping that it would get the elves' attention.

The snow around her and the laurel bush melted instantly.

"Sees-From-Laurel, can you hear me?" she said. "It is I, Alexandra Quick." She touched the tip of her wand to the laurel bush. "I, Troublesome."

"Troublesome!" repeated Charlie, cawing from the tree behind her.

The laurel blossoms brightened until they were almost fluorescent. Then two of them blinked at her.

"Troublesome," said Sees-From-Laurel, his mouth the rustling of laurel leaves and his arms the branches, which were now as green and leafy as if it were springtime. "You have done us an injustice."

"How did I do you an injustice?" she asked.

"You drove the dwarves out of the mountain, buried the way to the World Away, and left us trapped within," he said.

"I thought you wanted the dwarves out."

"We wanted out! Now the way is buried beneath rocks and stone. How will the Ozarkers ever go the World Away?"

"Maybe the dwarves can help with that," Alexandra said.

Sees-From-Laurel's eyes were bright and unfriendly in the glow of the magically rejuvenated bush. "Why would the smelly tribe of diggers help either us or the Ozarkers?"

"I guess you're not aware of what's going on up here," Alexandra said. "It seems the dwarves still have a jimplicute problem."

"Ah. You did an injustice to them too."

"Maybe." Alexandra meant to sound sarcastic, but then she looked down involuntarily, twirling her wand and watching sparks spin off it. "Anyway, if I'm going to fix this, I need your help."

"The last time we helped you, it did not go as planned."

"Yeah, well, let's be honest, your plans weren't exactly in my best interest either. But I think you'll like this plan."

"Why?" asked Sees-From-Laurel.

"Because there's no risk for you, only for me. If it works, we get rid of the jimplicute and the dwarves can return to the mountain."

"And if it does not work?"

Alexandra raised her head to look at the elf again. "Then I guess you'll have a kind of justice."

## **\*Chapter 38\*: Doleful Calamity**

"Splain this to me again," said Burton. "How's an elf gonna make me invisible?"

"It's a thing they can do," Alexandra said. "Elf magic. Sees-From-Laurel has some kind of special connection to laurel. They can't actually leave their mountain, because of the Compact you guys made with them, but some of them can, like, project themselves to certain spots, and also use laurel bushes or cracks in the rocks as a sort of cloak from sight..." Her voice trailed off. "You are totally not taking this seriously at all, are you?"

They stood in the woods near what had once been the jimpicute's lair, where Burton had agreed to meet her after she sent a message with Charlie. He was listening with an amused, patronizing smile, and now he put a hand on her cheek. "Now, Alex, did you really invite me out to the woods to talk 'bout elves 'n jimpicutes?"

"Yes!" Alexandra slapped his hand away. "Oh my God, did you think this was just a booty call?"

"A what?" Burton grinned.

"Don't pretend you don't know what I mean, jerk!"

Sitting on the laurel bush behind them, Charlie said, "Big fat jerk!"

Burton's brow furrowed. "You know, that raven really puts a crimpin' on the romance — ow!" He jumped as Alexandra jinxed his feet. "Now stop that, I was just funnin'!"

Alexandra glared at him. "Well, stop 'funning.' I'm dead serious. I need your help if I'm going to fix any of this."

Burton folded his arms. "Alright, s'pposin' I believe there's a jimpicute, an' you can take us to the World Away, an' we'uns need the dwarves now to do that, and these elves feature into it somehow, though I ain't ne'er seen elves in the Ozarks —"

"That's because they were trapped, by the Confederation. And the dwarves."

Burton shook his head. "You hain't makin' a lick o' sense, Miss Quick."

Alexandra gritted her teeth at his condescending "Miss Quick," but forced herself not to show anger. "Fine, supposing you do believe me. Will you help me?"

Burton chuckled. "Sure. Show me."

Alexandra snapped her fingers.

"You will put your life in this one's hands?" The voice came from the laurel bush. "He seems something of an oaf."

Burton walked over to the laurel bush and leaned forward, staring into it until he could make out Sees-From-Laurel's form camouflaged within.

"Well, tie me down," said Burton. "Howdy, little feller."

"Yeah," Alexandra said, "he's an oaf. But he's got the meanest Severing Charm in the Five Hollers. So he says."

Burton turned back to Alexandra, now not looking quite so amused. "That's Dark magic, usin' a Severin' Charm on livin' Beens."

"A jimpicute isn't a Being, it's a Beast," Alexandra said. "You just said you could do it. Are you backing out now?"

Burton scowled. Alexandra knew she was attacking his pride.

"So, I'm gonna sit in a laurel bush, invisible-like, an' the jimpicute's just gonna come by all unsuspectin' an' let me lop its head off?"

"Basically," Alexandra said. "But you should take this Hasten potion." She handed him the little bottle she'd brewed two days earlier. "I'm going to cast Slow Lines, which will probably slow it enough for you to kill it, but just in case, as soon as you see it —"

"You just hold yore horses!" Burton took the bottle but held it as if Alexandra had offered him poison. "A year off'n my life? You don't ask for much, do you, Miss Quick?"

"I know I'm asking a lot," she said. "But seriously, you haven't seen how fast this thing moves —"

Burton snorted. "You admitted yourself you barely saw it atall." He held up a hand before Alexandra could protest. "Alright, alright, if'n I see it, I'll drink the brew."

"*When* you see it."

Burton's smile was more rueful now. "Whatever you say, Alex."

Alexandra didn't actually have much faith in the potency of the brew, and she wasn't sure about Burton. She was mostly relying on her Slow Lines. Slow Lines were one of the more difficult spells in the Auror's Field Training Grimoire. Not as difficult as the Patronus Charm, which she still hadn't been able to cast successfully, but she'd only just started practicing Slow Lines that morning. She didn't tell Burton this. "Just stick to my plan."

Burton's skepticism was still written across his face, but his expression became a bit more serious. "I still hain't bereckoned what we need the hill-folk for."

"They know where the jimpicute hunts, and they know how to lure it." Alexandra's face darkened. "I think they've left people out for it before."

"Not just people," said Sees-From-Laurel.

Burton shook his head. "If'n I thought we'un're actually gonna see a jimplicute, I'd call this a plumb foolish plan."

"Well, since it's not real, maybe you'd like to be the bait, then?"

"Hain't lettin' no dwarves tie me up. But I'll humor you an' the hill-folk, so maybe they'uns'll stop pesterin' us with this jimplicute nonsense."

"Fine. Humor me." Alexandra couldn't really let him be the bait — Constance and Forbearance would never forgive her. She took a deep breath.

"Now, I've got to go talk to the dwarves."

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"It doesn't have to be so tight," Alexandra said, as a dwarf tied her wrists together.

The dwarf grinned and pulled the rope extra-tight, hard enough to make her wince.

She dubbed him "Jerkass." None of them had given her their names. It was apparently a thing with dwarves — they didn't even give false names, like the elves. They just let humans assign them names if they needed them for dealing with "bigfeet."

"Hey, now," Burton said. He waved his wand, and the ropes around Alexandra's wrists loosened.

"Convincing we want it to be, do we not?" Jerkass said.

"It's convincin' enough," said Burton, giving the dwarf a scowl that momentarily replaced his amused smirk. All the dwarves around Alexandra stepped back.

They were inside the palisade the dwarves had built. Alexandra didn't see Asshole or any of the other dwarves she'd first encountered, but Asshole's friend who had remonstrated with her before was here, along with most of the dwarven population of the Ozarks, it seemed. All of them stared at her and Burton with hostile, angry expressions, and Alexandra wondered if it was only Burton's wand that kept them from skipping the plan and exacting vengeance now.

Alexandra had given her wands to Charlie. Remembering how hard it had been to send her familiar away from Eerie Island, she had coaxed, cajoled, and commanded until Charlie was far from Furthest Holler. She felt Charlie's unhappiness even from leagues away, and tried to think soothing thoughts, which was hard surrounded by angry dwarves preparing to stake her out as bait for the jimplicute.

"We go," said Jerkass, jerking on Alexandra's rope hard enough to make her stumble before she jerked back, almost pulling the dwarf off his feet.

Burton looked Alexandra up and down. Beneath a winter coat, she was in an Ozarker dress and bonnet, though she wasn't sure she believed the dwarves that the jimplicute was smart enough to differentiate between humans.

"Alright, Miss Quick, you ready to be chained to a rock like Andromeda?"

Alexandra managed a small smile. "I'm not going to be chained to a rock, I'm going to be staked out by a rope."

"More like a billy-goat," Burton agreed. "But I still gotter rescue you." He winked. "Traditionally, the hero gets a reward, don't he?"

"First you have to slay the monster, hero."

"Oh, don't you worry none." Burton held up his wand. "Any jimplicutes show up, I'll dispatch 'em like ol' Perseus himself."

"You'd better." Alexandra wished he would stop looking so skeptical. "And remember where I put the Slow Lines."

"Should you hide yourself before we arrive," one of the other dwarves said, addressing Burton.

"Right," Burton said. "Off to sit in a laurel bush an' twiddle my thumbs all day." He Disapparated away.

Jerkass tugged hard on her rope again. This time Alexandra meekly allowed herself to be pulled along, like a proper sacrifice, and tried not to let her annoyance show. There were only five dwarves with her this time — the minimum number, they said, to make it less likely the jimplicute would decide to pick them all off.

There had been a heavy snowfall the night before, so the snow was thicker as they hiked through the woods. Little conversation passed between them; as they walked deeper into the jimplicute's territory, Jerkass seemed less interested in making Alexandra stumble or wince when he pulled on her lead. The dwarves all looked around nervously and mumbled to each other.

Alexandra was alert to the sensation she'd felt before when she was spied on, but she wasn't sure how reliable it was, and she felt no eyes on her now.

Miles from the dwarven homestead, and not far from the mountain that was their former home, they found the copse of trees they'd chosen earlier, surrounded by thick laurel. Alexandra and the dwarves stared intently at the laurel, but Sees-From-Laurel's elfish magic must have been working; Alexandra couldn't see Burton. She was tempted to whisper his name, just to make sure he was actually there, but the jimplicute could be tracking them now, and though she wasn't convinced it was as cunning as the elves and dwarves thought it was, it would still be a shame to spoil the trap after they had gone to all this effort.

The dwarves brought Alexandra to the agreed-upon spot. As they passed through the laurel and entered the little copse, their movement suddenly slowed to less than a crawl. It felt like trying to move through transparent molasses. Alexandra sucked in a breath and realized she could breathe normally, but the invisible Slow Line she had cast between the trees dragged at each of them until they had passed it completely.

Then Jerkass was moving normally again, while Alexandra was still Slowed. He pulled hard on her rope until it felt as if he were trying to pull her arms off. She glared at him but could do nothing until she was past the Line, and then curled her fingers to rub her wrists where the rope had chafed and burned.

The dwarves staked the other end of the rope into the ground with heavy mallets.

"Should we bind your arms and legs as well," said one of the other dwarves. She dubbed him "Creepy."

"No," she said. "Get lost. My witch senses say the jimplicute is coming."

She could see they were skeptical, but not skeptical enough to risk the chance that she was telling the truth. They scrambled away without another word, leaving her standing in a copse by herself, wrists tied together, attached to a rope that was staked into the ground.

"Hope you're not talking a nap, Burton," she murmured.

Distantly, but not distantly enough, she heard a caw. *Stay away, Charlie.*

She supposed, to be realistic, she should be trying to escape. She began trying to work her wrists free, and found that Jerkass had done an exceptionally good job of tying them. She gathered up the rope in her hands and began pulling at the stake. It didn't even budge. She began rocking back and forth, trying to wiggle it loose, but it didn't move. The heavy metal spike the dwarves had used stayed sunk into the ground as if it had been charmed. She didn't think dwarves had any magic of their own, but she found herself frustrated at her inability to move it.

She knelt in the snow and began scrabbling at the dirt around the stake. Her hands quickly became numb, and the ground was hard and frozen. She might have been able to dig enough dirt out to loosen the stake's hold in the ground with hours of work and terrible damage to her fingers, but she had to admit that without magic, she really would be dead meat should the jimplicute actually appear.

*Now Burton's skepticism is rubbing off on me*, she thought. Her knees were already sore and damp from kneeling in the snow. She stood up and shook her legs and rolled her shoulders. It was chilly, but not as cold as some days. However, if it was uncomfortable for her, Burton was probably not enjoying sitting in the hunter's blind they'd made of the laurel bushes, though at least he'd have Warming Charms and whatever else he'd brought along to keep himself comfortable.

"Just don't fall asleep," she said under her breath.

She was pretty sure she could free herself with wandless magic — doggerel verse, if nothing else. But that might frighten away the jimplicute. The whole point was for her to be a wandless, helpless morsel staked out as a sacrifice.

"That's right," she said, in a high-pitched, sing-songy voice. "I'm just a scared little girl who's been left out as jimplicute bait. I don't have a wand or a gun or anything. I'm just dinner for monsters. Come and get me."

*Those dwarves*, she thought. They really had been planning to feed her to the jimplicute the first time. So maybe she had gotten carried away with her retaliation. Maybe not all of them were guilty of human sacrifice. Still, she felt like maybe the Ozarkers ought to have a chat with the hill dwarves about accountability too...

It appeared so quickly that it was if she'd summoned it by blinking, and for a moment, her brain didn't register the figure that had suddenly replaced what was empty forest an instant before.

Only yards away, a spiked reptilian head attached to a long serpentine body reared above the laurel bushes to stare down at her. It was motionless, a monstrous life-like statue that could have just Apparated into sight. Transfixed by its gaze, Alexandra found herself unable to move or even breathe, like the stories she'd heard of rats paralyzed looking into the eyes of a serpent. Staring at the jimplicute at close quarters and being truly defenseless was worse than when it had trapped her in its tunnel under the mountain. Now she had no wand, no Charlie —

She heard Charlie caw, and realized with dismay that she must have summoned her familiar to her in her terror.

*Charlie, stay away!* she thought, managing to seize onto that thought and repeat it with all her will. Her heart was hammering, her pulse racing, and when the jimplicute lunged forward, she found herself pulling at the stake in earnest, panic replacing her rational thoughts.

The jimplicute would have snatched her in its jaws before she could even move, but for the Slow Line. Its eyes turned round in rage and fear as the magic forced it to move at reduced speed, passing between two of the trees ringing Alexandra, but still it came fast, slithering at her like a giant horned serpent, though it had tiny clawed legs that pushed against the snow on the ground.

Up close, Alexandra realized it had fur under its scales, and its face resembled a cross between a weasel and a snake. She yanked against her tether with all her might. The stake came out of the ground and flew into the air. It wasn't some surge of strength bestowed by adrenaline — it was magic. Alexandra swung her arms thinking maybe she could hit the jimplicute with it, but instead the rope wrapped around her and the heavy iron stake struck the back of her head, almost knocking her off her feet.

"Burton," she said dizzily. The jimplicute opened its mouth wide. Like a snake, it could no doubt swallow her whole. Its body was thicker than hers.

"Burton!" she repeated, staggering back. She couldn't think of any doggerel verse, and the jimplicute's lower half was almost past the Slow Line. It glared at her with cold-blooded ferocity, and its front claws, while tiny compared to its body, were much larger than a man's hands. It could disembowel her while its jaws closed around her head...

"BURTON!" she screamed. She stared wide-eyed at the gaping jaws closing, and heard another voice. She thought it said, "*Diffindo!*"

The jimplicute's head slid off its neck and fell to the ground. Its jaws snapped shut as a spray of blood arced across the space Alexandra stood, splattering her and all the nearby trees and bushes.

The long, half-reptilian, half-mammalian body spasmed and convulsed. Alexandra took deep breaths as wet droplets of blood and snow flew everywhere. Charlie flapped around with great alarm, and Alexandra finally raised her hands, which were still tied together. Charlie landed on her outstretched palms, and with a word she released the Sticking Charms that held her wands to Charlie's talons. When she gripped her wands, her ropes fell away from her wrists. The skin there was red and sore.

Burton staggered into the tiny clearing, stepping over the jimplicute's twitching tail. He held his wand and looked wild-eyed, as if in shock. His movements were accelerated and jerky.

"It's a jimplicute!" he declared. "It's a goldanged jimplicute, hide me if it ain't!"

"Yeah," she said. "Well done. I mean, you could have been a little quicker there, you know? But —"

"ARE YOU OUTTER YORE MIND?" he roared.

Alexandra blinked and took a step back. Charlie cawed angrily.

"You are insane!" Burton yelled. His words spilled out, too fast. "You are the craziest, most hazardous witch I ever met in my life, and you're lucky to be alive thrice over, prob'ly a hunnerd times over if'n I believe half the tales my sisters told, which now maybe I ought! What vexatious madness passed through yore mind to pull a cymlin-headed stunt like this, girl? Where'd you get the damfool notion to use yoreself as bait for that *thing* and expect me to kill it?" He pointed at the jimplicute. "There wasn't a single sane or sensible thing about this idee!"

Alexandra's mouth hung open. Even when he stopped yelling, she was so stunned by his outburst that only seeing a pair of small, elfish eyes blinking from the laurel behind him allowed her to collect herself and answer him.

"Why are you so upset?" she asked. "It worked."

"What if I'd nodded off?" he demanded. "What if I'd missed? What if I din't see it in time or the Slow Line din't work or I din't take yore dangnabbed potion quick 'nough? How'd you even know for sure I was actually in the laurels, hidden by your li'l friend?"

"I had faith in you."

"Well you oughtn't've!" Burton yelled. "I din't even believe in jimplicutes! I thought this was a farce, a jakey notion of yourn I was gonna humor! An' you knew that! You knew I wasn't takin' it serious!"

"You mean I knew you were just hoping to get laid?" Alexandra smirked. "But it worked, didn't it? Everything went according to plan." She stepped toward him, and laid a hand on his chest. He was so agitated, his chest was heaving nearly as much as hers had been when the jimplicute appeared. "Good job, hero."

He stared at her a moment, then grabbed her hand, and to her surprise, pushed it away from him.

"You," he said, "are a dangerous, doleful calamity! If'n one thing'd gone wrong, yore blood'd be on my hands, an' my sisters woulda lost a friend they cherish dear, more dear'n you deserve, you reckless, high-headed lunatic!" He shook himself off, as if trying to banish chills. "They ain't lyin' when they'uns say you're Troublesome."

"Troublesome!" Charlie said.

Alexandra felt her own temper beginning to rise.

Before she could say anything else, Burton said, "I reckon you done took a year off'n my life an' then some. I think it's best if'n you don't call 'pon me again, Miss Quick." With a pop, he Disapparated away.

Alexandra stood there in shock for a minute, until she heard Sees-From-Laurel's voice. "Well done, Troublesome."

Alexandra turned to look at him with a blank expression, unsure if he was being sarcastic. Blood ran down her face and dripped on the snow. She must be a ghastly sight, she realized, covered in gore.

"I, too, ask not to be called upon again," the elf said. "May the next time we meet be the fulfillment of our pact."

"Greedy-guts!" said Charlie. The raven stood on the jimplicute's severed head, and began to peck at its eyes.

Sees-From-Laurel looked from the raven to Alexandra, and then faded from sight.

Standing there bruised, sore, and cold, in a blood-soaked dress, Alexandra felt like her triumph had been trodden on, and wondered why everything had to be so hard.



## \*Chapter 39\*: Champion

Alexandra heard nothing more about the dwarves, and she didn't say anything more to Granny Mahnkey or anyone else about the jimplicute hunt. She didn't know if it was a coincidence or not that Granny Mahnkey stopped sending her on errands, and instead gave her more chores around the cottage, which allowed Alexandra more time to study, but less opportunity to visit other Hollers and pick up news or gossip.

The week before Christmas, Alexandra received another owl from Julia. She still wasn't quite sure how owls could find her but Inquisitors couldn't.

*"My Dearest Sister,*

*I am delighted to inform you that as of December 17, we are both aunties! Livia's son Nicholas Austin Farr-Pruett was born at 8:47 a.m. Claudia went to visit her in Milwaukee, and sent me pictures to relay to you via Owl Post..."*

Alexandra read the rest of the letter with bittersweet feelings. Julia bubbled about the baby, and how she hoped Livia would let her visit soon. The photographs Claudia had taken showed a squalling, puffy, red-faced thing nestled in Livia's arms. Julia proclaimed their nephew "adorable."

Alexandra was sad she couldn't visit herself, though she'd never been around babies and wasn't sure if she'd get along with one.

The reminder that the rest of the world was moving on without her put her in a melancholy mood. Granny Pritchard found her sitting on Granny Mahnkey's porch, holding Julia's letter with her face sunken and her shoulders slumped.

"Constance an' Forbearance an' Innocence are back home," Granny Pritchard said. "They'uns is eager to see you, if'n you can pull yoreself outter yore doldrums and fix a proper bonnet on yore head."

"Last time I visited them, I didn't wear a bonnet at all," Alexandra said.

Granny Pritchard sniffed. "Is that letter from yore sister?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "How did you know?"

"So what think you 'bout goin' to stay with Angles?"

Alexandra's brow wrinkled. Granny Pritchard, seeing her confusion, said, "Angles is what we call Old Colonials who settled in New England."

"Wait, what?" Alexandra said. "Why would I be going to New England?"

Granny Pritchard put her hands on her hips. "Din't you finish that letter?"

Still not sure how Granny Pritchard knew who her letter was from or what was in it, Alexandra read quickly through the rest of the scroll — lots about Nicholas and Livia and Claudia, not much about Julia's school year, tidings from Croatoa and Ms. King and the Kings' elves, gentle queries about Alexandra's doings in the Ozarks (and fortunately no mention of Burton) — until she came to the end.

*"I know you've only met Lucilla and Drucilla once, but Mother and I have had many conversations with them since the possibility was first suggested, and they are positively lovely people — like all our sisters! So I hope you will give your deepest consideration to their offer, dear Alexandra. They make it with not inconsiderable risk to themselves, given the fraught political situation, but of course they are already accustomed to the hardships of being our father's daughters, perhaps even more acutely than we are, which is probably why they so readily agreed to offer you an apprenticeship and a home out of reach of Central Territory."*

Then Alexandra saw the second, smaller roll of parchment, attached to Julia's letter and sealed with a small circle of wax stamped with an owl. When she opened it, it fluttered out of her hands and unrolled itself in midair before her eyes, displaying a much briefer letter.

She looked up. "The Whites want me to go live with them?"

"So I'm given to understand," Granny Pritchard said.

"But I'll still be wanted," Alexandra protested. "I'll just be bringing trouble to them. If you're exiling me —"

"Stop bein' foolish!" Granny Pritchard snapped. "Hain't no one turnin' you out. Now go dress yoreself decent and might be you'll get things 'splained to you, on the way to my grandson's house."

"I am dressed decently," Alexandra said. "I've worn dresses and bonnets to make Granny Mahnkey happy while I run errands all over the Five Hollers, but if I'm going to meet my friends, I'll wear what I please. I'm a foreigner, and I'll dress like a foreigner, especially when you're clearly trying to get rid of me because I'm a foreigner."

"You are a wicked, troublesome, spiteful girl. You oughter be glad you hain't no kin o' mine."

"Yes, ma'am," Alexandra said.

They stared each other down for a moment, and then Granny Pritchard sighed. "Come along, then."

"Are we going to Apparate?" Alexandra asked.

"Nope," Granny Pritchard said. "An' my boots hain't charmed like yourn, an' I hain't sittin' on yore broom. I came by mule. He'll carry us both."

After saying good-bye to Granny Mahnkey, they went to the little yard outside, where the grass that showed through patches of snow was blueing with evening shadows. Granny Pritchard walked over to an ordinary-looking mule, and said, "You set in front, I'll hold onto you."

Alexandra patted the mule's nose, then swung a leg up in what she knew was, according to Ozarkers, a most unladylike fashion. This provoked a snort from Granny Pritchard. Once Alexandra was astride the mule, Granny Pritchard placed a hand on the mule's saddle, and with surprising

spryness, hopped on to sit sidesaddle behind her.

"Hie, you ornery thing!" said Granny Pritchard.

"You talking to me, or the mule?" Alexandra asked. Granny Pritchard's hand clutched her shoulder as the mule's hooves left the ground.

Rising through a light curtain of snow, the mule turned toward the one place Alexandra had avoided for the past few weeks. The mule was slow so Charlie was able to keep up easily.

"You recall as I schooled you some on the Confederation and its Territories?" Granny Pritchard asked.

"Yes," Alexandra said.

"You are currently wanted in Central Territory. You hain't officially a fugitive, seein' as how you weren't never convicted. But the Guv'nor still ordered you arrested on sight."

"Same difference," Alexandra said.

"Not quite. If you was an escaped felon, you'd be subject to extradition, as you said. Every Territory'll send fugitives back where they come from. But an arrest order only applies within the Territory it was issued. Now, Guv'nors can ask other Guv'nors to honor their arrest orders. Most will. An' o'course, nearly every Guv'nor will do anything Guv'nor-General Hucksteen asks."

"Of course," Alexandra said.

The snow was getting heavier, but Granny Pritchard waved a hand and the snow and cold air flowed around them.

"Can you teach me that spell?" Alexandra asked.

"Pay more attention when Granny Mahnkey sets you to yore chores an' you'd learn a piece," Granny Pritchard said. "As I was sayin', *most* Guv'nors will do as the Guv'nor of Central Territory and the Guv'nor-General asks."

"But not Ozarkers," Alexandra said.

"Nope. Nor the Guv'nor of New England, because Angles's always been an ornery bunch. We'uns never had no love for them nor they'uns for us, not even back in the Old World, but we'uns both held the Ministry of Magic in contempt, albeit for different reasons."

Confederation politics, and Granny Pritchard's surprisingly detailed knowledge of them, would normally have been of greater interest to Alexandra, but as she saw a familiar hill with a Muggle highway curling around it, an indication that Furthest Holler and the Pritchards' home was not far beyond, she asked, "What are you saying? New England won't extradite me, and the Governor-General has no power there?"

"Oh, the Guv'nor-General is a powerful man," Granny Pritchard said. "Hain't nowhere in the Confederation where he hain't got power. But the Angles' Guv'nor is nearly as muleish as we'uns when it comes to been' pushed 'round by outsiders."

"What about Special Inquisitors?" Alexandra asked.

"They'uns still have authority in any Territory. But since the Guv'nor-General hain't declared you an Enemy o' the Confederation, it's right pervokin' to folks when Inquisitors snatch someone without a warrant in a Territory where the Guv'nor hain't invited 'em."

"How do you know all this legal stuff?" Alexandra asked.

"We'uns can read, Missy," the Granny said. "An' as isolated an' backwards as you may think we are, some of us find it needful to regard the world outside our home."

"I don't think you're backwards," Alexandra said. The mule began to descend toward a familiar homestead. The snow was falling heavily now, but three figures waited in the tiny half-circle of light cast in front of the Pritchards' house, pressed close together beneath the heavy coats they'd donned over their dresses and bonnets.

Charlie cawed a greeting and the three of them turned their faces upward — Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence, all waiting for her.

"Granny Pritchard!" called Constance.

*Right — and her,* Alexandra thought.

"Alexandra!" called Innocence.

"Hello, Charlie," Forbearance said, as the raven swooped low and landed beneath the eaves over the porch.

When they settled on the ground, Alexandra waited until Granny Pritchard slipped off the mule and then dismounted herself. She put an arm around Innocence, who was the first to hug her.

"I never reckoned you'd be a genuine fugitive!" Innocence said.

"Really? Everyone else seemed to think it was inevitable," said Alexandra.

Constance and Forbearance traded places with their younger sister and embraced Alexandra.

"We'uns missed you terrible," Constance said.

"We'uns was so feared for you," Forbearance said.

"I missed you, too," said Alexandra.

"Is you gals gonna stand out in the snow gabbin' like beasts too dumb to know when to come in?" boomed a voice from the porch.

"You're a right blaggard, Burton," said Constance.

"Who you callin' a beast, boy?" Granny Pritchard's voice was icier than the weather.

Burton immediately took his hat off. "Beg yore pardon, Granny Pritchard. I din't see you there."

"You'd a'knowed I come with Miss Quick if you had a lick o' sense," Granny Pritchard said. "Now let's all come in outter the weather. It's chillin' my old bones. Burton, you'll take care o' Pict, won't you?"

"Yes'm," said Burton.

Five females ascended the wooden steps and walked past Burton. His sisters stared past him, stiff and indignant. His cocky grin faded beneath Granny Pritchard's gaze, and he barely glanced at Alexandra. Charlie hopped onto Alexandra's shoulder, then took up a perch just inside the threshold, above the door.

"Big fat jerk," the raven said.

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Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard were clearly uneasy with Alexandra's presence. She couldn't blame them. She thanked them for the food they offered and tried not to pepper Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence with a hundred questions about school and Anna and David and Sonja.

She initially tried to avoid Burton's gaze, then decided she wasn't going to act like a silly girl, as if she'd done something wrong, so she stared directly at him, until she worried she was being too obvious, and then she ignored him except for when she studied him out of the corner of her eye. As far as she could tell, he was doing the same thing — alternately ignoring her and staring blankly back at her. Sometimes she thought the two of them must have been obvious to everyone else in the room. By the end of dinner, Alexandra realized she'd spent so much time worrying about how to act around Burton that she'd barely paid attention to the conversation.

Granny Pritchard finally drew it back to her. "Has Miss Quick told you'all 'bout her letter?"

Everyone looked expectantly at her. Alexandra cleared her throat.

"My sisters — Lucilla and Drucilla, I mean — have invited me to come stay with them. I guess I'd be their apprentice."

"Oh," said Constance.

"Well," said Forbearance.

"Do you want to go?" asked Innocence.

"I don't know. I mean, sure. It would be good to... " Alexandra wasn't sure what she wanted. She started to say she was worried that she'd be bringing trouble to them, and realized that would imply she was okay with keeping trouble here in the Ozarks. She sighed. "I don't really know them. We've only met once. And I'm still not sure how Confederation law works. I've been worried the whole time I'm here that Inquisitors would show up and take me back to Eerie Island, and I don't know what will stop them from just showing up at Lucilla and Drucilla's house."

Granny Pritchard set her fork down and pushed her plate away. "You might've noticed they hain't come to snatch you whilst you was here."

"I have noticed that," Alexandra said.

"Consider how it makes the Guv'nor-General look," Granny Pritchard said. "All that effort to take in one little girl who had a tantrum makes the mighty Confederation look awful weak."

"One girl who's the daughter of the Enemy of the Confederation," Alexandra said. She wanted to add more about her "tantrum," but noticing how the mention of her father made Mr. and Mrs. Pritchard's lips tighten, she let it drop. She was surprised they hadn't kicked her out already.

"The decision's yourn," Granny Pritchard said with a shrug. "Granny Mahnkey'll let you bide with her s'long as it pleases you, and we'uns hain't never gonna turn you out o' the Five Hollers, long 's you behave yoreself."

Burton made a sound in the back of his throat. Alexandra's eyes flickered in his direction and narrowed.

"You'll stay at least through the holidays, won't you?" Constance asked.

"I haven't even answered their letter yet," Alexandra said. "I don't know when they expect me to come if I do come." She looked at her friends, who wore their bonnets even at the family supper table. Innocence grinned at her. "Yeah, I'd like to stay while you're here."

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After dinner, she walked with Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence in the woods behind their house. Snow fell around them, making the Ozarks beautiful and wintry. The Pritchards spoke of Charmbridge, and their classes, mentioning several times how much Alexandra's other friends missed her.

"I reckon even Larry Albo misses havin' you to tussle with," Innocence said.

"I doubt that," Alexandra said. "He's in training for the Junior Wizarding Decathlon."

"Dean Grimm is sendin' a few students to New Amsterdam with him," Forbearance said.

"Larry's friends, I reckon," said Innocence.

"I have to figure out how to get there," Alexandra said.

The sisters all tilted their heads to regard her with some surprise, as they stepped lightly over the thin crust of snow surrounding the house.

"What for?" Constance asked.

Alexandra said, "I need to do something there."

"Is this somethin' else you hain't gonna tell us 'bout?" Constance chided. "Hain't you kept enough secrets from us, Alex?"

*Not enough, and too many*, Alexandra thought, bowing her head. "It has to do with, um, what we talked about before. With Julia."

"Oh, you mean one o' those things you don't want to tell me about!" Innocence said, sticking her lower lip out.

Alexandra put a hand on the younger girl's shoulder. "That's right. Now let it go. Seriously."

Innocence looked at Alexandra, opened her mouth, and closed it again.

They were quiet awhile. Then Alexandra said, "I did have an idea, but it's probably crazy."

"Oh dear," said Forbearance.

"Let's hear it," Innocence said.

Alexandra said, "I've been Named, right? Like, according to your folks, I actually am Troublesome."

"That's so," said Constance.

"So, doesn't that... technically... make me an Ozarker?"

"Accordin' to the Stars Above, you surely are," said Forbearance.

"Alex," said Constance, "you hain't conceivin' what I think you are?"

"As an independent Culture, you Ozarkers can nominate anyone you like as your Champion to the Junior Wizarding Decathlon," Alexandra said.

Constance said, "That's... that's..."

"It's ingenious!" exclaimed Innocence.

"It's unprecedented," said Forbearance.

"It's crazy," Alexandra said. "But — it can't hurt to ask?"

Constance said, "We'uns hain't never sent a champion to any Confederation games. Not the Wizarding Decathlon, nor the Junior Wizarding Decathlon, nor the National Potioneers Championship, nor the Confederation Games, nor even the World Series o' Whist."

"There's some Grannies might like to attend the World Series o' Whist, if'n we ever condescended to participate atall in Confederation events," Forbearance said.

"It'd take some cajolery," said Constance.

"Even if it works, how do you reckon you can go to New Amsterdam bein' a fugitive?" Innocence asked.

"I'm only a fugitive in Central Territory, if what Granny Pritchard told me is true. I mean, nothing stops the Office of Special Inquisitions from making me disappear. But they could do that here, if they really wanted to."

"Alexandra Quick as Ozarker champion," said Forbearance. "My stars 'n garters."

"That is the most bodacious thing I ever heard!" said Innocence. "I bet you could win, too!"

"Maybe." Alexandra smiled. "But who can nominate me as the Ozarker champion? The Grannies?"

"Not officially," said Constance.

"But it's where we'uns oughter start," said Forbearance. The twins nodded in unison.

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Two weeks later, Alexandra stood in the gravel parking lot behind the A&W. She adjusted her pack, checked her gloves and boots, and adjusted her wool scarf, tying it so it wouldn't fly away as she ran. It was the middle of January, and snow still blanketed the Ozarks.

Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence stood with her at this boundary between their Holler and the Muggle world.

Granny Pritchard had come with them, all of them riding on mules. Granny Pritchard stood at the edge of the woods with the mules, allowing the girls a semblance of privacy, though Alexandra had no doubt the Granny could hear everything they said.

Alexandra spoke first. "Guess it's time to say good-bye... again."

"We'uns'll see you again," Constance said.

"Maybe in New Amsterdam," Innocence said.

Forbearance shook her head. "Dean Grimm hain't gonna let us go to New Amsterdam. An' Pa surely wouldn't."

"It's probably for the best," Alexandra said.

Innocence stuck out her lower lip.

"I owe you so much," Alexandra said. "For everything. You got the Grannies to listen to me. Your family let me stay with them. And you've put up with me being..."

"Troublesome?" Forbearance said.

"I wish everyone didn't expect me to be like Troublesome," Alexandra said. "Those are just stories. Ozarker girls have been named Troublesome before, right? They didn't all —"

"Spell the li'l people an' churn the hill-folk?" said Innocence.

"Catch a Thren and kill an underwater panther?" said Forbearance.

"Or seduce our brother," said Constance, and suddenly there was no humor in her expression.

Alexandra's eyes went wide. "Oh my God. You knew?" She looked over their shoulders, and glared at Granny Pritchard. "She told you!"

Constance and Forbearance shook their heads. "No one told us, Alex," Constance said.

Forbearance said, "Boys talk."

Constance said, "They *gossip*."

Innocence said, "They'uns is horrible braggarts, an' Burton worst of all."

Alexandra felt heat rising from her despite the winter chill. "So much for 'I hain't gonna ruin yore reputation,'" she said bitterly.

"I don't reckon he meant to," Forbearance said. Her cheeks burned brighter than Alexandra's as she spoke. "He's been braggin' to the Five Hollers 'bout slayin' a jimplicute."

"Oh," Alexandra said. *Well, that's ironic*. "But..."

"He din't 'zactly boast 'bout your part," Constance said, also blushing. "But it did come up. An' that led to what you done to the dwarves —"

"You ought've told us 'bout that, Alex," said Forbearance.

"I didn't realize," Alexandra said unhappily. "Not everything, at the time."

The Pritchards exchanged glances, then Constance went on. "Anyhow, I reckon Noah teased the rest outter Burton, an', well, then it come out that he, um, bedded Troublesome."

"Great," Alexandra said. "I guess now I'm the biggest slut in the Five Hollers."

Everyone's face was red now. "Well, he set up to you, I reckon," said Forbearance. "Neither o' you done anythin' you din't both want to do. So he's certainly 'sponsible 's much as you."

"More," said Constance, pursing her lips. "He ought've known better. An' with our *friend*!"

Alexandra looked away.

"Anyhow," said Innocence, "everyone knows Charity Harper is the biggest—"

"INNOCENCE!" Constance and Forbearance said together.

"I—" Alexandra started to apologize, then faced them. "I am sorry for any embarrassment I caused you. And I'm sorry if you think less of me now. But you're right — neither of us did anything we didn't both want to do."

The three sisters stared back at her with their bright, blue eyes.

"Well then," said Constance.

"We'uns don't think less o' you, Alex," said Innocence.

"Though we'uns might not fancy your choices," Constance said.

Alexandra hung her head.

"But you surely are Troublesome," Forbearance said, and there was something particularly sad in the way she said it.

All three girls embraced her.

"Be careful," Constance said.

"Be well," Forbearance said.

"Lick 'em good at the Decathlon!" Innocence said. "Show them furriners!"

Alexandra laughed. "I'm only an Ozarker on a technicality. We all know I'm still a foreigner."

"I reckon that makes you the first Ozarker furriner ever," Granny Pritchard said. She had walked forward to join them, leading the mules with her, and the other Pritchards quietly stepped back. The old woman fixed Alexandra with her gimlet stare.

"You have surely lived up to yore Name," she said, "and I 'spect you hain't half done."

"I expect I hain't," Alexandra replied evenly.

"You just 'member what you promised. This hain't all about you an' yore personal preoccupations, Missy."

"I know what I promised," Alexandra said. "And you know I have to live to keep it."

Her proposal to the Grannies, and their petition to whoever made decisions in the Five Hollers — the patriarchs of the Five Families, she supposed — had ended in vague promises from both sides.

She could open the cracks in the world, but they never lasted long. She didn't know if the Ozarkers meant to go to some specific World Away, and she certainly didn't know how she could hold open the way long enough for every Ozarker in the Five Hollers to pass through. She felt like they just expected her to fulfill her part because of her Name. And she had no idea what was going on between the Exodans and the Steadfasters, nor the disposition of the hill dwarves; none of them, not even the Pritchards, would talk to her about discussions that were only between Ozarkers.

Granny Pritchard gave her a rueful smile. Her voice softened. "For what it amounts to, I would prefer you alive to dead. And I suspect Granny Mahnkey's become a mite fond o' you as well. So do try to avoid gettin' into more trouble than you can extricate yoreself from. It would make my great-grandchillun' right melancholy."

"Thank you," Alexandra said. Her voice lost its sarcastic edge. "I will try. But you know, trouble seems to come to me whatever I do." She shrugged. "I really will try to avoid inviting more."

It was pointless to say this, and they all knew it. There was no way to accomplish any of the things she aimed to do and not run into trouble. But it made her friends feel better if she told them she was going to be careful.

She set off down the highway, and only when she was out of sight, and no Muggle cars were visible on the road, did she leap forward, letting her boots carry her halfway to the next bend with one step, around the bend with the next. She moved in bursts of speed, stepping into the woods when a car appeared. Once she was alone again except for Charlie, she emerged and resumed her trek to town, where she could catch a bus to New England.

## **\*Chapter 40\*: Apprentice**

After a nineteen-hour bus ride, Alexandra stepped out into a gray evening in Connecticut. Headlights reflected off the glass and snow around the bus terminal. A surprising number of people were bustling about. It wasn't as busy as Chicago, but there were more people than Alexandra had been used to for the past few months.

She looked around, fearing an Auror might appear, or Diana Grimm. But she supposed if she'd been tracked on her cross-country journey, they'd have intercepted her before she arrived at a public place with so many Muggles around.

After visiting the bus station's restroom and buying a sausage sandwich, she walked outside again, stretching and rolling her shoulders. She was tired and had not slept well on the bus.

She opened her backpack. "You all right in there, Charlie?"

"Fly, fly!" The raven was not happy about being confined so long. Alexandra had snuck the bird out a few times during the long trip, long enough to share some food and a little sunlight, but Charlie wanted to fly.

"Soon," Alexandra promised. She zipped up her pack again, silencing Charlie's angry caw.

Lucilla and Drucilla hadn't provided much in the way of instructions, only that she should find a pay phone, insert a Pidge, and dial a particular number. In the icy, slush-filled alley behind the terminal, there was a lone pay phone under a battered metal hood.

Alexandra picked up the phone, stuck a Confederation Pigeon into the coin slot, and dialed the seven digits she'd been given. Nothing happened. The dial tone resumed.

She looked around, then unrolled the letter from Lucilla and Drucilla and reread it. She had not made a mistake with the numbers, and there were no additional instructions.

She was about to try putting another Pidge into the pay phone when she felt a disturbance in the air. She whirled, and had her wand out before she even realized what she was reacting to.

"Easy, little sister." A cloaked, hooded figure stood in the alleyway, holding up her hands. "A bit jumpy, are you?"

"When people Apparate behind me, yeah," Alexandra said.

The figure slowly pulled back her hood, revealing blonde hair and ice-blue eyes.

"Lucilla, right?" Alexandra said.

Lucilla smiled. "Very good." She nodded to Alexandra's wand. "I understand your wariness. But don't wave that around in town if you can help it. You never know when there are Muggles watching. Also, it's poor form for an apprentice to hex her teacher, or her sister."

"Sorry," Alexandra let out a breath and lowered her wand.

Lucilla said, "If you'll take my arm, I will Apparate us to our home."

Alexandra hesitated, then did as Lucilla said, keeping her wand in her other hand.

The Side-Along Apparition only unsettled her for an instant. Then they stood before a large house. No other buildings were visible near it. From what Alexandra could see, they were in a frozen marshy area next to a river. Dead reeds poked out of the snow, and small trees with bare branches stood on two large hillocks to the east and west.

Just across the river were the lights of what looked like a large port, with big gray ships sitting in docks.

"Is that... a military base?" Alexandra asked.

"I believe so," Lucilla said. "Don't worry. The Muggles can't see us."

Alexandra gazed at the ships, then turned her attention to the house. Hidden between the two hills on either side of it, it was larger and more impressive than it first appeared. Multiple gables thrust up into the twilight gloom. Most of the windows were dark, and the wood seemed old and weather-stained, but in sheer size the house was several times larger than the Pritchards' home back in the Ozarks. It was more a mansion than a house. And that was just what she could see from the outside.

Lucilla said, "Before we go in, there's something you should know."

Alexandra nodded, expecting to hear some unpleasant surprise.

"Our house is protected by a Fidelius Charm. I know you know what that is. By bringing you here, I've revealed its location to you. Until now, Drucilla and I were the only Secret-Keepers. Not even our father can visit us here. You must not reveal this place to anyone else. Not even him." Lucilla's mouth settled into a frown. "Especially not him. But not Julia or any of our other sisters either, nor your friends, and obviously, not your dear aunt Diana Grimm."

"Do you really think I would?" Alexandra asked.

Lucilla's gaze was unblinking. "I don't think so, no. But realize we don't really know you, Alexandra. We have taken an enormous leap of faith in inviting you here and extending our trust. Before you set foot inside, understand that as our apprentice, you will be expected to obey our every instruction. Even the ones that don't make sense to you, or which you find tedious or unpleasant. Don't worry, we won't be harsh teachers, and we will not haze or abuse you or make you do unpleasant things just because we can. Some wizards think it's traditional to treat an apprentice like a house-elf." Lucilla shook her head. "But if you ever break our trust, we will not give you a second chance. Are these terms acceptable to you?"

Alexandra nodded. "Just one thing." She unslung her backpack, opened it, and pulled Charlie's cage out of it.

"Alexandra!" Charlie said, in a demanding tone.

"You knew I had a familiar, right?" Alexandra asked, as she opened the cage to let Charlie out. The raven pecked Alexandra's hand, then fluttered up to her shoulder.

Lucilla smiled. "Well, aren't you a fine black bird?"

"Pretty bird," said Charlie.

"Familiars cannot be Secret-Keepers," said Lucilla. "And they cannot reveal a secret. Your raven will be able to come and go freely, just as owls can."

Alexandra wondered again how that worked, but she nodded. "Well, Charlie, looks like this is where we're staying for a while."

The front of the house boasted a porch wide enough to hold a dance on, though the wood was so old and warped that it didn't look like a good idea. As they walked across it to the front door, Lucilla said, "Dru is downstairs, quenching something. She'll be up shortly."

She led Alexandra inside. Past the entry hallway was a small living room decorated with polished wooden furniture and lined with glass-fronted bookcases. A large chandelier dominated the room, and Alexandra had to hold Charlie's legs to prevent the raven from flying up into it.

"I'm sure you'd like something to eat," Lucilla said.

Charlie cawed.

"You too, my fine black bird," Lucilla said.

Charlie cawed again, and said, "Clever bird!"

Lucilla nodded, as if used to conversing with ravens, then turned and beckoned for Alexandra to continue following her.

Alexandra remembered Lucilla as the dressier and more glamorous of the twins at Maximilian's funeral two years earlier. Her face was plainer today and she wore casual robes, but fine silver and gold bracelets jingled on her wrists. Jeweled rings and dangling earrings flashed as she led Alexandra down a dim hallway.

The hallway seemed unusually long. There were no pictures or lamps hanging on the walls, but they passed three doors on each side. Alexandra tried to reconcile the number of paces with the size of the house on the outside.

"Is your entire house wizard-spaced?" she asked.

"Not all of it," Lucilla said. "But the interior does move sometimes."

She beckoned Alexandra into a sitting room dominated by overstuffed red chairs and sofas and a coffee table. Alexandra sat down in a chair, and Charlie hopped to the armrest.

"Your familiar will need to stay in that cage while inside," Lucilla said. "I know Charlie will want freedom to fly about, but there are things in this house that aren't good for birds, especially birds who love shiny things." She raised a hand and waved a finger at Charlie, who was indeed eyeing the bangles on Lucilla's wrist.

"Okay," Alexandra said.

Lucilla reached under her belt and withdrew a long, pale wand. She made a small gesture, and a set of plates glided into the room through the open doorway, followed by a gleaming silver tea kettle. One plate held a pile of rich-looking yellow cakes, and another held a teacup. They settled onto the table in front of Alexandra, and the tea kettle sprouted thin legs like a fat metal spider, rose above the table's surface, and tilted to pour tea into the cup, like something out of a children's cartoon.

Charlie, without waiting for Alexandra's approval, hopped onto the table and began nibbling at one of the yellow cakes. Lucilla frowned.

"Sorry," Alexandra said. "Charlie doesn't have the best manners." Over Charlie's objections, she put both hands around the raven and forced her familiar back into the cage.

"Thank you for letting me come here," she said. She picked up a cake that Charlie hadn't begun pecking at yet. "I'm not sure what you intend for me to do. I've never been an apprentice before. I've never been anything but a student. But I'll do my best."

Lucilla smiled. "You've been many things besides a student, I think. And Drucilla and I want to hear all about your adventures, in much more detail than we've heard already."

Drucilla entered the room. Her hair was the same yellow shade as Lucilla's, but it was tied back in a braid. Her robes were a bit rougher than Lucilla's, with frayed patches at the elbows. A pair of heavy leather gloves were tucked into a sash around her waist. Unlike Lucilla's soft slippers, Drucilla's feet were covered in worn brown leather boots. Sweat still beaded on her forehead and there was a blueish smudge on her cheek. Alexandra wasn't sure what "quenching" was, but she guessed that Drucilla had been working when she arrived.

"So, our fugitive, troublesome sister has arrived," Drucilla said. "Along with a familiar, I see."

Charlie cawed.

"It's good to see you again, Alexandra. I know you've been through some trials since we last met. I hope this will be a place of safety and comfort for you, but there is a great deal for you to learn, and rules for you to follow."

"Lucilla has been explaining things to me," Alexandra said.



"She's told you you're to do all the housework, and serve us breakfast in bed each morning?"

Alexandra glanced at Lucilla. Lucilla laughed. "She's joking. You can't always tell, because Dru likes to pretend she doesn't have a sense of humor."

"Pretend?" Dru shook her head. "Eat and rest, little sister. We'll have plenty of time to talk later about chores and responsibilities."

"Yes," Lucilla said. "When you're done eating, I'll show you to your room. I'm afraid there's a trick to it."

"A trick?" Alexandra said.

"Well, it won't always be the same room," Lucilla said. "Our guest bedroom moves, you see. The house likes to hide it, so you may have to try a few doors to find its current location. That's true of a lot of rooms in this house, but we've fixed most of them in place."

"Mostly," said Drucilla.

"Yes. Never step through a door in this house blindly. The basement steps mostly rotate between three or four doors, but depending on the time of day and the season and the weather, they can occasionally appear elsewhere."

"And sometimes the steps will be missing entirely," said Drucilla.

"It sounds like the house sometimes tries to kill you," Alexandra said.

"Not anymore," Drucilla said seriously, but Lucilla laughed.

"We had to banish a lot of ghosts, and a particularly difficult poltergeist, and some ill will still lingers," said Drucilla. "I hope you aren't unusually sensitive."

"No one's ever called me sensitive," Alexandra said.

"The house is not quite aware," Drucilla said, "and we've done our best to make sure it doesn't become so — that can cause all kinds of problems — but it's very old, so... yes, watch your step. And be careful opening cupboards. Or turning on faucets."

"This is also one of the reasons you should keep your raven in a cage," Lucilla said.

"Don't complain," Alexandra said to Charlie. "It'll be just like home." That triggered a twinge of homesickness, which she ignored.

"Well then," said Lucilla, "let's show you to your room."

Alexandra didn't know how they knew which door led to her room, but Lucilla opened the first door on the right after they left the sitting room, and nodded as if confirming a guess.

Alexandra found within an old four-poster bed with fresh sheets, and simple dressers and baskets that wouldn't have been out of place in a Muggle home of the same time period in which it appeared this gabled mansion had been built. There was a mirror on the wall, and Alexandra noticed as she passed by it that neither she nor Charlie cast a reflection in it. A window next to the bed, with curtains tied back, showed snow banks surrounded by water. The water came to within yards of the house. The lights were of the old gas lamp style Alexandra had seen at Croatoa and in other older wizard buildings.

She set her pack and Charlie's cage down. "It should be safe for Charlie to fly around outside, shouldn't it?" she asked.

"As safe as it is for any familiar around Muggles," Lucilla said.

"Charlie is used to flying around Muggles," Alexandra said.

The Whites showed Alexandra around the house. As she had already deduced, it was larger on the inside than on the outside, and it was quite large on the outside. Her bedroom was near a large kitchen and dining room, the sitting room Alexandra had already seen, a spacious party room, and what seemed like an excessive number of smaller sitting rooms, reading rooms, and closets.

Everything was furnished with quaint elegance, and few of the rooms appeared recently used. Aside from its magically expanded internal geometry, the house had few obvious wizardly appurtenances... until they reached the library

It was the first room Alexandra had seen in the house that was expanded vertically as well as horizontally; it was nearly as large as the Larkin Mills Public Library she'd spent so many hours in as a child. The shelves all looked relatively new, not like the antique furniture of the other rooms. It was lit by glowing spheres hanging wirelessly below the ceiling. The books ranged from recent publications Alexandra had seen at Boxley's Books in Chicago's Goblin Market to much older tomes, some of which had the distinctive worn leather covers she associated with very old wizarding texts, sitting adjacent to drawers with piles of scrolls on top of them.

"This is awesome," Alexandra said.

"Awesome," Lucilla repeated, as if intrigued by the word. "Well, thank you. You're welcome to use it any time, of course, and in fact we're going to start your training with quite a few books to read. But we do need to point out a few volumes that are... well, you shouldn't open them."

"You mean they're forbidden," Alexandra said, remembering the Restricted section of Charmbridge's library.

Drucilla said, very seriously, "Nothing here is forbidden, Alexandra."

"Really?" Alexandra looked at the twins, waiting for the catch.

Lucilla said, "What you did in Roanoke, taking Valeria's Time-Turner... is that your usual behavior?"

Shame burned Alexandra's cheeks, and she looked down.

"If you think that, I'm surprised you trust me at all," she said quietly.

"We do trust you, Alexandra," said Drucilla. "We know the circumstances, at least what Valeria told us. What you did was the headstrong act of a foolish girl. Who was still grieving and could not let her brother go."

Alexandra maintained a stoic expression, still gazing at the floor.

"That was the past," Drucilla continued. "You are no longer that foolish girl. Are you?"

Alexandra let out a breath. "I'm not sure my friends would agree. But I think... I hope... I've gotten a little less foolish."

"You're here as an apprentice," Drucilla said. "We expect you're going to behave like one, and that means taking our warnings as seriously as our lessons. You're not a child to be looked after, and we're not your babysitters."

Lucilla nodded. "You can leave any time this arrangement no longer suits you. We hope you'll prove worthy of our trust and take our warnings seriously. If you can't, then this arrangement may not work for us either. We haven't shown you the workshop, the laboratory, the forge, or the cellars yet. There are things there that cannot be mishandled, and we don't want you touching them before you're prepared."

"Okay," Alexandra nodded. "I won't touch anything you tell me not to touch."

Drucilla gestured toward the library, which had more chairs and tables than there were residents in the house. A writing desk by the window, its wood surface stained with ink, had a jar full of quills on it. Next to it was a large table made of a thick slab of wood, more appropriate for a carpenter's workbench than a library. Several piles of smooth, dark stones were lined up along one edge, presumably to hold down the immense scrolls and maps rolled up in sheaves in a glass case by the wall.

Most of the books were wizarding texts, and the titles alone read like subjects far more advanced than Alexandra had encountered at school. *Non-Euclidean Apportionment*. Seven volumes of *Thaumaturgic Reactions and Anti-Reactions*. *Kingsley's Handbook of Conjuring Primitives*, 11th Edition. *Unreal Arithmancy*. 667 *Advanced Transfigurations*. *Before We Had Wands: Practical Ancient Wizardry*. *Syncretic Polyspatial Feng Shui*.

"Wow," she said.

"The books that you shouldn't open will tell you so," Drucilla said. "We put Warning Charms on all of them."

"Also Thieves' Curses, of course," said Lucilla, "but you won't have to worry about that." She tapped one book, which had a black cover with bright red bands across it. "Go on, touch this one."

Alexandra did so, cautiously laying her fingers on the stiff leather binding.

"Gitcher filthy paws offer me!" said the book. Its title was *The First Step Into Darkness: What You Should Know*, by Gilroy Wycliffe.

"That one came with a Warning Charm already on it," Lucilla said, shaking her head. "It's actually a terrible book, and I don't mean terribly Dark."

"Nowadays anyone can get published," Drucilla said with a sigh.

"But," Lucilla continued, "the rituals that idiot warlock recommends could leave you blind and tongueless if you try them right out of the book."

"If there is a volume you're interested in but it warns you not to touch it, just let us know, and if you really want to read it, we'll work out the necessary precautions," said Drucilla.

"Thank you," Alexandra said. After days of travel, and weeks of feeling like an outsider even among the most hospitable Ozarkers, she was filled with an enormous sense of gratitude. These two half-sisters barely knew her, yet they were giving her the run of their house and unlimited access to materials that seniors at Charmbridge wouldn't be allowed to even look at. She took a deep breath. "I appreciate everything you're doing for me, and I really want to learn more. About everything."

She didn't just mean magic. She was intensely curious about their upbringing, and how much they knew about their father, and just what they did besides enchant magic items out here in a house on the edge of a swamp. She hoped there would be time for such conversations.

Lucilla and Drucilla exchanged a meaningful look; it was the first time they had displayed any sort of mannerism that reminded Alexandra of the Pritchard twins. She guessed they knew what she meant as well.

"Well," Lucilla said, "why don't you unpack your things and arrange your room as you like it. Time enough to begin studying tomorrow. We'll talk about chores and things over dinner — and by the way, I hope you know how to cook."

"Um," said Alexandra, remembering Granny Mahnkey scolding her for burning water. "Not really."

"Humph. Well, we have a magic oven and plenty of convenient cooking charms, but you will be on your own for food quite often."

"That's fine." Alexandra had fed herself at home for much of her childhood, usually on sandwiches and snacks.

"Very well." Lucilla nodded. "Welcome to our home, Alexandra. You will begin your studies tomorrow."

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Alexandra didn't sleep well, despite how tired she'd been. The bed was comfortable enough, but disturbing dreams haunted her sleep only to recede from her conscious recollection moments after she woke up. She was unsettled, not sure if the feeling was just the lingering after-effects of a nightmare.

Charlie slept contentedly until Alexandra rose, then immediately began complaining about being caged.

"Shush, Charlie."

Something bothered her. It took her a moment to realize what it was: she'd gone to sleep with her head to the north and her feet to the south, the

window to her right. But when she woke, her head was to the south and her feet to the north.

She examined the bed. She had not somehow reversed her position in her sleep. The bed was pointing in the opposite direction from when she went to sleep.

Alexandra shook her head, not entirely sure she wasn't misremembering.

She pushed aside the curtains and saw only mist beyond the window. It curled around the house and pressed against the glass, obscuring the snowy ground even immediately in front of the house. But she could hear sounds from the river harbor.

Lucilla and Drucilla were both in the kitchen already when Alexandra joined them. Drucilla looked sleepier than Lucilla, who was tossing toast into an oven and tapping her wand against a row of eggs, instantly bursting them cooked and scrambled out of their shells. The shell fragments flew in a white spray into a ceramic cup.

"Traditionally, an apprentice does all the chores, including cooking meals," Lucilla said.

"Ignore her," Drucilla said, yawning. "We've never had an apprentice before and this is hardly the usual sort of apprenticeship."

"Family apprenticeships are quite traditional," said Lucilla.

"Our family isn't," said Drucilla.

Alexandra sat down at the table. "Have you talked to our father much?" she asked.

"When we were younger," Drucilla said. "We spent more time with him than Valeria did, but, well, our parents' marriage was already strained by the time she was born. You know that he's never been particularly..."

"Monogamous?" Alexandra said.

"I was going to say, constant," Drucilla said.

Lucilla snorted. "Our mother was rather bitter, so we didn't hear much good about him growing up. Eventually we reconciled, but, well, he's always been felt more by his absence."

Alexandra nodded. "I only met him three years ago, and it was only a year before that that I found out who he was."

"Your upbringing was quite unusual, I must say," Drucilla sounded interested, rather than judgmental. "I understand that was mostly Claudia's doing."

Alexandra learned over breakfast that Lucilla and Drucilla had been talking to Julia and Livia a lot over the past year. They knew far more about her life than she did about theirs. The White sisters spoke highly of their stepfather, with whom their mother had had several more children, but they seemed almost indifferent about their father.

Lucilla floated their dishes into the sink with a wave of her wand, and Drucilla folded her hands together across the table from Alexandra.

"So," she said. "What do you know about Artificing?"

"Just what I learned in school," Alexandra said. "I've had four years of Magical Theory and Transfiguration and Charms and Alchemy. I've read a little bit. And I know something about wandlore. Just what little the G— what I learned in the Ozarks."

"Ozarkers," Drucilla waved a hand dismissively. "Wandcrafting is for mystics and runecarvers."

"Dru doesn't like any art she can't understand," Lucilla said. "Wandcrafting is a different kind of enchantment. It requires much more... sensitivity."

"Mumbo jumbo," Drucilla said. "No one understands it, not even wandcrafters. We're here to teach you Artificing. It will take everything you've learned in school and a great deal more, and before you're ready to create your first item you'll know more than a Charmbridge graduate, at least in our particular specialty. But it will require reading a lot of books, because we're going to make very sure you know what you're doing before you try your first enchantment."

"You may find our practices more formulaic and rigorous than you're used to," Lucilla said. "Every Artificer must find their own foundation, but ours is built on Arithmancy and Alchemy in the Paracelsusan tradition."

"I know who Paracelsus is!" Alexandra said, happy to show off that she wasn't completely uneducated.

"I should hope so," Lucilla said. "You're introduced to him in sixth grade, aren't you?"

"Well, yeah." Slightly deflated, Alexandra listened to the Whites list the books she was to read and all the steps she'd have to complete before they'd allow her to make her first Artificing attempt.

"Yes, it is daunting," Drucilla said. "We're going to cram your head with years' worth of study in a matter of months. That doesn't mean you'll be as good as someone who's spent years studying the art of Artificing, but either you have aptitude or you don't, and we may as well find out quickly."

"I do have aptitude," Alexandra said. "I'm as much a witch as you are. And I've been places, done things, and seen things you haven't."

Drucilla sat back in her chair, while Lucilla, still standing, raised her eyebrows and folded her arms. "You were much more humble last night," she observed dryly.

"I know I'm younger than you, and I have a lot to learn," Alexandra said. "I know you're both really accomplished, and I want to learn from you. I'm grateful, too — really grateful." She looked back at each of them, and her hands curled into fists. "But I don't have as much time as you think, and I have things I need to do. I'll study, hard. I'll do everything you ask. I'll follow your rules. Just don't hold back. I can do anything you can do."

"Can you, now?" Lucilla made the rest of their meal and accompanying dishes vanish with a wave of her wand. "Well then, you'd best get started."

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At Charmbridge, Alexandra had considered herself quite formidable, at least in Charms and Transfigurations, and dueling and flying. When it came to book-learning, she had to admit she'd been an uneven student. She was an avid reader, but she had not always been a diligent one.

Lucilla and Drucilla piled books on her, as promised. For a week or so, she barely saw them except at breakfast and dinner, and did not leave the library much. Some of the reading she was given covered subjects she had studied at Charmbridge — Arithmancy, Alchemy, Magical Theory — and she wondered if her sisters were just trying to push her missing school year on her. But Alchemy led to Esoteric Metallurgy, and Thaumaturgic Vitality, and Investment Rituals, and other fascinatingly arcane topics. She found a scroll instructing how to create a Pensieve, and eagerly studied it, but found it very difficult to decipher. It referenced a book about Memory Alchemy, which she spent the entire day studying.

Alexandra hated to admit it, after the speech she'd given her sisters, but she was lost. The material was too dense and difficult for her. She had no doubt she could grasp it, given enough time. She didn't have time.

When Lucilla asked her that evening how she was faring, Alexandra hesitated. The three of them were eating soup that Drucilla had made. Alexandra sipped cautiously; the previous night, she had tried to heat up some stew, and burned her mouth. Not because she'd poured too much heat into it from her wand, but because this house made odd things happen sometimes. She'd tripped, walked into doors, found walls where doors should be and vice versa, and once the bathroom had been replaced with stairs down into a closet in the middle of the night.

"It's... a lot," she said.

Lucilla's eyebrows went up. "But you're very smart," she said. "And you have had a lot of experience."

"I have, but... not so much learning from books." Alexandra sighed. "I was kind of hoping you could... help me."

Behind Lucilla, Drucilla smiled. "We were just waiting for you to ask."

Lucilla pulled Alexandra's book across the table. "We were warned that you can be a bit full of yourself, and sometimes you need to learn the limits of your ability before you ask for help."

Alexandra frowned. "Warned by who?"

Lucilla flipped through the pages of the book. "We haven't been entirely fair to you — an apprentice wouldn't normally begin at this level of study. But then, an apprentice wouldn't normally be as old as you and with so little learning."

"So little learning?"

"Don't be offended. Your general education at Charmbridge was fine, I'm sure. And yes, we realize you're very talented. Your magical ability is not in question. But Artificing is a very demanding specialty. Drucilla and I have been studying it since we were eleven."

"I've been studying it since we were eleven," Drucilla said. "It took you a few more years to take a serious interest in something besides boys."

Lucilla tossed Alexandra's book back to her. "Don't listen to her, Alexandra. She was interested enough in boys, too."

"My priorities were different," Drucilla said.

"All work without a switch makes Dru a dull witch. Don't be like her, Alexandra. Now, let's talk about solvents." Lucilla picked up another book, opened it to a chapter with lurid green lettering in the margins, and set it on the table in front of Alexandra. Acrid fumes burned her nostrils. "Careful. Don't handle the pages without snakeskin gloves or treating your fingers properly beforehand."

Startled by the transition from banter to lecture, Alexandra held her breath and leaned forward.

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None of Alexandra's classes at Charmbridge had been as difficult as weeks of cramming under Lucilla and Drucilla, but she never complained. She reminded herself that she'd asked for this, but she wondered when she'd be allowed to actually do magic. She'd hardly used her wands since arriving at the seven-gabled house.

Drucilla quizzed Alexandra every morning, while Lucilla set various items out for her inspection and made her assess them. Alexandra was learning to see the spells in the everyday objects Lucilla and Drucilla left around their house, and she was beginning to notice things even in the items she already owned, like her backpack and her waterproof boots. Like Witch's Sight, it seemed less remarkable the more she employed it.

It was three weeks before they finally allowed her downstairs.

Lucilla led her through an oak door that was conspicuously thicker and heavier than any other door in the house. Also conspicuous, now, was the small wrought iron gargoyle mounted in the frame above the door. Alexandra stared at it, and the little creature winked at her as she passed beneath it.

The stone steps went down further than should have been possible, considering the house was sitting on marshy ground next to a river. At the bottom of the steps, Alexandra looked left and right and saw corridors stretching in both directions, lit by torches. The basement had to be enormous.

"Don't wander around here by yourself," Lucilla said. "Don't come down here without one of us. I'm very serious about that. Most of our work is quite mundane, but Artificing can be dangerous, and we have things down here which you're not to trifle with."

"Okay," Alexandra said.

Lucilla turned and looked at her.

Alexandra frowned. "Look, I don't know what Valeria or Julia told you, but I don't go wandering around causing trouble just for the heck of it."

Lucilla arched an eyebrow.

"Well, not anymore," Alexandra said.

Lucilla smiled slightly. She beckoned for Alexandra to follow her.

The first door she opened led to an ordinary-looking workroom, with a long bench filled with brooms. On the wall were racks of broomsticks, and in one corner were bins full of straw of various lengths, shades, and materials. Other boxes contained bits of wood, leather, metal, stone, glass, and all sorts of tools. The brooms were in various states of disassembly. With her Witch's Sight, Alexandra saw this was true of their charms as well as their physical construction.

"A lot of our business is repairing brooms," Lucilla said. "It's boring work, but every broom is a little bit different, and each repair is a slightly different challenge. It's perfect for an apprentice. You can find manifests for all the most common models there." She pointed to a cabinet by the door. "I expect it will be weeks before your work is actually acceptable to ship back, but this is what you're doing until we're tired of it."

"We?" Alexandra asked.

"Drucilla and I. We don't care if *you're* tired of brooms. And you will be."

By the end of the week, Alexandra was very tired of brooms. Lucilla had given her no further instructions, only inspected her work at the end of each day, leaving Alexandra to figure out what was to be done with each broom. There were tags affixed to each one indicating the original owner, but rarely any notes about the broom's condition. Some were models she recognized; there was a Valkyrie like the one Maximilian had given her for her thirteenth birthday, and a fine 2012 Hesper that looked brand new except for the split along its shaft. Many were old — brooms with bent sticks and cracked, peeling paint, and charms in a similar state of decay. Some were so old they were just bundles of straw tied to a stick with a leather thong, and Alexandra could barely believe they had ever been flightworthy. Even the Ozarkers had brooms in better condition than that!

The problem, she realized, was that repairing them required both craftsmanship and Artificing skill. A simple Repair Charm could mend fractures and splits, but sometimes she had to resort to cutting new splints of wood herself, or finding the right type of straw to attach. She peeled her knuckles with clumsy woodworking skills, and spent long hours looking up the right spell to reactivate the Flight Charm on something that belonged in a coal bin.

Elves, she thought, would probably love this kind of work. Or would they? Julia and Ms. King had no qualms about letting elves serve them, but she had seen no elves here. The first time she asked Lucilla about house-elves, her sister glared at her as if she'd uttered an obscenity.

"We," she said, emphasizing each word, "do not employ house-elves."

Next to her, Drucilla eyed Alexandra coldly.

It was the first time Alexandra had seen the twins truly angry. She didn't press the point. She did wonder what Lucilla and Drucilla thought about the Kings' house elves.

A few days after that, Lucilla examined one of Alexandra's repair jobs and for the first time pronounced it acceptable.

"You are on your way to becoming competent," Lucilla said. She tossed the broom on the bench. "Tomorrow you can start testing, but only before dawn and after dark."

Alexandra grinned. It had been a while since she'd been flying — and she'd barely been out of the house since arriving.

"Only to test the brooms you're repairing," Lucilla said.

"Don't let us, or any Aurors, catch you flying your own broom," Drucilla said.

"I haven't seen Aurors or anyone else since I got here," Alexandra said. "How do you do business, anyway?"

"Most of it is by Confederation Post nowadays," Lucilla said. "But we have a small clientele, and sometimes Drucilla and I make business trips. You haven't seen any of that because we've kept you busy. It will be a while before you meet any of our customers."

Alexandra took a couple of her most recent repairs outside that evening. She hadn't realized how long it had been since she'd been outside, other than to let Charlie out and sometimes walk around the house waiting for her familiar to return. She'd watched the ships out along the river, and even heard automobiles pass by, not too far away, but her cell phone was long dead and she'd had no contact with anyone but the Whites since arriving. She had sent letters by owl to all her friends, as well as Julia, but no replies had come back yet. Lucilla and Drucilla's words made her realize how isolated she felt. Flying around over the river did little to relieve her of the feeling, but at least it was freeing. Below her, ships churned up and down the icy waters of the river.

## \*Chapter 41\*: Sojourns

An owl brought a letter from Julia the next day, and letters from Anna and David finally arrived the following week. Charmbridge Academy was excited about the upcoming Junior Wizarding Decathlon, and of course, their champion, Larry Albo. Even David, while no fan of Larry and his Pureblood friends, was enthusiastic about the contest itself.

He and Anna had collected as much information as they could about previous Junior Wizarding Decathlons and the sorts of trials that happened there. The challenges used to simply be named after the skill being tested — Alchemy or Charms or Divination. In recent years, however, the titles of the contests had become more dramatic in theme: *Acromantula Challenge*, *World Curses*, *Sirens of the Seventh Sea*, *A Giant Surprise*, *Manticore Races*, *An Envenoming Evening*, *Dueling Demighosts*, *Tomb Raiders*. Alexandra thought they actually sounded kind of fun.

*"These contests are really dangerous, Alex," Anna wrote. "The adult Wizarding Decathlon has a fatality rate of one in twenty, and even in the Junior Wizarding Decathlon kids die sometimes. I know that won't make you reconsider doing this, but please be careful. It's not just a dueling competition like what we did at Charmbridge."*

Anna knew well enough that Alexandra had faced things much more dangerous than the Junior Wizarding Decathlon. But Alexandra wasn't surprised that Anna was anxiously imagining her being eaten by a manticore or something.

David had researched past Decathlons even more thoroughly, and compiled statistics on them as if they were a sporting event. She studied his charts, but they seemed more useful for betting on champions than winning as one.

According to her friends, Sonja continued to insist she had the gift of prophecy. All the teachers had told her to stop going on about her "Inner Eye"; even Ms. Estrella, the Astrology teacher. This didn't stop her from scribbling predictions in a notebook day and night, and she'd insisted that David and Anna forward a collection of them to Alexandra. Alexandra unrolled the bits of parchment Sonja had enclosed, and began reading them.

*Mirrors don't always show the truth, sometimes they show your enemy.  
Beware of alligators.  
Don't do that! Seriously. You'll know what I mean when it happens.  
You won't get what you want but you'll get what you need.  
It wasn't him, it wasn't him, it wasn't him, it wasn't him!  
On your birthday, a black cat will cross your path after a long journey.  
Avoid humble pie, it might be poisoned.  
Charlie will spy something and steal something.  
You'll see someone who's dead again.  
You will not finish everything but you'll go further than anyone else.  
All your sisters will be together only once.  
The monster you never see is the one you need to kill.  
One ring to save them both, and in the darkness find them.  
Don't fly too close to ships, especially haunted ships.  
When you open the World Away, it will be the last time you see me.  
Don't steal something you can't steal twice.  
There are rats in New Amsterdam.*

Alexandra shuffled all these predictions together, annoyed. David and Anna said she'd given similar long lists of predictions to them and anyone else who'd listen. Making so many vague "prophecies," of course some had come true, or resembled things that had happened, so Sonja had apparently convinced a few kids at Charmbridge that she really was a Seer. She was becoming quite strange and full of self-importance.

Alexandra put down the letters as Lucilla strode into the kitchen, looking particularly glamorous, with a softly glowing robe and charms illuminating her face. Her hair was tied into many long, thin braids, and she wore an array of rings and necklaces and spinning earrings.

"You're going out," Alexandra said, with some surprise. She hadn't seen either of the twins leave the house since she'd arrived weeks ago, though she supposed they must. For that matter, her letters from her friends and sisters had made her suddenly aware of how long she'd been stuck in the house.

"I am." Lucilla smiled and cupped Alexandra's chin in her hand. "You haven't been out at all, have you? You and Dru should go into town."

"Town? There's a wizard town around here?"

"No." Lucilla shook her head. Her earrings flew about her head, then settled back into their regular orbits. "In this part of New England, wizards all live sequestered among Muggles, or else out in the boonies. Drucilla can show you the wizard establishments hidden across the river." She gestured toward the city on the other side of the submarine base. "I don't much like going there myself. Being around that many Muggles..."

Alexandra frowned. "You don't like Muggles?"

Lucilla's eyebrows went up. "Goodness! I didn't mean it like that. I just... don't understand Muggles or Muggle society."

"You didn't have a Muggle Culture class in school?"

"I skipped it. But some of my best friends were half-bloods. Until they found out who my father was." Lucilla shrugged. "In any case, I am going out. You and Drucilla should go out, too. Really, it will be good for both of you."

"Where are you going?" Alexandra asked.

"I," said Lucilla, primping her hair with an exaggerated gesture, "have a date." She winked at Alexandra. "Tell Dru not to wait up for me." She stepped out onto the porch, and with a snap of her fingers, Apparated away.

"Huh." Alexandra looked across the snowy hillock past the porch where Lucilla had been standing.

She was in the library studying her Auror's Field Training Grimoire when Drucilla emerged from the basement half an hour later. "I don't recognize that book," Drucilla said.

"I, um, picked it up in Chicago," Alexandra said. "Some of the spells might be useful in the Junior Wizarding Decathlon. You don't know the Patronus Charm, do you?"

Drucilla shook her head. "That's only taught to Aurors and Regimental Officers."

"I'll bet our father knows it," Alexandra said.

"Quite possibly," Drucilla said. "But it has nothing to do with Artificing."

Alexandra closed the book, and Drucilla looked around. "Where's Lucilla?"

When Alexandra told her of Lucilla's departure, she muttered, "Fool."

Alexandra raised her eyebrows.

Drucilla said, "There are reasons we don't leave the house much. When we do, it's with Misdirection Charms and under a Glamour, or some other disguise. But Lucilla chafes under the isolation. She's always been the sociable one, and I suppose I can't blame her for wanting a life, but..." Drucilla shook her head.

"I wouldn't mind going to town," Alexandra said. "I haven't left the house since I got here. I mean, if that's part of apprentice training, that I don't get to go anywhere for weeks and weeks..."

"Sometimes it is, but I understand. You want to go out, too. We're not keeping you here out of spite." Drucilla seemed pensive. "I do have some business to take care of. I suppose you can follow along, though you'll have to stay outside for most of it."

"Shouldn't I learn your business, as an apprentice?" Alexandra asked.

"Not this business. It's for your own good, Alexandra." When Alexandra began to protest, Drucilla said, "Remember the terms of our agreement? Apprentices don't argue."

Alexandra closed her mouth. "Yes, mistress."

"Stop that." Drucilla waved a hand. "Tomorrow morning, we'll conjure a fog bank and cross the river. Be ready an hour before dawn."

"Yes mistr— I mean, sister." Alexandra grinned.

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Lucilla did not join Alexandra and Drucilla for breakfast the next morning. It was still very early. Alexandra asked if Lucilla was coming along, and her twin said no. Alexandra considered asking if Lucilla had come home last night, and decided not to.

Alexandra and Drucilla left the house together dressed in winter clothing — Alexandra in a parka, pants, and her magical waterproof boots, Drucilla in a long fur coat over witch's robes. Alexandra left her backpack back in the house, but carried a wallet with what little Muggle money she had left, and her dead cell phone.

They walked through the snow down to the riverfront, and found that the submarine base was no longer across the river.

Alexandra looked questioningly at Drucilla. "The house has moved."

"I told you, it does that sometimes." Drucilla consulted a half-spherical object on her wrist. "Only a few miles this time. We're perfecting the *locus* enchantments. Now, let's call in the fog."

Alexandra knew almost nothing of weather magic. She could summon a wind, and knew basic charms for heat and cold, but what Drucilla did, as easily as Alexandra could conjure a breeze, was turn the river and the air against each other. She took time to show Alexandra the gestures she used, but it was a complex ritual in abbreviated form.

In minutes, heavy fog was crawling past their ankles, then rising above their heads. Before the first rays of sunlight appeared, the fog was dense enough that Drucilla, only a few feet away, was an indistinct form.

"Do you think you can reproduce that?" Drucilla asked, even her voice muted by the fog.

"After you showed it to me once? Maybe? Probably not." Alexandra ran through the ritual in her mind. "Can I practice?"

"Another day. I'm glad to see you're allowing for a degree of uncertainty. You're still overconfident, but you're learning. The fact is, Lucilla and I have cast charms before to make this easier. You might say, I cheated. So you certainly would not be able to reproduce the effect on your own without knowing where we laid those helping charms. At least not this quickly."

Alexandra was certain Drucilla was smiling, though she couldn't see her face.

"Let's cross," Drucilla said. They stood on a snowbank, just above the icy shore. Drucilla cast a Water-Walking Charm, and Alexandra did the same, a little less confidently. The river was colder than Lake Michigan had been during Alexandra's fateful journeys to and from Eerie Island. Chunks of ice floated past them as they walked across its rolling, swelling surface. Though the dense fog made it impossible to see more than a few yards, they heard several boats pass nearby, one so close as it loomed out of the mist that Alexandra could have reached out and touched it. The men aboard it were busy dragging some sort of equipment out of the water, and didn't notice the two witches walking past.

"They won't notice us," Drucilla said. "They never do."

They came ashore in a frozen fen, with dead reeds visible here and there in the ice near the riverbank. The fog thinned, and barely touched the town itself.

Just a few yards away was a metal fence with red signs facing the street. Drucilla and Alexandra walked up the slope to the metal fence, which lined a jogging trail. There were few joggers at this time of year, but a woman in sweats and a scarf and woolen cap did huff past, giving them a curious glance before continuing on.

"She noticed us," Alexandra said.

"We're not Unnoticeable anymore," Drucilla said. "We're surrounded by Muggles and we don't belong here. But they still usually don't pay much attention to us." She waited until the jogger had disappeared down the trail, then slid her wand out of her sleeve and cast a charm that caused the metal fence to dissolve into mist just long enough for her and Alexandra to step through, before it became solid again.

"I wish I didn't have to drag you along on my errands," Drucilla said. "But I don't want you getting into trouble. We're going to be surrounded by Muggles."

Alexandra said, "Um, you realize I grew up with Muggles, right? I'll bet I know Muggle towns better than you do."

Drucilla looked as if this thought had not occurred to her. "I suppose you do. But this isn't the town you grew up in."

"I've been to Chicago. And New Mexico and the Ozarks. It's no big deal. If you don't need me, I'd rather go see a movie or something. Maybe get a closer look at those submarines."

"What's a submarine?" Drucilla asked.

Alexandra stared at her. "You live right across the river from a submarine base!"

"Do you mean those gray metal ships that sink below the surface of the water?"

"Yes!" Alexandra said in astonishment.

"I have often wondered how they work. They're not magical, so they must work by some engineering contrivance, involving gears and pumps and wires, yes? Perhaps someday I'll study them."

Alexandra shook her head. "You two act like Muggles are aliens. And I thought Julia was sheltered." She gave Drucilla a hard look, and noticed a twinkle in her eyes.

"You're messing with me," she said.

"I have no idea what you mean, little sister," Drucilla said.

"So, can I go into town by myself?" Alexandra asked.

Reluctantly, Drucilla said, "I suppose so. Do remember that even if the Trace is not on you, any magic is likely to be noticed, and above all, we must not attract Aurors. If you are detained again, Alexandra... Lucilla and I may not be able to help you."

"Don't use my wand, and no flying. Right, got it."

"Also, don't forget you're still an apprentice, and mind your manners."

They walked on until they saw traffic at an intersection ahead. Drucilla said, "I need to pick up some Alchemical supplies, and then I am going to speak with someone who handles many of our commissions. I plan to be finished by afternoon." She pointed. "Down that street is a little shop owned by a witch who's lived in this town for generations, and she occasionally has Goody Pruett pies or other delicacies from the Goblin Market in New Amsterdam. We'll meet back here shortly after noon, all right?"

"Okay." It had been ages since Alexandra had eaten at Goody Pruett's, and she felt oddly nostalgic for two worlds at once. The establishments around her and the sounds of Muggle traffic felt like home, yet the thought of treats from shops in the Wizarding World, treats now denied her in most places where she might show her face, made her think of Charmbridge Academy and the Goblin Market in Chicago, and New Roanoke.

"Do avoid trouble," Drucilla said. "I confess I have some misgivings about giving you the run of the town. Muggles are usually harmless, but every now and then they can be dangerous."

"So can wizards," Alexandra said.

Drucilla smiled tightly. "Indeed. But seriously, don't make me regret this. We're not nearly as strict with you as is traditional with apprentices."

Alexandra sighed. "I'm really not up to anything. I just want to walk around and see a movie or something. If any trouble comes, it won't be my fault."

Drucilla hesitated, then patted Alexandra on the shoulder. "Well then. I'll see you in a few hours."

She walked down the street, her robes snapping around her ankles in the breeze coming off the river. A few people looked askance at her odd dress, but as Drucilla had said, Muggles rarely paid much attention even to the stranger things around them.

Alexandra walked in the opposite direction. She had only a little money, but she found a cafe and sat there for half an hour, drinking tea, while her cell phone charged.

She was pleased to find her number still worked. All these months she'd been gone, Archie and Claudia had continued to pay for her service, and now she saw that she had messages. She had to hold her phone away from her wands, but the voice that spoke in her ear was Claudia's.

"Hello, Alex," her sister said, in a husky voice. "I don't know if you'll ever hear this. I don't know exactly where you are right now. I don't... I don't know if I'll ever see you again..."

Alexandra sat in the cafe, listening to one message after another from Claudia, while her tea grew cold. Claudia had called her weekly. At first not



even knowing she was still alive. Then, having learned she was on Eerie Island, not knowing if she'd ever be freed. And then, after she'd received news of her escape, not knowing where she'd gone or what had happened to her.

All those months, Alexandra had not really reached out to her, but Claudia had been reaching out to her, speaking into the void and unburdening herself as if Alexandra's voicemail was a journal. Voicing her fears, her regrets, her sorrow, telling her all the things she'd never talked about before. Raising a little witch sister like her own daughter, the awe and terror of seeing Alexandra's first uses of magic, the knowledge that their father was always out there, always watching, like a wolf hiding in the shadows who's supposedly protecting you... And the Confederation's Special Inquisitors, visiting her yearly to remind her of what she was and what she was not. The loneliness that had led to dating a cop in the small town she'd moved to, and her fear of Archie discovering what Alexandra really was and not being able to handle it. Of missing her other sister, and watching Alexandra leave for Charmbridge for the first time, and knowing someday she would leave and not come back.

Alexandra stayed composed until the final message, which was not from Claudia. It was from Archie.

"Hey, Alex," her brother-in-law's gruff voice said. "I know your mo- Claudia has been leaving you messages. She said she's not worried that you never call back. Something about phones not working where you are." He grunted. "Listen... She misses you... We miss you. Come home when you can. Or at least call your mother. I mean — dammit, you know what I mean." He cleared his throat. "I really want to say—"

The rest of his message was cut off by a toneless voice saying "Mailbox full."

Alexandra set her phone down. She wiped at her eyes. Her face was wet. The woman behind the counter glanced at her and smiled sympathetically, but said nothing.

Alexandra picked up the phone again, and called the house on Sweetmaple Avenue.

She got their answering machine.

"Hi," she said. "It's me. I guess you're both at work. I just wanted you to know I'm okay. And... I hope I see you soon." She hung up quickly, swallowed past a lump in her throat, and walked back up the street to where she'd seen a small movie theater.

A couple of hours later, she emerged from the darkness of the theater, having spent almost the last of her money on a tub of buttered popcorn and a soda. The movie, a romantic comedy, had starred the same actor who'd been in the film Alexandra had seen with Brian and Julia in Larkin Mills. Alexandra had enjoyed the funny parts, but the romantic parts just reminded her that she was becoming more and more isolated from everyone who'd once been close to her.

She headed for the street Drucilla had pointed out, where the local wizards did business.

It was hardly a Goblin Market, or even a main street like that of New Roanoke. Most of the shops at street level were run by Muggles: convenience stores, pawn shops, and fast food places. They were clearly unaware of the nature of the tiny doorways and alleys squeezed between their storefronts, which the pedestrians on the street walked past without a glance. As Alexandra watched, a small man in a shabby frock coat descended the steps leading down from one of the doors on the second floor above a fried chicken restaurant. A truly garish red and green muffler was wrapped around his neck and covered the lower half of his face. Tiny, perfectly round spectacles perched on his nose. Tufts of hair stuck up from the sides of his head like hedgehog bristles.

He peered around, glared at a passing car as if it were the misplaced intruder, then stared at Alexandra for a moment. Alexandra stared back, and he blinked and turned away.

There was something about wizards, Alexandra thought. Not everyone in the wizarding world walked out into the Muggle world looking like some poorly-dressed caricature in a children's picture book, but they did stand out enough that she could usually spot magical folks.

She didn't see Drucilla anywhere, so out of curiosity, she went up the steps the wizard had just descended. They weren't hidden, exactly, and Alexandra didn't think any spells were cast on them, but they had an aged look of archaic wrought iron that, like the wizard, didn't fit the buildings on either side of the narrow alley. The steps were old stone that could have been original construction from hundreds of years ago, despite the neon light flashing yards away.

The door at the top of the stairs was made of very dark wood. Brass letters stenciled across a smoky glass pane spelled out "*Sojourns*."

Alexandra had half-expected a wizard pub, but "Sojourns" made her think of the black brick building with that name located in New Roanoke, set apart from the rest of the wizard town's shops. She hadn't gone inside, and Julia hadn't told her anything about it. Alexandra tried the door, and it opened with a creak.

Inside, the smell was a mixture of acrid smoke and pungent chemicals. Alexandra recognized the scents of wizard tobacco and Alchemy.

The front of the shop was extremely dim, and barely larger than her bedroom back in Larkin Mills. There was a glass counter and walls lined with packed shelves, but Alexandra could barely make out what was on them. The only light in the establishment came from the pane in the front door, a dirty glass window near the ceiling, and the lit tip of the proprietor's cigar. It glowed redly as the man holding it took a puff, then exhaled a cloud of smoke.

"You look underage," he said. He was a big man, Alexandra could see that much. His shoulders were bare, and prodigiously muscled. Alexandra took a step closer, and saw he was wearing a tank-top and a jangling mass of medallions around his neck. He also had impressive rows of earrings in both ears, a nose ring, and elaborate, abstract designs tattooed on his cheeks and neck. His head was bald, except for a bristle-brush mohawk.

"You look..." Alexandra realized she wasn't quite sure what he looked like. The smart retort had just come out of her without bidding, and then died.

"I look what?" the man asked gruffly. "What do you want, little bit?" She couldn't judge his age; she wasn't even sure of his skin color.

"I was just curious," she said lamely. Then added quickly, "I'm not a Muggle." She looked down into the glass case. It was full of sharp needles and small knives and dishes full of liquids of various colors. On the lower shelf was a variety of insects captured in amber. Stacked on the counter were old books. Alexandra started to reach for one, and stopped.

"You look like a Muggle. Muggle-born?" The proprietor puffed his cigar again.

"Close enough," Alexandra said, lowering her hand. "What is this place?"

"Off-limits to little bits. Get out."

"There's a place called *Sojourns* in New Roanoke," Alexandra said.

"I know it. It's the main shop. I get most of my supplies from there."

"Supplies for what?" Alexandra asked.

The man with the mohawk sighed. "Tattoos, piercings, scars, brands, and more exotic modifications."

Alexandra looked around. There seemed barely any space for someone to sit down and be tattooed, or... branded. She grimaced. "Why?"

"Why?" the proprietor repeated. "Why does anyone do anything? Because they want to. Decorative, arcane, ritualistic, I am an artist in all forms of alteration."

"So, I could get a tattoo here?" Alexandra said. "Like, a wizard tattoo?"

"No, you could not. *Under. Age*. I know you're working for the Aurors, little bit. I'm not so much as piercing your ears."

"My ears are already pierced, and I'm not a... a little bit. I'm not working for Aurors. I'm working for Lucilla and Drucilla White."

The wizard's demeanor changed abruptly. He put down his cigar. "Really? The Whites have taken an apprentice?"

"Yes. I'm their sister, actually."

"Their sister?" He leaned forward, planting his meaty palms on the greasy counter. "Does that mean... your father is... ?"

"Yes. Him."

"Well, Merlin's smelly slippers." He ran a hand over the bald portion of his scalp. "Are you doing business for the Whites?"

Alexandra wasn't sure what he meant, but knew she should probably say no. Instead, she shrugged.

He lowered his voice. "Listen, if they've changed their minds about that Infernal Rum, I can still move it. I'm, er, I'm willing to go ten percent higher. And I have a line on some basilisk teeth... they're the real thing, guaranteed."

Alexandra hesitated. *Basilisk teeth?* "I'll let them know. Anything else?"

"I've got a batch of Koryŏ Firewhisky that'll put hair on your chest."

"Gross." When he frowned at her, she said, "Yeah, I know, it's a figure of speech."

"Actually, it's not. Merlin's beard, you're too young for this. Why are they sending their little sister to me?"

Alexandra shrugged again. "I have to learn the business somehow."

"Orders have been slow lately. Business has been bad up and down the coast, thanks to your father."

"None of us have much say in that."

"Well, I can understand if your sisters are planning to stop the trade, with all the panic over the Dark Convention and the WODAMND Act." He scowled and picked up the cigar again. "But if they're planning on moving into the European market without JJ, they're making a big mistake."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Alexandra said, with perfect conviction, since it happened to be true.

"Right. Well then... tell your sisters not to send a little bit next time. It could cause problems for me if underage witches are seen frequenting this establishment. Cursed licensing bureau." He puffed on his cigar.

Alexandra decided not to push the charade any further. She had enough to ask Lucilla and Drucilla about now. She walked back out onto the landing and closed the heavy black door behind her. She stopped at the top of the steps when she saw who was waiting for her on the snow-covered sidewalk below.

"Alexandra," said Diana Grimm. "I do hope you haven't been up to no good."

The Special Inquisitor wore a red coat and shiny black boots. Her hair was hidden beneath a tall fur cap. She displayed no wand, and could have been just another Muggle out shopping, except her outfit was far too upscale for this street.

Alexandra's face went cold. She reached slowly, almost casually, for her wand.

"Are you here to arrest me, Aunt Diana?" she asked. "Because I'm not going back to Eerie Island."

Her aunt's eyes followed the movement of Alexandra's hand, then she raised them back to Alexandra's face and arched a brow.

"Do you really want to duel here in the street, child?" she asked.

"The way I see it, I don't have much to lose," Alexandra said.

"Oh, you're wrong about that," Diana Grimm said. She shook her head. "Always so troublesome. Please, keep your wand in your pocket. If I meant

to arrest you, I'd have Petrified you as soon as you left that shop. What are you doing in such an establishment, anyway?"

"Getting a tattoo," Alexandra said.

Her aunt snorted.

"What do you want?" Alexandra asked.

"To talk." Grimm held her hands out, palms up. "No wands. No Aurors, no one else around."

Alexandra descended the steps, slowly and without taking her hand away from her pocket. Grimm watched her, letting her own hands fall to her side.

"Why, Alexandra?" Grimm asked when Alexandra stood on the sidewalk next to her. "Why must you make everything so difficult?"

Alexandra felt anger surging, until it throbbed in her temples. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did I make things difficult by being sent to Eerie Island without a trial? Where I was tortured by goblins, and almost got eaten by a sphinx? Or did I make things difficult by escaping? Because I was just supposed to rot in prison until everyone forgot about me? Or was it running away to the Ozarks instead of staying in Central Territory that made things difficult for you?"

"Alexandra, you would have eventually been released."

"I WAS THERE FOR MONTHS!" Alexandra shouted.

Someone across the street paused to look in their direction.

"You were there for a few weeks," Grimm said.

"They were going to keep me there until I was twenty-one!" Alexandra said through clenched teeth.

"You wouldn't have been there that long. Mr. Black made a grievous error."

"No kidding? And you couldn't have told me that at some point? You saw what happened to me, and you did nothing! You just stood there and watched while I got dragged away in chains —"

"Let's not forget that you lost control and assaulted a Confederation official. You could have killed Mr. Brown, Alexandra. Don't play the innocent lamb."

"He left Penny in a room with a Boggart! He *hit* me! He was abusing students, and worse..." Alexandra's voice trailed off. She wasn't sure how much Diana Grimm knew about the Accounting Office, or if she'd care, or if saying something to her about it would only incriminate herself further. "Why are you here, Aunt Diana?"

"I told you to stop calling me that." Diana Grimm began walking slowly down the street, without a word or gesture. Annoyed at once again allowing the Special Inquisitor to steer her, figuratively and literally, Alexandra followed.

"Do you know why you haven't been pursued from Central Territory?" Grimm asked.

"Their Aurors don't have any authority here."

"True, but the Office of Special Inquisitions does."

"Have I been declared an Enemy of the Confederation?"

Grimm laughed harshly. "You probably should be. Do you have any idea what you set free back on Eerie Island?"

"You mean Typhon and Edna? What makes you think I freed them?" Alexandra didn't know how much Grimm knew, but didn't see any purpose to admitting anything.

"Don't play games with me, girl. You unleashed Powers that have been imprisoned for centuries. No one is bothering with you right now because they are a little distracted. And because of the example that was made of Carlos Black."

Alexandra wondered what that meant. What had her father been up to, while she was breaking out of prison and living as a fugitive?

"So why are you here, if you're not going to arrest me?" she asked.

"I understand you intend to go to New Amsterdam to compete in the Junior Wizarding Decathlon."

"So?"

"You've been protected a great deal, Alexandra. You may not think so, because you only see what affects you directly."

Alexandra stopped walking and folded her arms. "I'm still not sure why you're here, Special Inquisitor Grimm."

Diana Grimm stopped, and turned back to her.

"Don't go to New Amsterdam," she said. "The eyes of the entire Confederation, and the Governor-General himself, will be on you if you're foolish enough to present yourself at the Junior Wizarding Decathlon as the... the Ozarker champion."

"Will I be arrested and thrown in a dungeon?" Alexandra asked.

Grimm pursed her lips. "Probably not. The Governor-General wants you to disappear, not stir up even more controversy."

"Will he make me disappear?"

"That isn't what I meant."

"Sure it isn't." Alexandra glared at her aunt. "Because you'd never do a thing like that, would you, Aunt Diana?"

Diana Grimm's jaw tightened. "If you keep testing your allies and taunting your enemies, you will learn there is a limit to how much trouble you can cause before someone does decide that disappearing you is worth the risk."

"Well then, what do I care if everyone's eyes are on me? They're already on me! You say I've been protected a great deal, but I've also been watched and made a pawn since before I even knew who my father was. Are you really worried about me, or are you worried about what I might do?"

"What is that, exactly, Alexandra? I can't imagine it's just your love of dueling that makes you want to compete in the Junior Wizarding Decathlon."

Alexandra shook her head. "If I told you I just want to prove I'm the best, you wouldn't believe me. Or maybe that I want to see New Amsterdam and this is the only way I can get there. With the protection of being the Ozarker champion. I don't know what you expect from me. And I never know if you're talking to me as my aunt or a Special Inquisitor. You like threatening me, and when that doesn't work, you act like you're trying to protect me. Just like Aunt Lilith. But even she knows the Governor-General is a rotten bastard. You know everything Hucksteen has done, and you still work for him."

Diana Grimm's lips pressed together as Alexandra made her speech. Her face grew pale with anger, but her voice remained level when she spoke.

"The Governor-General is a politician. What I do is arrest dangerous criminals — like Cygnus Nero, Pasquale Mercurio, and Elisabet Todd, whom you set free among Muggles, just as you set free Typhon and Echidna. Like father, like daughter. Your father can justify everything he does far more eloquently than you, and he's done terrible things, Alexandra. You don't know everything he's done, but you know enough — and you still protect him. And if you don't work for him knowingly, you're certainly still doing his bidding."

Down the street, Alexandra saw a flutter of robes, which quickly vanished. Had that been Drucilla? When Alexandra looked in that direction, Diana Grimm's gaze followed, but now only Muggles were on the street.

"Thanks for the warning, Diana," she said. "I'll think about it."

This provoked a spark of anger in her aunt's eyes, quickly suppressed. Then she said, "I understand you acquired a new wand in the Ozarks. I am curious how you escaped Eerie Island and made it to the Ozarks without one."

*I'll bet you are*, Alexandra thought. She said nothing.

Diana Grimm reached under her jacket. Alexandra tensed and her hand went to her wand again. Grimm sighed, and very carefully withdrew a wand, held between her thumb and forefinger. Alexandra recognized the basswood wand the Special Inquisitor had taken from her when she was arrested.

"Carlos Black never bothered to ask me for this," Grimm said. She handed it to Alexandra, who took it wordlessly. "I'm sure the Ozarker wand you have now is much better than a Grundy's wand."

Alexandra tucked the basswood wand under her jacket. Now she was carrying three wands on her person, one more than Diana Grimm thought she had.

A little too casually, the Special Inquisitor asked, "Where are your sisters, by the way?"

Alexandra shrugged. "Around. They let me go to town by myself."

"Did they? How... trusting of them."

Alexandra had a sudden flash of intuition. "You're not after me, you're after them."

"There have been a lot of Dark Artifacts circulating in New England lately. And the Whites have managed to hide themselves even from the Office of Special Inquisitions. They're overdue for questioning."

"And you think I'll take you to them? No way."

Grimm gazed down the street again, then back at Alexandra. "I could make you."

Alexandra met her gaze. "Maybe. Maybe not. But since you're not doing it, there's some reason you don't want to. I'm not sure what that reason is. I mean, you keep talking about the WODAMND Act and how I've pissed off the Governor-General himself, so what keeps you from just doing what you threatened to do, and dragging me back to wizard prison again?"

Her aunt didn't say anything, just continued staring at her.

"You probably don't want a wizard duel in the street, but I'll bet that wouldn't really stop you, when you can just Obliviate any Muggle who witnesses it. Like you Obliviated Brian." Alexandra tried to keep her voice cool, but there was anger in it now. Diana Grimm's expression flickered. Was it guilt, or uncertainty that Alexandra saw? "Are you really protecting me, Aunt Diana? Or is something else protecting me, something you don't want me to know about?"

Grimm gave her a sour smile. "Don't let that sort of thinking go to your head, Alexandra. I assure you, you are not beyond the Governor-General's reach, nor are you immune to consequences."

*And yet*, Alexandra thought. She was still walking around free.

She took her hand away from her pocket, and held out her wrists, as if offering them up to be manacled.

"Whatever you intend to do with me, do it," Alexandra said. "But if you want me to give up my sisters, you'll have to Crucio me. And you'll have to Crucio me good, because I already know what it feels like."

Indeed, it took all of her willpower not to shudder violently at the thought. She knew her bravado was empty, should her aunt actually take her up on her suggestion. But for the first time, Diana Grimm looked horrified.

"Stars Above, child. I do not Crucio people! Especially not..."

Alexandra stared at her, still holding out her wrists.

Her aunt let out a short, bitter laugh. "You are truly incorrigible. I do not mean that fondly. Alexandra, stay away from New Amsterdam. It will go badly for you."

She glanced around to look for any Muggles on the street, then Disapparated away with a pop.

Alexandra lowered her hands and looked around. She was alone on the street. She walked slowly back to the river, only realizing when she saw Drucilla waiting for her beyond the fence that she never had visited the wizard sweets shop.

"That was your aunt, the Special Inquisitor," said Drucilla, confirming for Alexandra that Drucilla had seen them on the street together.

"Yes. I thought she was after me, but I think she was actually looking for you." Alexandra looked around nervously.

"We're safe, for the moment," Drucilla said, without explaining how she knew this. "But we should hurry home. She'll be back. She or one of her colleagues. So did you tell her about our secret stash of Corpse Candles and Infernal Rum?"

"No," Alexandra said. She thought Drucilla was joking... but after her conversation with JJ, maybe not. "Um, I know where you can get some basilisk teeth."

Drucilla's eyes narrowed. "Come along, apprentice. I think you've seen enough of the town for one day."

## \*Chapter 42\*: Keeper of Secrets

Alexandra and Drucilla did not walk back across the river. Instead, Drucilla took them to the park next to the submarine base. From higher ground, Alexandra looked down at the river and asked, "Are you going to conjure another fog bank?"

"At this time of day, it would look too unnatural. We're going to Apparate."

Alexandra frowned. "If we can Apparate, why didn't we do that to begin with?"

"I didn't want to alert the Aurors when we went into town," Drucilla said.

"They know when we're Apparating?" Alexandra asked. "I've heard of Anti-Apparition Wards, but I didn't know they could detect someone Apparating."

"They can't. But they can detect when I poke a hole through the Anti-Apparition Ward over the river." Drucilla wove her wand in a complicated gesture Alexandra was unfamiliar with, muttering some phrases that sounded more Greek than Latin.

"Teach me that?" Alexandra pleaded.

"When you've finished the Essential Elements series and are handling basic enchantments adequately." Drucilla stabbed her wand into the air in front of her, and Alexandra felt a burst of pressure in her ears accompanying the purple flash around Drucilla's wand.

"Fly, Charlie," Alexandra said. Charlie took off, as Drucilla took Alexandra by the arm.

They Apparated, and Alexandra felt only a moment's disorientation. They were back in front of the Whites' gabled house.

"Won't they, like, fine you or something?" Alexandra asked.

"If they can find us. Your aunt would do worse, if she found us."

"I don't really understand why," Alexandra said. "How long have you and Lucilla been avoiding the Office of Special Inquisitions?"

Drucilla gave her an odd look Alexandra couldn't decipher. "Almost two years. I am surprised Diana Grimm let you go so easily."

"I think she might not have been here... officially." Diana Grimm was always cagey and hard to read, but this visit had been more confusing than usual.

"Don't believe she's taking a personal interest in you because she's your aunt," Drucilla said. "No Special Inquisitor is anything but an instrument of the Confederation."

Lucilla came home late that night. Alexandra heard her enter as she lay in bed reading Tarsusi's *Catabasis and Anabasis*. With blurry eyes, she glanced at the clock and saw that it was past the Witching Hour. Lucilla and Drucilla's voices were just muffled enough that she couldn't make out what they were saying. She gestured with her wand to put out the light, and let the book slide off her stomach as she fell asleep.

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The next morning, Alexandra asked at breakfast, "Have either of you ever gotten a tattoo?"

Lucilla and Drucilla looked at each other.

"No," they said together.

Drucilla went right to the point. "What were you doing in Sojourns?"

"I was just curious," Alexandra said. "The proprietor seemed to know you."

"Every witch and wizard in the city knows us," Lucilla said. "And there's a reason we live here on the other side of the river."

"Sojourns is off-limits to underage witches," Drucilla said, "as JJ should have told you."

"He did, but then I told him I was your sister, and he started talking about basilisk teeth and asked if you were cutting him out..."

"Jonah Jonas is a conniving warlock," Drucilla said. "He deals with the Dark Convention."

"So you don't do business with him?" Alexandra asked.

"You've just started learning our art," Drucilla said. "It will be a long time before you're ready to get involved in the trade. Focus on your studies and keep your nose out of our business."

Lucilla glanced at her twin. In a more conciliatory tone, she said, "JJ isn't to be trusted, Alexandra. I really want to tell you to stay away from his shop, but as we said when you arrived here, we're not interested in trying to control you. I don't blame you for venturing into Sojourns out of curiosity, but there's nothing there he can sell you legally, and you don't want anything he has to offer."

"Okay." Alexandra was not entirely convinced. She could tell by their expressions that Lucilla and Drucilla knew she wasn't convinced, but she had only walked into Sojourns out of curiosity, and she didn't know that there was anything there she actually wanted.

However, she did not miss the fact that her sisters had not actually answered her question.

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Eventually, Lucilla and Drucilla let Alexandra work on something besides brooms. They started with small items, like lamps and teakettles, a pair of

enchanted bedknobs, and a card box. Alexandra found even these trivial items required a great deal of research in the library, finding exactly which Charm was used to accomplish which effect.

One day she found a pair of very old-fashioned roller skates sitting on the workbench where Lucilla and Drucilla usually left things to be repaired. Alexandra puzzled over these, as she found no charms on them, and they appeared to be of Muggle manufacture. After spending an hour trying to figure out what needed to be done with them, she put them on and tried skating up and down the tiny hallway in the basement. Two of the wheels barely turned, one of the laces was broken, and the stitching was coming loose so they weren't very comfortable. Alexandra found some whale oil in the rack of Alchemical supplies she'd finally been permitted to open, and lubricated the wheels. She repaired the stitches with a Mending Charm that Granny Mahnkey had taught her, but the laces she had to weave almost by hand — there was no magical spinning wheel in the workshop.

When Lucilla and Drucilla returned that evening, Alexandra presented the skates to them, feeling defeated. "If this was a puzzle, I failed. I didn't find what I was supposed to fix."

Lucilla smiled. "But you did." She put her hand into one of the skates, like a child who'd gotten confused about which limb shoes belonged on. She slapped the wheels with her other hand, and laughed with pleasure at the sound they made spinning. "Do Muggles really travel this way? It's so... quaint!"

"Kind of," Alexandra said, "but mostly just for recreation, and those are, like, really old. I had a pair when I was little that were newer than those."

Lucilla put the skate down next to its mate. "Well, these aren't magical. I found them in a shop in town and I thought they were adorable."

Alexandra said, "You're having me mend skates? Might as well teach me cobbling."

Drucilla, who had also been smiling with her sister, abruptly turned cold. "Don't be vulgar."

"What?" Alexandra was confused by her abrupt change in mood.

"I told you, we do not employ house elves," Drucilla said angrily. "And we do not employ their crafts."

Alexandra shook her head. "I don't... Look, I'm still learning this stuff. What's the big deal with cobbling?"

Lucilla sighed. "I'm sorry, we do forget sometimes that you did not grow up in the wizarding world. Cobbling is reserved for elves."

Alexandra gestured at the skates. "Is what I just did considered cobbling?"

"I mean magical cobbling. I would never have given you magical skates, if such things exist, to repair. Only elves do that."

"What's so special about footwear that only elves can enchant them?"

"It's not that wizards *can't* enchant footwear. But it's just not done."

"Like a taboo?" Alexandra asked.

"Something like that. An elf who sees magical shoes made by someone other than an elf will be very offended. And they can tell, somehow."

Alexandra frowned. "Since when do wizards care about offending elves? I mean, most wizards don't seem to."

"That is true," Drucilla said. "But it has something to do with the Compact between elves and wizards. When they were bound in servitude to our kind, we made certain agreements that even wizards violate at their peril."

"Like not enchanting boots?" Alexandra found this baffling.

Drucilla sighed. "It was a very long time ago, and frankly, I think we should break that terrible Compact anyway. But yes, we don't enchant boots. Anyone who wants magical boots repaired should find an elf to do it, and they needn't darken our doorstep."

"Sounds like you agree with ASPEW." Alexandra had been introduced to the American Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare by David in sixth grade.

"I suppose I do," Drucilla said. "They're quite popular here in New England."

"But," Alexandra said, "I have two pairs of magical boots. Does that mean they were both enchanted by elves?"

"Almost certainly," Lucilla said. "Unless they were enchanted by Dark wizards."

"Um," Alexandra said.

Lucilla raised an eyebrow.

"Well, I got one pair from a hag, and it was... kind of smuggled by the Dark Convention? I mean, I don't know where they came from originally and I've worn them around elves before, so they must be kosher."

"I don't know what that means, but let us see them," Drucilla said.

Alexandra brought her two pairs of magical boots downstairs — the waterproof JROC boots that had been a gift from Beatrice Hawthorne, and the Seven-League Boots she'd taken from the hag in the Goody Pruett warehouse. Lucilla and Drucilla passed them back and forth. Examining the first, Lucilla said, "Basic Waterproofing Charm... these boots were probably made in one of those awful elf workshops."

"Elf workshops?" Alexandra looked at the boots she'd once been so proud of. "Why are elf workshops awful?"

"What sort of working conditions do you suppose elves without a wizarding home live under?" Lucilla asked. "Abolishing those workshops is one of ASPEW's chief goals."

"I thought they wanted to abolish all elf servitude."

"They do," Drucilla said, as she began examining the Seven-League Boots. "But it's much harder to argue for freeing family elves, who frequently are treated well and don't want to be freed." She glanced up from the boots to catch Alexandra's eyes. "Like the ones who live with Thalia and Julia."

Alexandra's mouth tightened. She had been thinking about the Kings' house-elves. "Julia and Ms. King do treat their elves well..."

"I know, and I won't speak ill of them, nor do I wish to offend them," Drucilla said. "But you know that so long as some families keep house-elves, they will all remain in servitude. We can't make only the unkind masters free their elves."

Alexandra wanted to object, but she realized uncomfortably that Drucilla might be right. David had made similar points, less gently. "So you are with ASPEW."

"We probably would be, if they'd have us." Lucilla smiled wryly. "But even do-gooders who care about elfish welfare won't be seen with the likes of us, and it would hardly help their cause to have daughters of the Enemy of the Confederation speaking on their behalf. But I confess I have sent them anonymous donations from time to time — oh my." She cut off the discussion of ASPEW as she ran her fingers along the seams of the Seven-League Boots, held its soles over her wand, and closed her eyes.

"What?" Alexandra asked, afraid Lucilla would tell her elves had died to make these boots or something.

"The enchantment on these boots is... unusual. Definitely of elfen make, and not from a workshop." Lucilla lifted the boots off her bench and set them on the ground. She slid her feet out of her work shoes and into the boots. "Look how they fit my feet as perfectly as they fit yours." She took one foot out of a boot, and Drucilla put her foot in.

"I told you, originally a hag was wearing them," Alexandra said. "But I already knew they were magical. I practically ran across a whole Territory in them."

Lucilla regarded Alexandra with an inscrutable expression. "I think you can do much more than that. You've been using these as Seven-Step Boots, which is what most so-called Seven-League Boots really are. They let you travel seven steps with each step taken. Useful, but not actually that impressive compared to the Seven-League Boots of legend."

"What do the Seven-League Boots of legend do?" Alexandra asked.

"What the name implies. Travel seven leagues with each step."

"Right... how far is a league, anyway?"

Drucilla rolled her eyes. "There are some significant gaps in your education, Alexandra. It's a basic Arithmantic unit, for Merlin's sake!"

"Um, well, Arithmancy was never my best subject." Alexandra tried to recollect. "Okay, I remember... it's how far a man can walk in an hour, except there are different ways of measuring that because, you know, everyone has different leg lengths, and men and women walk at different paces and of course the original measurement was based on how far a *man* can walk, and it's like really vague and you have to calculate all these imprecise variables and that's why I hated Arithmancy..." Her voice trailed off under Drucilla's judgmental stare.

"If I am not mistaken, these are true Seven-League Boots," Lucilla said, after Alexandra fell silent. "The craftsmanship is characteristic of Old World elfish make, and the enchantments upon it are far more potent than some seven-step trifle. You may have never unlocked their true power, because it simply didn't occur to you to try."

"Seven hours journey in one step?" Alexandra considered that. "That would be... really, really fast."

"Indeed. That's why Seven-League Boots are considered legendary, and some doubt any still exist. I've never actually seen a real pair." Lucilla turned Alexandra's boots over and over in her hands. "What a remarkable find. And you just happened to find a hag wearing them? How exactly did you convince her to part with them?"

"That's kind of a long story."

Lucilla set the boots down. "Do you have somewhere else to be, apprentice?"

Alexandra sighed. Over the next hour, as Lucilla and Drucilla continued to study her boots, Alexandra told them about the Regal Royalties Sweets and Confections warehouse, the Dark Convention's smuggling operation, and her encounter with Martha, including the hag's untimely end.

When she was done, Lucilla and Drucilla were silent long enough that Alexandra grew uneasy. They had stopped examining her boots, and seemed to be examining her.

"We've heard tales of your exploits, of course, from Valeria, and Julia," Lucilla said. "And even Father has mentioned your... predilection for trouble."

"He has?" Alexandra said with surprise. Drucilla gave Lucilla a warning look that Alexandra didn't miss.

"We thought perhaps they were exaggerating," Lucilla said, a little too quickly. "Although after you told us about Eerie Island I suppose we should have known better. Stars Above, Alexandra, your feats are on their way to becoming legendary."

They didn't know the half of it, Alexandra thought, but said nothing.

"I do find it very interesting that these boots just happened to fall into your hands," Drucilla said.

"You aren't going to take them away from me, are you?" Alexandra asked.

The twins looked almost offended. "Of course not. They're yours," said Lucilla.



Drucilla pushed them across the bench to her. "But it is interesting. The Dark Convention somehow acquired a pair of genuine Seven-League Boots, sent them to an abandoned warehouse in Central Territory, where a hag happened to appropriate them, undoubtedly having as little idea as you did of their true nature, and then you ended up taking them from her."

Alexandra shrugged. "Stranger things have happened to me. Do you think someone planned for me to get them? 'Cause that would be a pretty elaborate plan."

Drucilla shrugged. "I doubt it. Even Father can't manipulate events with that much precision."

"Can't he?" murmured Lucilla, and Drucilla glared at her again.

"I think we should accelerate your studies a bit," said Lucilla. She smiled, a little sadly. "We do enjoy having you here, but you're not going to be content to settle down and be an Artificer, are you?"

Alexandra smiled back. "Maybe when I'm older?" *If I get older.* "Honestly, I've never thought about a career, or you know, what I'm going to do when I grow up. But I have things I need to do before then, and one of them is going to the Junior Wizarding Decathlon this summer."

"Right," Lucilla said. "You never have explained exactly why that is so important to you. And I don't think it's because you fancy winning the Gringott Grail."

"Gringott Grail?" Alexandra asked.

"The prize for winning the Junior Wizarding Decathlon," Drucilla said.

"Which you are so intent on participating in," Lucilla said dryly.

"Okay, I remember. It's some kind of goblin cup. No, I don't really care about the prize. But I do have to go, and I can't tell you why."

"You mean you won't tell us why," Lucilla said.

"Because you're secretive and untrusting," Drucilla said, "and perversely protective. You think keeping your secrets is for our benefit. I think Julia is well used to this treatment."

"Valeria certainly experienced it," Lucilla said.

"And your friends as well," said Drucilla.

Alexandra shrank a little. "It's not that I don't trust you," she said. "But some things can't be talked about."

Lucilla and Drucilla stared at her for several long moments. Then Lucilla said, "Father made you his Secret-Keeper when you were an infant, to protect the Thorn Circle. That was a terrible burden to put on a babe."

"It's not like I could object," Alexandra said. "I don't even remember it."

"Obviously not," Lucilla said. "But I think it left more of a mark on you than either of you knows. You are a keeper of secrets to this day, Alexandra."

Alexandra folded her arms. Then she said, "Wait a minute. How do you know about me being a Secret-Keeper?" She stared at her older sisters. "Did he tell you?"

Lucilla and Drucilla looked at each other, and back at her.

"He didn't have to," Lucilla said.

"We were there," said Drucilla.

## **\*Chapter 43\*: Seven-League Boots**

Alexandra stood quietly in disbelief for a moment. "You were there? But that would mean... you're both members of the Thorn Circle!"

Lucilla and Drucilla nodded.

"All this time? You knew what our father was up to? All his plots and — and the Roanoke Underhill!"

"No, not that," Lucilla said. "He doesn't share everything with us, especially not since the Circle went into hiding."

"You knew my mother," Alexandra said. "You knew... you knew all along that Claudia wasn't my mother!"

"We've never met Claudia," Drucilla said. "And until Maximilian's funeral, we hadn't seen you since you were a baby."

"It was her choice to sever contact with the wizarding world and Father's side of the family," said Lucilla.

"You knew Ben Journey, too," Alexandra said.

"Yes. I always did think he was rather creepy," said Lucilla. "Calling us 'little cornstalks.'"

Alexandra had experienced this before — the sudden revelation of a secret everyone but her had known — and while that lessened the shock, she also felt the familiar sting of resentment, of bitterness that things had been kept from her.

Lucilla spoke placatingly. "Remember, much of what relates to the Thorn Circle we couldn't tell you, because of the Fidelius Charm. We still can't tell you who the others are, so don't ask."

Alexandra breathed in and out rapidly. Then she did some quick math in her head.

"Wait a minute," she said. "You couldn't have been much older than me..."

"We were thirteen," Lucilla said.

"Our father let you join the Thorn Circle when you were thirteen?" Alexandra exclaimed.

"He did have reservations," Lucilla said.

"Oh, that's good. At least he had *reservations* about—"

"About letting thirteen-year-olds risk their lives for a cause they believed in?" Drucilla's tone was dry. "About allowing them to choose for themselves whether they wanted to fight the Confederation that had so mistreated their older sister, and committed crimes against wizarding folk and Muggles alike?"

Alexandra hesitated, her indignation blunted. "It sounds like you had more choice than I did, actually. He told you a heck of a lot more than he ever told me."

Lucilla smiled sadly. "Well, your being kept away from wizarding society was Claudia's decision."

Drucilla said, "As for the rest, if you have grievances against our father, you will have to bring those up with him. We certainly can't speak for him, and we have grievances enough of our own."

"Is Valeria a member of the Thorn Circle too?" Alexandra asked.

"We wouldn't tell you if she was," Drucilla said, "but no. She was only eleven when Father became the Enemy of the Confederation. She'd barely gotten her wand. Father would not have allowed that."

"So she doesn't know that you're members of the Circle?"

Drucilla sighed. "I think she suspects."

"I think she very strongly suspects," said Lucilla. "Now please, Alexandra, no more questions about Valeria, or who else is or isn't in the Circle."

"I want to know!" Alexandra said.

"I'm sure you do," said Lucilla. "We've just revealed ourselves to you. We don't have the right to do that for anyone else."

"Even though you revealed all of us to the Wizard Justice Department," Drucilla said.

Alexandra went very still.

The twins watched her without malice or condemnation. Alexandra carefully set the Seven-League Boots she'd been holding back on the bench.

Two years ago, at the Sweethearts Dance at Charmbridge, her father had come to her, and she had demanded a boon from him. She wanted to free Anna's father, who was being imprisoned at the time for suspicion of being a member of the Thorn Circle.

Abraham Thorn had extracted the memory that was still in Alexandra's head from when she was a baby, of the Thorn Circle gathered around her as he whispered their names in her ear and made her their Secret-Keeper. He had warned her there would be a cost, but she'd given the extracted memory to Diana Grimm, and so the Confederation had finally learned the identities of all the Thorn Circle.

"That's why you've been in hiding for the last two years, and had to put a Fidelius Charm on your house," she said. "Oh my God. And you just go into town even though the Aurors and Special Inquisitors would arrest you on sight?"

"The Aurors aren't very smart," Drucilla said.

"Special Inquisitors are another matter," Lucilla said.

"But you still go out. I mean, you were gone overnight—" Alexandra hesitated. Lucilla smirked, as if daring her to finish the thought.

"Lucilla does like to take risks," Drucilla said.

"Yes, let's just hide in our house until the war begins," Lucilla said.

"War?" Alexandra asked.

Drucilla said, "Father did warn us, before you and he gave us up to the Office of Special Inquisitions."

Alexandra lowered her head. "I didn't realize."

"You knew you were giving someone up," Drucilla said. "You just didn't know it would be us."

"Don't be harsh, Dru. Alexandra might not have entirely understood what she was doing, but Father did, and I'm sure it was his plan all along. He'd warned us that sooner or later the Thorn Circle would lose its protection of secrecy, and he made sure we were prepared before it happened."

"But why tell me now?" Alexandra asked.

"Because you want to go to the Junior Wizarding Decathlon, and we want to know why," said Lucilla.

Secrets, Alexandra thought. They were right, she was always keeping secrets. Always for what she thought was a good reason, but she knew her sisters, her friends, even her father, would probably tell her there was a time for keeping secrets, and a time for revealing them.

She finally met her sisters' eyes again. "I suppose you know about the Deathly Regiment."

"Yes," said Lucilla. "Some. We've never been able to get all the details — Father either can't or won't tell us. But we know enough."

Alexandra nodded. "Well, there's something hidden in Storm King Mountain that has to do with the Deathly Regiment. It's somewhere in the Accounting Office there. I want to find it, and the only way I can go to New Amsterdam without getting arrested or kicked out is if I'm representing the Ozarkers as their champion."

Now Lucilla and Drucilla were the ones to fall silent.

At last, Drucilla said, "I am not sure how you intend to get into Storm King Mountain. I doubt they will let you simply stroll in and ask for the Accounting Office's secret records."

"Yeah, I doubt that too," Alexandra said.

"But if you're going to go on such a foolhardy mission, I suppose it behooves us to make it less foolhardy, if we can," said Lucilla.

"And," said Drucilla, "we may as well try to improve your chances at the Decathlon."

Lucilla chuckled. "Wouldn't that vex the Governor-General, if you won?"

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Their idea of preparing her turned out to involve more study and less practice with spells than Alexandra would have liked.

Lucilla and Drucilla had an enviable library, and they were the sharpest minds Alexandra had encountered outside of Charmbridge Academy. Yet she felt increasingly restless. The education she was receiving in Alchemy and Artificing was better than she would ever have gotten at Charmbridge, but when it came to practical wizardry, the Whites were less adept.

"Duelling?" Drucilla said, when Alexandra brought it up during a lesson on quenching goblin iron. The evil-looking dagger lying on the bench in front of them twitched and spun when Drucilla held a wand over it, and the motions she made as she tried to dissolve the anti-wizard wards laid into it reminded Alexandra of dueling movements. "No, this isn't like that at all. I never studied dueling."

"You should," Alexandra said.

"Whatever for? I don't duel."

"For protection?" Alexandra suggested.

Drucilla shrugged. "We know basic self-defense charms, of course, and Father taught us a few nasty curses, but we never planned on dueling with Dark Wizards."

"We were only thirteen," Lucilla pointed out.

"You're not thirteen now," Alexandra said.

"We've spent the years since then perfecting our craft," said Lucilla. "I know you're very fond of hexing and blowing things up, but magic is so much deeper than that."

"All that flashy wandwork may impress boys, Alexandra, but we can teach you to employ your passion in far more subtle, yet effective ways," said Drucilla.

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "I'm not trying to impress boys."

Drucilla set down her wand, and spoke with unusual fervor. "Artificing is putting your soul into your work, literally. We can show you, Alexandra. How to channel your great ambition into a Great Work worthy of your talents."

Lucilla said, "Artificing isn't just putting charms in objects. We do more than create puissant tools. Enchantment is the very engine of power, driving the entire wizarding world. Charms and hexes and transfigurations are spells rippling the surface of the world. We put our fingers on the machinery of magic itself."

"I believe you," Alexandra said. "I want to learn all that. I wish I had years to spend mastering it. But I really don't. And for the Junior Wizarding Decathlon, I only have a few months. And you know, hexing and blowing things up has worked pretty well for me so far."

"Has it?" Drucilla sounded disappointed.

"I'm still alive," Alexandra said. "Maybe I'd be alive if I were a great Artificer as well. I will study, like I promised. I'll learn everything you have to teach me. But I don't think I should abandon what I'm good at."

Lucilla sighed. "We aren't asking you to do that. But I can see you will always be attached to your wand. Most wizards are. The wand is just a tool. Perhaps the greatest tool we have. But it isn't where magic lies."

Alexandra could not entice either of the twins to practice dueling with her. Frustrated, she tried to content herself with practicing dueling charms in the marshes behind the house. She hexed and blew up an acre of mud and grass, but it wasn't very satisfying.

The Whites' instruction was otherwise everything she could have hoped for. They directed her little, only answering her questions and examining her work.

A week after Lucilla revealed to Alexandra the true nature of her Seven-League Boots, she decided to try them out.

Lucilla and Drucilla had warned her that leaping about with them blindly could be as disastrous as a splinching. Alexandra had tried using Scrying Charms, but decided that Charlie would help her with her first test.

"Fly, Charlie," she said, standing on a cold, windy hillock just a little ways from the Whites' house. "Fly up high and let me see what you see."

"Fly!" Charlie repeated, and took off into the air, a little disgruntled. The raven had not wanted to leave the warmth of the seven-gabled house to go flying around in a New England winter, even if the weather was clear. But soon Charlie was a remote speck in the sky. Alexandra closed her eyes and focused on what Charlie could see... and then she stepped.

Previously, her Seven-League Boots had carried her seven steps at a time, but that just felt like running, with the world accelerated. Now that she had unlocked their true power, with help from her sisters, the first step was as dizzying as her first Apparition. She stepped from the marshes to the middle of a woods, miles from the river and the town, with all the space between passing by in an incredible rush of wind.

She stopped and gulped in air, and looked up to see Charlie now a speck in the opposite direction.

*Just one step!* she thought.

She knew she should just go back, and could feel Charlie's worrisome cawing in her head, but what was the point of Seven-League Boots if they couldn't carry you for leagues? She took another step, and flew through the air too fast to see the landscape speeding past.

She was on the edge of a precipice looking down into a small valley, with people behind her. One of them made a startled exclamation. Rather than face whoever it was and try to concoct an explanation, she stepped toward the horizon again. She could see where she was going only to a limited extent. She had decided to follow one of those cracks in the world that her Witch's Sight revealed to her, emanating not far from the Whites' home, but while it was a guide of sorts through woods and dale, it did not help her anticipate where she would next set her foot down. According to Lucilla and Drucilla, the magic of the boots would carry the wearer where she wanted to go in some semblance of safety — she would not step into empty air above a valley, or into the middle of a lake.

She had asked about lava. Lucilla asked where she expected to encounter lava. Drucilla was pretty sure the boots wouldn't let her step into lava either.

But, Alexandra discovered, the boots would *not* keep her from stepping into traffic. Her next step brought her to a busy freeway, where she stepped directly in front of a truck, and only by taking another step immediately did she avoid being splattered across its bumper. She could still hear the panicked air horn and smell the diesel after the roaring wind carried her to a playground at the edge of a small town. Several children and their mothers jumped as Alexandra whooshed into sight before their eyes.

"Hi," Alexandra said. "Where am I?"

As they stared at her, she said, "I mean the name of this town?"

Both women screamed. The children began to cry. Startled, Alexandra took a step back the way she'd come, hoping to avoid the highway this time. Her feet settled onto a muddy shoulder rather than the middle of the road. A car went past and honked a horn at her.

Alexandra stepped again, and she was back in the woods. The trip had left her dizzy.

Far away, she heard Charlie caw, complaining about being abandoned.

"I'm back, Charlie," she murmured. Charlie could never keep up with her if she took more than a step at a time. Would the raven be protected in a cage, or would the wind rushing past, seven leagues at a step, be fatal? The boots protected *her*, but she'd have to ask Lucilla and Drucilla if they thought she could carry others with her.

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March arrived. It was sunnier but not much warmer. Alexandra had seen little of the sun, buried in the library or the workshop of her sisters' house.

In the third week of March, she woke before dawn, left a note on the kitchen table, and left Charlie croaking mournfully in the cage by her bed.

"I'll be back soon," she said. "Don't worry, greedy-guts. Lucy and Dru won't let you starve."

"Troublesome!" Charlie scolded.

She left her room quietly and walked outside. It was early on the morning of the 22nd, her sixteenth birthday.

Standing on the foggy marsh by her half-sisters' seven-gabled house, she opened her eyes to her Witch's Sight, and considered doing something truly reckless: using her Seven-League Boots to step into and through the cracks in the world. It was an insane thought. She pushed it aside, while composing the spells she'd prepared for this journey.

Her first spell was a Navigation Charm to guide her, with help from her Lost Travellers Compass and a Scrolling Map Parchment she'd prepared. It was one of her first works of Artificing, and Lucilla and Drucilla had approved of her work, and its intended purpose, without realizing quite how soon she meant to put it to use.

She cast a Warming Charm, remembering how chilly the rushing wind could be.

Finally, she cast an Unnoticeability Charm on herself. She wasn't sure it would work if she stepped out of nowhere in front of someone. She hoped it might at least deflect the attention of someone who was inclined to ignore things they couldn't explain — which she had learned seemed to be most people.

She thought about adding a rhyming incantation as well, a bit of doggerel verse to give her luck. But that bordered on superstition. If her "doggerel verse" worked, it was because it was actually ritual magic without structure or mastery. It wasn't, as she'd thought when she was a child, because rhymes themselves were magic.

Packed and ready, she faced west, with the sun rising behind her.

"I'm coming home," she whispered. "Let anyone try to stop me!"

She stepped seven leagues, and then another.

## **\*Chapter 44\*: This Sad, Futile Ritual**

No one tried to stop her. No one even noticed her, as far as she could tell. There were some close calls. She tried to follow the Automagicka, but the Seven-League Boots did not always keep her on the wizarding side of the road, and sometimes she stepped into traffic, literally. Only for a moment, but she saw cars and trucks in the brief instants she stepped onto asphalt. Alexandra left them behind in a flash, and she supposed their drivers might have gotten a brief glimpse of a girl stepping onto the highway before disappearing in a blur.

She hoped she didn't cause any accidents, but she didn't know how to run across the country, stepping from woods to dale to valley, without ever appearing in inhabited areas.

Seven leagues at a step, she had the Great Lakes stretching to her right before she was even tired, and then, minutes later, they were behind her, and she was racing into the heart of Central Territory.

When she came to a halt, it was in a familiar place. Finally breathless, she waited until her head was clear, while listening to the sounds of insects and birds around Old Larkin Pond. The sun had followed her, and was dawning over Larkin Mills.

She walked the rest of the way to her house on Sweetmaple Avenue.

*It's not really my house anymore.* That brought a pang to her, but she realized it was true — whatever might happen, whatever she discovered in New York, she didn't think she'd ever be able to return to her life in Larkin Mills. This was a visit, not a return.

It was too early for traffic, and even the buses weren't running yet. Brian was probably just getting up for school. The kids at the Pruett day school wouldn't have arrived yet. But when Alexandra walked up the driveway to the rebuilt house she'd grown up in, the door opened and Claudia emerged, fumbling with her keys. Next to her car was Archie's truck.

Claudia froze when she saw Alexandra.

"Hi, Claudia," Alexandra said. She almost called her "Mom."

"Alexandra." Claudia walked slowly forward, and then wrapped Alexandra in a tight embrace. "We've heard so little. You were imprisoned in that... place for so long, and we couldn't do anything!"

Alexandra realized with dismay that Claudia was crying.

"It's okay," Alexandra said, putting her arms around Claudia. Her own throat was hoarse.

Claudia pulled away, and looked around, her eyes suddenly filled with fear. "What if they see you? We should get inside."

"They who?" Alexandra asked, following Claudia back into the house. "Has the Special Inquisition been harassing you?"

Archie was in the living room, buckling his belt over his police uniform. He looked at Alexandra.

"Hi, Archie," Alexandra said.

"Alexandra." The two of them stared at each other for a few moments, Alexandra and her brother-in-law, whom she'd grown up thinking of as her stepfather.

Then Archie said, "What's the Special Inquisition? Is that what they call your... wizard police?"

"There's different kinds of wizard police," Alexandra said. "Have they been bothering you?"

Archie shook his head. "They've got no jurisdiction here. I think Claudia got questioned a few times. She won't talk about it, but I told her I'd deal with anyone else who came around. Don't think they've been back. Have they?"

"No," Claudia said quietly.

Archie nodded, satisfied. Alexandra and Claudia exchanged a look.

Archie walked over to Alexandra. "Are your relations treating you all right?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "Lucilla and Drucilla have been very good to me, and I'm safe there."

"You'd be safe here," Archie said. "You should come home."

Alexandra smiled wistfully. "I'm just here for a visit."

"How'd you get here?"

"Magic."

"That again." Archie snorted.

Alexandra looked at Claudia. How could Archie see what he saw, know what he knew, and still convince himself it was all some elaborate story, not to be taken seriously? She thought about the lengths to which Brian had gone to avoid believing. Maybe it really was a Muggle thing. Claudia shrugged.

Archie put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder. "I'm going to call in and take a personal day. We'll figure out what to do next."

"You don't have to do that, Archie. I'm leaving soon."

Archie frowned. He and Alexandra had never been close, but he'd never mistreated her, and as undemonstrative as he was, this was nearly as much affection as he'd ever shown her.

"I mean it," he said at last. "You should come home."

Alexandra paused, to let the thickness in her voice dissolve, before she said, "I'd like to. But I don't know when I can. I will come back, though."

"It's sure not the same around here without you. Say, where's that damn bird of yours?"

"Back in New England. Charlie's fine too. You should both go to work. I'm not staying. I just wanted to check on you."

Archie said stubbornly, "You can't just drop by after being gone for months and tell us you're running away again."

"I'm not running away." Alexandra looked from Archie to Claudia sadly. "Both of you have always been good to me. I know I was a trial and a pain growing up." She laughed a little bitterly. "I guess I still am. But you put up with everything, and even if I seemed ungrateful, I always knew... I knew I was safe, and I always had a home. There's so much I wish I could tell you both. So much that's hard to explain."

"Alex," Archie said. "You're just sixteen. Happy birthday, by the way."

Alexandra smiled.

"You're too young to be on your own. If you know you have a home here, then don't be so damn stubborn. Come back. Hell, technically you're a runaway right now."

"I know you want to protect me, Archie, but you can't. Not here. And I have things I have to do." When Archie frowned, and looked prepared to argue, Alexandra said, "If you've ever believed you could take my word for anything, if you've ever believed I was anything but a troublesome little brat, then please believe me now, Archie. You can't keep me here, and I can't stay. Nothing you say will change that. It's not the way I want it to be. It's just the way it is. Claudia knows."

Archie turned to his wife. Claudia nodded slowly. "She's right," she said in a quiet voice.

Archie shook his head. "Whatever trouble you're in..."

"You can't help me," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry, but you can't. There's literally nothing you can do."

Archie's shoulders drooped. Alexandra felt bad for him. He seemed to age years in that moment. She put her arms around him, and allowed him to embrace her as he rarely had when she was a child.

When they separated, he continued looking from Claudia to Alexandra, as if uncertain what to do next.

"You should go to work," Alexandra said.

"Do you need a ride somewhere?" he asked.

She smiled and shook her head. "No."

Archie frowned, and glanced at Claudia again.

"Go ahead, Archie," Claudia said. "It will be all right. Alexandra and I need to talk. I'll explain everything to you later. I promise."

"All right." Archie put his hat on uncertainly. He still seemed reluctant to move. "You two have some girl talk." Slowly, he went out the door.

"Everything? Really?" Alexandra said.

"As much as I can. I've been trying... he's very stubborn and not very imaginative, and none of this makes sense to him." Claudia looked at Alexandra almost blankly. "I always appreciated that about him."

Alexandra didn't know what to say to that. Claudia had run away from the wizarding world, and she'd married a man who seemed constitutionally incapable of believing in it. She supposed that made a certain kind of sense.

"He misses you," Claudia said. "He won't admit it, but he does. You don't give him enough credit. You never did."

Alexandra shrugged uncomfortably. "So are you okay, really?"

"Are you?"

"Yes. Lucilla and Drucilla are cool, and I'm learning... well, lots of stuff. You could say they're giving me career training."

"I see." Claudia folded her arms around herself. "You shouldn't have come. Not that I'm sorry you did. I'm happy to see you, Alex. But it's dangerous. We're protected, here in this house, but you know they're out to get you, and you came here, on your birthday, of all days?"

"Tell me about the protection," Alexandra said.

"I don't understand all the magic," Claudia said. "But Abraham put a lot of spells on this house. Wards against Dark magic, curses against anyone who tries to harm us. According to him, it will practically withstand a magical siege."

"But not someone setting it on fire from inside, apparently," Alexandra said.

Claudia smiled wanly. "He told me he wasn't sure how you did that, and he had to recast most of the protective charms when the house was rebuilt. That winter was the first time I spoke to him since the day he handed me the deed, just before we left Chicago. You and me."

Alexandra barely remembered her life before Larkin Mills. An apartment? A car ride? The memories were like dreams — she'd been so young, and

Claudia would never talk about it. She wanted to know more, but she realized Claudia probably didn't know how any of the protective spells worked. She just accepted that they were there. And she was right — the longer Alexandra stayed here, the more risk she brought on herself, and her sister.

"I'm sorry, Claudia," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry for everything that happened to you, and all the trouble I've brought on you."

"It's not your fault." Claudia chuckled without much humor. "Well, most of it isn't your fault."

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm all right. And that I forgive you for everything. And I hope you can forgive me too."

"You don't need forgiveness, Alex. Whatever you did, you did as a child."

Alexandra swallowed past a lump in her throat. Claudia was wrong about her not needing forgiveness, but she just said, "I have to go now. But I'll be back, as soon as I can."

"Be careful." Claudia hesitated. "Are you going to visit Brian?"

Alexandra shook her head. "It's better for him if I don't. But tell him... I don't know. Tell him I'll see him again."

"All right." Claudia's face look aged, too. "Happy birthday, Alex."

Alexandra opened the door and looked outside. There were cars on the street now, but still no kids. No sign of anyone coming out down at the Seaburys' house.

"Goodbye, Claudia." Without waiting or prolonging their farewell further, Alexandra closed the door behind her, and walked rapidly down the street, barely keeping her feet on the ground even without the magic boots. She kept walking until she reached the Interstate and the tunnel beneath it. Then she ran to Old Larkin Pond, and from there, she stepped seven leagues north, reached a Trollbooth where she gave a defiant finger to a startled troll, and hopped over the chain. The troll emerged, roaring in outrage, but an instant later she left it seven leagues behind, and moved along the Automagicka, faster than even the fastest wizard vehicles, heading toward Charmbridge.

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It must have been a cold winter in the forests around Charmbridge. Here and there, in shadowed recesses beneath large trees or rock ridges that rarely got sun, Alexandra could still see a few lingering patches of snow, though most of the woods were turning green. She shivered in the cold air. Back in Larkin Mills it had only been chilly, but here, she was grateful for her Warming Charm. Her breath was almost frosty as she exhaled.

Behind her was the Muggle highway she'd ascended and descended so many times, usually in the Charmbridge bus. Before her was the Invisible Bridge. She didn't really know what would happen when she crossed it. As far as she knew, no alarm spells alerted anyone at the school when someone went across the bridge, but she wouldn't be surprised if Dean Grimm did have such a spell keyed to her office. For that matter, she wouldn't be surprised if Lilith Grimm, or someone else, had placed traps and wards across the bridge. Just to be safe, she looked at it closely with her Witch's Sight, and then cast some Revealing Charms. She saw only the bridge itself. Squaring her shoulders, she set foot upon it.

Without using the distance-covering leaps of the Seven-League Boots, she walked the rest of the way to Charmbridge Academy, through the woods and right up to the large double doors. No one was outside. This was unsurprising — it was Thursday, and everyone should be in class.

She entered the school just as students began flowing out of classrooms in the break between periods.

At first no one recognized her. A mob of sixth graders passed her by with the natural deference and averted gazes of younger students. Alexandra stared at them and wondered how it was that she'd come to Charmbridge Academy that small and young.

Then someone gasped, "Alexandra?"

Alexandra turned. Tomo Matsuzaka, a year younger than Alexandra but not much larger than the sixth graders, clutched her books to her chest and stared at her one-time nemesis.

"Hi Tomo." With a smile, Alexandra put a finger to her lips. "Shh." Then she walked on.

A few more students recognized her. Alexandra saw Torvald Krogstad and Stuart Cortlandt and waved to the two pranksters. They waved uncertainly back at her. Adela Iturbide, a Pureblood who'd once been in the JROC with Alexandra, glared at her.

There were teachers in the hallway too, now, and the first one who spotted Alexandra was Mr. Grue.

"Quick!" he growled, pushing his way through the throng of students, physically shoving aside those who didn't clear a path quickly enough. His thick black robes barely seemed to move. "You don't belong here!"

"Yeah, you've been telling me that since sixth grade," Alexandra said.

The Alchemy teacher closed the distance between them and glowered with a familiar, hateful stare. "Don't be flippant, girl," he said. "You have no business being here. You're not a student. Begone!"

"You can't just banish me with a word," Alexandra said. "And I'm not leaving yet."

She turned her back on Mr. Grue and walked on. She heard gasps and murmurs from the students now filling the hallway. She half-expected to feel Mr. Grue's hand clapping her heavily on her shoulder, or worse, a hex in the back, and she wasn't even sure what she would do if her old, least favorite teacher did try to stop her. But he didn't. Probably he was alerting Dean Grimm as Alexandra headed toward her office.

She didn't see any of her friends — not Anna or David, or any of the Pritchards, or Sonja. She figured they must all be in classes in one of the other six wings of the building, and hoped she could track them down before she left Charmbridge, but with word quickly spreading about her arrival, she knew she'd have to confront Dean Grimm immediately, rather than just wandering around to chat with her friends and wait for the Dean to arrive.

In the front office, another familiar face glared at her from the picture frame hanging behind the barrier between the reception area and the usually-



empty secretarial desks.

"Miss Quick," said Miss Marmsley, the prudish portrait who served as Dean Grimm's secretary and personal assistant. "You do not have an appointment, nor do you have a Visitor's Pass!"

"No, ma'am," said Alexandra. "But I'd like to see Dean Grimm anyway."

"She's busy!" snapped the portrait.

"Busy like gone from the school busy, or busy like she doesn't want to be bothered by students busy?" Alexandra asked. "Because I'm pretty sure if you tell her I'm here, she'll want to see me."

"I doubt that!" Miss Marmsley retorted. Alexandra just stared at the portrait. Miss Marmsley had never been friendly, but she wasn't usually this acerbic. Perhaps being a non-student allowed the painting to show her true feelings more openly.

Alexandra waited, and after a moment, Miss Marmsley sighed and stepped out of her picture frame. Behind her, there was only the painting of a chair and the reddish-brown oily canvas of her background.

A few seconds later, Miss Marmsley returned. "Go in," she said stiffly.

Alexandra walked down the hallway to Dean Grimm's office. This was a walk she'd taken many times in the past. Usually because she was in trouble. The portraits of prestigious alumni stared solemnly down at her, saying nothing. Alexandra reached Dean Grimm's office, almost knocked on the door, and then simply turned the knob and opened it.

Dean Grimm sat behind her desk, wearing the white suit she favored over witch's robes on most occasions. Her straight black hair was loose, which was unusual, but otherwise she was as made up and composed as Alexandra remembered. Sitting on her desk were all the same wooden in-boxes, small portrait frames, and piles of paper. And sitting on her lap, Galen.

"Hello, Aunt Lilith," Alexandra said.

Her aunt beckoned her in. "Close the door behind you, Alexandra," she said coolly.

Alexandra did so, then approached the Dean's desk, her eyes on the black cat sitting on her lap.

"How did you get here? Surely you didn't Apparate from New England?"

Alexandra shook her head. "I took another route."

Lilith Grimm leaned back in her chair. "Very well, I suppose your evasiveness is to be expected."

"Is it really?" Alexandra had resolved not to show anger or brattiness to her aunt, but found she couldn't keep the resentment from spilling out of her.

The Dean didn't seem surprised or offended. "If you're blaming me for what happened, Alexandra, your anger is misplaced. I certainly didn't want you sent to Eerie Island, but I had nothing to do with that. As for expelling you from Charmbridge, I really had no choice about that and you know it."

Alexandra tried again to control herself, knowing that her aunt was right about her anger being misplaced. "I came to see my mother."

"Of course you did. It's your birthday." Ms. Grimm genuinely sounded sad. She looked down at Galen, purring in her lap. She ran her fingers through the cat's fur. "Do you intend to do this every year?"

"For as long as I live. Or for as long as my mother is a cat."

Ms. Grimm sighed. "Even your father couldn't undo the curse on her memory. Don't think Diana and I didn't try, either. There is no cure, Alexandra. There never will be."

"You told me that before. Even if you're right, that won't stop me from trying. I've been learning a lot. More than I'd learn here." She knew that last part sounded snide, but she was having trouble keeping her anger completely under control.

"Diana said you'd return today."

Alexandra tensed. Ms. Grimm smiled. "You're very foolish to be so predictable, but you needn't worry. She won't come for you."

"Why not?" Alexandra couldn't help asking.

Ms. Grimm ignored the question and rose from her chair. Holding Galenthias, she walked around her desk and set the black cat on the chair next to Alexandra. She stepped back and waved her wand in what seemed to be a lazy series of motions.

The cat stretched and grew, taking human form in moments. Hecate Grimm, the triplet sister of Lilith and Diana Grimm, sat in the chair she'd occupied as a cat, wearing what appeared to be the same white robes Alexandra had seen her in a year ago.

"Hello," Hecate said uncertainly. She looked from Lilith to Alexandra, and back at Lilith. "Do I know you?"

"I'm Lilith. Your sister." Her voice was as steady as always. Only the tight set of Lilith Grimm's mouth betrayed any feelings.

"I'm Alexandra," Alexandra said. She resisted the impulse to reach out and run a hand through her mother's long, black hair. "I'm your daughter."

"My daughter?" Hecate's eyes widened slightly. "I have a daughter?"

Encouraged by the reaction, Alexandra said, "Yes — me! Look at me. My name is Alexandra. Say it, please!"

Hecate gave her a long, slow look. "Alexandra," she repeated.

Alexandra nodded and took her mother's hands in her own. "Try to hold onto that," she said, pleadingly. "Can you remember it?"

"Remember what?" Hecate asked. Her eyes were flat and confused. She looked down at her hands, clasped in Alexandra's, and then over at Lilith. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"I'm Lilith. Your sister." Lilith Grimm's expression didn't change.

"My sister?" Hecate raised an eyebrow. For a moment she resembled Lilith to a degree that was almost painful. Then she said, "Who is this girl?"

"Alexandra," Alexandra said, with all conviction draining out of her voice. "I'm your daughter."

"My daughter? I thought perhaps you were her daughter." For a moment, Hecate actually seemed to be studying her. Then she looked at Lilith and said, "Forgive me — where am I, and who are you?"

"Are you satisfied?" Lilith asked Alexandra. "Or would you like to repeat this cycle a few more times?"

"Would I like to repeat what cycle?" Hecate asked.

"You don't have to be such a bitch," Alexandra said bitterly.

There was dead silence in the room for a moment. Then Hecate asked, "Who are you calling a bitch?" There was a slight edge in her voice, but her expression still had that gentle, befuddled dullness.

Lilith flicked her wand at her sister, and Hecate vanished, replaced by Galenthias the cat once again. Galenthias meowed.

"If you ever speak to me like that again," Lilith said icily, "I will turn *you* into a cat, Alexandra. And please believe me when I say *I am not bluffing*."

Alexandra blinked and turned her attention away from Galen, to face her aunt. Lilith Grimm's eyes glittered with intensity. Her knuckles were white around her wand. The silver rings on her fingers made a slight sound as they ground together.

"I have been taking care of Hecate for sixteen years," Ms. Grimm said. "Diana and I have done the best we can for her, and exhausted all possible remedies, for as long as you have been alive. You just learned about her last year, and you think you know better than us what is to be done? You're going to conjure up a cure because you're so brilliant, gifted, and special, are you? The most talented of your father's children?"

Alexandra was taken aback. Lilith Grimm's face never lost its icy composure. Galenthias meowed again, almost a yowl, then jumped to the floor and pushed against the office door. It opened and she slipped out into the hallway.

"I don't know if I'm the most talented of my father's children," Alexandra said, trying to keep her voice even. "But —"

"Get out," Lilith said.

"What?" Alexandra was startled by her aunt's cold fury.

"I don't need to protect you or give you special favors anymore," Lilith said. "And I certainly don't need to suffer insults and slights from you while you are trespassing. I allowed you to see your mother. Next year, perhaps I will allow you to repeat this sad, futile ritual. But until then, **get out of my school!**"

Alexandra opened her mouth. "Can I —"

"No, you may not stay and visit with your friends. Begone!" Lilith raised her wand. "Unless you truly intend to challenge me."

Alexandra swallowed. "No."

She turned and followed Galen out of the office. She walked down the hallway and past Miss Marmsley. The portrait said something which she didn't hear. Out in the main corridor, it seemed as if half the school was milling about, and everyone stopped when she appeared. When she realized her eyes were stinging, she began running. Someone called to her, and she thought she saw Mr. Grue again, but she ignored them and burst out the doors. In the early spring cold, she sprang forward, took a step with her Seven-League Boots, and was at the Invisible Bridge in an instant.

She discovered that she could not cross the bridge except the normal way, one foot in front of the other. But once on the other side, she took seven-league steps that carried her down the hill, away from the valley, and soon, out of Central Territory. Only a Portkey could have beaten her to New England.

## \*Chapter 45\*: A Share of Ego

Alexandra sulked around the seven-gabled house for a day before Lucilla and Drucilla finally got the story of her visit out of her. Once they did, their sympathy was mixed.

"It is unfortunate that you couldn't see your friends, but it was foolhardy to go there in the first place," Lucilla said. "They can still arrest you in Central Territory."

"And why didn't you think Diana Grimm would be waiting for you?" asked Drucilla.

Alexandra shrugged. "I don't think her sister likes her there."

Drucilla scoffed. "Diana Grimm is a Special Inquisitor. If she wants to go to Charmbridge Academy, Dean Grimm can't stop her, sister or not. You were being foolish, very foolish. You just assumed nothing would happen to you because nothing has happened to you before at Charmbridge, despite your reckless adventures."

Alexandra had been staring at a book about ancient Etruscan necromancy without really reading it. Now her head snapped up.

"Nothing has happened to me?" she said. "Really?"

Lucilla glanced at her twin. "You quite put your foot in your mouth that time, didn't you, Dru?"

Drucilla glared at Lucilla, then turned back to Alexandra. "Well. I'm sorry, but you know what I meant. You've been protected from the Wizard Justice Department and Diana Grimm, and a great many consequences, until Dean Grimm couldn't protect you any longer. And when you paid her an unannounced visit, trespassing on school grounds and demanding to see her sister restored to human form for you, you insulted her."

"She wouldn't even let me say hello to anyone," Alexandra said. "I crossed the country to see them—"

"Oh, do stop whining," Drucilla said.

Lucilla sighed. "Gently, Dru."

"She's a grown witch, Lucy. Well, practically an adult, and an apprentice. Do you want to be coddled like a child, Alexandra, or do you want to hear the truth, especially when you've cobbled things up?"

Alexandra folded her arms, but kept her mouth shut.

Drucilla spoke in a somewhat gentler tone. "You did not think through the consequences of your actions or your words. It's not unlike what you did to Valeria. You still have a habit of launching yourself into whatever course of action occurs to you and expecting it to work out. Sometimes it doesn't, and then you suffer the consequences, but rather than learning from the experience, you brood on what went wrong and how it will turn out better next time."

"So you're saying I shouldn't have gone at all," Alexandra said.

"Yes, actually, I am saying that, or I would have if you'd bothered to ask," said Drucilla. "But you asked for neither permission nor advice. Apprentices do not typically run off on their own personal quests without at least asking their teacher if it will inconvenience them, you know."

Alexandra said, "I'm sorry. I just thought —"

"You thought if you told us what you were going to do, we'd try to talk you out of it," said Lucilla. "Didn't we have a conversation not long ago about keeping secrets?"

"All right," Alexandra said. "You're right. What should I do?"

Lucilla said, "You might start with writing an apology to your aunt." She laughed softly at the face Alexandra made. "Oh, Alexandra. Pride runs very strong in all of us, but you surely inherited a great share of Father's ego."

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Alexandra's pride was bruised, but she tried to take her sisters' words to heart. She wrote explanations to her friends, who no doubt had heard of her unannounced visit, in which she didn't stay long enough even to say hello to them. And swallowing the greater share of her pride, she sent a letter of apology to Dean Grimm.

Over the next few weeks, owls brought back responses from Charmbridge.

Dean Grimm replied to her apology with a terse note: "*Apology accepted. Please do not return without a prearranged visitor's pass.*"

*Well, at least it wasn't a Howler,* Alexandra thought.

A week after that she received a visit from a very solemn hoot owl, arriving just after dusk at her open bedroom window. It made no sound, just stared sternly at her until she took the scroll tied around its leg.

It was a single thick square of parchment, with flourishing cursive script penned above a wax seal:

*"Be it known to all that Alexandra Octavia Quick, a Most Troublesome Girl, is hereby recognized, notarized, duly authorized and certified to represent the Five Hollers of the Ozarks at the Confederation Junior Wizarding Decathlon of the Year 2012 A.D. as the Ozarker Champion, and on behalf of the Five Hollers, it is respectfully requested that she be extended all rights, privileges, courtesies, and obligations owing to this election.*

*Signed,*

Leland Laird Sawyer  
Jeremiah Mason Bevins  
Rufus MacLaine Stuart  
Dust Isaac Pritchard  
Balthazar Nathaniel Donaldson"

Alexandra wondered how they had persuaded Balthazar Donaldson to add his signature. He must have heard about her appearance at the Jubilee, following the Unworking. Had the other Ozarkers persuaded the Exodans that she would take them to the World Away?

According to her friends, everyone at Charmbridge was excited about the Junior Wizarding Decathlon. Most of the school would be rooting for Larry, of course — only Alexandra's friends knew that she would be there, too.

All the other champions had been sent a list of decathlon events at the beginning of the year, but no one had bothered sending a program to the Ozarks, since the Ozarkers had never registered a champion before. David and Anna were the ones who procured a copy for her.

She unrolled the scroll on her workbench.

**Schedule of Events for the 61st Confederation Junior Wizarding Decathlon**  
**June 4-9, 2012**  
**New Amsterdam**

*Every Junior Wizarding Decathlon features ten categories in which champions will compete: Alchemy, Arithmancy, Charms, Transfigurations, Divination, Apparition, Brooms, Beasts, Mysteries, and Dueling. While the categories are always the same, each Junior Wizarding Decathlon, like the Confederation Decathlon, is different. The judging panel, under the supervision of the Magical Sports and Games Commission, will devise a set of unique challenges for each event.*

*The challenges will test every champion's mental, physical, academic, and magical fitness. The champions will be scored on their performance in each event. The winner of the prestigious Gringott Grail will be the wizard or witch who achieves the highest total score in all ten events.*

*The schedule below provides the only clues available before the day of the event as to the nature of each category's challenge this year.*

**Day One:**

*Arithmancy — Shimon Says*  
*Alchemy — Drink If You Dare*

**Day Two**

*Divination — Underground Necromancy*  
*Apparition — Mirror, Mirror*

**Day Three:**

*Charms — The Burning Times*  
*Transfigurations — Ancient Forms*

**Day Three (Evening)** — The Junior Wizarding Decathlon Ball, Hosted by the New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards.

**Day Four:**

*Mysteries — A Golden Thread*

**Day Five:**

*Beasts — Dungeons & Dragons*  
*Brooms — Night Racing*

**Day Six:**

*Dueling — Standard multiple elimination rounds.*

*While reasonable safety precautions are in place to reduce the risk of grave injury or mishap, all champions acknowledge that every event has the potential to inflict serious, possibly even mortal, harm. All champions must have a waiver signed by their parent or guardian.*

David and Anna had both included a great deal of speculation about what the nature of the events might be. David thought whoever created the Beasts challenge must be a Muggle-born nerd, and had mailed her several books from a fantasy roleplaying game, copiously marked with his commentary. Alexandra looked through them, but was not convinced that she was likely to face "gelatinous cubes" or "rust monsters."

Sonja claimed that her Inner Eye wasn't to be used for gaining an advantage in competitions. This didn't stop her from sending a long list of warnings:

*They really are out to get you. You shouldn't trust elks. The bathroom isn't a safe place. Don't drink too much. Watch your wand. Stay out of traffic. Listen carefully. Feed Charlie before your trip. If someone says not to, believe them. Magnificent is awesome. Silver will save her. Night isn't when the worst will happen. Read the fine print. Sleep it off...*

"She's lost her mind," Alexandra said.

David and Anna were of much the same opinion — even when one of Sonja's "predictions" came true, they were never helpful.

Alexandra was tempted to write back to Sonja, asking her to answer some specific questions, like "Who will try to kill me, and how?" or "When should I go to Storm King Mountain?" But she was sure Sonja would just tell her that her Inner Eye didn't work like that.

While Alexandra wasn't really going to New Amsterdam for the Junior Wizarding Decathlon, she was intrigued by the events, and her competitiveness would make it hard to walk away from any challenge. If she was in it, she was going to try to win it!

Her last months at Lucilla and Drucilla's house were spent divided between Artificing and studying for the Decathlon. Her sisters taught her many

things she'd never have learned at Charmbridge.

The Apparition lessons in particular were trying. Lucilla and Drucilla were both experts, while Alexandra... wasn't. Any previous Apparating she'd done had been mostly accidental.

To avoid both Muggles and Aurors, they took her deep into the woods to practice, and many afternoons were spent getting unsplined. After weeks of practice, Alexandra could Apparate well enough to get somewhere nearby that she knew well, but she didn't have high hopes for competing with champions who'd actually gotten their Apparition licenses.

All her Arithmancy and Magical Theory lessons at Charmbridge seemed inadequate. She'd barely been allowed to use her broom for weeks. She had faced more ghosts and spirits than most wizards had in a lifetime, but she'd never studied Divination, let alone necromancy.

"Isn't necromancy a Dark Art?" she asked the twins.

Lucilla responded by dropping a heavy book on top of the already sizable stack on her bench. It was one of their ominous, leather-covered volumes that made groaning sounds when opened.

"In vulgar usage, necromancy may involve Dark Arts," Lucilla said, "but the original practice, and what I should hope Decathlon champions will be restricted to, is consulting the dead for wisdom. It is as much diplomacy as magical art. Ghosts aren't always cooperative."

"I know that," Alexandra said. "I've had to Banish a few."

Lucilla gave her one of those looks that Alexandra was never sure whether to read as disappointment or concern.

"I also haven't found many ghosts to be that wise," Alexandra added.

"Oh, you found a book about dungeons and dragons!" Drucilla said, plucking up one of the volumes David had sent her. She frowned as she flipped through the pages. "Wait — this text is very odd. And what a ghastly picture of a goblin! Alexandra, you haven't been reading wizard supremacist materials from the Dark Convention, have you?"

"It's a Muggle book," Alexandra said.

"Muggle?" Drucilla turned the pages again. "Well. No wonder they have no idea what a fairy looks like. How will this help you?"

"It probably won't." Alexandra took the book and set it with her others. "I don't think it's a puzzle. I think they're just going to put us in a dungeon with a dragon."

"Possibly." Lucilla looked at the list of challenges. "But where will they find a dungeon in New Amsterdam? Putting a wizard-space like that under the city would be so staggeringly difficult as to be absurd."

Drucilla said, "The very idea of holding a wizarding decathlon there is quite odd, considering you'll be absolutely surrounded by Muggles. The New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards used to have some of the most formidable Muggle-Repelling Charms in the world, but young witches and wizards racing on brooms, challenging dragons, Apparating, in the middle of a Muggle city? I cannot see how it will be done."

"If only we could come to watch," Lucilla said.

"I wish you could," Alexandra said.

"At least they'll be broadcasting it on the Wizarding Wireless," Drucilla said.

Alexandra stared at the books in front of her, and thought about the ten challenges. The real challenge was getting to Storm King Mountain. She and the Whites spent evenings discussing how she might use one of the challenges as a diversion, but they had so little information.

She studied, and practiced, and read, as March turned into April, and April into May. She memorized maps of New Amsterdam and the Hudson River. She learned new potion recipes, and rituals for invoking spirits. She spent hours doing Arithmancy drills, and evenings that Lucilla and Drucilla weren't helping her practice her Apparition, she flew slalom courses through the trees on her broom. All this, while still performing her tasks as an apprentice.

She also read anything that might tell her about the World Away, but the few books that mentioned "ley lines" or travel to other realms were full of speculation and nonsense and very little that matched Alexandra's experience. No one had mapped cracks in the world, but she did find confirmation that wizards historically gathered and built at "places where magic made the borders thin."

Lucilla and Drucilla occasionally went across the river to conduct business. They brought Alexandra with them a few times, but only to let her practice more Charms and Transfigurations — they did not let her accompany them on their actual errands. Alexandra avoided Sojourns, but used the opportunities to call home.

"You'll always have a home here," Claudia said, her voice sounding thick and hoarse on the phone, no doubt a trick of the distance between them. "You can always return." But they both knew she couldn't.

There was little other news from Larkin Mills. Bonnie was still missing, and still considered a runaway by the police, though her parents were insisting that something else had happened to her, and had mounted a campaign to find their daughter.

Alexandra called Livia once. Livia was cordial, telling her that Madam Erdglass was still teaching at the Pruett School, and some new students had arrived to replace the ones who'd dropped out.

"What about Mr. Brown?" Alexandra asked.

Livia was silent a moment. "He's gone. He will not be back."

"Do you know what happened to him?"

"If I did, I don't think I'd tell you. Haven't you been in enough trouble, Alexandra? I hope Lucilla and Drucilla are keeping you busy."

"Oh yeah," Alexandra said. "I'm learning all about broom and cauldron repair, making Clockworks, enchanting Wizarding Wireleses and mirrors and rings..." She didn't tell Livia about her plan to go to New Amsterdam. Neither did she tell Claudia.

As summer and the Junior Wizarding Decathlon approached, Alexandra spent almost every waking hour trying to take in everything the Whites could cram into her head.

"Can you believe this?" she asked Charlie, as she opened book after book. "I've become a wyrm. What would Anna say if she could see me now?"

"Troublesome!" Charlie said.

Though it wasn't supposed to be the real reason for her trip to New Amsterdam, Alexandra found herself hoping she would be able to participate in all the Decathlon challenges. The final one was the one she felt most confident about. She doubted any of her rivals had faced as many actual Dark Wizards and warlocks as she had, in duels that were actually life and death. Certainly not Larry Albo.

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"Foolish girl, that's not why you're going, and it's certainly not what we've been training you to do," Lucilla said, walking alongside Alexandra as they made their way to the Wizardrail station on the other side of the river, several miles from the harbor, the day of her departure. Alexandra had confessed her ambition to her sisters, and mentioned her rivalry with Larry Albo.

"No, you certainly haven't been training me to duel," Alexandra said. "It's about the only thing you didn't help me with."

Lucilla and Drucilla both rolled their eyes.

"Anyone can hurl Charms about willy-nilly," Lucilla said. "I should hope you've learned important things from us."

"I have, but if you think hurling Charms about is easy, try it when someone's trying to kill you," Alexandra said.

"No one will be trying to kill you at the Junior Wizarding Decathlon," Drucilla said.

Alexandra snorted. "We'll see."

At the Wizardrail station, Alexandra had to rub her eyes to wipe away the guise the station wore for Muggles. To casual passersby, it was a decrepit, rotting old hulk of iron and crumbling stone, like many other abandoned structures from a century past scattered about the New England woods. But to Witch's Sight, it was a small, rather charming rail station made of polished red wood, with a flat paved stone walkway leading up to the platform.

Charlie cawed from inside the cage tucked under Alexandra's arm. She shushed the bird, then told the twins, "I'm really grateful for everything. I hope I was a good apprentice."

"You were adequate," Drucilla said.

"Oh, stop it, Dru." Lucilla gave Alexandra a hug. "You could be brilliant, if you dedicated yourself, but Artificing is not your calling."

"I don't know what my calling is," Alexandra said, as she returned the hug awkwardly. "I have a Name, and a fate, and... all these other things that are supposed to happen, and I don't understand most of it. I've probably done more planning for this than I've done for almost anything else in my life, and I'm still mostly making it up as I go along."

"That's one part being sixteen years old, one part life, and one part your essential nature," Lucilla said.

"We tried to help you prepare," said Drucilla. "Don't forget our lessons."

The Wizardrail train materialized out of the morning riverside fog and rolled almost silently into the station. There were only a few other passengers boarding here. One wizard had a mohawk, while the others were dressed like traditional Old Colonials, in robes and pointed hats. They looked at the young mohawked wizard with distaste, and then at Alexandra, in her jeans and light jacket, carrying a backpack and a caged raven, and their haughty expressions wrinkled further.

"Go!" said Charlie, causing the two Old Colonials to jump. They turned their backs and hurried onto the train.

"Remember," Lucilla said in a low voice, "the Thorn Circle is still watching over you, Alexandra. You've always been protected."

Alexandra resisted the urge to point out how often that protection had failed. The Circle of Protection that their father had put on her was broken when Benedict Journey tried to kill her in sixth grade. As far as she could tell, the protection of the Thorn Circle hadn't done her much good after that. Instead, she nodded. "I could probably use their help. You know, if I knew who any of them were..."

Lucilla smiled and patted Alexandra's cheek. "You'll know when and if you need to, and not if you don't."

"Farewell, little sister," Drucilla said. "We will see each other again."

## \*Chapter 46\*: New Amsterdam

The New Amsterdam Wizardrail Station was immense. The Goblin Market in Chicago was the largest wizarding community Alexandra had ever seen, and she thought New Roanoke was a pretty sizable town, as wizarding towns went, but when she got off the train in New Amsterdam, there were more witches and wizards than she had ever seen in one place.

This was, she quickly realized, an illusion in more ways than one. The throng was not made up exclusively of magical folk.

There were scores of witches and wizards from all over the Confederation. Old Colonials, wearing more ruffles and lace than Alexandra had seen in either Chicago or New Roanoke, and New Colonials with robes in colors that ranged from traditional staid solids to neon hues. And there were other bizarre fashions she had come to associate with the wizarding world. There was a wizard swaddled in thick furs, complete with the snarling, taxidermified faces of the animals that had previously worn them hanging off his shoulders and waist like tiny bestial spirits. A witch lounged against a wall, cleaning her fingernails with a dagger, wearing a low-cut chainmail bodice that looked neither comfortable nor warm. A column of black-robed children with solemn faces and tall, black hats filed past. None of them looked at her. Alexandra found the unaccompanied youngsters, who appeared too young to even have wands, disturbing.

But what was really remarkable about the scene, besides the fashions that were strange and attention-grabbing even to her, was the fact that Muggles were mingling with wizards immediately outside the Wizardrail station, and none of them gave the astrological robes and conical hats, medieval armor, Eastern cassocks, leather jerkins, or Colonial garb a second glance.

Alexandra had heard that New Yorkers were jaded, but she didn't think they would fail to notice witches and wizards walking in their midst. Yet the men and women in business suits or sporty spring outfits suitable for the breezy riverside hurried along as if people in robes and furs and stovepipe hats were commonplace.

She had a map of New Amsterdam, but she already knew from memorizing it that the Colonial Bank of the New World was down the street, between two Muggle skyscrapers. As she walked further from the Wizardrail station, the witches and wizards became scarcer, and an old bearded warlock in purple robes and emerald green spectacles *did* attract attention from the Muggles around him. No one said anything to him, but they obviously noticed that he didn't fit in, until he walked into a small alcove next to a market, opened an unmarked wooden door, and disappeared.

Alexandra tried to look like she fit in. She wasn't exactly dressed like a witch, but she was carrying a raven in a cage, and Charlie was complaining loudly. People stared at her, and someone took a picture of her. She turned her face away.

The Colonial Bank of the New World was a large marble structure similar to the one in Chicago. It was less impressive when dwarfed by glass and steel skyscrapers that seemed to have grown around it like trees towering over a mushroom. People streamed in and out of the buildings on either side of the wizarding bank, but no Muggles walked up the steps to the CBNW, or even sat on them. The Muggle-Repelling Charms must be extremely potent, Alexandra thought.

She ascended the marble steps and walked through the entrance. There were two trolls standing in the lobby, wearing blue uniforms that barely stretched over their immense shoulders and completely failed to cover their huge bellies. The tiny blue caps on their heads only made them look more childlike, but there was nothing childish in the scowls they gave her and Charlie. Alexandra had never seen guards of any kind at a CBNW before. She wondered if there were wizard heists here in New Amsterdam.

Walking past the scowling trolls, she approached a witch behind a teller's window, and took out her leather booklet with the bank's seal embossed on it.

"I'd like to withdraw a hundred Lions," she said.

The witch took her bank book, and went into a back room. After a few minutes, she returned, accompanied by a stern-looking wizard in a pinstriped suit and bowler hat. The green cape draped around his shoulders did not match the gold and black outfit. Nor did the long pipe clenched between his teeth.

"This is my manager, Mr. Ponzelskinn," said the teller.

"You want a hundred Lions?" Mr. Ponzelskinn asked.

"Yes," Alexandra said. "Is that a problem?" She wondered if the Wizard Justice Department could keep her from withdrawing money from her account.

"Not at all. I was just wondering if you might like to talk to one of our investment advisors. You have a substantial amount of coinage in your account, and it's not working as hard as it could be, sitting in a vault."

"Oh," Alexandra said. "Um, not right now, thanks." She wondered how many coins she did have in her account. The teller was stacking golden Lions up on the counter, and it was more money than Alexandra had ever held in her hands at once. It was actually more money than she'd be able to physically hold in her hands. She heaved her backpack up on the counter, set Charlie's cage next to it, and opened her pack, preparing to shovel the coins into it.

"How about a WizardExpress card?" the wizard in the pinstripe suit asked. "It's not too early for a young witch to start building her credit." He grinned at her in what seemed meant to be an avuncular manner.

"Sure," Alexandra said, although his smile reminded her of the hags in the Goblin Market. Claudia and Archie had never let her have a credit card.

The stack of forms they brought her was much thicker than she expected. The banker assured her that her account balance was a sufficient guarantee, and that she didn't need a parent's signature. But she paused when she got to the Blood Signature. She actually started reading the Terms & Conditions.

"Wait," she said. "This interest rate depends on securing my 'line of credit' with... my firstborn child?" She looked up at Mr. Ponzelskinn with an expression of disbelief.

He spread his hands, with an ingratiating smile. "The best interest rates in the wizarding world! But of course, you can accept the standard interest rate without that security —"

"Seriously, what would you do with my firstborn child?" she asked.

He cleared his throat. "It really doesn't come to that very often."

She left the bank with a backpack full of Lions, but no credit card. The bank manager watched her leave, biting down hard on his pipe with an unpleasant grimace. Then he yelled for an owl as he began writing on a piece of vellum.

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On Alexandra's parchment, New Amsterdam was a small purple blob surrounded by what the map labeled "*Greater Muggle New Amsterdam (also known by Muggles alternatively as The City of New York, Five Boroughs, and The Big Apple).*"

There were cautionary glyphs and red rings around every exit from the wizarding world. Crude pictures and flashing text warned against speaking to Muggles, giving money to Muggles, or casting spells outside the purple blob. There were also illustrations on the back of the map indicating "Common Muggle Hazards," which included buses, cars, trains, potholes, pigeons, lights, lines and cables, tall buildings, falling airplanes, policemen, and sharks.

The New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards had once been a single building, marked on the very edge of wizarding New Amsterdam. Now, students lived in a dorm near the original location of the school, while the buildings used to conduct classes were scattered around New Amsterdam.

The instructions sent to Decathlon champions led Alexandra through a quieter part of Manhattan full of big expensive vehicles and buildings she guessed were apartments where rich people lived. As she walked down a tree-lined street, she saw something beneath her feet, with her Witch's Sight: an immense, rippling crack in the world. When she focused on it, she felt it stretching off into the distance ahead of her and behind her. It might run the entire length of New Amsterdam.

There had been a lot of these cracks in Chicago; she bet there were more of them in New York as well.

At the intersection where the school's administrative offices were supposed to be located, she found a small fenced garden surrounded by more apartments. It was a "private park," according to the plaque on the locked gate.

She looked around, then slid her wand out. The lock opened easily, and when she stepped through the gate, she found that the park was much bigger than it appeared. She walked along a gravel path between tall elms until she reached a granite pedestal with a black marble plaque embedded in it.

The words inscribed on the plaque were:

*New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards  
Est. 1731*

*Solum Bonum Draco Mortus Est*

*Here was established the new grounds for the New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards in 2011, after the historical building was destroyed by the Enemy of the Confederation in 2010. Let students past and present never forget this despicable attack upon our beloved school and the very foundations of Wizarding society, and seek ever to uphold the honored traditions of New Amsterdam Academy and the Confederation. May justice be done!*

"Huh," Alexandra said.

A single three-story building sat in the far corner of the park. It looked like a smaller replica of the big apartment buildings surrounding it. She walked up the steps into the foyer.

Beyond the entrance was a newly tiled floor, but the walls were paneled with old wood and covered with tapestries. Suits of armor stood next to the two doors opposite the entrance, reminding her of Doomguards. She took one step into the foyer, and was immediately frozen in place. She couldn't move a muscle, or cry out, and for a panicked moment, thought she couldn't breathe. Charlie didn't make a sound either, so she assumed the spell must be affecting the raven as well.

The two suits of armor moved in unison. The swords they held vertically in front of them flipped in their hands and descended to a downward-pointing angle as they stepped off their platforms.

Alexandra tried to break the spell, but she was helpless as the suits of armor advanced on her. Then they stopped, and the door on the right opened. A slim young man in a white suit and tie stepped out, adjusted a pair of glasses with bright blue lenses, and snapped his fingers. Suddenly Alexandra could move again.

She looked at the armored suits now standing motionless on either side of her, then back at the young man.

"I'm registered for the Junior Wizarding Decathlon," she said, before he could put some other spell on her, or reactivate the suits of armor. "I'm here to get a room. I sent in a form requesting accommodations."

The young man adjusted his eyeglasses again with a precise gesture. "Most students don't arrive unaccompanied."

Alexandra shrugged. "I'm on my own."

"Which Territory or, er, Culture are you representing?" he asked. His supercilious tone and condescending attitude made Alexandra feel like she'd accidentally wandered into a formal ball wearing her jeans and boots and road-worn backpack.

"I'm the Ozarker champion," she said.



The young man's neatly trimmed eyebrows rose behind his glasses. "Really?"

He held out his hand, as if waiting for an invisible waiter to place something in it, and suddenly there was a notebook lying flat in his palm. He lowered his hand, flipped open the notebook, licked his thumb, and quickly paged through the book. He stopped and studied the page he'd thumbed to.

"Alexandra Octavia... Thorn?" he said, hesitating on the last name.

Alexandra clenched her jaw. That was not the name she'd filled out on her registration form. She had forged Claudia's signature on the parental permission form. She was beginning to think she might as well have forged her father's.

"Quick," she said. "It's Alexandra Octavia Quick."

"It says here —"

"Some people apparently like reminding me and everyone else who my father is," she said. She kept speaking, over the young man's sudden intake of breath. "But my name is Alexandra *Quick*. That's the name I sent in on my registration form. I know on the Confederation Census it's Alexandra Thorn, but I've never used my father's name."

Charlie chose that moment to cry out, "Alexandra!"

The young man stared at her, not moving.

Alexandra said, "Change it, please."

Slowly, he held up his other hand. A pencil appeared in it. He applied the eraser to the page, with tiny, precise motions, and then wrote something.

"Thank you," she said.

"The Ozarkers have never sent a champion before," he said. "Ever. Either to the Junior Wizarding Decathlon or the Confederation Decathlon."

"I'm the first, I guess."

"You don't sound like an Ozarker."

"It's a long story. But I have a notarized, duly authorized, and certified letter right here." She held out the parchment that the heads of the Five Families had sent her.

He peered at it, then her, then Charlie, as if trying to see through them. "If you require lodging, we will require cash. In Confederation coinage. As the registration form you sent in will have informed you, the Academy has a limited number of guest accommodations available..."

Alexandra reached into her pack and pulled out the bag full of Lions she'd withdrawn at the CBNW. She jingled it.

"I see," he said.

He made her sign some more forms. Alexandra was intrigued by the fact that he used a pencil. When she asked if everyone at New Amsterdam used pencils, he scoffed. "Certainly not. Far too *avant garde* for most wizardfolk in this town."

His name, she learned, was Proctor Matthews. Or perhaps it was his title. She wasn't sure.

"This way, please," Proctor Matthews said. "And do keep your voice down, there are some classes in session in this building."

Alexandra had many questions. She asked them in a hushed voice, which didn't seem to annoy him any less as they walked down carpeted, wood-paneled hallways lined with immense portraits that stretched from floor to ceiling. Everything looked out of place; the carpets and wood panels had obviously been conjured by magic, and the portraits did not seem well-grouped, as evidenced by the fact that Proctor Matthews frequently had to shush them as they argued with their neighbors.

"Why the Doomguards?" Alexandra asked.

"The what?" whispered Proctor Matthews.

"The suits of armor."

"Doomguards? Is that some quaint Ozarker appellation?" He sniffed. "Occasionally, we have unauthorized visitors."

"Muggles?"

"Merlin, no. They'd never get past our Muggle-Repelling Charms." He sniffed again. "But New Amsterdam is crawling with warlocks, renegade goblins, masterless elves, gnomes, trolls, hags, and other riff-raff. Thanks to your father."

At that, all the portraits in the hallway glowered down at her. Alexandra said nothing, but doubted that New Amsterdam had only become a haven for such creatures as a result of the Dark Convention.

The portraits were painted against backgrounds of vast libraries, green-hilled countrysides, or marble atriums. One painted wizard with a face like a shrunken apple stood on a dock, stooped forward, hands clasped over a dolphin-headed cane, with a large sailing ship sitting in the harbor behind him.

"Is it true?" he demanded. "Is her father the one who destroyed our home?"

"Cast her out!" cried a row of tightly-corseted and bonneted witches from their canvases.

"Shh!" said Proctor Matthews. "You must remember, good witches, classes are in session!"

"We never used to hang near student classrooms," sniffed one of the witches.

Proctor Matthews gave Alexandra a condescending glare, as if to say, *See what you've done?* Alexandra just glared back at him.

She heard voices behind a few doors, but they encountered no one else in the hallway. They finally reached a tiny office. Proctor Matthews led Alexandra into it, sat behind a desk, and pulled a card and a key out of a filing cabinet.

"The only remaining guest quarters for visiting witches are located in Walloon Tower," he said. "You'll have privacy, at least." He smirked.

Alexandra looked on her map of New Amsterdam. "That's out in the river!"

"Yes. But conveniently located near Crown Hall, the witches' dorm for our regular students. Walloon Tower has no, ah, facilities, so you'll have to Apparate to Crown Hall and use the communal bathroom there."

Alexandra glared at him. "I'm paying a lot of money for guest quarters that don't even have a bathroom in the same building?"

"You could always handle things the old-fashioned way, with a Vanishing Spell."

"Gross." Alexandra had once heard someone say wizards used to do that, before indoor plumbing, but she didn't actually believe it.

"You're also free to find lodgings amongst the Muggles, being careful to observe the International Statue of Secrecy, of course. Some of our students and visitors from less... traditional families do that. Everyone in New Amsterdam is suffering considerable inconvenience, with improvised facilities and heightened security, thanks to —"

"My father, yeah, I get it." Alexandra slapped down a pile of Lions and took the key and card from him.

"You do have an Apparition license?" Proctor Matthews asked.

"Um, no."

"Oh, dear. Well, you'll have to walk back and forth, then."

"You're kidding." She looked at the map again — Walloon Tower was a dot in the river.

"Apparition without a license is strictly prohibited in New Amsterdam." Proctor Matthews wore a smug expression. "The fines can be quite steep. And needless to say, flying across the river by broom is also strictly prohibited. For our regular students, flying is grounds for suspension on the first offense, and expulsion on the second. For Decathlon champions, you'd probably be disqualified."

He handed her a bell. "This will part the water between the tower and shore. You must exercise discretion — Muggles won't notice you if they aren't already paying attention to you, but if you ring it right in front of them, they'll see it. I believe you're the only witch without an Apparition license in Walloon Tower. From Crown Hall, you can follow the other witches to the cafeteria which currently serves as our dining commons."

"I assume there's an exception to that Apparition rule for the Decathlon?" Alexandra asked.

"I assume so," Proctor Matthews said lightly. "Good luck."

Alexandra walked out of the building, crossed the gated park, and walked three long blocks and through an underpass beneath a highway to the river. On her map, Proctor Matthews had shown her where she could take an old path down to the riverfront along a concrete embankment, hidden from Muggle sight and warded against their notice. The stone steps that led down to the water's edge were ancient and worn smooth.

About twenty yards offshore, a stone tower cast a shadow all the way to where she stood.

Walloon Tower looked like the sort of place one might find a kidnapped princess imprisoned on the top floor. It thrust out of the river in plain sight of the riverfront, the bridge that stretched across the sky behind her, and the boats and ships that churned through the water. Yet like so much of the wizarding world that was hidden in plain sight, it apparently attracted no more notice than one of the navigation buoys. Alexandra couldn't tell when or how the tower had originally been built, but it appeared that it might have at one time been anchored on dry land. Perhaps the river had shifted, or it had been reshaped by construction and landfills.

She looked around to make sure no Muggles happened to be at the water's edge, then rang the bell.

Water surged and parted, making a loud sucking sound. The riverbed lay exposed, brown and slimy, in a narrow path leading to the tower. Alexandra stepped off the last concrete step, and her boots sank into the mud.

"Gross!" said Charlie.

With slow, squishing steps, Alexandra walked between rising walls of water on either side of her until she reached steps cut into the stone base of the tower. Below the waterline, they were slippery with algae. Once Alexandra reached a small stone ledge above the level of the river, the tunnel through the water collapsed behind her with a splash. Some water landed on her and Charlie. The raven protested loudly.

"They make everything so much harder than it has to be," Alexandra muttered.

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Walloon Tower was four stories tall. Stairs ran up the center of the tower, with two doors at each level, all of them closed. If everyone else just Apparated back and forth, Alexandra figured she'd probably never see any of her fellow guests.

She paused when she encountered a Clockwork golem on the first level, standing between the two doors.

Charmbridge's Clockworks were left shiny and featureless, but this one had a face painted onto it. Porcelain white, with enormous eyes, exaggerated lashes, and a creepy bow-lipped smile.

Alexandra found it disturbing, and she was not fond of Clockworks to begin with.

"What are you, room service?" she asked.

The Clockwork didn't answer, of course.

There was another one on each level. She edged past the Clockwork on the fourth floor, and opened her room with a sense of dread, expecting it to look like her cell on Eerie Island.

Instead, she found a bedroom that was more luxurious than her room at Charmbridge. It held only a single bed, and a complete set of antique woodwork furniture. The bed was large enough to require her to climb into it. It was covered with a thin blanket and pillows. There was an ornate writing desk, with fountain pens rather than quills. A large iron-banded wooden chest at the foot of the bed turned out to be more than spacious enough for all her belongings, but there was also a closet to hang her robes in, with a full-length mirror that she checked for charms or other ensorcellment. It appeared to be quite ordinary.

"Well," she said, "this isn't so bad."

"Charlie," said Charlie.

She set down Charlie's cage and let the raven out. Charlie hopped to the windowsill, which overlooked the river, and one of the other Boroughs of New York City on the opposite side. She unpacked some of her things, but kept her backpack with her as she walked back downstairs.

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After another hike through the river mud, Alexandra climbed back up the embankment, and followed her map to a high-rise that was also outside of New Amsterdam's official boundaries. There was no doorman and the lobby desk was unattended, but it appeared to be an upscale building. Muggles came and went freely, none of them giving Alexandra more than a cursory glance.

She walked to the elevators, as she'd been instructed, and looked for the button for the 7 1/2th floor. There wasn't one until she cast a Revealing Charm.

When she exited the elevator, she found herself in a carpeted hallway lined with perfectly ordinary numbered doors, with peepholes and minimal furnishings on the walls. But as she watched, two girls exited one of the rooms, wearing robes and witches' hats.

She followed them to the bathroom at the end of the hall. The two witches were about her age. When she emerged from the stall and went to the sinks, the witches were still there.

"You aren't a New Amsterdam student," one girl said.

Her tone was challenging, but neither of them had drawn their wands, so Alexandra responded in a pleasant voice, "I'm one of the Decathlon champions. Can you show me where the cafeteria is?"

They looked at each other. "Must be from one of the frontier Territories," one said.

"Which school are you from?" the other one asked.

"The Pruett School," Alexandra said.

"Pruett School? Never heard of it. Well, come on, then." They beckoned her to come with them, as they walked back down the hallway to the elevator. Alexandra followed wordlessly as they chattered about their Arithmancy final and how expensive brooms were becoming.

In the elevator, one of the girls waved her wand and pressed a button that appeared above all the other floors, marked with a large green "D."

The elevator rose at a startling speed, until it must have shot up through and past the top floor. Alexandra barely had time to grab one of the safety bars lining its interior, and then they went tumbling and rolling through space like a ping pong ball sucked through a vacuum hose.

Alexandra was sprawled on the floor of the elevator when it came to a halt. The two girls laughed at her, but one offered her a hand up as the doors opened. "You don't have pneumatic Floos back at the Pruett School, do you?"

"No," Alexandra said, waiting for her stomach to drop out of her throat.

The New Amsterdam witches laughed again, and then left her, walking into the large room the "Floo" had brought them to.

They appeared to be in another building entirely — Alexandra had no idea where it was in relation to Crown Hall. Past a carpeted lobby was an eating area, which resembled a restaurant more than a cafeteria. Alexandra tried to blend in with the other students filing in, but quickly realized that she was the only one not wearing robes. Students younger and older than her stared as she tried to get in line with them, only to be blocked by a Clockwork much larger than the ones in Walloon Tower. This one was painted with a black tuxedo and smiling masculine face with a small twirly mustache.

A girl who must have been a senior approached Alexandra, wearing the orange and white New Amsterdam school robes that the vast majority of kids wore, and said, "What do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to get dinner," Alexandra replied.

The girl pointed at the sign near the entrance: *No one will be served without proper wizarding attire. No brooms, backpacks, bags, or familiars.*

"That applies even to guests," the girl said. She had a badge on her chest similar to the one that had been pinned to Proctor Matthews's breast pocket. And as the older girl dressed her down, Alexandra glanced across the room and saw Proctor Matthews — now wearing orange and white wizard robes like all the others in the dining area. He caught her eye, smiled, and shrugged.

"No one told me," Alexandra said.

"Now you've been told," the girl said. "Go back to your room and change."

"Yeah, Quick. Don't track mud in here."

Alexandra clenched her fists, turned slowly, and found herself face to face with Larry Albo. He was flanked by his friends, Wade White and Ethan Robinson, all of them wearing Charmbridge robes.

Larry gestured at her feet. "Nice boots. What did you do, walk all the way to New Amsterdam?"

Alexandra glanced down. Her boots were indeed caked with mud from her travels.

"What in Merlin's name is she doing here?" asked Wade.

"Good question." Larry shook his head. "I heard a rumor you were coming, but I also heard you'd been sent to Eerie Island. I'd believe anything I hear about you, Quick."

"Believe this — I'm going to kick your ass in the Decathlon starting tomorrow," Alexandra said.

Larry squinted at her. "You're competing? But how? *I'm* the Central Territory champion."

"I'm the Ozarker champion," Alexandra said.

Larry and the other two boys stared at her in disbelief.

"The Ozarkers have never sent a champion," said Larry.

"They have now."

"You're not an Ozarker!" he protested.

"I am now." She gave him a smug smile.

"I told you you need to change into robes," said the girl who'd intercepted Alexandra. "You can talk to your friends once you're properly attired. We wear robes and shoes here, Ozarker Annie, so leave your boots and bonnets in your room. Ask another Proctor if you need help learning to use silverware."

Larry, Wade, and Ethan burst into laughter at that. Alexandra's cheeks burned and she stomped out of the dining commons, feeling everyone's eyes on her back.

"Seriously, that's what they think of Ozarkers?" she said, walking back to the elevator. She wondered about all the times the Pritchards had mentioned being made fun of. It hadn't happened much around her — how much had she not seen?

At the elevator, she paused. All the way back to Crown Hall, then across the river to Walloon Tower, and back again, just to change her clothes?

"Screw that," she said.

She closed her eyes and concentrated. *Destination, Determination, Deliberation.*

She arrived back in her room with a crack.

Charlie, not startled at all by her appearance, said, "Stupid!"

"So I Apparated without a license," she said. "They have to catch me first."

"Troublesome," said the raven.

She changed into robes, looked across the river, pictured the dining commons she'd just left, and realized she didn't know its actual location, and thus could not Apparate there.

"The heck with it," she said. She'd take a shower before everyone else returned from the dining commons, then get something to eat in one of the many Muggle establishments near Crown Hall. She picked up a towel, toiletries, and change of clothes, and Apparated to Crown Hall instead, appearing directly in front of the bathroom. She startled a pair of younger girls wearing New Amsterdam orange and white, who jumped as she appeared in front of them.

"You're not supposed to Apparate here," one of them said. They both wore very serious expressions, and seemed to be studying her, as if memorizing her face to report her.

"They're going to put up Anti-Apparition Wards soon," said the other one.

"Ah din't know," Alexandra said. "Please don't tell on me, okay? Ah'm a visitor. Ah'm the Ozarker Junior Wizarding Decathlon champion. You know us Ozarkers, we uns just doesn't know any better." She put a twang in her voice which could not have sounded less authentic, but the two girls just nodded.

They said nothing as Alexandra entered the bathroom.

It was empty. Alexandra chose one of the many shower stalls and took a hot shower, ignoring the rumbling in her stomach.

She could hear footsteps and voices in the hallway, but surprisingly little noise in the bathroom as she finished her shower. She cast a Drying Charm and put on a clean set of clothes suitable for walking around in Muggle neighborhoods, then stepped out of the shower stall.

Three girls stood between her and the exit. All wore orange and white New Amsterdam robes, and their wands were in their hands. The bathroom

was otherwise empty.

Alexandra was holding her hickory wand in one hand, and her bag of laundry in the other, where her other two wands were wrapped in a towel. She stared down the three girls.

"What, did I violate some rule by taking a shower?" she asked.

"*Stupefy!*" yelled the tallest girl, flinging a Stunning Charm at her. Alexandra had already dropped everything but her wand.

She deflected the Stunner, but the other two girls pelted her simultaneously. The three of them were very good and had obviously practiced coordinating their spells by the way they hexed her high, low, and at angles difficult to block.

*Great, bullies who use teamwork*, Alexandra thought, countering the jinx one of them tried to bounce around her Shield Charm.

Her wizard-dueling practice with Maximilian and his friends had taught her how to defend herself against multiple attackers, but the ambush had caught her off-guard. At least her opponents didn't seem to be expecting her to put up so much of a fight. She knocked one girl down and cursed one of the others, making her long flame-colored hair writhe and wrap around her neck. While the red-headed girl frantically tried to counter the curse, the girl on the floor iced the tiles beneath Alexandra with a freezing jinx. Alexandra stepped away, wobbly and off-balance, and deflected a hex, but failed to stop another Stunning Charm. The red burst of light caught her squarely in the chest and knocked her against the tiled wall behind her. She hit her head, dazing her further as she slid to the floor.

"*Accio wand!*" said the red-head, and Alexandra's hickory wand flew into her hand.

The three witches advanced on her. Alexandra's chest hurt and she could barely move. The girl who'd struck her with the Stunner was tall and stout of frame, with blonde hair and hazel eyes that looked like cold marbles. The other two girls were about the same age as her, probably a year or two older than Alexandra. The red-head had a pale, freckled complexion; the one Alexandra had knocked to the floor was a curly brunette with light olive skin and a large nose. Neither of them had the intense expression of hatred that the first girl did.

"How dare you come to my school?" snarled the blonde girl. "How dare you walk in here like you belong here, like you're entitled to eat our food, sleep in our beds, walk our halls? How dare you be here?"

"I... don't... know you," Alexandra said. That Stunning Charm had hurt — a lot.

The girl cast another hex that caused wrenching agony in both of Alexandra's knees, as if they were being twisted out of their sockets. She loomed over her.

"My name," the girl said, "is Harriet Isingrim. Does that mean anything to you, sorceress?"

"No," Alexandra croaked.

Harriet Isingrim flicked her wand at Alexandra's face. Sparks flew and singed her lips and eyebrows.

"My father's name was Fredrick Isingrim." Harriet's voice rose. "He was a passenger on the Roanoke Underhill!"

"Oh," was all Alexandra could say.

"Your father killed my father and my uncle, and a hundred other people!" Harriet shouted. "And nothing happened to him! Or you!"

Alexandra wanted to say that a lot had happened to her, but she could barely move. Harriet stepped back and unleashed another Stunning Charm. Alexandra blacked out this time.

She came to with a jolt of pain, and realized one of them had cast a Rejuvenation Charm. She gasped, and then another hex hit her in the stomach. Though she was already doubled up in pain, she curled even tighter. Yet another hex struck her, then another.

"C...Cr... Crucio... would work better," she managed to say, between painful breaths. "Doesn't even... leave a mark."

One of the girls gasped. Harriet stood with her mouth open for a moment.

"You vile little sorceress," she said. "I'll bet you do know how to cast an Unforgivable. You think this is funny? *Stupefy!*"

Stars blurred Alexandra's vision and pain made even breathing difficult. When she opened her eyes again, Harriet was holding a small blade.

Then another girl's voice said, "What are you doing?"

Harriet and her friends all whirled around. Alexandra thought the voice sounded familiar.

Harriet said, "Get out."

"This is none of your business," said one of Harriet's friends. "Just leave."

"Stars Above!" exclaimed the new girl. There was that familiar drawl again. "What are you planning to do, kill her?"

"No. We're just teaching her a lesson."

"We'll teach you one, too, if you don't get out of here!"

"*Expelliarmus!*"

It was the new voice who shouted that last incantation. Alexandra sucked in a deep breath and forced her eyes all the way open.

A dark-skinned girl wearing green and silver robes stood facing the other three. Her wand was pointed at them, but her expression was wide-eyed

and a little panicked. Harriet stared at her in astonishment. Her knife had gone flying over her shoulder and now lay under a sink. The other two girls were pointing their wands at the newcomer.

"Angelique," Alexandra said.

"Hello, Alexandra," Angelique Devereaux said.

Harriet Isingrim looked slowly back and forth between them.

"You two are friends," she said, through gritted teeth.

"We know each other," Angelique said. Then she swallowed. "Yes, we're friends. And... and you should stop this. You're not allowed to duel in the bathrooms."

Alexandra couldn't clear the stars from her vision, and when she tried to lift herself to her elbows, her arms trembled and didn't want to obey.

"Walk out of here now or you'll get what she's getting," the red-headed girl told Angelique. She wiggled her wand, and sparks ran along its length. "Do you think you can take all three of us?"

"I'll report you," Angelique said, pointing a trembling wand at Harriet.

Harriet held up her hands. "Fine." She walked carefully around Angelique, just within arm's length. She glanced back at Alexandra. "We'll settle this soon enough."

"But —" said one of Harriet's friends.

Alexandra opened her mouth to warn Angelique, but Harriet's lunge was too sudden. She grabbed Angelique by the throat with one hand, seized her wrist with the other, and shoved her against the wall. She was taller and clearly stronger. Angelique cried out as she slammed into the tiles.

Harriet leaned forward, with her lips curling back almost as if she meant to sink her teeth into the other girl's throat.

"You're from Baleswood, aren't you? Are you a Dark sorceress too? You know what we do to Dark sorceresses in New Amsterdam? We burn them!"

"I'm not... I..." Angelique whimpered.

Alexandra could still barely move. Her laundry bag and towels were just out of reach.

Angelique held up her other hand, palm out, in a pleading gesture. Her sleeve slid back, and Alexandra caught a glimpse of a tattoo inked into her skin when Angelique said, "Honey!"

The tattoo writhed and swelled, and emerged as a living thing from Angelique's forearm.

"Leggo, masher!" snarled the weasel-like creature, and then it leaped onto Harriet's face and sank its teeth into her nose.

Harriet shrieked and fell backward, covering her face with her hands and trying to pull Angelique's jarvey loose. The jarvey gabbled out several foul words even while clamped onto Harriet's nose.

The girl with the red-orange hair yelled and cast a charm at Angelique, who screamed and ducked. The spell cracked the mirror behind her. Angelique said "*Victoroi!*" and her wand made a popping sound as a blinding flash of light lit up the room, reflecting off all the mirrors. While Harriet's friends were momentarily distracted, Angelique said, "*Rennervate!*"

Alexandra felt a surge of energy. She could move again. She lunged for her laundry bag and thrust her hand into it, even as the other two girls renewed their assault. She whipped out the yew wand.

*Obey me!* she thought, and said, "*Levicorpus!*" She flipped the red-headed girl upside down and dropped her on her head.

The olive-skinned girl cast a spell at Alexandra and another at Angelique. She was fast. Alexandra deflected the spell directed at her, and Angelique did the same, barely. Then Alexandra knocked the other girl off her feet with a Stunning Charm of her own and pushed herself to her feet.

"*Accio wand!*" she said, and her hickory wand came flying out from beneath the red-haired girl and into her hand. She hastily switched wands, thrusting her yew wand out of sight.

Angelique cried, "Honey!"

"Stinking porker!" Honey exclaimed. The jarvey leaped off of Harriet and ran to Angelique, climbing up her leg inside her robes. While Angelique shrieked again, this time at her familiar, Harriet rolled to her feet, wiping blood off her face and glaring death at Alexandra and Angelique.

Alexandra, shaking and still seeing stars, pointed her wand at the defenseless girl. "My turn," she said.

Harriet's friends groaned. One reached for her wand, and with a flick, Alexandra sent it flying under one of the toilet stalls.

Angelique, struggling with Honey, who'd made it to her neckline and was now wriggling out from under her robes, said, "Y'all need to stop this now! Girls are waiting to use the bathroom, they aren't going to stay in the hallway all night!"

"Piss in a bucket, filthbag!" said Honey.

Harriet, still clutching a hand over her bleeding nose, made a defiant beckoning gesture.

"Do it, then," she said, addressing Alexandra. "Do your worst, Mudblood. Know that I *will* return it seven-fold."

"Filthy Mudblood!" screamed Honey.

Battered and sore, Alexandra struggled with her fury. She really wanted to return seven-fold what Harriet had already done to her. She glanced at Angelique, and saw fear in the other girl's eyes.

She turned her wrathful gaze back on Harriet.

"Get out," she said. "I'm better than you."

Harriet sneered.

The girl with the red-orange hair limped over to her wand and picked it up, slowly, keeping it pointed away from Alexandra and Angelique, who both held their wands poised to unleash more hexes.

"Just remember you had to gang up on me and ambush me," Alexandra said. "I'm a Decathlon champion — you'd never be a match for me in a fair fight."

"Cheating whore!" Honey said.

"I'm the New Amsterdam champion," Harriet said. "We'll see about that." She glared at Honey. "Someone should poison that thing."

Honey's response was a particularly profane and anatomically explicit outburst. Harriet turned purple. Even Angelique looked shocked.

The three defeated witches all limped out of the bathroom. When the door opened, Alexandra saw a crowd waiting outside. As Harriet and her companions exited, girls streamed in from the hall. Most went directly to the stalls, though a few stared at Alexandra and Angelique curiously.

"They were waiting," Alexandra said. "They knew."

Angelique giggled, a little hysterically. "I knew there would be trouble as soon as I heard Alexandra Quick was here."

"Troublesome Mudblood!" said Honey.

"Nice to see you too, you dirty talking sock," Alexandra said. "How did Harriet not wring your neck?"

"I feed her vitality potions," Angelique said. "She's tougher than she looks."

"Pansy little piggy!" said Honey, preening.

Angelique put a hand around the jarvey's muzzle. She stroked the jarvey, then let go, held out her arm, and pulled her sleeve back. "Honey."

"Kiss my ass!" Honey said.

"Treats later," Angelique said. Her voice became wheedling. "I have candied crickets."

"Eat worms," Honey said, and crawled onto Angelique's arm.

Alexandra watched in fascination as Honey sank back into Angelique's skin, becoming an inked tattoo, paws held high.

"How did you do that?" Alexandra asked.

"I researched the enchantment myself," Angelique said with pride. "But it took a while to find a wizard tattoo artist good enough to ink it."

"Vitality potions and a magic tattoo," Alexandra said. "Huh."

Angelique straightened her robes, then turned to the mirror and began grooming herself. "Oh my stars, my hair is a fright now."

Alexandra's blood was still pounding in her ears. She was torn between hunger, fatigue, and a desire to chase down Harriet Isingrim for a rematch. But as she regarded Angelique, who had once been Darla Dearborn's best friend, she made herself calm down.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" she asked. "You're not Baleswood's Champion, are you?"

Angelique stopped her primping, and gave Alexandra a flat stare. "Baleswood is gone," she said. "Swallowed by the bayou."

Alexandra closed her eyes. Her father had done that. Baleswood was the first school he and the Dark Convention had destroyed, as they escalated their war against the Confederation.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't —"

"I know, Alexandra. I know you're not responsible for what your father does." Angelique sighed. "After your... after Baleswood was destroyed, we all had to go somewhere. A lot of new day schools have opened in Louisiana, but some of us came here." She shrugged. "It's not so bad. New Amsterdam is interesting. But I miss Charmbridge." She bit her lip.

Girls of all ages were in the bathroom now. Some had gone into the showers. Most were giving Alexandra and Angelique a wide berth. Angelique stepped away from the sink and mirror so another girl could use it.

Alexandra lowered her voice and said, "So, Harriet Isingrim is the New Amsterdam champion. And she let everyone know that they were going to jump me in the bathroom?"

Angelique nodded. "I suppose so."

"And you helped me."

Angelique smiled. "We Charmbridge girls have to stick together, right?" Her voice cracked a little, and for a moment, her smile faltered and her eyes misted over.

Alexandra had always thought of Angelique as a friendly but silly girl. But Angelique had lost her best friend, then been brought home to go to a different school than the one she'd called home for years, only to have that one destroyed. And now she'd come to the aid of the girl who many would say was responsible for much of that.

"Thank you, Angelique," Alexandra said.

Angelique looked down, then raised her head again, and wiped at the corner of an eye with the back of her hand. She smiled.

"So," she said. "How's David?"



## **\*Chapter 47\*: The Junior Wizarding Decathlon**

The next morning, a momentary hush fell over the room when Alexandra entered the dining commons for breakfast. She sat down at an unoccupied table and waited for the Clockwork golems she saw serving food. She wanted to yell at the other students to stare at someone else. But it wasn't like this was the first time she'd been in this situation. Always the Dark sorceress, the daughter of the Enemy, the —

"Hey, Quick." Larry took a seat on the other side of the table. Ethan and Wade sat down on either side of him. "Heard you started the dueling event early last night."

"What. Do. You. Want?" Alexandra was in no mood for Larry and his insults.

"Merlin, you're touchy." Larry held up his hands. "Just thought I'd share a meal with a former classmate from Charmbridge. So, where have you been going to school lately?"

"Is it true you were in wizard prison?" asked Wade.

Alexandra found she wasn't even angered by their baiting. She just wanted them to go away.

A cheerful Louisiana drawl interrupted them. "Good morning, Alexandra." Angelique sat down next to her. She seemed to notice Larry for the first time. "Oh, hello... what's your name again?"

Larry smirked. "You know who I am, Devereaux. So, you two..." He pointed a finger at Angelique, then Alexandra. He wiggled it back and forth suggestively.

"Us two what?" Alexandra said.

"Are you a couple?" Larry asked.

"What?" exclaimed Alexandra and Angelique together.

"Well, I heard you came running to her rescue last night," Larry said.

"I always assumed Quick's squeeze was that little Chinese roommate of hers," said Ethan.

Larry shrugged. "I guess if Chu's not around..."

"You are such obnoxious trolls," Alexandra said.

"Hey, I don't judge," Larry said. "I mean, I think Devereaux could do better, but —"

"You're an ungentlemanly heathen, Larry Albo," said Angelique. "And Alexandra and I are not... not like that!"

"I don't know, that didn't sound very convincing," said Wade.

"You can't blame her for wanting to keep it a secret," said Ethan. Larry and his friends laughed, while Angelique fumed. A Clockwork set down a dish piled high with eggs and bacon, and the boys started shoveling them onto their plates.

Alexandra looked at Angelique. "They're just trying to provoke us. Maybe he thinks if I lose my temper and attack him, I'll get disqualified."

"Listen to her, talking about attacking people," said Wade.

"Sounds kind of like a dangerous felon to me," said Ethan.

"Yeah." Larry took a sip of pumpkin juice, eyeing Alexandra, as her eyes involuntarily went to the silver fingers holding his glass. "You think you can get through the Decathlon without maiming anyone, Quick?"

This barb landed more deeply than any of Larry's other taunts. Alexandra just glowered at him as she tried to finish her breakfast.

Across the cafeteria, Harriet and her friends sat with a crowd of New Amsterdam students. Alexandra ignored their glares.

She saw adults for the first time that morning when a group entered the dining commons. A tall, gray-bearded wizard in pale yellow robes cleared his throat. Conversations came to a halt as everyone turned their attention to him.

With a magically amplified voice, he said, "Good morning, students of New Amsterdam, and to our guests from out of town. I am Professor Haster, the Dean of Students here at the New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards. I trust you're all looking forward to an exciting first day, as the Junior Wizarding Decathlon will start in just under two hours."

At this, everyone in the dining room burst into cheers and applause. It took a good several minutes for the students to subside, after Professor Haster, smiling behind his beard, raised a hand to make a shushing gesture.

"Excellent, excellent enthusiasm. And I know it will be an exciting series of events, with seventeen Champions from around the Confederation. As you know, the Junior Wizarding Decathlon is not a public event — generally there are only a few spectators from each institution invited to watch, though there will be a Worldwide Wizarding Wireless broadcaster reporting on each event, describing key moments throughout each day of competition."

At this, he indicated a young wizard wearing a Muggle-style suit and a bowler hat with a slip of paper tucked into the hatband.

Alexandra started as she realized that he was the reporter who'd been present at her appeal hearing the previous summer in the Central Territory Headquarters Building.

Professor Haster continued: "This year, for the first time, the Confederation News Network will be broadcasting not just daily summaries, but the actual sounds and sights of the event, reported by Archibald Mudd!"

The CNN reporter reached his hands into the pockets of his robes and withdrew a small gold sphere in one hand, and a much larger dull ocher one in the other. He tossed the gold sphere into the air, and a pair of rapidly fluttering wings emerged from it and held it aloft.

"It's the latest innovation by our partners from the Worldwide Wizarding Wireless network," the journalist said. "A News Snitch. When it's activated, I can have anything it hears broadcast directly thanks to the charms in this set." He held up what appeared to be an antique crystal radio set. "Of course it will only be used during the most interesting challenges. The other device —" he held up the larger ocher ball "— is an Eye-Spy." As he spoke, an iris dilated in the surface of the orb, revealing a pupil that began rolling around the hemisphere facing the students. "Accompanied by the Snitch, we hope to capture some exciting moments to broadcast directly to the spectators back home, at least those who've purchased a new crystal Wizarding Wireless viewer from our friends at Potgieter's Wizard Widgets!"

Archibald Mudd went on for some time, sounding rather like an advertisement. Alexandra eyed the Snitch and Eye-Spy suspiciously.

Professor Haster spoke at last, when the journalist was done promoting himself and his widgets.

"We are also honored to have a very distinguished guest judge this year. The Governor-General himself will not only be observing the event, but he will be a member of our panel. Furthermore, as you know, the Academy has a shortage of event space, due to the despicable attacks on our institution two years ago." He didn't look at Alexandra, but she felt other eyes on her, and kept her own face impassive and her gaze locked on Professor Haster. He went on: "Therefore, Governor-General Hucksteen has generously offered to host the Junior Wizarding Decathlon Ball at the Governor-General's mansion!"

There were gasps and exclamations of surprise, and then clapping, which swelled and grew louder as more and more students applauded, apparently realizing they were supposed to. Even Angelique joined in.

Alexandra alone sat quietly in her seat, saying nothing and keeping her fists curled on the table.

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The first event was held on top of a building near the park where New Amsterdam Academy was currently headquartered. The roof was old orange brick, and mostly flat and featureless except where chimneys, vents, and a few stairwell doors emerged. Once this rooftop had probably towered over the streets below, but now it was a tiny parcel surrounded by immense Muggle skyscrapers.

The seventeen champions did not represent every Territory and Culture in the Confederation. There were no Plymouth Traditionalists, and no Voudons. Alexandra saw a Traveller in garish, colorful robes that looked more like a cyclone of sashes, and a New Reformed Druid, and a Majokai wizard. She saw no Indian wizards, though there was one girl with long black braids who looked like an Eskimo, wrapped in furs thick enough to face a blizzard.

Alexandra was probably the youngest one here. Everyone else looked a year or two older. The Roanoke champion from the Blacksburg Magery Institute wore a Witch-Sergeant First Class's uniform. Angelique had pointed out the Louisiana Territory champion, a tall, stick-thin young man with ebony skin and eyes so dark they almost seemed pupilless, and told Alexandra he was also a former Baleswood student.

The Alta California champion was a Radicalist from the Sedona School for the Mystically Inclined. A long-haired blond boy in a tie-dyed shirt and bandanna, he also wore a skirt, and at first Alexandra thought he was a girl. He reminded her a little of Mr. Journey, so she immediately mistrusted him, despite his cheerful smile.

Aside from the Sedona and BMI students, the Traveller, and the Eskimo witch in furs, everyone wore robes, even Alexandra. Her dress-like robes were a concession to her role as Ozarker champion. She stood between a boy in flat brown and yellow robes from Texarcana, and the New England champion, a Salem Traditionalist whose black robes and tall pointed hat would have made her the very model of a witch posing in a Muggle Halloween shop.

On the edge of the rooftop were seventeen dark gray humanoid figures, all motionless and seemingly lifeless. The champions stared at them, trying to guess what it meant for their Arithmancy challenge. Suddenly there was a series of loud popping noises and a rush of air as the judges Apparated onto the roof.

Alexandra was stone-faced as Governor-General Hucksteen took his place before the other judges. A large, red-faced man with a beard that reached down to his enormous belly, he wore a satin waistcoat over velvet trousers, a frilly cuffed shirt with lace at the neck and collars, and a tall hat with a gold buckle on it. It had been several years since Alexandra had seen him. Unlike her, he didn't seem to have aged at all. He still smiled with a forced geniality that never reached his eyes, and made Alexandra think of a Santa Claus who stole children instead of bringing them gifts.

There were eight other judges, for a panel of nine. One wizard was nearly as fat as Governor-General Hucksteen, and a head taller, but his beard was bushy and black and lit wicks or fuses were braided into it, smoking and giving off a not-unpleasant odor. The other judges gave him disapproving scowls. There was an Asian man in a shimmering golden kimono, at the sight of whom the Majokai champion bowed deeply. Another judge wore a Regimental Officer Corps uniform.

Distracted by the arrivals, and trying not to meet anyone's eyes, Alexandra realized that Governor-General Hucksteen had been speaking for a while. He wound up his speech with, "... I look forward to presenting the Gringott Grail to the winner of the Junior Wizarding Decathlon!"

Everyone on the roof applauded politely, Alexandra excepted.

She had no doubt Hucksteen was aware of her presence, but so far he'd taken no outward notice of her. The judges all went to sit at seats they conjured out of the air, and Professor Haster faced the Champions and explained their first challenge, "Shimon Says."

"The golems you see lined up on the roof have each been inscribed with incomplete Arithmantic equations," Professor Haster said. "Your challenge is very simple. When the symbols on your golem activate, you must complete the illuminated equation. Complete the equation correctly, and your golem will take a step forward. Each time you make a mistake, the golem will take a step backward. As you can see, they start out rather close to the edge, so you don't have much margin for error. The equations will become harder, so make mistakes later if you must make them. Your score will be based on how quickly you move your golem past the row of judges, marked by a line on the bricks." He pointed with his wand to where the judges were sitting, and a glowing line appeared, running from about a foot past the Governor-General's chair to the opposite edge of the roof.

*What if we just levitate our golem over the line?* Alexandra wondered. She looked around, and saw thoughtful expressions on the faces of the other champions. She was pretty sure some of them were having similar thoughts.

As if reading their minds, Professor Haster added, "You may not move your golem by any means other than as I have described."

"It's just an Arithmancy quiz," Alexandra muttered. "We're using silly props for an Arithmancy contest." She didn't realize until the boy from Sedona turned to look at her that she'd said it out loud.

"Well, it wouldn't be any fun if we were just solving formulas on parchment, right?" the Alta California champion said. "The whole point of competing is to be awesome, right?"

"I guess." Alexandra didn't return his smile. She really didn't like how friendly he was, and how much he reminded her of Mr. Journey.

"Champions, stand before your golems," said Professor Haster.

Everyone walked over to stand before one of the silent gray figures. They appeared to be made of clay, and were almost featureless. Their heads sat like elongated cannonballs on broad, flat shoulders, with only faint indentations to suggest eyes and mouths. Their hands were wide and roughly shaped, with thick, stubby fingers. Alexandra guessed that not a lot of craftsmanship had been put into their Artificing. Why bother for a single use in a competition that might see some of them walking backward off a rooftop?

"Champions... ready... begin!"

Alexandra's golem abruptly came to life — or rather, it unslumped slightly, and three sigils glowed on its chest. Alexandra recognized them immediately as three of the four prime factors used for all advanced Arithmantic proofs. Quickly, she traced the fourth prime on the golem's chest with her hickory wand. The four-symbol equation glowed briefly, and her golem stepped forward. She glanced right and left, even as more symbols appeared on her golem. Everyone else's golems were moving forward as well.

Arithmancy had never been Alexandra's best subject. Anna was better at it by far. But Lucilla and Drucilla had made her keep up her studies, and shown her applications of Arithmantic equations she'd never grasped at Charmbridge. So when the next set of symbols lit up on the golem's chest, it only took her a few moments to work out the missing sign that completed a formula for balancing somatic and vocal spell components. She wrote the sigil with her wand, and her golem stepped forward again.

She solved the third equation, but more slowly. She could see in her peripheral vision that she was already falling behind a couple of her competitors, but at least she wasn't the last — the Majokai champion seemed to be deliberating too long over his third equation, and the girl in furs kept raising her wand and lowering it uncertainly.

A fourth equation appeared. Alexandra completed it, and readied herself for the next one, deciding she would spend less time overthinking whether she was right. Solving her equations faster and hoping she didn't screw one up was the only way she was going to catch up to the Sedona and Baleswood champions, and Larry, all of whom were a step or three ahead of her now.

She heard a cry of dismay from the girl in furs as her golem stepped backward. It was now a step from the edge of the roof.

Alexandra's fifth equation was far more complicated, and included a radical she'd never learned to solve. She was sure she'd seen it before, but... With a mental shrug, she took her best guess. At worst, she'd be another step behind. This probably wasn't going to be her best event.

The sigil she traced on the golem glowed red, then faded. Not the right one. Alexandra frowned and waited for the golem to step back.

Instead, it reached forward with far greater speed than its previous clumsy steps, and its two massive hands closed around Alexandra's neck. She didn't have time to make a sound. It squeezed, and her eyes bulged.

She felt the life being choked out of her. She had no idea if anyone had noticed her predicament, but she knew immediately that she had only seconds before this thing strangled her unconscious, possibly to death. If she could have spoken, she'd have used a Blasting Charm or something on the golem, but she had neither the proficiency nor the clear-headedness to throw a non-verbal charm strong enough to make it release her.

She knew little about golems. They were precursors to Clockworks. Not used much in the modern wizarding world. Didn't they usually have some kind of built-in shut-down charm in case they malfunctioned? That was supposed to be the great improvement of Clockworks, besides being shinier and faster and sleeker — they didn't occasionally go rogue and try to kill you. Although Alexandra had her own experiences with that...

She almost closed her eyes, but she knew if she closed them she'd never open them again. Shut-down mechanism. Something to turn it off. It responded to Arithmantic equations etched on its surface... With her vision rapidly narrowing to a dark tunnel spotted with flashes of red and yellow at the edges, so she could just barely focus on the formless face of the golem, Alexandra raised her wand and wrote the Arithmantic null symbol.

The golem stopped squeezing. It stopped moving altogether. It did not release her, however, so Alexandra hung limply in its grip until Professor Haster and two more New Amsterdam faculty members, accompanied by a couple of the judges, ran up to her. Someone cast a spell that forced the golem's fingers open. Alexandra almost fell to the bricks, but managed to stay on her feet, barely.

"What did you do?" demanded Professor Haster.

"Made a mistake?" Alexandra said. "I thought it was supposed to just step back, not try to kill you!"

As if to validate her, someone shouted, and a second later, there was a distant thud as something plummeted off the roof of the orange brick building. The girl with the long black braids stood at the edge of the building, looking disconsolately down at the street below.

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Alexandra was unsurprised when they tried to blame her.

"You must have tampered with the golem somehow," Professor Haster said. This, even after they had examined her wand and cast a Reverse Incantation to verify what spells she'd cast.

"How could I have done that?" Alexandra asked. Her neck felt bruised, but she didn't touch it. "You all saw what happened. Did anyone else's

golem attack them when they made a mistake?"

Only the girl from the north had actually lost her golem over the edge. Most of the others had made at least one mistake before getting their golems over the finish line, but only the Alta California and Louisiana champions had completed every equation without error.

Governor-General Hucksteen approached with the insincere smile Alexandra remembered from her interview with him, years ago.

During their first encounter, in Dean Grimm's office, Alexandra had been twelve, and new to Charmbridge Academy and the wizarding world. She had done her best to appear meek and easily intimidated, because Dean Grimm had told her not to appear too bright or too willful to the Governor-General.

But that was years ago, and too much had happened since then. Alexandra suspected that Hucksteen had never been fooled by her act. He had marked her as the daughter of his greatest enemy from the very beginning, and she more than half-suspected that he himself had cursed the golem to attack her, or he'd had someone else do it. She kept her expression neutral, but when she met his eyes, she poured insolence and spite into her unblinking stare.

"Well, Miss Quick," he said. "It seems you managed to introduce a little unauthorized Dark magic into the event, hmm?"

"I did not," Alexandra said, and then, because she was technically the Ozarker Champion and he was a judge: "Sir."

Governor-General Hucksteen raised his eyebrows. "The golem surely didn't act that way of its own accord."

"Maybe someone's trying to kill me," she said. "Sir."

He smiled. "I suppose that's possible. I imagine there could be people who might want to kill you."

"I cannot find any signs of tampering, by Miss Quick or anyone else," said Professor Haster. "The judges will need to confer to decide how to adjudicate this most unusual situation."

The other champions waited, separated from Alexandra by a few yards and a much greater gulf that she could sense by the way Harriet Isingrim stood among them as peers, and she did not. Harriet's glare was pure hatred, but Alexandra detected no guilt or disappointment there. If Harriet was responsible for sabotaging Alexandra's golem, she wasn't showing it.

Larry stared at her, arms folded.

Archibald Mudd was speaking excitedly into his crystal radio widget. Alexandra heard him describing a "golem's murderous rampage" and "Dark sorcery at the heart of an elite institution." She frowned. What was he talking about?

After some heated discussion among the judges which Alexandra couldn't quite overhear, Professor Haster returned, flanked by the other judges. Alexandra waited for them to tell her she was being disqualified and kicked off the grounds.

"Golems are known for being somewhat unreliable," Professor Haster said. "But it's been half a century since the last attempted murder by a golem. We cannot detect any proof of tampering, so we can only conclude that this was a freak accident."

*Sure*, Alexandra thought, glancing at Governor-General Hucksteen, who didn't look like he was happy with the outcome of the judges' conference. *It was just a coincidence that my golem tried to kill me.*

"The decision of the judges is that your score for this event will be the event average," Professor Haster said. "This is based on the precedent set in 1943 when Lyndon Batterswool was prevented from finishing his Divination event when a fight in the spectator stands resulted in a stray hex blasting his teacup to smithereens." He addressed the CNN reporter, apparently speaking to a larger audience than the assembled champions. "That, incidentally, is when the Junior Wizarding Decathlon stopped being an open spectator event."

It was better than what Alexandra had expected. She saw from the expressions of the other competitors that some of them didn't think this was fair.

Well, she thought, what made them think this was going to be a fair contest?

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For the next event, they took everyone inside. The interior of the building looked more like an old apartment building than a school, but they passed several open doors that contained what looked like classrooms, so Alexandra assumed this was another building that had been temporarily taken over by New Amsterdam Academy.

They were led to a large room on the ground floor, where heavy stone tables had racks of Alchemical materials and glassware lined up on them. There was also what Alexandra recognized as an Alchemical storage closet much like the one Mr. Grue kept in his classroom at Charmbridge Academy.

"Welcome to 'Drink If You Dare.' For the Alchemical competition, you will be brewing potions," Professor Haster said to the seventeen champions. They were squeezed along the wall nearest the door, while the judges filed in and took seats at a long table opposite them. Mr. Mudd stood in a corner where he could view the entire room. Alexandra was forced to stand between Larry Albo and the Radicalist from Sedona. She folded her arms to keep from rubbing shoulders with either of them.

"As the name of this challenge suggests, you are allowed to drink the potions you brew," Professor Haster said. "Some of them may be helpful." He winked. "You'll be given a list of potions you must complete, in exactly the order listed. You will be scored on both speed and the poissiance of your potions. But there is also a negotiation aspect in this competition."

Everyone glanced uneasily at their rivals.

"You all have mostly the same supplies," Professor Haster went on. "But each of you is missing a few of the ingredients you need. You can trade ingredients with each other, or be as generous or as stingy as you like. You will lose points for each ingredient you acquire from another champion, and conversely, you will gain points for each ingredient you lend or give to someone else. It's up to you to decide whether helping someone complete one of their potions is worth the points you'll gain by helping them."

Alexandra frowned. Great — at least two of her competitors wouldn't lend her water if she were on fire. She'd just have to hope she could get by without anything in Larry or Harriet's supplies.

They went to their tables, on each of which was a small scroll tied with a slender gold thread.

"On my mark," Professor Haster said, "you may open your scroll and begin. And.... go!"

Alexandra opened her scroll and looked at the list of potions to complete. Gleefully, she realized that she recognized all of them. And most she had learned to brew, either at Charmbridge or with Lucilla and Drucilla. The two she hadn't, however — well, she was pretty sure she knew how they were supposed to be made.

The first was a simple tincture for treating skin blemishes, and the second was gnome-killing poison. Very nasty stuff, but easy to make, and certainly nothing anyone would drink. Alexandra was looking ahead at all of the requirements for each of the dozen potions, trying to organize her tools, the two cauldrons they'd been given, and the ingredients, and working out the fastest way to finish each and begin the next. Naturally, they hadn't chosen any potions that took a long time to brew.

Some of the competitors were already hurrying across the room to mutter to one another. Archibald Mudd wasn't saying anything at the moment — Alexandra imagined this competition probably wouldn't be very exciting to report on.

She had *Melancholia* and a Fire Protection Potion both in preparation, and was lowering the flames beneath her Draught of Peace, just before adding the hellebore syrup, when the girl in furs who'd lost her golem in the Arithmancy challenge approached her. She'd pushed her hood back, revealing an angular face with high cheekbones and a prominent forehead. Her face was marked with scars that stretched across her cheeks to just beneath her eyes. If her expression hadn't been so sullen, she would have appeared quite fierce.

She didn't quite meet Alexandra's eyes as she asked, "Do you have pixie wings?"

Alexandra didn't want to be interrupted in her brewing, as she knew getting one stir wrong with the Draught of Peace would require her to start over. She pushed a jar across her table to the other girl.

The Eskimo witch seemed surprised. "Just like that? You don't want anything in return?"

"I want you to stop bothering me," Alexandra said.

Her rival stared at her a moment, then shook out some of the pixie wings into a small silver cup and walked back to her bench. She wasn't hurrying nearly enough, Alexandra thought.

She was almost finished with the Draught of Peace when she encountered her first missing ingredient. *Amortentia* needed crushed pearls, and she had none. She rummaged through all the other gem ingredients on her table, then gritted her teeth and surveyed the room, trying to decide who she could ask. Her obvious first choice was the girl from the north, to whom she had lent pixie wings. She walked over to her.

The other witch was struggling with her third potion. Alexandra could see she was quite far behind the other competitors.

"You're adding too much nettle," she said.

The girl looked up at her balefully, but said nothing.

Alexandra, glancing at her rack of gems and metals, saw crushed pearls. "I need some crushed pearls," she said.

She was already reaching for it when the other girl said, "No."

Alexandra stopped. She stared at the scarred girl, who was trying to water down her potion to make up for the excess of nettles.

"Seriously?" she said. "Look, I'm sorry if I was rude before, but —"

"I can't help you." The other witch dropped a dusting of arrowroot into her cauldron, and finally looked Alexandra in the eye. "I'm so far behind, and you're so far ahead. If this competition weren't important to me, I would help you. I'm sorry."

Alexandra shook her head and walked over the next bench.

"Don't even ask," said the Roanoke champion in her BMI uniform. She was firing up a tiny eye-drop beaker for the difficult and delicate Universal Solvent.

"Hey, chickee, you need help, right?"

Alexandra turned around. The Radicalist Sedona student grinned at her. He was also in the midst of his *Amortentia* potion.

"Chickee?" Alexandra wondered if all Radicalists gave girls silly names.

"Heh, it's just a term of endearment, right? Thule over there, she's not too endearing, is she?"

"My name. Isn't. Thule," said the girl in furs, without turning around.

Alexandra said, "I need some crushed pearls, *rooster*."

Several of the other champions looked up at that. She heard the BMI witch snicker. The judges were watching them.

The young man from Alta California just grinned wider. He tossed Alexandra his jar.

"The name's Magnificent," he said.

"Magnificent," Alexandra repeated.

"Magnificent Blaze." He held his wand over his head, twirled it, then tossed it into his other hand, and with a theatrical flourish, began swirling his potion the required seven times. "Better get back to your own love potion, chickee — hate to see a good *amore* go to waste!"

Alexandra hurried back to her table. She finished her *Amortentia*, and breathed in the swirling steam that rose from it. It smelled like fallen leaves and cold breeze and something faintly burning. It wasn't at all what she imagined, but she found herself inhaling deeply, thinking of late autumn at Charmbridge and... Her eyes snapped open. She could easily waste the rest of her time entranced by her own potion! She looked around to see if anyone else had fallen under the spell of an *Amortentia* potion. They all appeared busy.

She had three potions to go. She itemized everything she needed, identified several more missing ingredients, and went around the room to barter for them. Avoiding Magnificent, Larry, Harriet, the BMI champion, and the girl Magnificent had called "Thule," Alexandra was able to trade what she needed with the Palatine boy from Hudson Territory, the Majokai champion, and the former Baleswood student.

This also gave her added information. She was ahead of most of her competitors, but the Louisiana and Roanoke champions, as well as Larry, Harriet, and Magnificent, were already brewing their next to last potions.

She still had to create a Hasten potion, followed by Balm of the Mind, followed by Bottled Sunlight. All very difficult; Bottled Sunlight would probably take almost as long as all the preceding potions put together, with its long list of ingredients and its very precise measurements. Here Alexandra saw what must have been the opportunity Professor Haster had hinted at: the Hasten potion! If she brewed it correctly, she'd be able to *Hasten* herself...

She glanced at the students who were ahead of her. Would they all do the same thing? How much did they want to win? Would drinking a Hasten potion really take a year off their lives? As she wondered this, she saw Albert-Louis, the champion from Louisiana, tasting his Hasten brew. At his table, Larry was already moving in jerky, accelerated fashion. Of course they would.

Did they all know the Heartsploder version? Alexandra searched for wolfsbane in her supplies, and found it. It would make her Hasten potion five times as potent, which would give her extra points for puissance, but without an antidote, it would Hasten her to death.

The antidote was fairly simple. Alexandra sorted quickly through her jars and bottles and found Calabar beans, charcoal, and sea salt. A grim smile crept across her face. Had the designers of this competition intended to dare the champions to challenge themselves in this way? Of course they had.

Alexandra finished the Heartsploder, and saw the judges watching her carefully, as was the CNN reporter. The judges, at least, must have known what she was up to. Alexandra held up the potion to Mr. Mudd's Eye-Spy, as if for a toast, and downed half of it, leaving enough for the judges to evaluate.

Her blood roared through her veins, making her temperature rise and giving her an instant headache. That was one of the side-effects she'd read about, but she'd underestimated just how terrible it would be as her arteries throbbed under the sudden pressure of a heart sped up fivefold. But everyone else seemed to become very slow, and she assembled the ingredients and preparation for the Balm of the Mind, the Bottled Sunlight, and the antidote to the Heartsploder in mere moments. She couldn't actually make potions brew faster, of course, but she'd reduced her preparation and transition time to almost nothing.

"...a... daaaaaangeerrrrous... tuurrrrrn..." Mudd was saying to his audience. His voice sounded like a far-away drawl. He was probably criticizing Alexandra and her risky gambit, but she didn't care. She cleaned up everything she'd used to make the Heartsploder with lightning speed from the perspective of everyone else in the room. Everyone else seemed so slow! Even the Louisiana and Alta California champions, who were slightly less slow — Alexandra could see they'd taken their own Hasten potions, but their speed was not nearly as accelerated as hers.

Or Larry's. She stared across the room at him, and realized he was moving at the same speed as her.

He held up his own Heartsploder to her, in a mocking imitation of the toast she'd given the Eye-Spy earlier. He was almost done with his final potion.

Alexandra glowered at him, but contented herself with the knowledge that at least she'd beaten everyone else. *Not bad for someone who almost failed basic Alchemy in sixth grade.*

She finished her Bottled Sunlight, holding it up to let its brilliance illuminate the room, just a minute after Larry had done the same thing. Then she picked up the mug in which she'd ground up the antidote to the Heartsploder, and choked down its contents.

Nothing happened.

She waited, then ingested some more antidote. But her heart still pounded in her chest, faster and faster. She was sweating, and her head felt like it was on fire. She ran through the ingredients and double-checked the Heartsploder antidote, but she was sure she'd done everything right. She looked wildly around. Some of the other champions were finishing their Bottled Sunlight, while half probably would never even get that far. But the judges had figured out her predicament. Was there a slight smile on Governor-General Hucksteen's lips? Everyone else looked concerned, but she suspected they would not intervene in time, if at all.

She moved across the room in a blur of speed, until she was facing Larry.

"I need your antidote," she said.

"I'll... bet... you... do," he said. He was already slowing down. She could see sweat on his brow, matting his dark, curly hair to his head.

"I think my ingredients were sabotaged," she said.

Larry raised an eyebrow. "Of... course... you... do." As the effects of his Heartsploder wore off, his voice became slower and slower.

Alexandra shook her head. To Larry, she was probably a jittery blur.

"Fine, maybe I made a mistake if thinking that makes you happy," she said. "*I need your antidote.*"

It took long, agonizing moments for Larry to smile. "Say... pretty... pretty... please."

"Please," Alexandra said, through clenched teeth.

"No. I ... want ... to ... hear ... you ... beg," he said.

Alexandra just stood before him, with her heart thudding so loud it must have been audible across the room. Red mist formed around the edges of her vision. She felt like her pulse was racing so fast she couldn't even breathe.

Larry's smile faded in slow motion. "You... crazy... brat. I... said... beg!"

Alexandra shook her head. It was just a flicker to someone not Hastened. "No."

Larry's lips peeled back until he showed his teeth in a grimace. He shoved a mortar at her. She snatched it out of his hands and poured its contents into her mouth, not even wondering if he might have given her something other than the antidote. But it tasted almost like hers.

By the time the judges reached her, she was moving at nearly normal speed. She gulped air. Her head felt as if Harriet and her friends had kicked it around a bit in the girls' bathroom, and her robes were damp with sweat. Her hair stuck to the sides of her face.

"That was an extremely dangerous stunt you attempted," Professor Haster said. "It's fortunate for you that Mr. Albo had a *properly* prepared antidote."

"Yeah... fortunate," Alexandra said.

Governor-General Hucksteen's face was blank. While Professor Haster calculated their scores, noting the additional bonus Larry had received for giving Alexandra his antidote, and her matching penalty, Archibald Mudd said, "... in a reckless act of suicidal desperation that would have resulted in tragedy if not for the heroic intervention of Central Territory champion Larry Albo!"

Larry did not look triumphant. He just stared at Alexandra and shook his head.

## \*Chapter 48\*: They Really Are Out to Get Me

Alexandra lingered in the laboratory after the judges and the other champions had left. She went through her components, examining each one in detail. She waved her wand over some. Others she examined by touch, or in some cases, by putting the ingredients to her lips.

Someone cleared his throat. "Trying to poison yourself again?"

Alexandra turned around to face Larry, standing in the doorway. "What do you want?"

He leaned against the frame. "I saw you stay behind. I was curious to see what you're up to. You're out of your league, you know. The rest of us spent all year preparing for the Decathlon. What have you been doing, besides getting expelled from one school after another?"

"Breaking out of wizard prison. It's more difficult than any of these challenges."

Larry's eyebrows went up. "You mean the rumors are true?"

Alexandra bit the small bean she held in her fingers. "I knew it! These aren't Calabar beans!" It was some other species, something that looked very similar.

Larry frowned at her. "Then you made the antidote incorrectly."

"I didn't make it incorrectly, someone sabotaged me!" She grabbed the jar and held it up, showing him the label, which said *Physostigma venenosum*.

"Of course. Everyone's always out to get you, Quick. You're crazy, you know that? You were actually willing to die rather than be humbled?"

Alexandra slowly set down the jar of unknown beans and looked directly into his eyes. "Is that what you wanted, Larry? To see me humbled? How far would you go to do that?"

His expression didn't change, but his fingers, flesh and silver both, curled into fists.

Something deeper than anger came over her. How many times had an unknown enemy tried to murder her? She never had figured out who Mary Dearborn's accomplice had been the previous year; they'd both thought it was John Manuelito, until Alexandra confronted him in Dinétah and he'd denied it. Maybe it had been the unseen hand of the Governor-General all along. Maybe Harriet Isingrim had somehow tampered with her ingredients. Maybe it was someone else. But she didn't think it was Larry. He didn't want to kill her; he was just a jerk who was always there to rub in her every failure and mock her every difficulty.

Her voice turned cold. "You've *seen* me survive attempts to kill me, and you still call me crazy. I almost died, *again*, and you just saw another chance to humiliate me. Why are you here, Larry? You're always telling me I don't belong and I'm not good enough. Well, I am good enough, and I'm going to beat you. Are you going to attack me, like Harriet Isingrim did? No? Then leave me alone, asshole."

They stared each other down, and then Larry shook his head and left.

When she went into the dining commons that night, the scores were posted. The top ten standings were:

Lawrence Albo (Central Territory) — 18.8  
Albert-Louis Cachemarée (Louisiana Territory) — 18.6  
Vanessa Lightwood (Roanoke Territory) — 18.4  
Magnificent Blaze (Alta California Territory) — 18.4  
Harriet Isingrim (New Amsterdam) — 18.1  
Rebecca Good (New England Territory) — 17.9  
Seimei Kamo (Majokai) — 17.8  
Peter Mack (Hudson Territory) — 17.2  
Jonah Crawley (Texarcana Territory) — 17.0  
Alexandra Quick (Ozarkers) — 15.1\*

The girl from Yukon Territory, whose name was Hela Punuk, was almost at the bottom, just above the North California champion.

"How is a Radicalist doing so well?" Angelique asked, coming up behind Alexandra. "Why, they don't even teach real magic at Sedona!"

"Seems like they do," Alexandra said.

As they sat down to eat, Angelique asked, "Is it true that you almost killed yourself by taking a Heartsploder potion without an antidote?"

"I had an antidote," Alexandra said. "Someone sabotaged it."

Angelique frowned doubtfully.

"I checked my supplies after everyone left," Alexandra said. "My Calabar beans were replaced with something else."

"Why would anyone do that?" Angelique asked.

"Calabar beans weren't an ingredient in any of the potions we had to make for the competition. We had a lot of ingredients that never got used. But the only thing anyone might have used Calabar beans for was a Heartsploder antidote."

Angelique shook her head. "That makes no sense. That would mean someone would have to know you were going to make a Heartsploder. Who would expect you to be that reckless?" Then she giggled. "Well, all right. But still, this sounds awfully far-fetched to me, Alexandra."

"Yeah, just like it was far-fetched that someone was trying to kill me in *sixth grade*! Why doesn't anyone ever believe me? No matter how many



times I'm right, I always get told I'm crazy, I'm being ridiculous, I should just listen to the adults. You know what happened at Charmbridge, Angelique — or you think you know, although you really don't know much at all."

Angrily, Alexandra began eating, while Angelique stared at her.

Alexandra finally set down her knife and fork. "Look, I know you don't believe me. But they really are out to get me."

Angelique's eyes widened. "Who?"

"The Confederation, right?"

Alexandra started as Magnificent Blaze sat down next to her. He'd put robes on over the Radicalist garb he'd worn for the competition, and he'd tied his hair back in a long ponytail. "You have a loud voice when you're vexed, chickee. You actually do sound a little crazy to anyone listening in, right?"

Alexandra scowled. "Why were you listening in?"

"*Muffliato*," said Magnificent. Alexandra noticed that he hadn't actually taken his wand out of his pocket to cast the anti-eavesdropping charm. As he began eating, he smiled at Angelique. "Hey, you're from Baleswood, right? You should believe Alexandra — what happened there, the Thorn Circle was a false robe, right?"

"A what?" Angelique asked.

Magnificent lowered his voice, despite the *Muffliato* Charm. "The Confederation just wants you to think that Abraham Thorn and the Dark Convention destroyed Baleswood, right? But it was really *them*."

Alexandra and Angelique both stared at him.

"That's ridiculous," Angelique said. "And I'll thank you to keep your conspiracy theories to yourself, because I don't find them amusing. I was there. There were no Confederation wizards summoning the storms that destroyed our school."

"Did you actually see any Dark Convention warlocks?" Magnificent asked. "Did you see Abraham Thorn?"

Angelique glanced nervously at Alexandra. "No, but..."

Magnificent nodded. "That proves it, right? He was set up." He turned to Alexandra. "I believe you, chickee. They're trying to kill you because then when they destroy Charmbridge, they can blame that on your father, saying he was taking revenge for your death, right?"

Angelique's mouth fell open.

Alexandra wasn't sure whether to be outraged or intrigued. She looked around. As far as she could tell, no one was paying much attention to them, though she caught Larry and Harriet, who were sitting with most of the other champions over at the table nearest the window, occasionally looking her way.

"What makes you think the Confederation is going to destroy Charmbridge?" she asked.

"It's part of their plan to destroy all magical schools, right? They want to return the wizarding world to the way it was before we started mingling with Muggles, when all magical Beings were enslaved."

"That's ridiculous! That's not the Confederation's purpose," Angelique said.

"It's not what anyone will tell you," Magnificent said. "You just know the history you're taught in school, right? No one ever told you that the Confederation was founded by the Order of the Ancient Mu."

"Order of the Ancient Moo?" Angelique repeated.

"The Ancient Mu. They're descended from the Atlanteans, but after the war with the Hyperborean Wizard-Kings—"

"Hyperborean Wizard-Kings," Alexandra repeated slowly.

"Right? See, there was this war in ancient times, between wizards and giants —"

"Giants?" Angelique exclaimed. "Do you really think we're that stupid?"

Magnificent looked wounded. "I'm not making this up, chickee. I know it sounds incredible—"

"It sounds ridiculous!" Angelique said.

"It's the truth!" Magnificent said. Alexandra suspected he might actually be serious.

"So is this what all Radicalists believe?" she asked.

Magnificent's brow furrowed. "Oh, Stars, no. Most haven't been told all of this. It's too deep, right? We're all trying to liberate all sentient Beings, and teach Muggles magic so they'll be able to join us in resisting the Order when the time comes, but not everyone knows all the secret history, like my folks. But you're the daughter of Abraham Thorn — he must have told you all this, right?"

"Actually, he's never mentioned Atlanteans or Hyperborean Wizard-Kings," Alexandra said. "Maybe he was waiting until I'm ready."

Magnificent studied her. She knew he wasn't sure if she was taking him seriously or not. She wasn't sure if he intended her to take him seriously.

Finally, he said, "So, what was your plan, coming to New Amsterdam? I know you don't care about actually winning the Decathlon, right?"

"I didn't, but now I kind of do." Alexandra shook her head, realizing that this was all distracting her from her real objective: Storm King Mountain. "So, you really try to teach Muggles magic at Sedona? How does that work?"

Magnificent frowned. "Not too well," he admitted.

Angelique laughed.

Alexandra wondered if Benedict Journey had believed this nonsense about wizard-kings and ancient conspiracies. Then again, hadn't she been upset at Angelique for not taking her seriously?

"Oh, hey, Thule," said Magnificent.

Hela Punuk stood behind Angelique, facing Alexandra with her tray of food, looking very uncomfortable. Alexandra thought the furs she was wearing had to be causing some of her discomfort.

"That's not my name," Hela said. Then she addressed Alexandra: "I am sorry about today."

"I helped you, and you refused to help me," Alexandra said. "I wonder if you would have given me Calabar beans."

"Maybe she should join us," Magnificent said. "The Thule don't like the Confederation either."

"What do you mean, join us?" Alexandra demanded.

"We don't call ourselves Thule," Hela said.

"What do you call yourselves?" Alexandra asked.

"We don't tell outsiders that," Hela said.

"Then what are we supposed to call you?" Alexandra asked.

"My name." Hela looked annoyed. "I just wanted to tell you it wasn't personal. It's important to my people that I perform well."

"Not much chance of that, after today," Alexandra said.

Hela's fierce features darkened. "There are eight more events. I knew I wouldn't do well with Arithmancy or your kind of Alchemy."

"Well, good luck," Alexandra said. "But don't ask me for help again."

"I won't." The other witch walked away.

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Alexandra almost asked Magnificent for help, but she still didn't trust the Radicalist. After lunch, she asked Angelique where New Amsterdam Academy's library was, and spent some time that afternoon reading books about New Amsterdam and looking for information about Storm King Mountain. It was listed on most Confederation maps, but only as the records repository for the Confederation Census Office. The Accounting Office was mentioned nowhere.

She had trouble falling asleep that night. Reluctantly, she allowed Charlie to fly free, with a window cracked open, only because the raven protested so bitterly about being caged for so long. She knew New Amsterdam — or New York — was the home of millions of birds, but she was fearful for her familiar in a way she hadn't been anywhere else.

Her conversation with Magnificent Blaze had been bizarre and unnerving. The Radicalist seemed to know a great deal about her father, and believed her immediately in a way few others did, even her friends. But that nonsense about Atlanteans! She wasn't sure he wasn't putting her on.

She took a sip of the Draught of Peace she'd prepared that day, and fell into a deep slumber. She dreamed that Charlie was flying north, guided by her thoughts about Storm King Mountain. But Charlie couldn't see well in the night mist rising from the river, so Alexandra called the raven back.

She awoke the next morning to Charlie cawing, "Good morning, Alexandra!" She realized her familiar had been making noise for some time. She yawned, shaking off the effects of her potion, which left her lethargic and not as sharp as she needed to be.

"It's a Necromancy competition, Charlie," Alexandra said. "I might need your help."

Charlie was pleased by this. "Clever bird!"

Ravens were used in certain rituals as guides to the afterlife, and Alexandra had seen for herself that ghosts tended to respect her raven. David had warned her that champions were expected, even encouraged, to bend the rules, and no one had said there was a rule against bringing your familiar.

She used the bell to walk across the riverbed to the shore, and sent Charlie to wait on the roof, then entered Crown Hall.

She was much more cautious when she entered the bathroom this morning, but Harriet and her friends were nowhere about, and none of the other girls bothered her as she took her shower. She still kept her wand ready in her hand, even under the hot water.

She avoided the cafeteria, and instead went back outside and bought breakfast from a food stand on the street. As she returned to Walloon Tower to drop off last night's clothes, she fed Charlie some hash browns and eggs.

She found the entire trip laborious and unnecessary, and was tempted to just keep Apparating back and forth. But it was too early to risk getting thrown out of the Decathlon.

The champions had been told to assemble at the entrance to New Amsterdam Academy this morning, by the plaque Alexandra had seen when she first arrived. Alexandra saw Hela Punuk and the North California champion going through the gate from the street, and wondered where they were

staying. Everyone else was already gathered when Alexandra arrived, with Charlie on her shoulder.

Larry had also brought his familiar, a large black owl named Corwin. Corwin hooted at the sight of Charlie, and Charlie fluttered nervously. Larry smirked. Rebecca Good held a black cat in her arms that was almost invisible against her black robes. Apparently all three of them had had similar ideas about the usefulness of familiars when it came to dealing with spirits.

In addition to the judges, Professor Haster was flanked by wizards and witches in red and black robes today. The red-robed officials, he explained, mostly speaking to Mudd and his Snitch, were observers from the Magical Sports and Games Commission. The black-robed witches and warlocks were from the Bureau of Hauntings.

"We'll be taking you to the site of this morning's Divination competition by means of Side-Along Apparition," said Professor Haster. Each adult paired off with one of the champions. Governor-General Hucksteen himself took Harriet, while a stern-faced witch in New Amsterdam orange wordlessly held out a hand to Alexandra.

With a twisting sensation that was smoother than most of Alexandra's Apparitions, they disappeared, and reappeared in some sort of dark underground bunker. The smell of dust and rot and other unpleasant things made several people begin sneezing immediately.

Over a dozen voices chanted "*Lumos!*" all at once. With Light spells giving them a better look at the chamber they'd been transported to, Alexandra realized it was a subway station. A very old, empty subway station. Cobwebs were everywhere, and bats stirred in the concrete arches high above them, while rodents scurried along ancient metal tracks that stretched off along branching tunnels into the darkness. Vault-like metal doors were marked with numbers and faded street designations. Behind a rusting iron portcullis, Alexandra saw concrete steps leading upward, but they were so far underground that not even a glimmer of light shone in.

Professor Haster began speaking. "This station was once part of what the Muggles call a 'subway' — it's their crude version of an underground Wizardrail. They abandoned this station almost a century ago. Now, it is one of New Amsterdam's designated Haunting Zones."

As if on cue, translucent glowing figures appeared all around them — ghosts, standing along the edge of the subway platform, on the tracks, and at the mouths of the various tunnels. Alexandra heard Hela Punuk gasp. A couple of the other champions looked nervous, but most reacted to the ghosts with interest.

"Necromancy was once one of the primary branches of Divination," Professor Haster said. "Of course it is rarely taught formally in schools nowadays, due to its association with the Dark Arts, but those of you who are well-prepared will have some knowledge of the art. Your task will be to ask questions of any spirits from whom you can wheedle, bargain, or compel an answer. The Bureau of Hauntings has assembled a gathering of volunteers who hold all the answers you seek."

The ghosts wore glum expressions, not looking particularly happy about volunteering — though in Alexandra's experience, ghosts usually wore glum expressions.

Professor Haster snapped his fingers, and as a bundle of scrolls appeared in his arms, all the ghosts faded from view.

"Each of you has a unique set of questions," Professor Haster said. "Your score will be determined by the speed with which you gather answers, and of course, their accuracy. Remember, ghosts can lie!"

The champions lined up, each taking a scroll. Then they stood apart, waiting for Professor Haster to give them the signal to begin.

Alexandra considered the layout of the subway station. Since this was a Divination competition, they couldn't just run around asking random ghosts to answer questions, like a scavenger hunt. They would have to track down particular ghosts, either summoning the ghost to them or casting a Divination spell that would lead them to the correct spirit. This was a hazy branch of magic, involving negotiation, empathy, and compelling, depending on how one approached ghosts. Alexandra had only ever approached them by asking questions directly. She knew how to Banish ghosts, but summoning them required diplomacy.

When Professor Haster told them to begin, Alexandra unrolled her scroll and read the questions:

*How many wizards died in the Great Blizzard of 1888?*

*Who is buried beneath the Gorgeous Gorgon Inn?*

*How many seventh sons arrived aboard the Nibiru?*

*Which wizarding school did the daughter of the first Governor of New Amsterdam attend?*

*What was the Most Terrible Gift?*

She froze when she read the last line. She looked around, wondering if this was some sort of sick joke.

No one was looking at her; even Governor-General Hucksteen's attention was elsewhere. The other competitors were all trying to divine the best way to call up the ghosts who'd answer their questions.

There was a gleam in the air as Mr. Mudd's Snitch flew overhead.

Unnerved, Alexandra cast her first spell. Calling cooperative ghosts from nearby wasn't difficult. She'd dealt with ghosts before, and they didn't scare her, but as she began questioning them, she found them uncooperative. Some tried to intimidate her. She realized that she'd been rattled by that last question, and the ghosts were reading her distraction as fear.

She Banished the first ghost who threatened her, and none of the others gave her trouble after that, but she realized that she now had the undivided attention of the wizards from the Bureau of Hauntings. *Well*, she thought, *nobody said Banishing was against the rules*.

Not every ghost would come to her. Like the other champions, she had to range about the subway station, and she was very mindful of where everyone else was.

"Watch my back, Charlie," she said. She wasn't entirely sure Charlie was helping with the ghosts, but she suspected they'd have been even less polite without the raven present.

"Yes'm," said Charlie.

Getting ambushed down one of these dark tunnels seemed like a very real possibility, so when she had to go into darkness seeking the oldest of the ghosts, her path lit only by the light of her wand, she was ready for an attack. But none came.

Alone in a massive tunnel that was large enough to sail a ship through, and so wet she suspected they were actually under the harbor, she closed her eyes and licked her lips, debating whether she should do what she was thinking of doing. She checked first to make sure the Snitch and its accompanying Eye-Spy weren't around.

"Quimley," she whispered.

She opened her eyes. She was still alone.

She held her wand up, and opened her eyes to what was revealed with her Witch's Sight. This was an old and haunted place, and she was not surprised when she saw seams between this world and the next, but there was no gate to the Lands Below here. Still, the borders were thin, and she knew Quimley was capable of moving between worlds with more freedom than she was.

She took a deep breath, and said aloud:

*"In the dark, we're alone here,  
No one will listen or interfere;  
Quimley, free elf, I hope you hear;  
Come to me, do not fear;  
I need your help, I need your ear."*

Charlie cawed.

She waited, but nothing happened. She waited for a full minute, and then another. She was conscious of time passing by, which would cost her points, but this was no longer about scoring well in the competition. Someone had put a question on her scroll that no one living should know to ask... no one outside the Lands Below.

But Quimley didn't come.

She didn't know if her summoning had failed, or if Quimley was unable to come here, or simply unwilling. She might have attempted a stronger summoning, one to force obedience, but she wasn't willing to do that.

Angrily, she shouted into the darkness, "Hey! If you're looking to ambush me, you won't get a better chance!"

She was just venting. But to her surprise, someone moved in the darkness further down the tunnel. Alexandra immediately pivoted to face the unseen figure, and said, "*Ter Lumos!*" casting a blinding light directly into Hela Punuk's face.

The girl from Yukon Territory held a hand up to shield her eyes. Her wand was held away from her body, pointed downward. "I wasn't trying to ambush you," she said.

"What are you doing here?" Alexandra demanded.

"The same as you. Calling ghosts, away from everyone else. When you came down this tunnel, I hoped you'd finish and leave." Hela lowered her hand, and squinted. "What was that doggerel verse you were chanting?"

"Nothing," Alexandra said.

"You were trying to summon an elf? I don't even know if that's allowed."

"If it's not against the rules, it's allowed. And if you don't get caught, it's not against the rules," Alexandra said.

"Clever girl," said Charlie. Hela jumped.

"Ravens are evil," she said.

"Wicked," said Charlie.

Alexandra and Hela stared at each other.

Hela scowled. "You people — this entire contest is rigged."

"You have no idea," Alexandra said.

"They gave me a question that can only be answered by one of *my* people!" Hela said angrily, shaking her scroll. "None of our ghosts are here in New Amsterdam."

"Well, that sucks. They gave me a question that only my dead brother might know the answer to. So don't talk to me about how the Confederation screwed with you."

Hela paused. "I have dead relatives too."

Alexandra shrugged. "Too bad none of them can help us."

Hela said, "I'm very good at what you Colonials call necromancy. But speaking to one of my people from here requires a ritual, not just a

summoning."

Alexandra hesitated. "I know ritual magic," she said.

"With two people, it would be easier," Hela said.

Alexandra frowned. "Oh, so you want my help again?"

"You need my help, too," Hela said.

Alexandra lowered her wand cautiously. "Ravens are also helpful in summoning spirits from the Lands Beyond."

Charlie let out a caw that echoed eerily in the tunnel.

"The Lands Beyond?" Hela squinted at Alexandra. "You want to summon your brother?"

"No!" Alexandra kept her wand tightly clenched in a fist at her side. "But I think that's where the answer to my question is... in the Lands Beyond."

"Weakening the wall between this world and the Endless Wastes is dangerous," Hela said.

"I know."

Hela considered. "All right. We'll do it together. First mine, then yours."

They would have sat, except there was water pooled in the dank tunnel at their feet, so they squatted instead, using their wands to vaporize as dry a spot as they could, then while Alexandra put up wards, Hela began taking things out of a pouch at her side and arranging them on the wet concrete floor. The bony head of a fish skeleton. A chunk of white ivory — a tusk or a tooth, Alexandra wasn't sure. A silver necklace. Hela moved them around in arcane patterns, casting a spell each time she adjusted them.

Alexandra sent Charlie flying around them in circles. She began a ritual to call forth spirits.

*"You who dwell on the Other Side  
To this world, by raven ride,  
See your guide, dark wings in flight,  
Come to us from endless night."*

"Wizard verse," Hela muttered. "I suppose that will work."

Each beat of the raven's wings weakened the border between worlds, and brought forth darkness and endless, eternal desolation. Alexandra felt a bitter cold unlike anything she'd felt since traveling to the Lands Beyond. She shuddered. They weren't going there — they were just trying to call a spirit from there.

The subway tunnel was gone. They crouched in ghostly stillness, on what seemed like a vast, frozen, blue-green plain. Light without a source reflected off of ice that had not seen the sun in millennia. Alexandra shivered harder.

Someone walked out of the endless darkness and approached them. A stranger in heavy furs, with a hood pulled up over his or her head so there was only darkness where their face should have been. Hela gasped and rose to her feet. She faced the spirit with her wand held between them, and the whites of her eyes reflected ghostly blue-green light from their surroundings.

She spoke in a language Alexandra didn't recognize. The conversation that transpired seemed entirely one-sided to Alexandra. As far as she could tell, the ghost never answered back. But eventually, Hela seemed satisfied. She waved her wand in a gesture of dismissal.

The ghost did not leave. Hela tried to dismiss it again. It stood there.

A little desperately, Hela tried a third time, but seemed weakened by the attempt, and the spirit loomed larger over her, as if it were drawing strength from her.

Alexandra raised her wand and cast a Greater Banishing. With a howl and a crackle like ice breaking, the spirit vanished. Charlie cawed.

"Thank you," Hela said, as the ghostly plain around them receded and gave way to the subway tunnel again. "Now, pay close attention." She lifted the silver necklace on the ground and held it in the air in front of her. It swayed back and forth, twirling and reflecting the light from their wands. Swaying. Alexandra's eyes followed it.

Swaying...

"Good morning, Alexandra!" Charlie cried.

Alexandra couldn't move. She felt her eyelids drooping, and her limbs wouldn't respond. With a jolt that roused her mind, but not her body, she realized she'd fallen for a simple sixth-grade charm.

"I'm sorry," Hela said. "It's not personal." Then she yelled as Charlie flew at her, cawing and beating wings against her head, pecking at her face.

Hela said, "*Stupefy!*" With a flash of red, Charlie tumbled out of the air and landed in a puddle with a splash.

"That bird is evil," Hela said. Her footsteps faded up the tunnel.

Rage fueled Alexandra's concentration now. She couldn't speak or move her wand, but the barrier between worlds was still weak from the ritual she and Hela had performed, and she had another way to reach across it.

She focused on the thin spot that had already been created between this world and the Lands Beyond, and *demand*ed a response from the other side. Her physical form was paralyzed, but in her mind, she rose and stepped close to the barrier between worlds. She couldn't actually cross that

barrier — not without a much more powerful ritual, at a place of power, preferably with the help of a Thestral. But she could speak through it.

"What is the Most Terrible Gift?" she asked.

A glow appeared. Distantly, Alexandra heard childish laughter, and someone chanting in a sing-song voice. She remembered her visit to the home of the Most Deathly Power and would have shivered if it were her body and not merely her mind standing here.

The glow came closer and closer, until it took the form of a little girl. A little girl in a frilly dress and curls and an old-fashioned hat. She was an old-time story-book illustration come to life... or rather, unlife. The ghost skipped up to Alexandra and said, "Hello! You're still alive. I shouldn't talk to you."

"Maybe not," Alexandra said, "but you came when I called. Thank you."

The girl shrugged. "What do you want?"

"Do you know what the Most Terrible Gift is?" Alexandra asked.

The girl's eyes went wide, then brimmed with tears. Alexandra felt an urge to apologize, but kept silent.

"I'm the Most Terrible Gift!" the girl cried. "And you're terrible for asking me that!"

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said. "I..."

"You have a geist," said the girl.

"A what?"

"A geist." Now the girl smiled smugly, as if delighting in knowing something about Alexandra that she might or might not share. "It's your adversity — adversity—"

"Adversary?" Alexandra said.

"Yes. Your ad-ver-sary."

"Is my geist in the Lands Beyond?" Alexandra asked. "My adversary is a ghost?"

The girl smiled, but didn't answer.

She looked like she had been seven or eight when she died, but Alexandra couldn't tell how long ago that was. Her frilly dress resembled some Old Colonial fashions, but Alexandra didn't think she had died recently.

"Thank you for talking to me," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry I called you without knowing your name or whether you wanted to come."

The girl looked down and scuffed her foot against the endless darkness that was the ground at their feet. "I don't get to see living people anymore. So I don't mind, I guess."

"Will you tell me your name?"

The child looked up at her. "I shall, because my Daddy is very important. You should tell him to punish that awful Quimley! Will you do that?"

Alexandra swallowed. "Quimley?"

"He's a house-elf. He's a very *bad* house-elf!" The little girl scowled. "I want him punished extra!"

"I understand," Alexandra said.

The ghost's expression brightened. She tossed her head and said haughtily, "My name is Jezebel Keren Hucksteen."

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When the Entrancing Charm wore off, Alexandra stood, gathered Charlie into her arms, and walked back to the subway platform where they'd started.

Despite all the time she'd lost under Hela's spell, she wasn't the last champion to return. Hela and everyone else in the top ten on the leaderboard had beaten her, however. Alexandra glared furiously at Hela, but the other witch turned her back.

Alexandra was called forward to give her answers to a wizard from the Bureau of Hauntings. Consulting a long scroll with all the questions, he dipped his feather quill into an ink pot and asked, "How many wizards died in the Great Blizzard of 1888?"

"Three," Alexandra said. She had met one of them, and learned that he normally haunted Walloon Tower. After he kept trying to put his hand through her, she'd Banished him, so she didn't expect to see him again during her stay.

The Bureau of Hauntings official continued down the list of questions until he came to the last one. He frowned and adjusted his spectacles.

"This question is not on the list," he said.

Professor Haster and one of the other judges walked over.

"Her scroll hasn't been edited or otherwise tampered with," Professor Haster said, after casting a spell to detect such chicanery. He frowned at Alexandra, clearly ready to accuse her of something. "Well, did she get an answer to it?"

The official cleared his throat. "What was the Most Terrible Gift?"

Alexandra turned her head to stare at Governor-General Hucksteen. He looked as puzzled as the other judges. For a moment, she hesitated, and almost refrained from answering. Then, seized by some combination of hubris and malice, she said, "Jezebel Keren Hucksteen."

Hucksteen made a long, slow exhaling sound. His enormous girth and imposing presence still dominated the space around him, yet it seemed as if he had momentarily shrunk in his seat. His pale blue eyes, however, were like fire in their intensity as they fixed on Alexandra.

Everyone looked at him nervously, and back at Alexandra. Then the Bureau of Hauntings official exclaimed, "Here it is!"

Professor Haster looked at their master list, and back at Alexandra.

"That question was not written here this morning," Professor Haster said.

"But the scroll couldn't have been altered," said one of the other judges.

"Clearly it was!" Professor Haster snapped.

This prompted all of the judges to gather in another huddled conference. Governor-General Hucksteen barely seemed to pay attention to them. Finally, Professor Haster returned and said, "Miss Quick will get full credit for all her answers."

Alexandra watched as the remaining champions straggled in. She stroked Charlie's feathers as the raven recovered from being Stunned. Balefully, she glared at Hela Punuk, who continued to keep her back turned to Alexandra.

At last, all the scores were recorded. The remaining ghosts vanished, and Professor Haster told the champions and judges to Apparate back.

Governor-General Hucksteen walked over to Alexandra and seized her arm. Alexandra tensed, knowing it would do no good to look around for help. She wondered if he would strike her down right here in front of everyone.

"Fly, Charlie," she said, and Charlie flapped off before they could be Apparated. She didn't know where the exit to this abandoned subway station was, but she had to trust Charlie to find it.

Alexandra and the Governor-General arrived back in the courtyard in front of the New Amsterdam Academy plaque. Alexandra had expected him to splinch her or something, but their movement was instantaneous and without incident. Only his grip on her arm expressed violence — determined not to give him the satisfaction of wincing or crying out, she said nothing, but knew she would have a bruise all around her arm where he held her.

Before releasing her, he leaned over, so his beard was almost in her face, and whispered in a low, harsh voice, "I will see you *burn*."

He left her standing in the courtyard, shaken and fighting not to rub her arm.

## \*Chapter 49\*: I Will See You Burn

The Apparition contest was held in a nearby mansion. Alexandra could tell when they entered that it was a wizard's mansion; shiny, polished suits of gleaming chrome armor, unlike the black iron Doomguards of Eerie Island, opened the doors for them, and within, two house-elves swept the floors before them while a third led them to one of the mansion's wings.

Rebecca Good scowled disapprovingly at the house-elves, while Magnificent Blaze made a point of trying to introduce himself to them.

It was explained to them that this wing of their host's mansion had been reconfigured for the event. Several floors had been converted into a mirrored maze. Every surface had been turned reflective; mirrors were mounted on the walls and ceilings, and while there were no mirrors on the floor, all carpets had been stripped away and the stone tiles underneath magically buffed and polished to a brilliant shine.

Professor Haster explained the rules. It was essentially an obstacle course, but they were not allowed to walk anywhere. In fact, each step they took would result in a loss of points. They had a list of objectives they had to reach, and accompanying tasks, which included transporting glasses of water, bouquets of puffy white dandelions, and delicate crystal sculptures.

They were given maps, which were of limited usefulness since it was necessary to visualize a destination in order to Apparate. It told them where to go, but they still had to either Apparate up and down corridors using line of sight, or "cheat" and run, with a loss of points.

If Alexandra hadn't been worried about Charlie and the Governor-General, she might have found it fun.

When she felt through her connection to her familiar that Charlie had returned to Walloon Tower, she began focusing on strategically moving through the maze, rather than simply Apparating along the most direct route.

"Destination, Determination, Deliberation," she repeated to herself. Lucilla had told Alexandra that she Apparated like someone throwing herself by the seat of her own pants. She thought she was getting better.

The first time she heard a howl of pain, she thought someone had splinched themselves. Then she heard hexes flying, and the sound of shattering glass.

She found the North California Champion lying unconscious in a heap down the next corridor she Apparated into. Then someone popped into the space behind her. Looking at the mirrored wall in front of her, she crossed her arm over her chest, pointed her wand behind her, and blasted the Texarcana Champion, Jonah Crawley, off his feet.

"So that's how it is," she said as Jonah's wand tumbled out of his hand. *If it's not forbidden, it's allowed.*

"*Accio* Wands," she said, and Summoned both their wands to her.

Jonah lifted his head, eyes still unfocused. "Hey!"

"You started it," Alexandra said. "Don't worry, I'll leave them somewhere you can find them. By *walking*."

The outbreak of dueling in the mirrored maze must have been intended. No one intervened to put a stop to it, and she suspected the judges were magically tracking the champions' progress. Everyone else had caught on by now, too, so when Alexandra Apparated into the same room as Albert-Louis Cachemarée, he shrugged apologetically before casting a Tentacle Curse at her. She slashed viciously through the suckered appendages that rose out of the ground and walls, using her wand almost as if it were a sword. The tentacles burst into slime and gooey residue. Now covered with ichor, Alexandra was incensed. She blew a storm of red dust down the corridor with enough velocity to blind the former Baleswood student.

Coughing and choking, he Disapparated before Alexandra could follow up. She was ready to hex him when he reappeared, but he didn't.

She had delivered all but one of her objects that had to be transported. When she Apparated back to one of the junctures that would let her go downstairs, she found herself facing Rebecca Good, the Salem Traditionalist from New England. Rebecca was consulting her map, so Alexandra's appearance caught her completely off-guard.

"*Incarcerous*," Alexandra said, and the startled Salem witch fell over, with ropes wrapped around her from shoulders to ankles.

Alexandra leaned over her, and snatched away her wand.

"What are you doing?" Rebecca exclaimed.

"Taking your wand," Alexandra said.

"You... blackguard thief!"

"I'm not stealing it. I'm just confiscating it until this challenge is over. Sorry."

"What do you mean, sorry? That's not how this is supposed to work! This is an Apparition challenge, not an arena!"

"I guess you haven't been paying attention," Alexandra said.

"I know your sister," Rebecca said through clenched teeth.

Alexandra hesitated. "You go to Salem? Are you friends with Julia?"

"She's *nothing* like you," said Rebecca. Alexandra realized with dismay that the older girl was fighting back tears.

Feeling less triumphant than before, Alexandra Apparated to the bottom of the steps, and felt a sharp pain in her left hand. She raised it and saw with dismay that she'd splinched herself and Apparated without her fingernails.



She could go back and collect them, or she could finish the challenge. As she pondered it, her fingers began to hurt in earnest. Clenching her teeth, she decided she could deal with the pain. A good batch of Fudd's Grow-All could replace her fingernails.

With her last objective collected, she had only to return to the starting point. When she Apparated there, she arrived immediately behind Hela Pujuk.

Without even thinking about it, she pointed her wand and said, "*Caedarus!*" The glowing green ball of energy struck Hela square in the back. The other witch went flying into the wall in front of her, hit it hard enough to crack the mirrored surface, and crumpled, her reflection multiplied all around them, like a fun-house mirror.

"*That was personal,*" Alexandra said.

She realized only after she said it that this was the entryway to the mirrored labyrinth, and just through the door into the next wing of the mansion, the judges and Mr. Mudd stood watching her.

Alexandra dumped all the wands she'd collected at her feet, and Apparated one more time to exit the labyrinth. Larry, Albert-Louis, Vanessa, and Magnificent had all finished before her.

No one said anything as she joined them, but the room was quiet and the silence weighed on her. There was a poof of air as Harriet appeared; she was the last one to make it out without walking.

*I'm not even here for the Decathlon,* Alexandra told herself. Though she was no closer to figuring out how she'd get to Storm King Mountain. She'd become caught up in the competition.

Standing next to her, arms folded, Larry glanced her way and shook his head.

"You have something to say?" she demanded.

"Nicely done, Troublesome. If you can't win fair and square, hex them in the back."

"Oh, like you weren't dueling and taking out the competition yourself?" Alexandra said angrily. Her hand was throbbing.

"Actually, I didn't. I didn't have to."

When the contest ended, with half the champions needing to be removed from the maze and administered Healing Charms, Larry strolled away, robes swirling around him.

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Alexandra obtained a jar of Fudd's Grow-All from the school's infirmary, and applied it to her fingernail beds. The pain was becoming acute. Charlie, who was now sitting complacently in the golden cage Livia had given as a gift, made sympathetic noises as Alexandra winced. She could only hope her nails would be mostly regrown by tomorrow morning.

Instead of Apparating again, she took the long way from Walloon Tower to the dining hall. Her stomach was growling loudly by the time she got there.

Voices fell when she entered the room. The glares from the upperclass tables, and the other champions, were hard to ignore as she sat down and waited for Clockworks to bring food.

She felt like apologizing to Rebecca Good, but the Salem Traditionalist, when Alexandra caught her attention, scowled and turned her face away.

Hela Pujuk sat alone, with bandages on her face, and stared daggers at Alexandra. Alexandra casually held up a middle finger.

"Not very classy, Alexandra," said Angelique. She shook her head as she sat down across the table.

"I didn't think you'd want to sit with me anymore," Alexandra said.

Angelique pursed her lips. "Oh dear, are you in one of your moods where you feel sorry for yourself because everyone hates you?"

She cheered up as Clockworks arrived with platters. "Hush-puppies! I love those!" She dished some onto her plate. "I see you've moved up a few spots." With the latest scores, Alexandra was now in fifth place, between Magnificent and Harriet.

To Alexandra's annoyance, Magnificent joined them again, "That was not righteous," he said, sitting down next to her. "You're a mean chickee."

"Then why are you sitting with me?" Alexandra asked. "And stop calling me 'chickee.'"

"I saw the way the Governor-General looked at you, and how he grabbed your arm. Stars, he really hates you, right?"

Alexandra looked at Magnificent oddly. "Yeah, he really does. Did you duel anyone in the mirror labyrinth?"

The Radicalist boy looked uncomfortable. "Well, Seimei tried to hex me, so I Stunned him. Oh, and Thule — she's almost as mean as you, right?"

"She's meaner."

Magnificent chuckled. "Right... So, she tried to bushwack me, but she ran. And Vanessa Lightwood, the chickee from BMI. Stars, she's fast! I Disapparated before one of us got Stunned, right? Not looking forward to dueling her."

Alexandra thought about the contests scheduled for the next day. The Charms challenge was "The Burning Times," and that was followed by "Ancient Forms" in which they would perform Transfigurations. She wondered if the ball that night would be a good time to slip out of the school. Flying away from New Amsterdam on a broom would surely get her caught. She thought she could get most of the way to Storm King Mountain with her Seven-League Boots, but then what? She was still without a plan of any kind.

"Alexandra?" Angelique said. Alexandra blinked and realized that while her mind had been elsewhere, the two of them had been talking to her.

She finished her dinner and pushed her plate away. Her fingers ached fiercely where her nails were regrowing. "I'll see you tomorrow. Good luck, rooster."

Magnificent grinned at her and popped another hush-puppy into his mouth, while Angelique just sighed.

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On the third day of the Decathlon, the champions were brought to the New Amsterdam Quodpot Stadium. This turned out to be a small open-air stadium hidden behind the buildings adjoining the Wizardrail station, with enough bleachers and boxes for a sizable crowd. They were almost empty today; as with the other events, spectators were limited to those connected to the competition.

Most of the champions walked to the stadium from the school or their lodgings. Alexandra had chosen to avoid the dining hall again, eating breakfast at a local Muggle diner, then following her New Amsterdam map to the stadium.

When she entered the stadium, she brought out a wand sheath and hooked it to her belt. She had a suspicion about the nature of this challenge. From the sheaths she saw the other champions wearing, they had come to similar conclusions. Everyone wanted their wands to be easy to reach.

She caught Governor-General Hucksteen staring at her for just a moment, before he turned his gaze away. Alexandra carefully slid her basswood wand into the sheath.

Magnificent Blaze arrived by Apparition. Everyone gawked. He wore a kilt and sandals and not much else. Bare-chested, tanned, and muscular, he grinned at the other champions.

Alexandra shook her head at him. Rebecca Good was clearly embarrassed.

Professor Haster conferred in whispers with the judges, then approached Magnificent. They had a conversation, after which Professor Haster turned back to the other judges and shrugged, as if to say, *What are we supposed to do?*

He walked out to the center of the field, and addressed the competitors.

"Good morning, champions. As you know, today's first event is the Charms competition. The name of the event, 'The Burning Times,' refers to a sad period in history when Muggles, driven by their characteristic ignorance and fear, zealously hunted witches and wizards in an effort to eradicate wizardkind. Of course they mostly only succeeded in killing each other, as few magic folk were foolish or inept enough to fall into the clutches of Muggle mobs, but it did occasionally happen that an incautious witch or wizard was made the guest of honor at an auto-da-fé."

At this, Professor Haster waved his wand. All around them, tall wooden stakes rose out of the ground, followed by magically conjured piles of wood at their bases.

"This will be a test of both Charms proficiency and nerve," Professor Haster said. "As you have probably guessed by now, you will each be tied to a stake and set on fire."

Everyone started at that, and Professor Haster laughed. "I jest. Of course *you* will not be set on fire — only the kindling at your feet. You are to free yourselves by magical means. You will be scored on speed, and penalties will be deducted for any injuries you sustain in the process. Anyone unable to free themselves will receive no points."

*This is twisted*, Alexandra thought. She wasn't the only one to exchange looks with some of her fellow competitors. She assumed that the judges would rescue someone who was about to be burned to death, but it appeared none of the others wanted to ask that question aloud either.

Magnificent stretched, flexing his arms and chest. Alexandra wondered if he was deliberately trying to be distracting. It was definitely working on Harriet and Vanessa. Rebecca put a hand to her cheek and looked away.

"That's anti-Muggle slander, right?" Magnificent said. "Muggles hardly burned any witches, but we still talk about it just to make wizard-folk think Muggles are dangerous to us."

"Thank you for your insight, Mr. Blaze," said Professor Haster. "If you have an objection to the challenge, you may bow out, of course, and receive no score."

"Oh no," Magnificent said. "I'm going to smoke this event, right?" He snapped his fingers and produced a puff of smoke.

Alexandra saw more than one eye-roll. Then each of the champions was led to a stake. She knew this was mostly theatrical, but she had to admit it was unnerving to be tied to a stake meant to burn people alive.

New Amsterdam faculty used Incarcerous Spells to wrap ropes around everyone, then walked up to each of them to make sure they were firmly bound. They caught Seimei Kamo, Magnificent, and Albert-Louis all using charms to loosen their bonds before the competition started. There was no penalty other than their ropes being pulled extra-tight. Magnificent and Albert-Louis both groaned in pain.

The wizard who checked on Alexandra tightened her ropes, and tightened them some more, even though she'd made no attempt to loosen them. Then he conjured a thick strip of cloth to use as a gag. With his fingers, he shoved it almost to the back of her throat before tying it. Alexandra struggled not to gag while glaring at him.

Only close up was she able to see his face, beneath his hood. It was Richard Raspire.

He whispered in her ear, "Sometimes witches do burn."

She felt his hand on her hip as he grabbed her wand, then felt as much as heard the cracking sound of wood splitting in its sheath. With a smile, he withdrew from the pile of kindling around Alexandra and her stake.

Professor Haster said, "Good luck, champions!" With a flick of his wand, all seventeen piles of wood ignited.

Casting spells without use of one's hands or tongue was extremely difficult for anyone. Without a wand, it was practically impossible.

Slowly, forcing herself to work her jaws methodically and without panic, Alexandra started pushing the gag out of her mouth. She ignored the pain in her wrists and ankles where the Governor-General's lackey had drawn the ropes tight enough to cut off her circulation.

The flames licking at her feet were not an immediate concern. Just before entering the stadium, she'd taken the rest of the Fire Protection Potion she'd brewed during the Potions challenge on the first day. This seemed like such an obvious thing to do, she assumed everyone else had thought of it as well, so she was surprised when a couple of the champions began to twist and writhe in their bonds. Apparently some of them hadn't figured out yet the unofficial rules of this competition.

There was almost certainly an Anti-Disapparition Jinx on the stadium, though she'd try Apparating if she got the chance. Since the Governor-General meant to kill her, she also assumed there would be something special about her ropes, her fire, or both. And indeed, the flames around her seemed to be growing in intensity much faster than everyone else's.

It wasn't the fire that would kill her, though; it was the smoke. How long would they leave her here? Could Hucksteen actually keep the other judges from saving her?

She didn't need to be saved. As the flames reached her chest, she closed her eyes and leaned forward as far as her ropes allowed. The fire whipped around her face, but the Fire Protection Potion kept her from burning. Not so her gag, and in moments, she was able to spit burning chunks of cloth and bits of ash out of her mouth.

She was having trouble breathing, though. She dipped her chin and whispered, "Accio Wand."

She'd stayed up late the night before practicing this over and over, until she could do it in one try. She'd gotten the idea from Livia and Diana Grimm, who both seemed to have mastered the trick of tucking a wand down the front of their shirts where it couldn't fit. In her case, the spell had taken a lot of work, but her black hickory wand had stayed hidden down her front. She had expected a dirty trick of some sort, and her instincts about the sheath had been correct.

She wished she was able to see the expression on Hucksteen's face as her hickory wand slid out of her shirt. She caught it in her teeth, and decided that if they wanted a spectacle, she'd give them one. Mumbling around the wand in her mouth, she cast a Flame-Freezing Charm to make herself extra fire-resistant, and then called forth a fiery explosion.

She only meant to cast it from her hickory wand. But her yew wand, which she had kept tucked under the back of her shirt as a backup plan, blazed to life as well. It burned against her skin, and then both wands flared and for a moment she felt like she was caught in an oven.

The fireball lit up the stadium. At the center of the inferno, Alexandra felt the heat despite her magical protection. The black hickory wand between her teeth had become painfully hot, burning without igniting, like the yew wand broiling her from behind.

She fell to the ground and tumbled away from what little was left of the wooden stake she'd been tied to. Rolling across charred, blackened grass, she snatched her wand out of her teeth, and reached behind her to seize the yew wand, which still blazed hot in her hand. It was as if an invisible convection current was running between the two wands.

To her annoyance, she saw that Magnificent and Rebecca had both freed themselves first. More annoyingly, her clothes were nearly completely incinerated, and her wands refused to obey her when she tried to conjure a simple robe. She was forced to cover herself up with her hands, conscious of the judges and other spectators all watching her. She slid the yew wand underneath her, trying to keep it hidden from sight. She avoided looking at the Governor-General.

Rebecca had emerged somewhat less scathed, though her dress had burning holes in it and her hat was smoldering. This, Alexandra realized as Rebecca glared at her wide-eyed, was from standing too close to the blaze Alexandra had triggered.

"You should have worn something fireproof, chickee," Magnificent said. His kilt appeared undamaged. Sweat glistened all over his skin, and he seemed a bit redder than he had been before. He waved his wand and conjured a robe, which fell around Alexandra's shoulders.

"Thanks, rooster," Alexandra said, pulling the robe over herself. "You're a real gentleman."

He grinned, and winked at Rebecca, who just sighed and turned away.

Larry freed himself next. He appeared to have made his robes fireproof as well. Albert-Louis, Vanessa, Seimei, Harriet, and Hela followed. Jonah Crawley and several of the other champions eventually got away, though nearly as naked as Alexandra had been.

Only the champions from Columbia Territory and Hudson Territory failed to free themselves and had to be rescued by the watching faculty. The Palatine boy from Hudson appeared to have panicked completely. But none of them were seriously hurt.

Alexandra finally looked in the Governor-General's direction. His eyes fell on her, cool and betraying nothing.

It was a stupid murder attempt, she thought. He couldn't possibly have thought she was going to die here.

As if reading her thoughts, the corners of his mouth twisted upward, in a small, cruel smile.

Nope, she thought, that wasn't a real attempt to kill her. That was just him letting her know he meant to.

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"Are you licensed to carry multiple wands?" Professor Haster demanded, once everyone was dressed and the fires put out.

"I didn't know I needed a license for multiple wands," Alexandra said.

"In New Amsterdam you do," Professor Haster said.

She pointed at Mr. Raspire. "Isn't breaking someone's wand a crime?"

Raspire, now with his hood down, revealing his ruddy, bald head, was unperturbed. "What an accusation, Miss Quick. Everyone knows carrying more than one wand risks a disjunction in their cores. The stress of the contest and your lack of proficiency in managing multiple wand cores led to the weaker one shattering."

Alexandra glared at the lying lackey of the Governor-General. "We both know that's bullsh—"

"Miss Quick, please remember you are a Decathlon champion and maintain proper decorum," said Professor Haster. "You are not allowed to abuse or slander the judges or faculty here. I should make you apologize to Mr. Raspire, but I understand you're very emotional."

"What?"

"Nearly dying in the competition, and then embarrassing yourself —"

"I came in third!" she snapped. "After someone tried to leave me wandless! I'm not embarrassed!"

"The judges will have to confer," Professor Haster said. "Champions are allowed to prepare in any way not explicitly forbidden by the rules, but an unlicensed second wand is technically a violation of the law."

Alexandra wondered if Professor Haster was also the Governor-General's lackey, or just another idiot.

After a short conference, Professor Haster said, "Ingenuity and cleverness are an accepted part of the Junior Wizarding Decathlon. There are no rules against carrying a second wand per se. Miss Quick's score stands."

Surprised, Alexandra folded her arms and stared at Harriet and Larry triumphantly. Harriet looked outraged. Larry just snorted.

"However, for violating the New Amsterdam statute against carrying an extra wand without a license, you're to be fined twenty Lions," Professor Haster said. "And had it not been destroyed, it would be confiscated."

"Whatever," Alexandra said, glad that she had managed to keep her third wand hidden, in the spectacle of her self-immolation.

Professor Haster gave her a disapproving look. "We will break for lunch, and then reconvene for the sixth event of the Decathlon, the Transfiguration challenge."

Alexandra wished she could avoid Magnificent and Angelique at lunch, but they were both determined to hear how she had hid a second wand down her shirt.

"I'm impressed," Angelique said. "You certainly can't hide very much down there."

"Not everyone's as blessed as you, right?" said Magnificent, resting a hand on his chin and not being subtle at all about where his eyes were resting.

Angelique laughed. "Why, I ought to sic Honey on you."

"I'm not sure what that means, chickee, but I like the sound of it, right?"

While Angelique giggled, Alexandra's eyes followed the gazes of the other students in the dining room, who had noticed the entrance of a small crowd of newcomers. They looked like students, but they weren't wearing New Amsterdam robes.

Vanessa Lightwood stood up. "Damien!" she exclaimed. One of the boys who'd just entered wore a BMI uniform. He grinned and walked over to join Vanessa at her table. They clasped hands, to the cheers of her table companions.

"Awesome!" Magnificent said.

"What's awesome?" Angelique asked.

A boy of about twelve came running over to them. His robes were a blinding, glittery kaleidoscope of silver, gold, shiny purple, and reflective orange, with illustrations of animals that literally danced around his waist and up and down his sleeves. He had cornflower blue eyes and blond hair that matched Magnificent's, except it was much shorter.

"He" was also a girl, Alexandra realized. She was only able to tell once the girl had reached Magnificent and embraced him.

"This is my sister, Awesome," said Magnificent.

"I'm sure it is. What's your name?" Angelique asked.

"Awesome!" Magnificent repeated.

"Brother," the girl said.

"My brother, Awesome," Magnificent said.

"Your brother is awesome?" Angelique was thoroughly confused. "Or it's awesome she's — he's — your brother?"

"You just said she's your sister," Alexandra said.

"Brother," both Radicalists said together.

"He's a boy today," Magnificent said.

Alexandra looked at the child. "Is that... some kind of Metamorphmagus ability?"

The girl — or boy — stared back at Alexandra coolly. "You're not very awakened for a witch."

"Most Colonials aren't, Awesome," Magnificent whispered, which was absurd since Alexandra and Angelique could both hear him clearly. "Remember, we're not in Sedona anymore."

"But what is your... brother doing here?" As Alexandra asked this, she noticed all of the newcomers seemed to be someone known to the competing champions. Jonah Crawley bumped fists with a boy his age dressed like a cowboy bedecked with more bling than a rap star. Hela Punuk was claspng the shoulders of an old woman with long, gray braids, wearing furs like Hela's. Albert-Louis lifted a little girl, even younger than Awesome, off the ground in an exuberant hug. There were exclamations of delight and hugs and happy reunions all around the room.

Except for Larry Albo. Alexandra almost laughed when she saw who had come for him. A slim, beautiful girl with glossy black hair tied up in a ponytail stalked across the room to him, folded her arms, and just glared. Adela Iturbide had been Larry's girlfriend several years ago, but as far as Alexandra knew, they had broken up on not particularly amicable terms. That seemed confirmed by Adela's apparent displeasure at being here, which made Alexandra wonder why she was Larry's visitor.

The last person to come through the entrance to the dining hall was a small figure in red robes, with a hood that she pulled back as she entered.

Alexandra smiled. Anna smiled back and walked over. The two girls embraced.

"Her girlfriend?" Magnificent asked Angelique, in that same stage whisper.

Alexandra pulled away and faced the other three kids. Angelique hadn't answered, so Alexandra said, "This is Anna Chu. She's my best friend. Why do all of us have special visitors?"

"We're here to help you during one of your challenges," Awesome said to Magnificent. "But they wouldn't tell us how, or any details."

"I don't think we're going to help you," Anna said. "I suspect we're going to be bait. You'll probably have to rescue us from a dragon or something."

Magnificent frowned at this.

"You weren't forced to come, were you?" Alexandra asked.

"No, I was asked if I was willing to participate," Anna said. Awesome nodded in agreement.

Alexandra looked across the room at Larry and Adela. They seemed to be arguing, while trying to keep their voices low.

"It's nice to see you again, Anna," Angelique said.

"You too, Angelique," Anna said. "I'm sorry about what happened to Baleswood. I'm glad you made it out okay."

Adela gestured furiously, clenching something in her fist. Larry threw up his hands in frustration. Alexandra wondered why Adela had agreed to come if her attitude was any indication of how she felt about him now.

"Alex?" said Anna.

Alexandra turned her attention back to her table. "Huh?"

Anna looked at her oddly. "I was asking if you've seen any of the *Wizard World Weekly* articles about you."

"About me?"

Anna nodded. She pulled a bundle of newspaper clippings out of one of her sleeves. "They're broadcasting images of the Junior Wizarding Decathlon, you know, taken by that Eye-Spy."

Alexandra looked at the first picture Anna held out. It showed the golem strangling her.

*Deadly Decathlon for Dark Wizard's Daughter*, was the headline.

"You're kind of infamous now," Anna said.

"Like I wasn't already," Alexandra said.

"No, people are really following the Junior Wizarding Decathlon now. All over the Confederation. Usually it's just one news article or two; it's not like the real Decathlon, after all. But with the CNN using those stupid Snitches and Eye-Spys to capture dramatic moments, and, um, you being a contestant..."

"I'm, like, a tabloid star?" Alexandra looked at the next picture. There, in animated, full-color detail, was Hela Punuk strutting down a mirrored hallway — just before Alexandra Apparated behind her and hexed her in the back.

*The Enemy's Daughter Continues to Rack Points Ruthlessly*, said the headline.

"That was pretty harsh," Anna said. "Did you really mug four other champions and take their wands?"

Alexandra looked at the next clipping. The Eye-Spy had captured Alexandra in very unflattering detail as she tumbled out of her auto-da-fé, all but naked. The headline was: *Almost Well Done*.

Alexandra turned red. "They can print this?" she demanded.

"Well, they did, um, blur the image," Anna said, also a little red.

Alexandra grabbed the clipping, and it ignited and disappeared in a cloud of ashes. Down the table, New Amsterdam students glared at her, while a Clockwork immediately appeared to sweep the ashes off the table.

"I don't suppose anyone is rooting for me?" Alexandra asked.

"I am!" Anna said. "So are all of us back at Charmbridge. Well, all of your friends." Her shoulders slumped. "Pretty much everyone else is rooting for Larry."

"Well, this is fantastic," said Magnificent, patting Awesome on the shoulder. "But I think it's time for our next event, right?"

"We're not participating until tomorrow," Anna said. "Today we're just spectators. We'll be part of the Mysteries challenge tomorrow."

"But we get to attend the ball tonight, right?" said Awesome. "I'm going to be fabulous!" The youngster held up glittering sleeves that sparkled and dazzled even in the reflected light of the dining hall.

"Will that be your name, or does that stay the same?" Alexandra asked.

Angelique snickered. Awesome and Magnificent both glared at Alexandra.

"She's a jerk," said Awesome.

"Right?" said Magnificent.

Alexandra looked sharply at Anna, who said nothing but seemed to be trying to suppress a snicker of her own.

## **\*Chapter 50\*: Wizard Verse**

For the sixth challenge, they were brought to an arboretum in the middle of New Amsterdam. Alexandra was expecting a greenhouse-sized space, like in the central courtyard of Charmbridge Academy, but it was a small park, hidden from Muggles like so much of New Amsterdam.

They walked past a garden of exotic orchids tended by small winged figures. Alexandra had never seen faeries before, and didn't know they were trainable.

At the center of the arboretum was an immense tree whose trunk appeared to be made of iron. The leaves were silvery-gray and metallic. Many were half-buried in the ground around it like small knives. Professor Haster cautioned everyone not to stand beneath the Ironwood without casting a Shield Charm over their heads. Instead, they all gathered by a small pond next to it, which was populated by very colorful but mundane-looking carp.

Professor Haster said, "We are honored to have Professor Aaronson, a Professor Emeritus and former Confederation Wizarding Decathlon Champion, acting as head judge for the Transfigurations challenge. He will explain the 'Ancient Forms' challenge to you."

He stepped back, allowing a very old wizard to hobble forward.

Professor Aaronson wore robes so faded they were of an indeterminate color, matching the wide-brimmed hat that almost concealed his face in its shade. The pointed top of his hat had long since slumped over in a fraying heap. The professor's beard reached past his waist, and he leaned against a tall, gnarled wooden staff. Despite his aged appearance, Alexandra got the same feeling from him that she'd felt around the Grannies; it would be foolish to regard him as a doddering old man.

Professor Aaronson spoke in a surprisingly deep and resonant voice. "Long ago... before the rise in popularity of charms, and all their flash and spectacle, wizards knew the power of transfiguration. Instead of flinging jinxes and hexes at each other like ill-tempered brownies, we settled matters of honor with a contest of transformations... and rhymes. Wizards were not merely wand-wielding prestidigitators; we were scholars and poets. This was the way wizards dueled in ancient times. Today, we will bring back that ancient form."

He planted his staff in the ground, and instantly it became an enormous cobra, head raised to the professor's height, hood spread, hissing. Everyone in the front ranks stepped backward involuntarily.

Professor Aaronson laughed softly, and spoke in a low, rhythmic cadence.

*"Step away and know defeat,  
Give no ground,  
Plant your feet."*

The grass at his feet turned to glass pebbles in a perfect circle around him.

*"Face your foe, and use the air,  
The earth, the water,  
All that's there."*

The cobra made a slight clatter as its coils twisted over the transformed pebbly ground.

*"First to move is first to lose,  
And the rules: you may not use  
Charms or hexes, jinxes, curses."*

The light itself dimmed around him.

*"Only Transfigurations with your verses."*

The cobra struck, lashing through the air directly at Magnificent. The Radicalist raised his wand and cast a Shield Charm. The snake bounced off it, straight and rigid, and Professor Aaronson caught his staff.

Professor Aaronson said, "That would have cost you points."

"I didn't want to hurt your snake, right?" said Magnificent.

Professor Aaronson had already turned his back.

"You'll each be matched randomly with two other opponents," Professor Haster said. "You will be scored on the skill, sophistication, and creativity of your Transfigurations, especially when enhanced by verse, but any magic aside from Transfigurations will cost you points. The contest ends when one of you steps or is forced outside your circle, which will cost the loser a full point."

Not a traditional wizard-duel, Alexandra thought. But it would give them all a chance to size each other up before the final dueling event.

Their circles were placed around the great Ironwood tree in the center of the arboretum. The Eye-Spy and the Snitch zipped about; Alexandra watched them warily. She stood in her circle, with her back to the pond, and felt a sense of inevitability when Larry was her first opponent.

Five yards apart, with only grass and stones at their feet, Larry and Alexandra raised their wands in the customary duelists' salute, even though this wasn't a wizard-duel of the sort they were used to. Larry looked as cocky and confident as always.

Well, she thought, she might not be a poet, but she could rhyme.

*"Braggart, blaggard, bigot, bully,  
We've traded curses, verses, and worse,  
Time to go down hard, fast, and fully,*

*Time for you to lose to my wizard verse."*

Alexandra made the grass at Larry's feet grow rapidly and wrap around his legs, crawling up his body. Larry scoffed and flicked his wand. The grass blew away as dust.

*"Troublesome's boring, Troublesome's trite,  
Troublesome's spells are how sixth-graders fight."*

Tentacles rose out of the ground around Alexandra and wrapped around her body.

"That's a Tentacle Curse!" Alexandra protested. "And terrible verse!"

"It is not," Larry said. "It's a proper Transfiguration. *Grass to flesh, and flesh into motion, out of your league, just like that potion.*"

Alexandra transformed the tentacles to rope, and the rope to straw, which she easily snapped by flexing her arms. Larry shook his head.

"You are out of your league," he said. "That took you two Transfigurations to — ow!"

A giant butterfly with metal wings slammed into the back of his head. Several more came at him, all transformed from the Ironwood leaves embedded in the ground behind him. Their flapping wings blew back his hair and cloak, before he transformed them into actual butterflies and sent them streaming at Alexandra in a brilliant, colorful cloud of orange and blue.

"Very pretty," Alexandra said, slow-clapping in mock applause. "Not like your crap verse."

The butterflies swarming around her fell on her as a forest of hairy legs. She was suddenly covered in spiders the size of her hand, crawling through her hair, on her neck, up and down her body, into the folds of her robes. Several put their legs into her mouth before she clamped her eyes and lips shut.

She ignored the spiders, though it wasn't easy — the sensation of many legs scurrying over her body was definitely unsettling. But she didn't act aggressively, and none of them bit her. She concentrated on the stones she could still visualize on the ground at Larry's feet, and heard him yell and curse.

She transformed the spiders to falling leaves, and opened her eyes. Larry was shaking silver ball bearings out of his robes, but he looked furious. Some of the giant stinging ants she'd created had bitten him before he transformed them.

"You've gotten sneakier," Larry said.

"Thank you," Alexandra replied.

"It wasn't a compliment." The ball bearings turned to little metal spiders with enormously long, spindly legs, scurrying across the ground toward her.

She scoffed. *"Again with the spiders, you're such a dull boy,  
You think you can scare me with these little toys?  
I'll scream like a girl and then run away?  
Have your spiders back, transfigured my way."*

Alexandra melted the spiders into puddles of mercury, and sent the mercury sloshing back toward him.

"And you called my verse crap," Larry said.

She was working on a transfiguration back to living matter — going directly from liquid metal to animal should be worth a lot of points, she thought — when darkness closed around her. She was yanked off her feet and found herself enveloped in something slick, wet, and smelly. She was being smothered.

She couldn't visualize what it was that had engulfed her. With no other choice, she Apparated back to the dueling circle.

"Match to Lawrence Albo," said one of the judges, who was standing a few yards away. Alexandra heard a smattering of applause. Her robes were damp and she smelled like the bottom of a fish tank. She turned around, where the ripples in the pond behind her had not yet subsided.

Larry smiled. "Since you like attacks from behind."

While she glowered, he said:

*"I'm not a poet, no rhymes to rehearse,  
I'm sure your mother's proud of your doggerel verse.  
Call me dull, 'cause you're so clever, always full of ruses.  
Troublesome brags, but Troublesome loses."*

He offered her another mocking salute as he walked on to his next match. Professor Aaronson nodded his head slightly and made a gesture at his fellow judges, indicating tepid approval.

Alexandra gritted her teeth angrily. Then cursed under her breath as her next opponent stepped into the circle Larry had just vacated. It was Harriet Isingrim.

"That was marvelous," Harriet said. *"Dirty little witch, sneaky like a fly, almost swallowed by a fish, why-ever won't you die?"*

The pebbles bounced around Alexandra, higher and higher, growing in size, until she was being pelted with rocks the size of her fist. She began exploding them with bursting transformations into popcorn, which soon piled around the ground to ankle height, while wondering how Harriet's verse had not only transformed the stones but animated them. But Harriet was already weaving her wand back and forth and chanting again.

*"Fire and water, oily and black, for this bastard daughter he'll never take back."*



"What?" Alexandra exclaimed, and then water sloshed all around her feet. She turned her head to see that it had overflowed the banks of the pond to flood across the grass to her, just before she smelled the scent of oil.

With a roar, it ignited. Harriet had turned water into oil and somehow transformed the air into an accelerant to ignite it. But Alexandra, registering Harriet's words, immediately transformed the fire to flickering blue flames of cold.

"Nice rhymes," Alexandra said. "I can do that." She smiled and her eyes were like fire.

*"Three little witches, brave as can be,  
All the courage in the world, when it's one to three.  
But when the fight's a fair one, they all leave on their knees.  
Now you've got no friends, you bitch,  
Now it's you and me."*

The air around Harriet boiled and turned blue, and as Harriet choked on the acrid fumes, smokey fingers materialized out of the miasma and clamped around her neck.

"You want Dark," Alexandra said, "I can go Dark."

Only then did she look up and see Mr. Mudd's Eye-Spy hovering directly above her, staring with its unblinking dilated pupil.

*Well, she thought, I can't wait to see the headline for this one.*

Harriet snarled as the smoke dissipated into mist.

*"We all know that blood is true,  
But why did he abandon you?  
Not like your sisters, who have names and more,  
Maybe your mother  
Was just some random whore."*

A whirring sound was Alexandra's only warning before a swarm of metallic wasps came hurtling at her. Harriet had used the Ironwood leaves, just like Alexandra had to attack Larry, but Harriet's animated creations were far deadlier — fast, with impaling proboscises and knife-like wings, they zoomed at her with lethal speed.

Neither of their verses were enhancing their transfigurations now; they were just taunting each other. Maybe that was how these duels usually ended, with jarring rhymes and couplets meant to insult and provoke?

Alexandra turned the wasps into jelly doughnuts, the only inspiration that came to mind. They smacked wetly into her, splattering sticky syrup everywhere. She doubted she'd get a lot of points on creativity for that.

She probably wouldn't get many points for this, either, but she was angry.

*"You made this about our paters,  
I don't care about his name.  
You're just another petty hater,  
I didn't ask for all this fame.  
But since you went there...  
I can smile while you sneer,  
My old man may be Dark and wanted,  
But that's not the reason you're so haunted.  
Your dad's just a flattened smear."*

Alexandra smiled cruelly at the raging transformation that twisted Harriet's features, but the moment of dark, vicious satisfaction was followed by just a teeny bit of guilt. That was definitely not what Magnificent would call "righteous." Alexandra would hear about it from Anna later, she was certain.

*But she started it, with the goading and the —*

Alexandra had been readying another transformation — something like grass into spears, stabbing upward to impale Harriet. But she hesitated, still holding back even though Harriet wasn't. Then she realized that Harriet's transformation was literal, and it was still ongoing. The blonde witch's face extended, her nose became a long, snarling snout, and her lips peeled back. Her grimace turned into a slathering fanged mouth as she fell onto all fours. Just before she released her wand from a hand that had turned into a hairy, clawed paw, her robes whipped away from her body.

"Wow," Alexandra said. She gestured with her wand, performing a different transformation instead. Dark green tufts sprouted from the grass around her pebble circle.

Harriet Isingrim crouched, and then leaped at Alexandra, covering the distance between their circles in an instant.

Alexandra *almost* sprang the spear-trap on her. The hesitation nearly cost her her life, as the wolf that Harriet had become fell on her and tried to clamp its jaws around her throat.

Alexandra turned the collar of her robe into iron instead, and Harriet's teeth clamped onto hard metal. The weight of the wolf slammed Alexandra to the ground, but she managed to keep her feet planted, bent at the knees, so she was still within her circle when the wolf landed on top of her. She felt the wolf's feet clawing at her, tearing her robes and scratching her legs.

A dozen charms could have blasted the wolf off of her. Alexandra heard no one running to her rescue. Were they just going to let the contest continue with one of the champions trying to kill the other one? Harriet's teeth were still clamped around her neck, and the wolf was growling madly, shaking its head and worrying Alexandra like a rag doll, as it tried to bite through the metal armor Alexandra had formed around her throat.

Alexandra's head fell on the grass as the wolf released her and reared back, growling. Its jaws opened. Alexandra kicked hard, and the wolf made a startled grunt and rolled away from her, then immediately growled in fury and pounced back onto her.

Alexandra pressed the popcorn still lying on the ground around them into her ears. This sight must have seemed so strange that, even as a wolf, Harriet paused and cocked her head quizzically.

While Alexandra grabbed at the grass just beyond the pebbles, Harriet opened her jaws and lunged at Alexandra's face. Alexandra managed to get her other arm in the way, but wasn't fast enough to turn her sleeve into metal this time. The wolf's jaws clamped down, and Alexandra screamed in pain as hot blood spurted over her face and chest.

She didn't hear her own scream, however, as she had already transformed the popcorn into wax. Nor did she hear the scream of the ugly little thing she'd pulled out of the ground. But Harriet did. The wolf's eyes went wide, showing whites, and then it fell over.

Alexandra immediately slammed the squirming thing in her hand onto the ground, throwing up a shower of pebbles, and then she pointed her wand and cast another transfiguration. It became a blackened, slimy carrot.

Alexandra lay back on the pebbles, covered with slime, drool, jelly, something fishy, and her own blood, and nearly blacked out as people finally — finally — came running over. She didn't hear their footsteps, or their voices, but she saw Professor Haster and Richard Raspire both leaning over her. Professor Aaronson was there too, and the Majokai judge, so maybe they wouldn't just kill her. She closed her eyes, pressed her good hand over her torn forearm, and waited for whatever would happen next.

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"You created a Mandrake, and used it to try to kill your opponent," the Majokai judge said.

"Actually, I uncreated it to keep from killing her," Alexandra said. She had been allowed to sit on a stone wall at the edge of the pond while a Healer applied salves and bandages to her badly torn forearm. Alexandra kept casting a glance back at the calm waters of the pond, even though she saw only orange and white carp swimming there now.

"It was still a dangerous piece of Dark magic," Governor-General Hucksteen said. All the judges had gathered, now that the other matches had finished.

Professor Haster cleared his throat. "With respect, Governor-General, Mandrakes are not formally classified as Dark creatures. While it's true they are used in many Dark Arts recipes and conjurations, Miss Quick did not, technically, violate any rules."

"And Harriet Isingrim did," said Professor Aaronson. "A pity. These two witches produced some of the better verses, amateurish though they were."

Harriet sat some distance away, surrounded by New Amsterdam faculty. She glared at Alexandra and wiped blood from her mouth with a handkerchief.

"Yes, well, Miss Isingrim must unfortunately be eliminated. Attempting to outright murder another competitor is grounds for disqualification, and sadly, that means New Amsterdam no longer has a champion in this Junior Wizarding Decathlon."

The Eye-Spy and Snitch both hovered right over Archibald Mudd's head, so Alexandra suspected Professor Haster's announcement was made for the audience's benefit more than anything else.

"A shame," Professor Haster went on. "Becoming an Animorphmagus, at such a young age, shows that she is clearly one of the most talented witches of her generation."

This was almost more than Alexandra could stand. She had been vilified and set up from the beginning, and now that covert murder attempts had become open murder attempts, her would-be murderer was the one getting praised? She raised her voice over Professor Haster's and said, "She still lost."

All of the judges glared at her so sternly that Alexandra might have flinched, if she weren't already wincing in pain from nearly having her arm bitten off.

"I enjoyed your contest, Miss Quick," said Professor Aaronson. "Your cants showed a proper appreciation for classical form, though your rhymes did meander into doggerel verse. For your age, it was impressive improvisation. A little vulgar, though."

"It was vicious taunting," said Governor-General Hucksteen. His glare would have struck Alexandra dead on the spot if the Evil Eye were real. "She mocked Miss Isingrim's dead father, slain by the Enemy!"

Alexandra said, "With all due respect, Governor-General, I'm sure you missed the part before that, where she called my mother a whore."

"Ah." Hucksteen smiled unsmilingly. "So your excuse is 'she started it.' And because of that, you degraded this contest with an exchange of juvenile barbs and insults. You must have thought you were back at Charmbridge, where evidently this sort of behavior was mollycoddled, and not competing in a national wizards' challenge representing the Ozarkers as their champion."

"Certainly, neither witch displayed much dignity or sportsmanship," Professor Haster said. "However, we cannot disqualify Miss Quick, nor retract Miss Isingrim's disqualification." He paused. "And that was some inspired transfiguration."

## \*Chapter 51\*: Closer Than Sisters

Through the window of her room in Walloon Tower, lights across the river illuminated Brooklyn, as Alexandra prepared for the Junior Wizarding Decathlon Ball.

Walking into Governor-General Hucksteen's home felt like a trap. She had vague ideas about gathering information, possibly asking around about Storm King Mountain, but that seemed likely only to alert Hucksteen to her intentions. She'd have preferred to skip the ball altogether, but for some reason Anna and Angelique were both eager to go and had insisted that Alexandra could not skip the Decathlon ball because she was a Decathlon champion. So she found herself sitting in front of her magic mirror, trying to make herself pretty.

Alexandra rarely spent time worrying about her appearance, but she had brought one set of formal robes. If Mr. Mudd was there with his Eye-Spy, she was sure he'd capture her in the most unflattering way possible, so she reluctantly applied the basic makeup charms Julia had taught her and brushed her hair carefully before the magic mirror.

Her hair had grown longer than she was used to — in fact, she thought it was about time for a haircut. Still, in the flattering reflection of the mirror, her black hair was long and silky, and in the center of her pale face, her green eyes sparkled like emeralds.

It was flattering to see what a prettier version of herself might look like, in a different world, but Alexandra was struck with a sudden inspiration. She pursed her lips, then cast a Sticking Charm to set the mirror on the wall over the desk.

*"Liar, liar, on the wall,  
I don't look like that at all,  
You always show a lovely guise,  
Flattering me with pretty lies,  
Instead of showing fantasies,  
Show me what my enemy sees."*

Her reflection raised darkened, carefully-trimmed eyebrows, gave her a small smile, then winked.

Instead of transforming into a less flattering version of herself, the view in the mirror changed to show Archibald Mudd, regarding her with a skeptical expression. He was holding his Eye-Spy in one hand. As Alexandra stared at the unexpected vision, Mr. Mudd opened his mouth to say something, then frowned. The Eye-Spy suddenly irised open, and seemed also to be staring directly at Alexandra through the mirror.

Alexandra waved a hand and banished the image. She leaned back, biting her lip as she tried to make sense of what her spontaneous scrying had shown her. Her reflection once again flattered her by making her look adorable as her teeth gleamed against full, luscious lips. Thoughtfully, Alexandra resumed preparing herself, knowing her appearance would never come close to what she saw in the mirror.

"Pretty bird," said Charlie. Alexandra had opened the cage, so Charlie was sitting at her elbow, watching Alexandra's preparations with interest, especially when she put on a small pair of sparkling earrings and then fastened a gold chain around her neck. More gifts from Julia.

"You're a liar too, Charlie," Alexandra said. She leaned over and kissed the bird's beak. "But thank you, birdbrain."

"Liar, liar," Charlie said.

She wished she could wear her Junior Regimental Officer Corps uniform, which she preferred to these dress-like robes. But she was no longer in the JROC, and thinking about her uniform made her nostalgic and sad, reminding her of Max. With a sigh, she stood and examined herself one more time in the mirror. Her reflection twirled and hid her face coyly, tucked against her shoulder in a way the real Alexandra could never emulate without looking like she was trying to sniff her own armpit.

Her mirror suddenly fogged over, rippled, and then an entirely different image appeared there: Granny Pritchard.

The old woman's arms were folded across her narrow chest. "Are you enjoyin' yoreself, Missy?" she asked.

"How did you do that?" Alexandra asked. "Why do you even need owls, if —"

"You're the one with a magic mirror," Granny Pritchard said. "I see you're right gussied up. For a fancy ball, I s'ppose?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "It's the Junior Wizarding Decathlon Ball. I'm supposed to attend."

"As the Ozarker Champion, dressed like a furriner." Granny Pritchard shook her head. "You are representin' our folk, Miss Quick. You oughter dress the part for a formal ball, at least."

Alexandra wondered if Granny Pritchard had actually been watching the Decathlon on a Wizard Wireless set. She frowned. "You want me to wear an Ozarker dress and bonnet? Are you serious?"

Granny Pritchard gave her a very serious look back, through the mirror.

"What if I refuse?" Alexandra asked.

The Granny shrugged. "Please yoreself. I just thought you might show the least smidgen o' respect for them who allowed you to attend that to-do in New Amsterdam. But Troublesome does as she pleases."

"Nice. Would you'uns like me to talk like an Ozarker while ah'm at it? Are there any special Ozarker dances I can perform for you'all?"

Granny Pritchard's eyes narrowed. "You're not mockin' me," she said. "You're mockin' all my kin. Includin' my great-granddaughters."

"Is this really that important to you, or them?"

"There's times when forms ought be observed. Did you think bein' the Ozarker champion was just a bit o' flim-flam to get you into the Decathlon?"

Yes, *actually*, Alexandra thought. She sighed. "I don't suppose you have any advice or aid to offer, while you're reaching out to me like this? Because I still haven't figured out how to do what I'm actually here to do."

Granny Pritchard pursed her lips. "I reckon there's one person you hain't reached out to for help, hain't there?"

Alexandra stared at the old woman.

"Are you a member of the Thorn Circle, Granny Pritchard?" she asked.

Granny Pritchard's eyes widened. "Heavens 'n Powers, child! Where'd you get a notion like that? I've ne'er e'en met yore father. His war with the Confederation hain't no business of ourn."

Alexandra wasn't so sure about that. But she knew she'd get no more answers out of Granny Pritchard. "Fine," she said. "I'll take your suggestion under consideration."

"You do that, you stubborn, ornery child," Granny Pritchard said, and she disappeared.

Alexandra closed her eyes. With a deep sigh, she reached into her backpack, and found the bonnet she'd stuffed into the bottom of it after leaving the Ozarks. She did not still have her Questing Dress, fortunately — that, she had left with the Pritchards. But the dress they'd given her when she first arrived was still there.

It wasn't a fancy dress, and after spending half an hour trying to tailor it with some of the charms Granny Mahnkey had taught her, it didn't look much fancier. Alexandra supposed the Ozarkers would appreciate that, if any of them actually saw pictures of her.

"I guess Troublesome's going to the ball," she said to Charlie, tying her bonnet on with resignation.

"Troublesome!" said Charlie.

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She had agreed to meet Anna and Angelique outside the Governor-General's mansion, but she only knew its location from her map of New Amsterdam, so she walked through Manhattan in her Ozarker dress and bonnet. Her Unnoticeability Charm mostly deflected attention away from her as she hiked through the slowly emptying financial district.

The Governor-General's mansion was hidden amidst skyscrapers, at the end of a pedestrians-only street. When Alexandra emerged from between two buildings that blotted out the setting sun, she saw a palatial estate sitting hidden and out of place, surrounded by the glass and steel towers that had grown up around it. The front of the mansion was lined with immense Roman-style columns atop circular marble steps, and as Alexandra approached along a cobblestone driveway broad enough for horse-drawn carriages, Magnificent Blaze's nonsense about ancient wizard-kings came to mind.

There were two horse-drawn carriages in front of the mansion. As far as Alexandra could tell, they were mundane horses, though there were charms on the carriages which she was curious about, but could not investigate further as half a dozen red-vested Aurors stood nearby. Other witches and wizards were arriving also, some by Apparition and some on foot and a couple on brooms, but Alexandra felt the Aurors' eyes focused on her.

Anna and Angelique stood together by a fountain at the center of a small gravel path that split away from the driveway. Angelique waved, and Alexandra stepped onto the gravel path and walked over to them.

Anna wore a yellow robe with white trim, quite unlike her usual hooded cloak and darker colors. As Alexandra got closer, she saw the white was actually fine silver thread woven along Anna's sleeves and collar. She'd left her hair long and loose around her shoulders. Like Alexandra, she'd let her hair grow out. Alexandra was also surprised to see Anna's skin was paler than usual, while her lips were redder — she had applied makeup.

"You look nice," Alexandra said with a smile.

"Do I?" Anna asked. She didn't seem sure what to make of Alexandra's Ozarker dress.

"She does," Angelique agreed. She snapped open a fan, and fluttered it in Alexandra's direction. "Goodness, Alexandra. Did you borrow that outfit from Constance or Forbearance? If you needed formal ball robes, you should have just asked me."

"Like yours would fit me," Alexandra said.

Angelique was glorious in black and gold. Golden chains were woven through her hair, which was piled high on her head, and she wore golden earrings that contrasted with her dark lipstick and eyeshadow. Her robes were actually more Oriental than Anna's, featuring golden dragons and fans that moved when Angelique moved, and even when she didn't. They weren't fitted like Anna's, though — Angelique's robes opened in the front to expose a generous amount of cleavage. She waved her fan at the mansion. "I haven't been to a ball since I left New Orleans, so please promise me you aren't planning one of your outrageous stunts or anything else that's going to spoil the evening?"

"I can promise I'm not planning anything," Alexandra said.

In fact, she really didn't have a plan. Not for tonight, not for the next day's event, not for getting to Storm King Mountain, and not for facing the most powerful man in the Confederation, who wanted her dead.

They began walking toward the marble steps. The three of them joined the other late arrivals who were trickling inside. They appeared to be almost the only teens who hadn't entered yet. The other guests walking up the steps with them were witches and wizards in dark formal robes, old-fashioned evening coats and dresses, or Old Colonial-style doublets.

The front double doors were two stories tall, and Alexandra gaped with everyone else when she saw the doormen. Trolls she half-expected, but the immense guardians who stood and watched all who approached were much larger than trolls. They were giants. They wore red and orange uniforms over immense mail suits, with curved steel helmets that could fit a man inside, and each one held a polearm half the height of Walloon Tower.

Everyone was very quiet as they filed between the two giants. Alexandra only dared to glance up at them once. Their eyes were fixed on the driveway.

Inside, the Governor-General dominated the vast entrance hall with his presence, greeting each person who arrived. He wore a red velvet jacket over a white doublet and bright orange breeches, a tall, buckled hat, and a large gaudy sash decorated with medallions and ribbons across his chest. The tails of his jacket draped almost to the floor. He was surrounded by a retinue of officials. Behind them were several goblins in embroidered uniforms; Alexandra wasn't sure if they were servants or guests. At his side was Richard Raspire, still in his red and black cloak. The bald wizard's only nod to formality was a gold badge on a red sash hung from his shoulder to his hip, and a pair of highly polished boots.

Alexandra took a deep breath, figured there was nothing she could do to avoid it if she wasn't just going to run away, and walked forward with everyone else in line.

The Governor-General's expression didn't falter as Alexandra reached him. "Miss Quick!" he said, with the same genial, booming voice he'd used with the woman ahead of her. "How very brave of you to come. And such a bold fashion statement. And Miss Chu, you as well. Your father is making quite a name for himself out in California. You must be proud."

For a moment, Alexandra thought Anna would quail beneath Hucksteen's attention. Then Anna drew herself up and said, in a small but firm voice, "Yes, sir. I am."

"It's very generous of you to invite everyone," Alexandra said. "You have very impressive doormen."

"Don't I, though? You'd be even more impressed if I showed you half of my staff. Most of them, alas, go unseen, doing work that never ends, even during a night of dancing and frivolity. Much like myself. I never stop working, you know. I am always pursuing my goals, because I will never, ever be satisfied until I have accomplished everything I've sworn to do."

His face was warm and smiling, but his eyes were burning coals of hate. Beside him, Richard Raspire smiled soullessly, his own eyes dark and unreadable.

Alexandra tried to think of a witty rejoinder, but she didn't want to stand here and banter with Hucksteen. She wouldn't learn anything from him, and she didn't want to risk drawing his ire to her friends.

"Good luck, then, Governor-General," she said. She didn't curtsy or bow like most of the others had; she just walked away from him. Anna followed. Angelique smiled nervously and curtsied as the Governor-General shook her hand. Her smile faltered slightly when Hucksteen had to ask for her name.

Alexandra let out a breath, slowly, when Anna and Angelique both joined her at the door on the other side of the hallway. Anna had become just a little bit paler, but when Alexandra gave her a thumbs-up, she showed her teeth in a small grin.

Together, they all walked up a grand staircase to the ballroom.

The mansion's ballroom was enormous. There had to be nearly five hundred people inside, over half of them students, but also scores of adults, including New Amsterdam faculty, the Decathlon judges, and many other witches and wizards Alexandra assumed were friends of Hucksteen's, or bureaucrats and Old Colonials trying to curry favor with him.

There was a live wizard band. Alexandra paused when she saw they weren't all wizards — an elf was on the drums and another was playing a recorder.

"Will all the champions please come forward!" announced Professor Haster, who wore voluminous robes of deep yellow, decorated with mysterious symbols Alexandra didn't recognize. Unusually for formal robes, his also had a hood, though it hung loosely around his shoulders.

Reluctantly, Alexandra walked forward to join the other sixteen — well, fifteen now — champions.

Vanessa Lightwood wore a dress JROC uniform, denoting her rank as a Witch-Sergeant First Class. Rebecca Good's outfit was the same Salem Traditionalist black dress and pointy hat she always wore, though of a finer quality. She also had her familiar with her, which Alexandra thought was strange for a ball, but the cat seemed unbothered by all the commotion and sat quietly in Rebecca's arms. It hissed and bared its fangs when Alexandra came near, however.

Magnificent Blaze wore a kimono and a bandanna. He could have been a Majokai wizard, if not for his blond hair and blue eyes. Seimei Kamo, whose kimono was actually less flashy and elegant than Magnificent's, seemed not quite sure what to make of the Radicalist's outfit. He kept looking at Magnificent with an expression that was a mixture of amusement and contempt.

Hela Pujuk wore plain blue and white formal robes that were neither fancy nor pretty. She'd abandoned the furs and other adornments she usually wore. Her hair was still woven into long, tight braids. Other than that, her large forehead and facial scarring were the only things that stood out about her.

The Hudson Territory champion, a Palatine, and the Traveler champion had dressed formally in their Cultures' traditional garb, and everyone else was in fancy robes, including Larry Albo, who had added a richly brocaded cloak to his ensemble. His black curly hair had an oily sheen, and Alexandra had to admit he presented a respectable figure as he turned to the CNN Eye-Spy, which was flying around staring at each champion in turn. He faced it, gripping the front of his cloak with his silver fingers in what Alexandra thought was a rather pretentious pose.

When it passed by her, Alexandra just stared at it blankly. She knew she should at least try to smile, but figured any expression she produced that made her look at all attractive wouldn't be captured anyway.

All the other champions looked away from her, or else glowered at her, except Magnificent, who still gave her a friendly grin, and Larry, who smirked with amusement, then rolled his eyes as if he couldn't believe what she was wearing. She glared at him, listened as Professor Haster droned on about the history of the Confederation Decathlon and New Amsterdam Academy, and was grateful when they were finally allowed to disperse to the dance floor to enjoy the night, or not.

Alexandra immediately withdrew to the edge of the ballroom and watched everyone else dance. She was not surprised to see Magnificent make a beeline for Angelique. She caught a brief glimpse of Adela Iturbide, looking beautiful in a carefully prepared way that had to have taken much

longer than Alexandra had spent on her own appearance. Adela was pointedly nowhere near Larry.

Anna approached her, carrying a glass of punch in each hand. "You're supposed to dance, you know."

From the tables where Anna had gotten the punch, Alexandra saw the adults pouring beverages from tankards and multicolored glass flasks. These were served by Clockworks, but guarded from minors by an elderly-looking troll who looked like he was about to fall asleep. As Alexandra watched, the troll snuck a sip from a wineskin at his belt, then refilled it from one of the flasks.

Alexandra took a glass from Anna. "I'm the Enemy's daughter, and everything that's happened so far just reminds everyone of that. You really think anyone is going to ask me to dance?"

Anna said, "I would."

Alexandra paused, just as she was about to take a sip of her drink.

Anna held out her hand. "Will you dance with me, Alex?"

Slowly, Alexandra set down her drink and took Anna's hand. She walked with Anna out onto the floor. The band wasn't playing wizard rock — it was something slow-tempoed like jazz.

Anna put her arms around Alexandra and rested her head on Alexandra's shoulder while they danced. Alexandra looked around, avoiding assessing her own feelings by gauging the reactions of those around her. No one seemed scandalized by two girls dancing, though she had not seen any other same-sex couples and to her understanding, most of the wizarding world — Colonial society, at least — was not particularly tolerant. At least, she assumed that was why Max and Martin had never been open about their relationship, and why her ex-boyfriend Torvald had reacted poorly to finding out his best friend was a "bent wand."

*And what about you? Because you knew how Anna felt, didn't you? You've known for a long time, haven't you?*

Other dancers whirled by in slow motion. Rebecca Good danced with an older man, ignoring her. Her black cat slunk between their legs, somehow neither tripping them nor getting stepped on, and hissed at Alexandra. Hela Pujuk and the Reformed Druid champion looked equally uncomfortable as they danced stiffly together. Hela glanced at Alexandra and Anna, with an unchanging and unreadable expression. Magnificent gave Alexandra a wink and a thumbs-up over Angelique's shoulder.

Harriet passed by, in the arms of an older boy. Alexandra almost let go of Anna, she was so startled. Harriet — still here? She hadn't been arrested or suspended or anything? Alexandra's mouth started to drop open, but now Harriet was staring back at her, and the corners of her mouth turned up at Alexandra's evident dismay. Alexandra let her face go blank and just returned Harriet's glare stonily.

She felt like she should say something to Anna, but she didn't know what. The two of them swayed slowly to the music for a while, then Anna said, "I love you, Alex."

Alexandra's lips were very dry. She wished she still had her drink. "I love you too, Anna." But she knew Anna was about to say something that couldn't be taken back or brushed aside, and she felt like they were about to dance off a precipice.

Anna looked up. "I mean, I really love you," she said softly.

"I—" Alexandra started to say, "I know," but then Anna kissed her, putting her lips on Alexandra's. Anna closed her eyes, and Alexandra did too, but in confusion and consternation, not with the same dreamy look Anna had.

Alexandra pulled away. "Anna."

Anna opened her eyes.

The two of them faced each other, alone in a little bubble as other witches and wizards danced around them.

"Anna," Alexandra repeated, and she could see Anna's face already reflecting the hurt of what she was going to say. "I do love you. I love you as much as I love my sisters. We're closer than sisters. You're my best friend. You're the very best of friends, and I know I'm not always a great friend, and you really deserve... you deserve someone who loves you back just as much, the way you want..." Her throat tightened. "I'm sorry, Anna," she said, almost in a whisper. She embraced her friend again. "I wish I could love you that way. But..."

Anna stayed in her embrace a moment, then stepped back. Her face was wet. Tears left streaks in her makeup. "Don't you think you could try?"

Alexandra's mouth opened. "... don't know."

She thought about Torvald, and Payton, and Brian, and Burton. She liked all of them, but she had never felt about any of them the way she felt about Anna.

But it wasn't the same. Anna's kiss was nice, but it wasn't like Burton's kiss, that night in the swimming hole.

Anna sniffled. "I've tried. With boys. But it's you I want."

The first statement surprised Alexandra. She almost asked "Who?" She thought Anna shared everything with her.

*Like you share everything with her, right?* Her internal monologue was becoming nastier; she was feeling a growing sense of irritation.

Instead, she said, "I just don't have the same feelings. Not the right ones."

Anna leaned forward. "Maybe you could," she said, very softly.

"I don't think it works like that."

"How do you know if you haven't tried?"

"Really?" Alexandra said. "Why don't you try harder with boys, then?"

Anna's eyes widened. She turned around, and pushed her way through the crowd, away from the dance floor.

"Anna, wait!" Alexandra said, wishing in that moment that someone would just put a curse on her to seal her mouth shut forever. But she didn't follow. She just watched miserably as Anna left the ballroom.

"Hey!" a young voice piped up behind her. Alexandra turned to find Awesome Blaze standing there, practically glowing. Awesome's hair had become longer and was now magenta. The Radicalist wore earrings that looked like spinning planets complete with gas rings, matching the constellations and shooting stars on his — or her — robes. "Was that your girlfriend?"

"No. I mean, sort of, but not really..." Alexandra stammered.

"You sound confused," Awesome said.

"Are you a boy or a girl tonight?" Alexandra asked, with an edge in her voice.

Awsome scowled at her. "You are a jerk. I was going to ask you to dance."

"You're too young."

"Hah!" Awesome looked disappointed, then shrugged and pranced off into the crowd. In fairness, it appeared lots of New Amsterdam's younger students were also here, though most were lined up along the walls, chatting amongst themselves. Few had Awesome's bravery to plunge out onto the dance floor.

Feeling a boiling stew of emotions, Alexandra walked back to the table where she'd left her drink, and gulped half of it down. She wiped her mouth, scanned the crowd, and her eyes settled on Larry Albo.

All her emotions were drowned in a powerful surge of lust. She had never felt so light-headed and giddy as she did now. Larry was... a tall, dark, handsome asshole, the same asshole she'd loathed for years and who loathed her. She still loathed him. He was an arrogant, smug, bigoted, patronizing bully, and right now, she wanted to kiss him hard. She didn't question the feeling, but stalked across the room, pushing aside everyone in her path. She left curses and aghast stares in her wake, from students, champions, and a diminutive, elderly professor dancing with his wife.

Larry had just finished dancing with one of the witches who'd helped Harriet ambush Alexandra in the bathroom, the dark, pretty one. She turned, and her smile froze as she saw Alexandra bearing down on her.

Alexandra ignored her and advanced on Larry. Larry stared at her, nonplussed.

Alexandra held out her hand. "Dance with me."

Larry's brow wrinkled. He looked at his erstwhile dance partner, who faded into the crowd. Larry's friends Ethan and Wade were nowhere to be seen, for which Alexandra was glad.

"What, did Adela dump you again?" Alexandra demanded.

Larry rolled his eyes. Alexandra found this endearing. She became almost breathless when he took her hand.

"Adela and I haven't been a couple for three years," he said.

Alexandra's heart did a little flip, but she suppressed her grin. "Oh? Then why is she here?"

They had started spinning about in time to a wizard waltz, but then the lights went down and the music slowed again, and Larry, after a moment's hesitation, sighed and pulled Alexandra closer to him, though not as close as she wanted. Certainly not as close as she'd held Anna.

"Bathsheba and Galea wouldn't do it," he said, naming his other ex-girlfriends. "I guess they heard about what happened to some of the previous companions of Decathlon champions who participated in a challenge."

"What..." Alexandra was entranced by his eyes, but his words distracted her for a moment. "What happened to the previous companions?"

Larry shrugged. She could feel the shrug, with her hands resting on his shoulders, and wanted to pull him tighter. "Apparently, every once in a while they stage something really dangerous and someone dies. I'm not worried."

Alexandra was worried, about Anna, but that brought back all the flustered feelings she'd had a little while ago, which made her want to focus back on Larry.

"Why'd Adela volunteer, then?" she asked. Maybe Adela still had feelings for Larry. Alexandra would have to do something about her.

"Honestly, I don't know. Maybe because she loves attention and this is the only way she could be the center of it. Plus I wouldn't be surprised if she wants to see me fail. She's..."

Alexandra had heard enough about Adela. She stood on her toes, wrapped her arms around Larry's neck, and kissed him.

Larry made a low, startled sound. Then his hands, which had been poised gingerly at her shoulders, slid down to her waist, and he pulled her into the kiss. She felt his lips pressed against hers, touched her tongue to his... For a moment, she could almost feel his body relax.

Then he stiffened, and pulled away. Alexandra almost growled in frustration.

Larry wiped the back of his hand slowly across his mouth.

"What?" Alexandra demanded. "Don't tell me you didn't like it." She leaned forward again, parting her lips. His eyes narrowed. He looked around. Alexandra followed his gaze, but couldn't see what he was looking at.

Abruptly he grabbed her hand. "Come with me."

"Okay." Alexandra was confused, but she went with him willingly as he pulled her off the dance floor. She caught a quick glimpse of Angelique, who was now dancing with Albert-Louis. Angelique smiled and waved at Alexandra, though her eyes widened slightly when she saw who she was with. Then Larry was leading Alexandra out of the ballroom.

In the narrow, low-lit carpeted hallway outside, there were a number of doorways, and alcoves, as well as several display cases to hide behind. In more than one of these nooks, couples had found a barely-concealed place to snuggle up and engage in more kissing and making out than they could get away with on the dance floor. Alexandra thought this was what Larry had in mind, and was eagerly looking for an empty spot in the shadows where they could do likewise, but Larry kept tugging her along, until they reached a balcony open to the outside.

"Where's your room?" Larry asked.

Alexandra was almost shocked by his directness, but she didn't care. That light-headed feeling was still making her giddy and hot. "Walloon Tower."

"Walloon Tower? Where the hell is that?"

"On the river."

"Which river?" Larry grimaced. "Merlin. Can you Apparate there?"

Alexandra blinked slowly. The air out here was cool, which cleared her head a little bit.

"I don't have an Apparition license." She looked around. "I mean..." She turned back to him. "Okay. Sure. Hold on." She wrapped her arms around him.

"Seven hells, I meant can you —"

They arrived in her room.

"— Apparate *yourself*—!"

Charlie cawed loudly. Alexandra staggered, turned on a lamp, and put a finger to her lips. "Shush!" she told Charlie.

Larry held up his hands and examined his fingers, both silver and flesh and blood. Then he slowly twisted his hips and rotated his shoulders. "Amazing. You managed not to splinch us."

"Yeah. I did okay in the Apparition challenge for someone who just learned to Apparate a few months ago, right?" She grinned foolishly at him. He was standing right here in her room. She looked around and saw that the Clockwork had already made her bed.

She threw her arms around his neck again, and pressed her body to his. "You're such an asshole." She kissed him. Larry made a muffled sound, resisted for a moment, seemed to think better of it, and seized her wrist in his silver-fingered hand, hard enough to hurt. That didn't bother her, but then he pushed her roughly away, and she stumbled back and fell onto her bed.

Alexandra wiped her mouth, still tasting his kiss, with the faint aftertaste of those cigarettes he smoked. Her heart hammered in her chest. She looked up at him.

"I don't care if you hate me," she said. "We can do this anyway. I'm pretty sure I hate you too."

"Big fat jerk!" Charlie said.

"Merlin, you're a mess, Troublesome," Larry said. "Go to bed. Sleep it off."

He Disapparated with a pop.

Alexandra lay there, confused, enraged, and burning with humiliation.

The light-headed feeling hadn't gone away. Her heart still raced in her chest. She wanted to go after Larry, except she didn't know where he'd Apparated to. Had he returned to the Governor-General's mansion? Or gone back to his own room? She stood up, then caught hold of herself, clamping her hands to her mouth in horror.

"Oh my God, Charlie, what's wrong with me?"

Charlie, for once, didn't answer.

She fell back in bed, curled up, and stared at the wall. She kept thinking of Larry, and his dark eyes, and black curls, and how much she hated him. The taste of wizard tobacco on her lips, the feel of his silver fingers grabbing her wrist...

Shivering, her heart racing while her stomach churned, she didn't understand what was happening to her or why she was having these thoughts, only that she desperately wanted Larry to come back and was disgusted with herself for thinking that. Eventually, she fell asleep.

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Alexandra woke up the next morning still wearing her dress from the night before. She remembered the events of the previous night first with confusion, then shock, then horror, followed by realization, quickly followed by searing rage.

She rose to her feet and snarled curses that literally blistered the walls. Only Charlie's panicked cries forced her to clench her fists and rapidly breathe in and out until she was somewhat calmer. She looked around at the scorch marks, knowing she'd probably have to pay for the damage.

She stared at Charlie, eyes blazing. The raven shrank away from her.



"*Amortentia*!" she exclaimed.

"Pretty bird!" Charlie said.

Before leaving, she retrieved her raven charm bracelet from her backpack. She hoped it still maintained its bond to the snake-turned-owl bracelet she had given back to Anna, and that Anna still had it.

Then she Apparated to Crown Hall. She was ready to hex anyone who gave her grief about it, even an Auror.

Angelique was in the bathroom, making herself up before a sink. Alexandra scanned the room, and Angelique, watching her in the mirror, said, "Harriet already left. You need to hurry, don't you, if you don't want to miss the next event?" She yawned. "The ball was so much fun, wasn't it? Did *you* have a nice night?"

"No!" Alexandra snarled.

Angelique blinked and turned around. "Oh," she said. "I'm sorry." A look of concern crossed her face. "Did something... happen? I saw you leave with... Larry?"

"Nothing happened." Alexandra went into the showers, and when she emerged, Angelique was gone.

In the dining room entrance, she stopped short when she saw Larry sitting at the head table with the other seniors and fellow champions.

*You*, she thought, and a murderous rage seized her again. Of all the things Larry Albo had done over the past five years, this was the worst. She reached into her pocket, seized her wand, and stepped into the room.

A hush spread around her. There were titters. And whispers. Then conversation resumed.

Larry glanced in her direction. There was no triumph or mockery in his eyes. Rather than smirking, his expression was surprisingly blank. He shook his head, as if in vague disapproval, then sighed and turned his attention back to Magnificent, who was talking to him in animated fashion, probably trying to explain Atlanteans and Hyperborean Wizard-Kings.

Alexandra looked around, saw glances and smirks directed at her, but no one else would meet her eyes. Including Anna, who was sitting all by herself, apart even from Angelique.

Alexandra's rage waned, as she went over last night's sequence of events. *Amortentia* made you fall in love with whoever administered the potion. But if it was Larry... why had he acted surprised? And then left her in her room? And why wasn't he gloating now?

He wasn't acting like someone who thought it would be funny to give her a love potion.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and walked over to Anna.

"Can I sit here?" she asked quietly, trying to keep anger out of her voice.

Anna nodded, not meeting her eyes.

Alexandra sat down across the table from her.

"I meant what I said last night," Alexandra whispered. "I do love you, Anna. And I'm so sorry."

Anna pushed a piece of toast around on her plate.

"I just... I don't..."

"Stop it, Alex." Anna finally looked up. "I understand. It's not your fault, you don't... you don't feel the way I do."

Alexandra was still for a moment. Then, slowly, she reached for Anna's hand across the table, and pressed something into it. Anna withdrew her hand. She smiled at the raven charm, and held out her other wrist, revealing the owl charm looped around it.

"Closer than sisters," Alexandra said.

Anna's expression became sad. "A raven and an owl? I don't know any proverbs about the two of them together."

Alexandra wasn't sure what to say to that.

"It's just hard to believe you prefer Larry Albo to me," Anna said.

Alexandra sputtered. "Is that what everyone is talking about?"

Wordlessly, Anna unrolled a newspaper page from her sleeve and handed it to Alexandra.

*Dark Wizard's Daughter Dares Anything at Dance*, was the headline.

There was a picture of Alexandra and Anna, kissing. Alexandra gulped. Then there was Alexandra facing Awesome — looking as if the two of them were dancing, though they had only spoken for a few seconds.

Finally, Alexandra throwing herself at Larry. Alexandra clenched the newspaper, and felt her rage rise again.

"The Ozarker Champion was seen toying with witches and wizards alike all night, with age being no consideration..." Alexandra read. She gasped. "This is totally fake news!" she said loudly. Several other students looked up from their tables at her.

"Seriously, *this* is what he writes about? Who I danced with?" Alexandra shook the paper.

"It's not all about you. There are other stories about the Decathlon, and the ball," Anna said. "But yeah. My father's going to see that."

*You kissed me. Whose fault is that?* Alexandra thought. "I hope Granny Pritchard is happy that I was wearing my bonnet in all those pictures." She put down the paper. "Anna... I have to ask you something."

Anna just looked at her, so miserably that Alexandra almost couldn't ask the question. But she did. "Did you put *Amortentia* in my drink?"

Anna sat there for a moment, not understanding the question. Then her eyes widened.

"After I drank it..." Alexandra said.

"You and Larry...?" Anna said.

"No!" Alexandra said, too quickly. "I mean... yes. It made me..." Her cheeks burned. "Turns out Larry's an asshole, but he's not that much of an asshole. So nothing happened."

Anna began shaking. "But you think I am."

"I don't know what to think, but someone put *Amortentia* in my drink, and...."

"Alex, how could you?" Anna cried out. Everyone looked at them now.

With tears running down her face, Anna stood and hurried out of the room.

Alexandra heard boos.

She sat alone, brooding, until Magnificent walked over, wearing an uncharacteristically fierce expression and dragging his younger sibling with him. Awesome winced at Magnificent's iron grip on one arm.

"Awesome has something to tell you," Magnificent said.

"Mag..." Awesome whined.

Magnificent squeezed. Awesome grimaced, eyes tearing up.

"Tell her!" Magnificent said. "Or you can decide whether to be a boy frog or a girl frog, right?"

In a very small voice, Awesome said, "I stole Magnificent's *Amortentia* and put some in your drink last night." She studied the floor.

Alexandra stared at the girl. At least she seemed to be a girl today. Whatever. Alexandra didn't care; all the rage she'd been feeling earlier boiled up again.

"Why would you do that?" she asked, voice low.

"I think she has a crush on you, right?" Magnificent said. "But she didn't really understand what *Amortentia* does, did you, you little weed?" He shook Awesome.

"I added a couple of my eyelashes to Mag's potion. I just thought it would, you know, make you like me," Awesome mumbled.

"It doesn't work like that, right?" Magnificent said, sounding more annoyed than angry. "Who knows what altering *Amortentia* like that will do..."

"I know," Alexandra said. Her face must have been frightening. Awesome shrank back against her brother.

"You wanted me to fall in love with you," Alexandra said. "You stupid little —"

"I know, it was hexed," Magnificent said. "She didn't know, right? Don't worry, chickee, she's gonna get such a Howler." He shook Awesome again. "I've already told the rents."

"Mag!" Awesome protested.

"A Howler," Alexandra said. "You think a Howler will make this right?"

"Whoa, she looks like she wants to turn you inside out," Magnificent whispered to Awesome.

Awsome gulped and turned pale as Alexandra stood up.

"Uh, you're not actually going to do that, right?" Magnificent said.

"I have to go." Alexandra felt like flames were about to rise up on the sides of her face. She walked away, trembling with fury.

## **\*Chapter 52\*: The Golden Thread**

Exiting the dining commons, Alexandra almost walked into Harriet Isingrim and her friends.

For a moment, everyone stared each other down. Alexandra could practically feel the tension crackling against her skin. She was itching to draw her wand, and knew Harriet was, too.

Then she saw Archibald Mudd standing by the elevators, fiddling with his crystal widget.

She shoved past Harriet. Let them attack her in plain sight — maybe Mudd would actually report the incident. Of course, she thought, he'd probably write that she started it.

No hexes hit her from behind. She stomped up to the reporter and said, "Mr. Mudd!"

He looked up, and his eyes widened in recognition.

He was young, and had a rather pleasant, ordinary face. He could easily have been called nondescript, which Alexandra thought was fitting for someone who liked to sneak around and secretly report on people. His Snitch and Eye-Spy dangled on tethers from his belt, but he reached for something else. Alexandra tensed, expecting him to draw his wand, but instead he produced something more dangerous — his microphone.

"Why are you writing all these bullshit stories about me?" she demanded.

Mr. Mudd raised an eyebrow. "Bullshit, Miss Quick? What have I reported that's untrue?"

"Enemy's Daughter Racks Points Ruthlessly"? What does my father have to do with me competing in the Decathlon? And I wasn't any more ruthless than anyone else!"

"I think many people suspect he has a great deal to do with you being a Decathlon champion despite being expelled from two schools," Mr. Mudd said. "How did you get the Ozarkers to enter you, anyway? And would you care to comment on the rumors that you escaped from Eerie Island?"

"This is off the record. I'm just talking to you." Alexandra held up her wand. "Put that thing away or I'll blast it."

Mr. Mudd lowered his microphone. "Will you? I'll press charges, and you'll be disqualified, like the unfortunate Miss Isingrim."

"What about taking pictures of me at the ball? Why does anyone care who I dance with? And you made me out to be a... a..."

Mr. Mudd just stood there, with a raised eyebrow and a quizzical smile, evidently hoping she would finish the sentence herself.

"You should have left Anna out of it," she said in a lower voice.

"Anna Chu is a Congressman's daughter, in a relationship with the daughter of —"

"We're not in a relationship!" Alexandra said, then winced and lowered her voice. "And whose business is it anyway?"

"The public has an interest in you whether you like it or not, Miss Quick."

Alexandra's jaw clenched as tightly as her fists. "I want you to stop slandering me, and stop reporting on me."

Mr. Mudd shook his head. "The term is 'libel.' Feel free to complain to the Office of Press Matters. Perhaps you can even file a magelaw suit.

"You must not know what happens to people who write about Abraham Thorn's daughters. Haven't you heard about Jerwig Findlewell?"

"Are you threatening me, Miss Quick?"

"No. I'm just curious why you're not afraid of my father."

"Oh, I see." Mr. Mudd gave her another patronizing smile. "Your father is a very powerful man, and he's proven he won't hesitate to quash the free press and anyone else who stands in his way. But he's not the most powerful man in the Confederation, and there are defenders of truth who believe it should be reported. Even if — especially if — it angers Abraham Thorn."

"So you're just another one of the Governor-General's lackeys," Alexandra said.

"I am not connected in any way with the Governor-General's office," Mr. Mudd said. "Good luck in your next challenge, Miss Quick. You'd better hurry, or you'll be late."

Furiously, Alexandra walked past the journalist and entered the elevator. She didn't know what to expect in the Mysteries challenge, except that Anna would probably be in danger. Alexandra desperately wanted to speak to her before the challenge began. The only thing more terrible than letting something happen to Anna would be if it happened before she could apologize — before she could somehow make things right.

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The Mysteries challenge was in the New Amsterdam Arcanum Library, a marble building near the Governor-General's mansion. As the champions entered, a wizard in blue robes decorated with moon symbols directed them down stairs leading to the library's basement.

The basement was a large storage area, evident by all the shelves lining the walls and crates that had been stacked to the ceiling. Alexandra also saw stone urns and bronze sculptures, large picture frames draped with silk covers, and what looked like a sarcophagus. All of this was roped off, and further protected with a highly visible ward inscribed on the floor. Standing in the shadows, where it could almost blend in with the miscellaneous items around it, was a suit of black plate armor, holding a sword.

Even with part of the room filled with random junk, the free space that remained was nearly the size of Charmbridge's auditorium, and the

Decathlon officials had erected a wooden stage in the middle of it. All of the special visitors who had been brought in to participate in this challenge stood together in a circle on the stage.

Anna was among them, along with Vanessa Lightwood's boyfriend in his BMI uniform, Awesome Blaze, Adela Iturbide, Hela's grandmother, Albert-Louis's little sister, Jonah Crawley's friend, a teenage girl in Salem Traditionalist garb like Rebecca Good's, a bald old Japanese man in a kimono, a plump witch with enormous hoop earrings and gaudy rings, dressed in colorful multi-layered robes adorned with bells, and half a dozen others.

Ringling the edge of the stage, standing unsupported, were empty wooden frames, like doorways without doors, one behind each of the companions.

A row of seats for the judges had been conjured and lined up a couple of yards back from the raised platform. Behind the seated judges stood a row of wizards wearing deep blue robes with cowls drawn over their heads, hiding their faces in shadow. Closer to the stage was a bookish-looking wizard in plain brown and gray robes. Alexandra wasn't sure if he was a judge, some sort of official, or just one of the New Amsterdam professors. He held a flat stone slab, like a figure out of one of those Old Testament stories Alexandra had been forced to read during her terrible summer at Vacation Bible School. He stood apart from the judges and the mysterious blue-robed wizards, and seemed to be looking at nothing in particular.

Professor Haster stood somberly, waiting for all the champions to line up at the edge of the stage, outside the circle of free-standing doorframes. Alexandra shuffled into place, looking unhappily at Anna, who avoided meeting her eyes.

"Today, there is only one event, as it may be the most intense challenge you face," said Professor Haster. He turned to the cowed wizards. "As is traditional, the Mysteries challenge is designed by Analysts from the Research Office."

"Spooks," muttered Vanessa Lightwood. She folded her arms.

One of the wizards in blue stepped forward. Standing at floor level, below the assembled Decathlon challengers, he faced them and spoke in a clear baritone, sounding almost friendly despite the sinister cowl concealing his face.

"It takes a special aptitude to uncover the deepest Mysteries of the magical world," he said. "For every Junior Wizarding Decathlon, we design a series of unique puzzles to be unlocked by the brightest young minds of the Confederation."

He held up a glowing sphere that reminded Alexandra of a snow globe.

"Each of you will venture through these doorways," he said, "to unlock a puzzle only you can solve. Each one is connected to the friend, family member, or loved one who has volunteered to participate with you in this event."

Adela Iturbide tossed her head and sniffed loudly enough to be heard across the room. Alexandra risked a glance at Larry; he appeared to be grinding his teeth.

As the wizard from the Research Office spoke, the other Analysts raised their hands, and all the companions of the champions began to emit a soft golden glow. The aura around each person seemed to gather near their chests and then extend from them, like bright golden tentacles which thinned to ropes stretching behind them, and then to threads that extended through the nearest doorway. As the golden threads passed through the frames, they disappeared, as if cut off by an invisible barrier.

"These threads will lead you back to your companion... if you can find the way." Beneath his cowl, the wizard's mouth turned up in a smile. He gestured, and the polished wooden surface of the stage turned dark, as if it were sucking in light. The people on the stage looked nervous, and Alexandra wondered how much they'd been told about their part in this challenge.

The Analyst who'd been speaking turned around and ascended the steps to the stage. When he reached the edge of the inky darkness under the feet of the volunteers, he held out the glowing sphere.

There was a flash, and then a whoosh of air. Like an afterimage burned into her retinas, Alexandra had the impression of everyone being hurled into space, where they hovered for a moment, suspended in a fuzzy amber-like glow, and then shrank, shrank, and shrank some more.

The blue-robed Analyst held his arm outstretched over the black pool of darkness. In his hand, the glowing snow globe was now flecked with tiny figures suspended in the bright light at its center. The golden threads terminating at each doorway all converged on the sphere of light.

Alexandra was not the only one who gasped when the Analyst released the sphere. It fell into the darkness, and kept falling, until it was a tiny speck of light.

Alexandra heard soft sounds, like whispers, coming from the stage now. She looked right and left, and saw from their reactions that the other champions heard them too.

"What have you done?" cried Rebecca. Even some of the judges looked nervous. But not Governor-General Hucksteen.

"Don't worry," said the Analyst, in a soothing voice that did not sooth them. "Your friends are all safe, placed within a sphere of protection that will preserve them beyond the Veil. The threads that tether them are indestructible."

Someone next to Alexandra — it might have been Vanessa, it might have been Albert-Louis — drew in a deep breath.

"Now go," the Analyst said. "Find the other end of the thread."

"What if we don't?" asked Hela.

The Analyst's smile was creepy, with his face hidden in the shadows beneath his cowl. "Fear not, we'll bring everyone back."

Alexandra walked with everyone else onto the stage, and traced the thread from where Anna had stood, now leading into the whispering darkness at one end, and an empty doorway on the other. Magnificent stood at the doorway next to hers, and just before he stepped through it, he said, "This is not righteous."

"No kidding," Alexandra said. She stepped through the doorway.

There was no sense of movement, neither the whoosh and dislocation of Apparition nor the yank in her midsection that she experienced when traveling by Portkey. This was some other mode of transportation. She wondered how the doorways had been created, and why such transportation wasn't used in more places.

Her curiosity vanished as soon as she realized where she was. She was standing in a cemetery. It was old and choked with weeds, abandoned to every appearance. Gravestones stuck out of the tall grass and brambles all around her. A few yards away was a rusty iron fence. Beyond that, she saw trees in all directions. The sun was overhead, so she guessed she was either still in New Amsterdam or somewhere not too far from there, but she couldn't see any buildings or signs of life, Muggle or wizard. Except for the wooden doorframe through which she'd come. It stood in the middle of the green and brown vegetation and forgotten headstones, upright and unsupported as it did in the Arcanum Library basement.

Alexandra looked down and saw, faintly visible in the daylight, a golden thread running along the ground at her feet.

Maybe this wouldn't so hard, she thought. But when she looked up, Richard Raspire was standing in front of her.

She raised her wand. The bald wizard shook his head, as if disappointed. "I wouldn't act too precipitously, Miss Quick." He held up a large pair of iron shears. They were enormous, crude things, black with age. But hanging off the intersection where their open jaws hinged was the golden thread Alexandra had been following.

He gripped the shears in one hand, while he held his own wand lightly in the other. "What my colleague from the Research Office said was not quite true. The threads anchoring the souls of your friends are indestructible to any mortal force. But, as I believe you know, there are Powers more ancient than the wizarding world. The Abhorred Shears were crafted by one of those Powers."

"What do you want?" Alexandra asked, still pointing her wand at him. It took an effort to keep her voice and hand steady.

"I want you to throw your wand aside," Raspire said. He wiggled the shears. "It won't take much. Snip."

Alexandra tossed her wand into the brush.

"The other one also," Raspire said. "No more tricks. No clever gambits, no hidden wands, no doggerel verse, no *troublesome* stunts."

Alexandra slowly reached into her sleeve and withdrew the yew wand, while Raspire watched attentively. She threw it into the bushes, a few feet from her hickory wand.

"All right," she said. "Do you want me to beg? You can do whatever you want to me, just leave Anna alone."

Raspire laughed. "Oh, you foolish child. You're such a vicious little thing, threatening and headstrong, so full of self-importance."

Alexandra said nothing, just kept her eyes on those shears, and the tiny golden thread dangling between them.

"You know, don't you, that you could be killed at any time? I know you believe you're protected by your father, but no one is unreachable, not even the Enemy of the Confederation, and certainly not his children. You've been an annoying, troublesome pest since you first entered the wizarding world, but until now, that's all you were. You were watched in case you might provide information about your father and his plans, but nobody really cared about you, Miss Quick. If you were ever deemed an actual threat, you would have been removed. Whether at Charmbridge Academy, or in Larkin Mills, or while you were living with your trashy black marketeer sisters in New England, or visiting the Kings at Croatoa, or even traipsing around the Ozarks, there's nowhere you're safe. Not you, not your family, not your friends. You haven't been touched because no one cared enough to do anything to you. Even after you escaped from Eerie Island — after you set free two of the most terrible monsters ever imprisoned in the New World — it was less trouble to keep it quiet than to let everyone know what sort of chaos you've unleashed."

Alexandra stayed silent, though her hands twitched. She composed verses in her head, even contemplated charging Raspire, but she knew in her head and in her heart that any such reckless action would be futile.

Raspire smiled with a satisfaction that made Alexandra wish him dead so powerfully, he surely would have died if her wand were in her hand.

"It's hard to bite your tongue, isn't it?" he said. "You want to threaten me, or try to bluff your way out of this, or at least make one of your sarcastic comments. That's what got you into trouble, you see. The last straw was when you taunted Elias Hucksteen with his dead daughter's name."

"I wasn't taunting him!" Alexandra protested. "I didn't even know who she was. *She* gave me her name!"

"Tell your story to someone who might believe you, someone who cares," Raspire said coldly. We don't know if you dredged up her name on your own, or if your father provided it to you, but now you've finally earned the Governor-General's personal wrath."

Alexandra felt herself beginning to tremble. "Then do what you want to me," she said. "But Anna isn't important either, is she? You don't need to hurt her." She was almost begging now. She hated herself for it. But she would beg, grovel, fall to her knees, if that was what it took to save Anna.

"Ah, but you see, the Governor-General doesn't want you hurt. He wants you *broken*."

Raspire closed his hand, and the shears snapped shut, severing the golden thread. Alexandra almost felt her own heart stop, and cried out as her entire body went cold. The thread faded into insubstantiality and disappeared.

"The fact that this will also break Gering Chu, who's been another persistent thorn in our side, is an added bonus," Raspire said. "Now return to the Arcanum Library, Miss Quick. Go ahead and peddle your persecution complex and conspiracy theories, if you want to. Tell the world that the Governor-General had your friend killed." He studied her face, and smiled with satisfaction as tears ran down her cheeks. "Most won't believe you, and those who do are the sort of troublemaking rabble who *should* fear us. Remember that this happened because you caused it. And remember that next time, it could be you, or your sisters, or your friends... anyone."

He reversed the shears in his grip, and lowered his hand. With a final mocking smile, he Disapparated with a pop.

Alexandra stood numbly for a moment, and then cleared her throat.

"You won't break me," she said hoarsely. Then she repeated it. "You won't break us."

She'd lost Max. She could never get him back. She'd done everything she could, but it hadn't been enough. She didn't have the knowledge, or the power. But she had to believe Anna wasn't gone yet. Raspiro thought Anna was lost, but Alexandra had been to the Lands Beyond before, and she'd returned. She knew it was possible. And she knew a lot more now than she did last time.

*I'm coming for you, Anna.*

She retrieved her wands from the bushes, and then stepped back through the doorway.

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The judges, including the Governor-General, still sat in the front row of chairs. The blue-robed Analysts, however, had ascended the steps to the raised stage and were gathered around the circle of darkness. Fifteen threads still stretched from doorways circling the stage into the darkness, but there was none leading from the doorway out of which Alexandra had emerged. The wizard who'd dropped the glowing sphere with Anna and everyone else into the darkness stood in her path, and demanded, "What have you done?"

"Get out of my way," Alexandra said.

Remarkably, he did. He stood aside and consulted with one of his colleagues while Alexandra removed her charm bracelet. When she stepped to the edge of the void, one of the Analysts said, "Stand back from there. You can't enter without the protection we gave them. You'll die."

"I know." Alexandra held the silver raven charm in the palm of one hand.

*Please let this work*, she thought.

She didn't attempt doggerel verse. She didn't pray, either, but she invested every bit of love she felt for Anna into the raven charm, and then held up her wand and tethered the charm to her. She couldn't recreate the golden threads the Research Office wizards had crafted, but she thought she understood a little about the magic that had created them, from books in Lucilla and Drucilla's library. She'd been exposed to the Lands Beyond before, had held an obol in her hand, and this wasn't her first time bringing someone back to the land of the living. It wasn't the same, and she was improvising as she'd never done before, but if it didn't work and she died, it would be better than living without having tried.

The raven symbol glowed softly, then rose into the air, trailing the tiniest of silver threads behind it.

"What...?" said one of the Analysts.

They started whispering excitedly, but Alexandra ignored them. She tossed the raven charm into the void, and it arrowed through the darkness toward the distant glow that was, she hoped, Anna, preserved along with everyone else who'd been sent through the Veil.

As the thread unwound, she realized the problem with her plan. Her charm might reach Anna, and if she hadn't badly miscalculated, she could follow the thread while remaining tethered to her. But who would tether *her*? How would she return to the living world? It wasn't as if she could just tie the other end around one of the doorframes. She had no idea how the blue-robed wizards had done what they'd done, and even if they'd tell her, there wouldn't be time to replicate it.

"Impressive casting," said the first Analyst, as if he understood what Alexandra was attempting. "But it won't work. I don't know how your friend's tether was broken. I'm sorry. But..."

Alexandra said, "If you can't help me, then leave me alone."

The man's mouth closed, and after a moment, he backed away.

One of the other golden threads disappeared. Magnificent stepped through his doorway. Awesome clung to him, looking shaken but unharmed.

"Well done, Mr. Blaze," said Professor Haster, who had listened without comment to Alexandra's exchange with the Analyst. "You're the first... er, to successfully complete the challenge."

Magnificent frowned, and came over to Alexandra, taking in her tear-streaked face and her wide-eyed resolute expression. "Yo, chickee, where's your girlfriend?"

Alexandra looked at him. "I need your help."

He nodded. "Anything I can do, right?"

Alexandra held up the end of the silver thread. It glowed against her palm.

"I can only return if I have a path back," she said. "I need you to provide that path. And keep anyone else —" she inclined her head toward the judges "— from interfering."

Magnificent frowned at all the other wizards. "I don't understand what you're doing, right? This isn't like the puzzle I had to decipher to find Awesome at all."

"It's a life connection," Alexandra said. "It anchors and connects two souls, and I think it will work with Anna, but I don't know about you, because it's not like we're close. But I think the more you care, the better my chances are. I know it's a lot to ask, but I need whatever you can give me. Prayers, thoughts, good wishes, whatever."

"I've got you, chickee." Magnificent took Awesome's hand. "Awesome will help too. He has a wicked crush on you, right?"

"Magnificent!" Awesome turned red.

"If you do, then embrace it, because right now, I need that," Alexandra said, looking at the younger Blaze. "You're still too young, and what you did was almost unforgivable. But this is your chance to actually help me." She handed the end of the silver thread to Magnificent. When he took it, it seemed to flow into him. As Alexandra watched, she saw with Witch's Sight the silver thread running through him to Awesome.

"I think this will work," she said. "Maybe." She turned back to the edge of the dark veil.

"It might," said the Analyst, who had been listening silently to Alexandra and the Blazes. "There are legends of such feats, but we've never actually recorded someone returning from an Orpheus Journey. I hope you succeed, Miss Quick, but you realize that if you fail, you will be lost forever along with your friend."

"Then I'd better not fail," Alexandra said. She plunged into the darkness.

## \*Chapter 53\*: Silver Will Save Her

Alexandra had been here before. The cold, the darkness, the whispering that always seemed to come from right behind her no matter which way she turned. She was in the Lands Beyond.

This time, however, she was not riding a Thestral and she was not carrying an obol. She clutched the silver thread like the lifeline it was, and willed herself forward. The silver thread was her tether to Anna, and both their tethers back to the land of the living. Warmth and life flowed through the silver thread, and she knew if she let go even for an instant, she would be lost forever.

*Don't let go, Anna*, she thought. She pleaded with Magnificent and Awesome not to let go either. Her life was literally in their hands. And the Governor-General was sitting there, watching them. Probably with Richard Raspire. Alexandra had no doubt they could make the two Radicalists let go of the silver thread. No one could do anything about it. She could only hope they wouldn't do it in front of so many witnesses.

She couldn't see any of the golden threads tethering the other champions' companions. She supposed once she was through the Veil, physical proximity was meaningless. Everyone else could be across the world, across the universe, as far as she and Anna were concerned.

The whispering increased in volume. Faces took shape in the blackness, faces with only darkness where their mouths and eyes should be. They swirled around her and seemed to be sneering, howling, trying to get at her yet unable to touch her. They were skins without flesh behind them, hostile and empty, terrifying in their unlife.

"Chindi," Alexandra said, horrified. She had seen these malevolent spirits before, unleashed at Charmbridge Academy. She knew Banishing Spells, but they were in the Lands Beyond now — where could she banish them to?

They drifted around her, radiating malice, but they didn't touch her. She could feel their envy and anger, their desire to take from her the one thing she had that they did not — life. She felt her courage failing.

Though all her previous efforts to cast a Patronus Charm had failed, she raised her wand, tried to focus on a happy memory — her and Anna, at Charmbridge — and said, "*Expecto Patronum!*"

A wisp of silver smoke curled around the tip of her wand. The chindi continued circling around her, as if mocking her effort.

Seemingly, they couldn't harm her, but her presence was an affront to them, and their presence was a constant reminder that there was nothing between them but a silver thread. The more they howled and whispered, the more she felt as if she belonged with them.

"Anna," Alexandra said, and willed herself onward, through the endless void. The silver thread spun off into infinity, and Alexandra had little sense of movement, yet she left chindi moaning behind her, while more of them gaped and glowered and flew into her path, reaching out with hands that never quite touched her. There was no need for her to pull herself along the line — for the living, thoughts were actions in the Lands Beyond.

A luminescent figure appeared ahead of her in the darkness; not a featureless shadow like the chindi, but a more familiar spirit, glowing with the pale, ghostly reflection of life.

"You've made a mess of things again, I see," said the ghost.

Alexandra almost let go of the silver thread as she recoiled from the figure in front of her.

"You," she said.

"Why do you look so surprised?" asked Darla Dearborn.

Darla was still fourteen. She was still dressed in the robes she'd worn when she'd stepped through the Veil into the Lands Beyond, two years earlier. She regarded Alexandra with that familiar, condescending haughtiness.

"Are you here to help me?" Alexandra asked.

"You don't need my help," Darla said. "Just follow the silver thread. That's why you're here, right? To save Anna?" She laughed coldly.

"Yes," Alexandra said. "Why are you here, then?"

Darla's eyes flashed white, and then turned black. "Because I have no choice!" she said angrily. "I'm here because of you!"

Alexandra shivered as she held onto the silver thread. "You're here because of the choices you made."

"You're wrong, Alexandra. I *died* because of the choices I made. I'm trapped *here* because of the choices *you* made."

"What choices? You sent yourself to the Lands Beyond!" Alexandra didn't even know why she was arguing. There was nothing she could do for Darla, and evidently nothing Darla could do for her. "I'm sorry, Darla. I really am. I didn't want you to die. I tried to save you."

Darla smiled. It was the coldest, cruelest smile Alexandra had ever seen on the face of her former frenemy. "Oh, Alexandra," she said. "You'll never save anyone."

Like dissipating mist, Darla dissolved into the darkness and was gone.

Alexandra blinked back tears, and clenched her teeth. The chindi were whispering at her again, but she forced herself onward, squeezing her eyes to narrow slits so that all she could see was the glow of the silver thread. If the evil spirits couldn't hurt her, then there was no need for her to pay attention to them. Maybe that was true of Darla as well. For all she knew, that hadn't been Darla at all.

When she saw a soft, silver glow ahead, brighter than the dim aura around herself, she thought it might be another ghost. Or perhaps Darla again, or the thing that had pretended to be Darla. But this glow was at the end of the silver thread.



Anna floated in darkness, curled up into a ball. Her cloak hung around her, moving slightly in an invisible ghostly wind.

"Anna," Alexandra said.

Anna looked up. Her face was silver, aglow. Her entire form was a ghostly silver aura. It was beautiful and terrifying, and Alexandra knew she probably looked the same to Anna.

"I was alive, and then I wasn't," Anna said in a small voice.

"You're still alive," Alexandra said. This wasn't the time or place to explain what had happened. She took Anna into her arms. "Anna, I know you're mad at me. I know I hurt you, and you can say anything you want to me when we get back. I deserve it. But please, put your arms around me now."

Anna did. She pressed her face against Alexandra's shoulder. "What's happening, Alex? Are we dead? Please don't lie. I'd rather know the truth."

"We're not dead. I came to get you."

"You came to get me." Anna held onto her tighter.

"Of course I did. I'll always come for you, Anna. No matter what happens, I will find you."

"What happens now?" Anna asked.

"Now we go back."

Alexandra concentrated on Magnificent and Awesome at the other end of the silver thread. It wasn't like she could tug on the line and signal them to pull her back. All she could do was try to will herself back the same way she'd willed herself here. With barely any sense of motion, she couldn't even be sure they were actually traveling anywhere. They were suspended in an infinite darkness, filled with other lost souls.

Alexandra and Anna held onto each other for a very long time. Or maybe it was a short time. Alexandra knew from her last journey into the Lands Beyond that time and distance weren't the same here. She might pop back out of the void a moment after they'd left. Or maybe hours later. Would Magnificent and Awesome wait that long? Would Professor Haster and the wizards from the Research Office, and the Governor-General, let them?

"Those voices," Anna moaned, as the whispers became almost deafening around them. "It's like there are people here, but I can't see them, but they're just behind me and I can't quite understand what they're saying but I know they're saying terrible things —"

"Shh," Alexandra said. Perhaps what Anna saw and heard wasn't the same thing as what she did. But Anna seemed on the verge of panicking, and Alexandra was afraid she might let go if she did. "It's all right. They can't hurt you. I promise. Keep your eyes shut, and hold onto me."

Anna shivered, and did as she was told. She clung to Alexandra like she was clinging to life itself.

Surrounded by baleful wraiths who wanted only for the living souls to join them, Alexandra felt her hope and courage slowly ebbing. It was impossible to tell whether they were actually approaching the end of their journey. Or whether there was an end to their journey. They seemed fated to endure an eternity of torment from the angry spirits.

Alexandra didn't know if Anna would hold onto her forever, or if she could hold onto the silver thread forever. But either they would both come back, or neither of them would.

Light exploded against her eyes. She and Anna both cried out, in joy and shock, as they fell to the wooden stage. Magnificent caught Alexandra and helped her up. Someone else was helping Anna stand.

"That was *righteous*!" Magnificent said.

"You were fabulous!" said Awesome.

"Thank you," Alexandra said. "Thank you both." She looked around.

All of the champions stood in a circle around the Veil. They were all staring at her, along with their companions. Everyone must have made it back, having solved whatever puzzles they'd been given, unlocking the Mysteries designed for them. Some looked shaken, and the champions from Columbia Territory, Baja, and Texarcana were shame-faced. But everyone was back.

No, not everyone. Alexandra looked across the stage, and saw Larry, looking bleak and stricken.

"Where's Adela?" she asked.

As the contestants all looked over at the Central Territory champion, an argument broke out between several of the Analysts and the wizard in brown and gray robes who'd been carrying the stone tablet.

"There's nothing I can do about it," said the wizard with the tablet.

"You and your infernal accounting," said one of the Analysts. "You've completely ruined the experiment!"

"I didn't ruin it. Someone else's meddling..." The wizard looked up and pointed in Alexandra's direction. "A thread was severed. Magic abhors an imbalance. Therefore—"

Richard Raspire stalked quietly over to the squabbling wizards and spoke in a low voice. Whatever he said silenced them immediately.

Alexandra shook off the congratulatory hands of Magnificent and Albert-Louis and Vanessa, and gently disengaged from Anna. She walked around the circle of darkness to where Larry stood alone.

"I had her," he said numbly. "She was arguing with me, like she always does, and then she threw her damn ring at me. I told her to stop acting like

a child, and that's when the golden thread disappeared."

*Silver will save her*, Alexandra thought. "You have something that belongs to Adela?"

Larry stopped rambling, and his eyes gained focus. "What?"

"Something of hers. A ring? Something with feelings."

"Feelings?" Larry blinked. Then he reached into a pocket of his robes and pulled out a silver ring. "She definitely has feelings about this."

Alexandra stared at the ring, then at Larry. "You and Adela were engaged?"

Larry sighed. "For a few months. We were *fourteen*. It seemed like a good idea at the time. My father convinced me I was being an idiot, but her family —"

"Never mind." Alexandra snatched the ring from him. "Do you want to save her?"

Larry opened his mouth, then nodded.

"Even if it's dangerous, and you could die too?"

Larry closed his mouth, and gave Alexandra a long look. "Like you did for Chu, you mean?"

"Yes. Like that."

He managed a small smile. "If you can do it, I can."

"Forget about me. This isn't about your ego. If you don't care about her — I mean, really care about her — it won't work and you'll both be lost. Any feelings you still have for her, they have to be real." Alexandra held up the ring. "Does she still feel anything for you?"

Larry swallowed. "I'm not still in love with her," he said. "But I guess I care. Yes. And she definitely has feelings. A lot of them. Angry ones, mostly..."

Alexandra grabbed Larry's hand, pressed the ring into it, and closed his silver fingers around it.

"Focus on those feelings," she said. "This is your connection to her. You're going to go through the Veil, following the silver thread that will lead you to Adela, and you're going to bring her back."

Larry was silent. Alexandra raised her wand, took a deep breath, and pressed one hand over Larry's clenched fist, holding her wand over it with the other. Around her, the other champions were gathering. They had circled around the Veil, and listened quietly as she spoke to Larry.

"Cast the ring through the Veil," she said. "Go ahead."

Larry held up the ring and looked around, as if hoping someone would stop him, or intervene, or explain that this was all just an experiment, a test. But even the judges and the Analysts were silently watching.

He tossed the ring into the darkness. It fell, and fell, and behind it trailed a silver thread. Larry clutched at it.

"Follow that thread to Adela," Alexandra said. "Don't let go of it, no matter what. Don't let Adela let go of you, no matter how angry or scared she is. You'll see things. Spirits of the dead, maybe ghosts you know, maybe just phantoms. They want to get at you, and they'll be frightening, but as long as you **don't let go** of the thread, they can't hurt you. Make sure Adela understands that too."

"How do I get back?" Larry asked.

Alexandra took her hand away from Larry's. She had fashioned a silver thread the same color as the metal of his fingers, and she held it in her hand.

"You follow this thread." She looked right and left. "I need help."

Anna reached for Alexandra's hand. Magnificent took Alexandra's other hand, the one holding her wand, and closed his fingers around hers. Awesome took Magnificent's other hand.

Vanessa and her boyfriend looked at each other. Then Vanessa took Anna's hand, and held her boyfriend's hand. "I don't understand this spell," Vanessa said.

"It's not Dark, but it's not Light either," said Albert-Louis. He and his sister linked hands. "What you're about to attempt is madness."

"But she already did it once," said Anna.

One by one, all of the champions and their companions joined hands. Even Hela Punuk and the ancient woman who looked like her grandmother. Offstage, Professor Haster and the judges watched with astonishment.

Governor-General Hucksteen just sat in his seat and stared, expressionlessly, his beady eyes sunken into the fleshy folds of his face.

"Well, you've got more help than I got," Alexandra said to Larry. She nodded to him.

Larry looked at the ring of witches and wizards on the stage, over two dozen of them, and closed his eyes. "Right. Anything you can do..." He stepped into the void, and disappeared.

They waited.

Minutes ticked by. No one said anything. Alexandra held onto the silver thread, trying to clear her mind because there were too many distractions

and too many implications here. She could feel Anna's eyes on her. She could feel everyone's eyes on her, including the Governor-General's.

"This can't possibly work twice," said one of the blue-robed Analysts.

"What about your so-called imbalance?" asked another Analyst. The wizard with the stone slab scratched something on it. He muttered something Alexandra couldn't hear.

Richard Raspire walked to the edge of the stage, standing on the lower level of the basement floor, so he was only visible from the waist up. Alexandra kept an eye on him, waiting for him to say something, or possibly pull out his wand and scatter them all. But he just watched her.

"You sure you know what you're doing, chickee?" Magnificent whispered.

"I didn't know what I was doing the first time," Alexandra whispered back. "And stop calling me chickee."

A ripple of light pierced the Veil. Then there was a glow, and then Larry rose out of the darkness and stepped back onto the stage, holding Adela Iturbide in his arms. He was wide-eyed, looking much like Alexandra imagined she'd looked when she emerged from the Lands Beyond. Adela's eyes were squeezed shut; she huddled against Larry's chest and shivered, as he told her she was all right, they were back.

Alexandra smiled, and slowly unclenched her fist. The silver thread connected to Larry's hand slipped out of her fingers, but before it even spooled to the floor, it was gone. She turned away from Larry and Adela, and found herself facing Richard Raspire, and behind him, the Governor-General.

Their faces were cold masks. Their eyes were dark, as if they were reflecting the lightless abyss of the Lands Beyond. Neither man said anything, but their silence spoke fury and terrible threats.

Off to the side, the wizard with the stone ledger hurried off, surrounded by Analysts who were frantically arguing about something.

Alexandra fixed her own face into stone, and without waiting for the judges to pronounce an end to the Mysteries challenge, she walked off the stage. The champions and their companions followed her.

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"What was that? *What was that?*" demanded Magnificent.

"It was incredible and wicked and fabulous!" said Awesome. "Um, do you forgive me now?"

Alexandra turned and bent over so she was almost eye-level with Awesome.

"You helped save my life and Anna's," she said. "And Larry's and Adela's too. Thank you for that. I'm really, really grateful." She smiled at Awesome. Her voice didn't change. "If you ever again do anything like what you did last night — if I find out you so much as touched *Amortentia* — I will put your liver and spleen in bottles and sell them in the Goblin Market, I will decant your blood and bile into the darkest *schadenfreude* pudding anyone has ever seen, I will make a cover for my wand sheath out of your skin, and I will use your skull as a planter for mandrakes, and then I'll turn you inside out."

Awsome's face was colorless at the end of Alexandra's speech. Magnificent pushed Awesome behind him, looking rather pale himself.

Albert-Louis said, "Alexandra Quick, the things they say about you are true."

Alexandra turned to look at the champion from Louisiana Territory. "Who's they, and what do they say about me?"

Albert-Louis was a solemn young man, but there seemed to be no animosity or accusation in his tone. "The newspapers, the faculty here at New Amsterdam Academy, even in Louisiana the rumor mill speaks of the Enemy's youngest daughter, who causes trouble wherever she goes."

"I didn't cause this," Alexandra said.

"They also say that you're reckless, headstrong, and the bravest witch one is ever likely to meet." Albert-Louis smiled. "Actually, Angelique Devereaux told me that."

"Really?"

They emerged from the basement and ascended the stairs up to the main library floor, where they all gathered in the back entrance hall. And there was Archibald Mudd. Alexandra hadn't seen him during the challenge at all, but now his Eye-Spy and Snitch floated over their heads.

"I'm with the Junior Wizarding Decathlon champions, following the completion of the Mysteries challenge, from which, as you know, they banned journalists," Mr. Mudd was saying into his microphone. "But they have just emerged from the basement of the New Amsterdam Arcanum Library, and as you can see, once again it appears that the Enemy's daughter has drawn attention to herself — hey, would any of you like to tell our audience about the challenge?"

Alexandra wanted to tell Mr. Mudd she didn't give a damn about the Decathlon anymore. She was surrounded by her fellow competitors, and all the people they had brought with them, young and old, who'd been thrown beyond the Veil and left there to be rescued by the teenage champions. She didn't think any of the volunteers had known what they were signing up for, and none of the champions looked like they'd enjoyed the challenge at all. Larry stared at her, still holding Adela's hand. Adela's eyes were downcast — since emerging from the Lands Beyond, she had not said a word or looked directly at anyone. But everyone else's eyes were on Alexandra, ready to hear what she had to say. She even had the Worldwide Wizarding Wireless focused on her.

Then Richard Raspire ascended the stairs, stood at the edge of their gathering, and stared at Alexandra, as if silently daring her to make a speech denouncing him and the Confederation.

"Hello? Did something happen during the challenge?" asked Mr. Mudd. "Did things go awry again? Did someone cheat? Who'd like to give an interview?"

Professor Haster emerged next, and all the other judges filed out behind him. Governor-General Hucksteen exited last. He did not join Mr. Raspire,

but kept walking past the champions, out toward the front of the library. He didn't look at Alexandra or the Decathlon champions or his personal assistant at all. They all brushed off Mr. Mudd and his questions.

Alexandra exchanged a look with Anna. What would happen if she started ranting about the Deathly Regiment, and accused Mr. Raspire of trying to kill Anna? She had no doubt it would never see print in the *Wizard World Weekly*. And if any of the other champions believed her, what would they do? Would anyone listening believe her word over the Governor-General's?

She met Raspire's eyes again. It was if he could read her thoughts. He smiled.

This wasn't the time, Alexandra thought. This wasn't the audience. Some of them might believe her, but they'd just be more "rabble," as Mr. Raspire had called them. Alexandra would be putting their lives at risk just to vent her spleen.

She had a lot of venting to do, but not here, and not now. She stared back at Raspire, and imagined his bald ruddy head igniting like the sulfurous head of a matchstick.

Everyone else noticed the two of them staring each other down. Several people cleared their throats. Mr. Mudd called, "Miss Quick! What did you do this time? Excuse me, sir, what can you tell us about the Mysteries challenge? Was someone hurt? Is anyone missing?"

Alexandra turned her back on Raspire and Mudd.

"I'm hungry." To her surprise, she was. So was everyone else, it seemed. The Mysteries challenge, grueling ordeal though it was, had ended before lunch, and everyone wanted to eat. They all walked away, leaving Mr. Mudd trying to corner Mr. Raspire. Alexandra didn't wait to see what became of that.

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Anna sat with Alexandra in the dining hall, eyes still downcast.

"Anna," Alexandra whispered, as she saw Magnificent and Awesome approaching their table.

Anna looked up. Her face was pale and she still wore a mixture of shock, fear, and resentment.

Alexandra swallowed. "Please forgive me."

"You came for me," Anna said.

Alexandra didn't know if that was absolution or not, but then Magnificent and Awesome and Angelique all sat down at the table. Alexandra was surprised when Albert-Louis and his sister joined them, and then Vanessa and her boyfriend approached the table as well.

"Can we join you?" Vanessa asked.

Alexandra nodded. Her table was becoming nearly as popular as the senior table near the window where most of the other champions sat. Larry was there with Adela, but when Alexandra looked in their direction, she could see that Adela and Larry were arguing, again. She shook her head.

"I would really like to know how you created a silver thread to travel through the Veil and return," Albert-Louis said. "That sort of magic isn't taught in any school, not even the advanced Dark Arts classes we had at Baleswood."

"You had Dark Arts classes at Baleswood?" Anna asked. "Isn't that illegal?"

Albert-Louis waved a hand.

"Baleswood's charter gave it the exclusive right to teach Dark Arts," said Angelique. "But it was all for purely defensive purposes, wasn't it, Albert-Louis?"

"Of course," said Albert-Louis.

"Alexandra's spell was some righteous craft, but I want to know how Anna's tether got broken in the first place, right?" said Magnificent. "They said that couldn't happen."

Alexandra didn't see the CNN Snitch anywhere, but nonetheless, she slipped her hand over her wand, and murmured, "*Muffliato*." Then, looking around the table, she said, "Don't trust them."

"Don't trust who?" asked Vanessa.

"The Confederation," Alexandra said.

Vanessa frowned.

"We *defend* the Confederation," said her boyfriend. "Against all enemies, human or inhuman. But especially forces like the Dark Convention, and —"

"Damien—" Vanessa tried to interrupt him.

"— your father," he finished.

Alexandra looked at the two of them, in their BMI uniforms. They were both members of the Junior Regimental Officer Corps, like Maximilian had been. As she had been, briefly. They had probably known Max.

"I didn't say you should trust my father," she said. "I don't. My brother did, and now he's dead."

She had everyone's attention now.

"It was Richard Raspire who tried to kill Anna," she said. "The Governor-General's deputy. He did it because Governor-General Hucksteen wanted to get to me, and because Anna's father opposes the Deathly Regiment."

Anna gasped. The other teens stared at her, confused.

"The Deathly Regiment is the real secret of the Confederation," Alexandra said. "Not your stupid stories about Atlanteans and wars with giants, Magnificent." Magnificent frowned at her.

"What exactly is this Deathly Regiment?" Albert-Louis asked.

"Ask a member of the Elect," Alexandra said. Now Angelique frowned. "Ask someone in the Wizards' Congress. Ask Governor-General Hucksteen. But none of them will tell you. They *can't* tell you, and I'm not ready, yet. I know how this sounds. I'm only telling you this much because if something happens to me, someone else has to know."

"You sound paranoid," said Damien.

"You know what they say: just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you, right?" said Magnificent.

"Right," Alexandra agreed. "But I know most people aren't ready to hear this, and everyone thinks I'm a menace. Either I'm reckless and stupid, or I'm a Dark sorceress doing my father's bidding. So I don't expect you to believe me. But remember what I told you. If I survive, that's what I'm going to do. I'm going to blow all the Confederation's secrets wide open."

## **\*Chapter 54\*: Only One Can Leave**

Nothing was scheduled for the rest of the day. The champions had only to prepare for the next day's challenge: *Beasts*. At previous Junior Wizarding Decathlons, this had involved evading minotaurs in labyrinths, harnessing hippogriffs, and on one occasion, an underwater challenge. Two champions had died that year.

Alexandra avoided Anna, Magnificent, Angelique, and everyone else, and went directly back to her room. She was very tired and she needed a nap.

She allowed Charlie to fly freely over New Amsterdam and greater New York City, and while she slept, she dreamed of the great cityscape below. Far off in the distance was the Hudson River, stretching north until it was obscured by mist. Charlie ventured in that direction until Alexandra's worried thoughts pulled the raven back.

She woke up when Charlie returned. The sun was setting. Alexandra decided that maybe after dinner, she would be ready to face Anna, and possibly plan her attack on whatever dungeon she was going to be sent into, and think about how she'd get away from New Amsterdam after the Decathlon without Governor-General Hucksteen and his minions knowing what she was up to.

There was hardly anyone on the floor of Crown Hall when she walked out of the elevator and down the hall to use the girls' bathroom. Two girls were in the bathroom when she entered it. After she emerged from one of the stalls, it was empty.

She went to the sink. After washing her hands, she didn't bother reaching for her wand; she just levitated it into her hand, even before she saw Harriet Isingrim in the mirror.

She had to admire Harriet's stealth. Alexandra never saw her enter the bathroom or emerge from any of the stalls. The blonde girl had just appeared, as if from out of the shadows.

"Invisibility is impossible, and I didn't hear you Apparate," Alexandra said. "So how did you do that? I don't think Unnoticeability would work; I was kind of expecting you."

Harriet leaned against the wall. Her wand was held casually in her hand; not so casually she couldn't cast a spell in an instant, but she at least didn't appear to be intent on doing so immediately.

She shrugged. "A natural talent, I suppose."

Alexandra turned, her wand also held casually. "You don't have your friends with you this time."

"Neither do you." Harriet pushed off from the wall. "What was that clever rhyme of yours? *Now you've got no friends, you bitch. Now it's you and me.*"

"That didn't work out so well for you last time."

Harriet smiled. "This time it will be Code Duello, in the old style. I don't suppose a Mudblood like you knows what that is?"

"Not that it matters, but I'm actually a pureblood," Alexandra said. "If I were a Mudblood, I'd wear that proudly. I'm still going to wash your mouth out for insulting my friends, though."

"You can try." Harriet grinned a savage, pointy-toothed grin. "A duel under the Code Duello is one-on-one. No interference, and no vengeance taken afterwards, by anyone. It is one of the wizarding world's most ancient traditions. If your *pureblood* father still has the least regard for his honor and reputation, even he won't violate it."

"And if I don't want to duel you?"

"Then I'll kill you anyway."

Alexandra shook her head. "We don't have to do this."

"Actually, we do," Harriet said. "And by that I mean, we really, truly do. I've already Blood-Sealed this room. Only one can leave."

Alexandra frowned. She had read about Unbreakable Vows to seal chests, envelopes, even rooms. But... "Sealing the two of us inside would require both of us to swear to it, and I didn't."

"Wrong. A Blood-Seal requires only our blood. There's mine." Harriet pointed to a small dark symbol on the wall behind her. "And there's yours." She pointed behind Alexandra.

Alexandra warily turned sideways so she could still watch Harriet while looking at the spot she pointed to. There was a similar dark red mark on the tiles practically where she was standing. "How?"

"I intended to shed your blood here the night you arrived, but that bimbo from Baleswood intervened before I could make you bleed. So I had to settle for getting a mouthful of your blood during our duel."

"That's gross," Alexandra said. "You had plenty of time that first night, but you were too busy gloating and torturing me."

Harriet nodded. "You're right. But I got your blood after all."

"So we're both trapped in here," Alexandra said, "by your stupid seal." Experimentally, she tried opening the bathroom door from across the room with an Unlocking Charm, and then tried blasting it open with a Blasting Curse. Harriet watched contemptuously.

"Only one of us can leave," Harriet said. "That's the Oath I put upon us. No force can open this room so long as we both live. Even a spell powerful enough to utterly destroy it would kill at least one of us. So there will be no rescues. Even your father, as great as you say he is, couldn't get you

out of here." She assumed a dueling position.

Alexandra shook her head, and raised her own wand. "I never bragged about how great he is. I've never been part of my father's plans, and I don't try to use his name—"

Harriet burst out laughing. "Oh. My. God! You incredible liar!" She actually lowered the tip of her wand, though not enough to relax her guard. "Do you even *listen* to yourself?"

Alexandra extended her arm, keeping her wand pointed at Harriet. "What's so funny?"

"You don't use his name? Alexandra Octavia *Thorn*? Eighth child of the Enemy of the Confederation, who's been to the Lands Below, who's traveled to the Lands Beyond and back. Isn't that how you brag about yourself? You may call yourself Alexandra Quick, but you like to shout Abraham Thorn's name when you want to scare people, don't you? You don't use his name? Except when you're trying to intimidate journalists — yes, I heard you threatening Mr. Mudd!"

"I didn't threaten him—"

"Oh no," Harriet said mockingly, "you just *mentioned* what happens to reporters who write things about Abraham Thorn's daughters. You deny your father when you don't want to be associated with him, when it's socially inconvenient to be his daughter, but you have no problem dropping his name when it suits you... when you think it makes you sound impressive, or when you're trying to bribe or bully someone." Harriet advanced, eyes flashing, keeping her wand at the ready, but still ranting while Alexandra listened. "Do you think I picked you on a whim, you vile, narcissistic little cunt?" Alexandra backed away in spite of herself as the words spewed from the other witch. "After your father killed my father and my uncle, I swore vengeance, and I researched everything I could about him and his family. I know the names of all your siblings, and where they live. I know where they went to school, and I know their reputations. And of all Abraham Thorn's children, only one is always involved with his schemes. Only one has been causing calamities ever since she entered the wizarding world. Only one has left death and destruction in her wake because she's part of the Thorn Circle! You've been making enemies since you were eleven. Even the Governor-General hates you — that isn't because you're some innocent victim of your father's reputation. I could have gone after one of your sisters... but when I found out Alexandra Quick was coming here, to New Amsterdam..." Harriet smiled. "It was like fate."

Alexandra stopped backing away. Harriet also stopped. The two of them stood with wands pointed at one another, with barely an armspan's distance between the tips.

"Wow," Alexandra said. "You have got so much wrong. But — even if you weren't wrong, even if everything you say about me is true, I still had nothing to do with the Roanoke Underhill. You want to kill me for something my father did."

"No," Harriet said. "I want to kill you because it will make your daddy cry."

Alexandra said, "You can try."

Both their wands flared. Spells whipped past and around them, in incandescent white and green and purple arcs that stripped tiles from the floor, scorched burn marks across the walls, tore lights out of the ceiling, and shattered half the mirrors in the room. At such close range there was no finesse, only blasting and deflecting, again and again, the two of them hurling hexes and curses rapid-fire, one after another, as fast as the incantations could tumble past their lips, as fast as their fingers could make their wands fly, with just enough added motion to keep Shield Charms in the way. Fireballs and impaling black spikes and silver blades conjured out of the air and green acid clouds and poisonous white plumes blended together in a conflagration of destructive magical fury, boiling in a yard of empty space between them and spewing destruction in all directions around them.

Smoke and magic was so thick in the air, they could barely see each other even a few feet away. They stopped, stepped back, and circled, both taking long, matching breaths as each studied her opponent. They carefully stepped over bubbling pools of melted glass and blackened, burning ceramic, avoiding putting their feet down on the razor-edged shards of magically-conjured metal embedded in the floor. Harriet muttered a charm that blew the noxious fumes and gases away from her; Alexandra cast a Fresh Air spell on herself. Neither took her eyes off the other for a moment.

"I think you're really overestimating how much my father cares about me," Alexandra said.

"Oh, I don't think so," Harriet said. "Poor little witch, abandoned and neglected by Daddy, except when he wants you for some dire plan, some mission, some dark deed that you'll perform for him all the while crying that you have it so hard being his daughter..."

Another flurry of spells cut through the wooden wall separating the front of the girls' bathroom from the rear half where the toilets and showers were located. Alexandra and Harriet both moved to put the barrier between them, and promptly blew it to pieces. Alexandra conjured black rubbery tentacles to reach around it and seize Harriet; Harriet set them on fire and cast a Severing Charm that split and multiplied, turning the tentacles into a pile of black smoking chunks roiling on the floor. Then the cutting magic scythed off the floors, ceiling, and walls and converged on Alexandra. Alexandra's Shield Charm deflected the attacks, barely, and then she had to freeze the wall of fire rolling across the bathroom. It swept past her, leaving her with a bitter chill while setting on icy fire several stalls and what was left of the room's wooden divider. The mirrors in the room frosted over.

Harriet screamed and flung more curses that seared the air, burned what was left of the divider to the ground, and then burned through the floor tiles. Alexandra cast counter-curse after counter-curse, deflecting the effects away from herself, but she'd never dueled someone more brutally aggressive than herself, and Harriet was very good. The older girl kept Alexandra on the defensive until they'd circled the entire bathroom once more. The walls were blackened and charred, nearly all the mirrors were smashed along with the sinks, and half the stalls had collapsed. Ricocheting hexes had shattered partitions in the shower area, leaving a haze of dust from pulverized tiles, burned wood and carpet, and toxic fumes from vaporized metal and glass swirling in the unventilated room.

"Just die!" Harriet yelled. "*Avada Ke—*"

"*Barak!*" Alexandra said. Lightning flashed from her wand and flowed in sheets over the floor and Harriet. Arcs of electricity leaped to the metal faucets and mirror fixtures and across the room to the remaining toilets.

Harriet's Killing Curse was too slow to beat a Lightning Spell. Alexandra was faster.

She felt victorious, for an instant. Then she noticed something whirling through the air behind Harriet. It stabilized and spun about. Archibald Mudd's Eye-Spy turned its open iris on them both, surveying the battle scene.

Harriet unfroze from the rigid statue into which she had transformed herself. Her robes were tattered and charred, and her skin was red, cracked, and burned in places where the lightning had touched her; the transformation had not been complete. In rage and pain, she whipped her wand forward. Fountains of glass sprayed from the broken mirrors behind her, whipping viciously past her and hurtling at Alexandra in a glittering deadly stream of shards. Alexandra cast a Shield Charm, but now she was a heartbeat too slow, and glass ripped through her arm and sliced her legs. She staggered and almost dropped her wand. She switched hands quickly, turning her uninjured side toward Harriet and pulling her bloodied arm behind her back. But she was shaking now. Copious amounts of her blood spilled to the floor. She didn't dare glance at the one remaining intact mirror to see if any of the glass had touched her face.

She grimaced at Mr. Mudd's Eye-Spy, which floated behind Harriet, just before Harriet said, "*Expelliarmus!*" Alexandra's wand flew from her hand and clattered across the floor.

Harriet returned Alexandra's grimace with a feral grin. She took a step, only slightly less wobbly than Alexandra, but she held her wand steady. "You did this to me," she said. "You and your father."

"Let me guess — you never wanted to hurt anyone," said Alexandra.

Harriet's face twisted into a snarl. "Like they say in those awful plays: any last words?"

"*Accio Eye-Spy*," Alexandra said.

The Eye-Spy rocketed through the air in a straight line directly at Alexandra. Harriet's head was in its path. The impact made a heavy "*Thwack!*" sound, and as Harriet staggered forward, the Eye-Spy veered and spun away before arcing toward Alexandra again. She retrieved the yew wand from behind her back, where she had tucked it. She pointed it at Harriet and the onrushing Eye-Spy and said, "*Caedarus!*"

The yew wand was as ornery as ever, but wielded in fury, held by an arm soaked with blood, it yielded power generously. A green sphere erupted from its tip and seemed to fill half the bathroom. It lifted Harriet off the ground and hurled her against the last unbroken mirror. The mirror shattered, and Harriet slid to the ground, leaving blood smeared on the wall and broken glass behind her. The Eye-Spy was also knocked across the room, where it struck a toilet, bounced, and went rolling under the remaining undestroyed stalls.

Alexandra sank to the ground and sat cross-legged for a moment, still holding the yew wand and watching Harriet. The other girl didn't move. Neither did the Eye-Spy.

Alexandra waved her wand to blow smoke away from her. She was bleeding more profusely than Harriet. She was tempted to lie down on the floor herself.

After all the noise and destruction, no one had entered the bathroom. She tried to open the door again, but it remained shut. She couldn't hear anything from outside, and could not feel Charlie. She assumed that meant Harriet was still alive.

She had never been particularly skilled at Healing Charms, but she managed to extract the shards of glass from her skin and stop the bleeding. After resting for several minutes, she forced herself to her feet. First she stumbled to where Harriet's wand lay on the shattered floor. She picked the wand up, brought it over to one of the collapsed sinks, propped one end against the white ceramic basin, and brought her foot down on it. The wand broke with a splintering sound followed by a black and yellow flash and a cloud of smoke. Alexandra stomped the broken fragments a few more times for good measure, then kicked them under the toilets.

Then she retrieved her other wand, the black hickory wand. After considering a moment, she also picked up the Eye-Spy, which now lay motionless on the ground, its iris closed. She cast spells Lucilla and Drucilla had taught her, examining the enchantments that powered it, until she was satisfied, then cast a Shrinking Charm that reduced it to the size of a marble, and dropped it in her pocket.

Then she began pacing the room, exploring every boundary and seam. She tried burning through the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and of course, the door. Although she succeeded in leaving more burn marks, the room remained sealed.

She attempted to Disapparate from the room, but as she expected, she was unsuccessful.

Alexandra stood in the center of the bathroom and closed her eyes. For a very long time, she stood there, deep in thought. Then she opened her eyes, and looked around for an even longer time. With the yew wand in one hand and the hickory wand in the other, she remained in a state of near-meditation, and finally nodded to herself.

*Just you and me*, she thought. *And only one can leave*. Alexandra felt anger bubbling beneath her calm. It was like Darla all over again. Alexandra hadn't asked for this. She hadn't chosen to be put in this situation by another crazy girl who wanted to kill her and closed off all her other options. What else was she supposed to do?

She only moved again when she heard a growl.

"Down, girl," she said, pointing the hickory wand.

The growl was replaced with a startled grunt, then a whine. Alexandra turned to face Harriet, who was now in wolf form, wearing the shredded remains of her clothes. Alexandra's Deadweight Spell had pinned her to the ground with her four legs splayed out around her. The wolf was bloodied and dazed, and its fur was burned where Harriet's skin had been, but it managed to peel its lips back to growl at her.

"You really did seal this room up," Alexandra said. "You're right. There's no way to unseal it except for one of us to die."

The wolf stopped growling, and lay on the ground panting instead.

Alexandra walked over to her, and knelt by the quivering canine form. She tucked her yew wand back into her belt, and grabbed Harriet by the scruff of her neck, pointing her black hickory wand at her head.

"Do you want to do this as a wolf, or as a human?" Alexandra asked.



The wolf's eyes rolled back to stare at her. Then it transformed, and it was Harriet lying splayed, face-down on the bathroom floor, covered in blood, burns, and bruises. She was half-naked, but as Alexandra dispelled the Deadweight Spell and hauled her to her feet, she managed to pull the remnants of her robes to her body.

Alexandra maintained her grip on the back of Harriet's neck, now with her blood-matted blonde hair tangled in her fingers. She held the tip of her wand against Harriet's temple. Harriet took several deep breaths, then let out a sob.

"This isn't how you thought it was going to go, is it?" said Alexandra. Her voice was quiet, steady, no longer pained, though she still felt the cuts and burns over much of her body. But her calmness seemed to erode Harriet's. Tears ran down the other girl's face.

"I didn't do this to you," Alexandra said. "And neither did my father. You chose this. *You chose this*, and you can take all the reasons why and stick them where I ought to stick my wand."

Harriet shuddered.

"Everyone always has a reason for trying to kill me," Alexandra said. "But guess what? It never works! I'm still here!" She shook Harriet, who gasped and groaned in pain. "I won and you lost, just like everyone else. Any last words?"

Harriet squeezed her eyes shut, and shook her head.

Alexandra shoved the point of her wand between Harriet's lips, and as the bigger girl let out a startled squeal, Alexandra said, "*Fussensuds!*"

Harriet gagged as foam gurgled and spewed out of her mouth and nose. Alexandra reached for the magical seam she had felt running under the length of New Amsterdam, stretching out into the city. She opened a crack in the world, and shoved Harriet through it, before stepping after her.

They flashed through a brilliant landscape of gold and green, surfed over petals of enormous flowers, like Alice in Wonderland, all the while Alexandra still gripping Harriet's hair. Harriet's mouth opened in a soundless scream filled with soap bubbles, but she just flailed as Alexandra drew them toward the other side of the crack, which had seemed so much closer when she first opened it. She meant to just step into a world away and back, but that world was so much vaster than she'd imagined. She wondered if she'd made a terrible error, one that would leave her and Harriet trapped here forever.

Then the world dimmed and the air was cold against their skin, and Alexandra and Harriet both staggered into the corridor outside the girls' bathroom in Crown Hall. It seemed the entire New Amsterdam Academy faculty was there, with Professor Haster in the forefront. There were also a couple of those blue-robed Analysts, and a crowd of students, whom the adults were trying to keep back with little success. Half a dozen wizards were in the midst of casting spells before the girls' bathroom door, and the exterior of the door and the walls around it showed evidence of their efforts to break through.

Alexandra shoved Harriet, who fell to the ground in a heap of smoking, ragged clothing. She lay there, sobbing, a bloody, burned, bedraggled mess. Alexandra didn't feel much better, but she was determined to stay on her feet.

"She tried to kill me, if it matters," Alexandra said.

Professor Haster stepped forward. "As far as we could tell, the bathroom was Blood-Sealed, and from what Miss Isingrim's friends told us... " He turned to the two girls who'd joined Harriet in her ambush of Alexandra on the night she arrived. They looked terrified. "She cast it so that only one of you could leave."

"That's right," Alexandra said.

Professor Haster looked at Harriet. "No one can break a Blood-Seal. It's an Unbreakable Vow. Yet you are both still alive."

"I cheated," Alexandra said. "If you don't mind, I'd like to see a Healer now."

"We don't have a full-time Healer anymore," Professor Haster said. "You'll have to go to the hospital."

Alexandra was grateful when Angelique and Anna both emerged from the throng of open-mouthed spectators and took her arms.

"I guess she'll probably need healing too," Alexandra said, pointing at Harriet. "Just keep her away from me. Seriously." She looked at all the other girls crowding the hallway. How many of them had knowingly stayed away so Harriet could come after her again? "Sorry, that bathroom's going to be out of service, as long as we both live."

## \*Chapter 55\*: I Spy

After Angelique cast charms that mended Alexandra's clothing, and Anna removed the bloodstains, they both volunteered to accompany Alexandra to the New Amsterdam Center for Chirurgy and Healing. Angelique smugly informed them that she had an Apparition license.

The waiting room resembled the nave of a church. Over a dozen other witches and wizards waited to see the Healers, as did a hunchbacked creature with a canine face, whose long, grizzled jaw was locked on what looked like a chewed-off piece of a car engine, and a goblin who had flowers growing from his skull.

"Are you okay?" Anna asked, as they sat on a pew-like bench.

"I'll live." Alexandra leaned against her friend and closed her eyes.

"I'm still upset with you," Anna said.

"I know."

"Alexandra, did you really mean all those things you said about the Confederation?" Angelique asked. "Are they really trying to kill you?"

"What, you thought all this time I was just looking for attention?" asked Alexandra. Her eyes were still closed.

"It did sometimes seem that way," Angelique said weakly. "But Anna, that means they tried to kill you, too!"

"Yes," Anna said. "Alexandra saved my life, and then she saved Larry and Adela. She was incredibly brave and ingenious. That makes it hard to be angry at her for accusing me of giving her *Amortentia*."

"Alexandra!" Angelique exclaimed. "You didn't!"

"I did."

"Alexandra, you can be truly awful, sometimes," Angelique said.

"I know. I'd be even more terrible as a girlfriend."

Eventually, a witch in an old-fashioned nurse's outfit led Alexandra into another room with furnishings consisting of a cot and a rack of Alchemical supplies. The Healer there already had salves and potions opened. He was a bald wizard with a neatly-trimmed white beard, and seemed kindly enough as he inspected Alexandra's injuries.

"Did you try to heal yourself?" he asked.

"Yes," Alexandra said.

"Well, you didn't do a terrible job. But you'd have scars without professional healing." He cast a charm Alexandra was unfamiliar with that extracted slivers of glass she'd missed, without any pain. He cast some more healing charms on her various burns and bruises. "Where did all these other scars come from?"

"I can't seem to stay out of trouble," Alexandra said. She was grateful the Healer didn't seem to recognize her.

The wizard tsked. "I deal with dueling injuries fairly often. But this looks like it was a nasty duel."

"You should see the other girl." Alexandra wondered where they had taken Harriet.

"Well, I've patched you up pretty well," said the Healer. "I recommend resting and no intense physical or magical activity, and definitely no more dueling."

"Thanks," Alexandra said. "That sounds like good advice."

She walked out without assistance, though still with a slight limp. She told Anna and Angelique, "I'm hungry."

It was late evening, and they made their way through the narrow streets of New Amsterdam, which were cramped and busy, compressed as they were between the enormous avenues of Muggle New York that surrounded each block of the unseen wizarding community in its midst.

They found a Goody Pruet's, and over a slice of black, oily *schadenfreude* pie, with a glass of FizzyPop, Alexandra told Anna and Angelique about the duel in the bathroom.

They were shocked at the extremes Harriet had gone to in her murder attempt, then confused by Alexandra's escape from the Blood-Sealed room.

"So now you can open up other another world at will?" Anna asked.

"It's not that easy," Alexandra said. "I wasn't even sure I'd be able to get back to this one."

Anna's eyes widened. "Why would you do that?"

"Because otherwise she'd have had to kill that wolf-girl," Angelique said. "Honestly, Anna, sometimes you are so silly. What else would you expect her to do?"

"Kill the wolf-girl," Anna said.

Alexandra and Angelique both stared at her for a moment.

"She meant to kill you," Anna said. "She'll probably try again."

"I destroyed her wand. So maybe she won't try immediately." Alexandra sighed and chewed slowly on the black *schadenfreude* filling, savoring its taste. "She called me a vile, narcissistic cunt."

Angelique's hand went to her mouth. "My goodness."

Anna said, "She's the c-word. Seriously, Alex... She didn't deserve mercy."

Alexandra found Anna's unexpected bloodthirstiness unnerving, though filled with *schadenfreude*, she wondered if killing Harriet might have been more satisfying.

They left the Goody Pruett's. The street was full of wizard establishments — Alchemists, Artificers, a cafe advertising "Muggle-style Pizza Pies and Imported Coffee," a Clockwork repair shop, a wand shop, many robe and hat stores, and one tiny establishment, wedged between a bookstore and another pastry shop, with a small sign hanging over a narrow windowless door: "Snead's Elven Cobblers," beneath a picture of a boot.

Under other circumstances, Alexandra would have wanted to explore these places. And this was just one small street in New Amsterdam. They reached the end of the street, where another few steps would take them out into the Muggle world. Anna was unbothered by the sight of cars rushing past a few yards away, though Angelique regarded them with apprehension.

"I'm really tired, and I need to prepare for the Beasts challenge tomorrow," Alexandra said.

"You're still competing in the Decathlon?" Anna asked.

"Until I have a better idea," Alexandra said. "Have you got any ideas for how I can sneak off to Storm King Mountain, with all this attention on me?"

"No," Anna said resignedly.

"Where is Storm King Mountain? Why do you want to go there?" asked Angelique.

"Better you don't know," Alexandra said. "No offense, Angelique. Just think of it as another one of my outrageous stunts. And remember that it wasn't all about me, if I fail."

Angelique shook her head. "Alexandra, you sound so grim. I can see why Anna worries about you."

"I'm worried about her, too," Alexandra said.

Angelique looked from Alexandra to Anna, then frowned as a truck rolled past, blasting its horn.

"I'll be fine," Alexandra said. "I don't think anyone will try to kill me on my way back to my room."

"I'll walk with you," Anna said.

"But how will you get back, Anna?" Angelique asked. "You don't even have an Apparition license."

Anna smiled. "I'll be fine. I know how to get around a Muggle city. I'm not a pureblood like you two."

Angelique frowned doubtfully. Alexandra rolled her eyes, though she knew Anna was teasing.

"Well, take care, then," Angelique said. "And good luck, Alexandra." She gathered up her robes, which were long and fluttery and not very suited to walking around. She winked at them, and Apparated away with a pop.

Alexandra and Anna walked to the river, not saying much. They reached the steps going down to the water. Walloon Tower rose up in front of them.

"They put you there?" Anna asked.

"Yeah. I don't even know who else is staying there. Where are you staying, anyway?"

"There's a Chinese wizarding community here in New York. My father was able to arrange for me to stay with some distant relations."

Alexandra nodded. The two of them stood by the water's edge.

Alexandra spoke first. "I'm really sorry, Anna."

"You always are," Anna said.

"I mean, about everything."

"I know what you meant." Anna looked across the river. The wind blew her long black hair across her face, and her robes fluttered around her. "In eighth grade, I betrayed you to try to save my father. I know you forgave me, but I think you've never really trusted me after that."

"That's not true," Alexandra said with a pang, feeling like the gulf between them was widening.

"I don't blame you. But it really, really hurt, Alex, to think you'd believe I'd try to make you fall in love with me like that."

"I know," Alexandra said. "I was just so angry. I mean — I almost slept with *Larry*!"

Anna's mouth twitched.

"Anna... I'd take *Amortentia*, if it would make me feel the way you want me to feel."

Only a little light from the street lamps above reached them, and even when Anna tilted her face up, shadows fell across it. Alexandra had always thought she could read her friend's expressions, but now Anna's face was impassive, and her brown eyes were unreadable.

Slowly, Alexandra reached for Anna's hand. "I thought about what you said. About trying."

Anna didn't pull away, but she didn't say anything. Alexandra looked over at the tower, and said in a low voice, "You can come back with me, if you want. To my room."

Anna was silent a long time. Then she said, "*Amortentia* wouldn't be real. It wouldn't last."

"I know. I wasn't going to—"

Anna closed her eyes, and pulled her hand away. She turned away. "You were right," she said. "You'd be a terrible girlfriend."

Alexandra looked down. "Anna... I think things are going to get a lot worse. The threats, the danger to you and everyone else around me. And I'm running out of time."

"Then you should worry about yourself," Anna said. "The people around you can take care of themselves."

Alexandra didn't know what to say to that. She stood on the edge of the water and looked at her friend, wishing she had a Time-Turner again.

Anna's voice softened. "Be careful, Alex. Keep your promise."

Alexandra started to ask, "Which one?" but Anna Disapparated with a pop, startling her.

"Without a license," Alexandra said to the empty air. "Shame on you, Anna."

She took the magic bell out of her pocket, and rang it to walk through the river to Walloon Tower.

She had told Anna and Angelique the truth: she was very tired. But her night wasn't over yet. When she got to her room, she opened Charlie's cage.

"Miss you terrible," said Charlie.

"You knew I was in trouble, didn't you?" Alexandra said to the raven.

"Troublesome," Charlie affirmed.

Alexandra took a piece of parchment from her writing desk, and wrote a short message:

*"You win. I need your help. I'll do whatever you ask, but I need you to do something for me..."*

When she finished, she beckoned Charlie over, and tied the note around the raven's leg. Then she cracked the window open. "Take this note to my father."

She was still not sure how owls and ravens could find people that Special Inquisitors couldn't, but she assumed it depended on Abraham Thorn's willingness to be found.

"Fly, fly!" Charlie said, and flapped off into the night.

Next, Alexandra took out the tiny Eye-Spy she'd been carrying in her pocket. She reversed the Shrinking Charm and laid the orb on her desk to examine it in more detail. It was more complex than any of the artifacts Lucilla and Drucilla had let her work with, but she was able to figure out most of the enchantments on it. Repairing it was the easiest part. It started to roll under its own power immediately, and Alexandra cast another charm to fix it in place as she finished her work.

Finally, she released it. The Eye-Spy spun around, scanning the room before turning to face her.

"This is an invasion of privacy, Mr. Mudd," Alexandra said, knowing that without the Snitch present, the journalist couldn't hear her. But she gave the Eye-Spy the finger. Its iris opened wide, then it swiveled about and shot out the open tower window, zooming across the river back toward New Amsterdam.

She lay down in her bed, meaning to close her eyes only for a few minutes, but it was past midnight when she awoke. Angrily, she sat up and looked in the mirror, rubbing her eyes.

She waved her wand before the mirror, and said:

*"I spy, with Mr. Mudd's Eye,  
Archibald Mudd,  
So let's talk, you and I."*

The rhyme was a flourish, activating one of the spells she had cast on the Eye-Spy. The mirror shimmered and showed Mr. Mudd sitting at a desk, speaking into his crystal radio set. For the first time, she saw his bare head without the fedora he usually wore. She snickered at the sight of his premature bald spot. He wore pajamas, so he was in his room.

Alexandra unrolled her map of New Amsterdam, and pointed her wand. A pinpoint of light obligingly appeared, showing the location of the Eye-Spy. She was relieved that Mr. Mudd was not the guest of the Governor-General; instead, he seemed to be staying in the middle of New Amsterdam, near the Academy's temporary headquarters.

She rolled up her map and wearily began the hike back across the river to New Amsterdam.

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It took her forty minutes to reach the place where Mr. Mudd was staying: "The Gorgeous Gorgon Inn," according to her map. The inn was on a bustling street in downtown New Amsterdam that was busy even this late at night. Young witches and wizards were strolling from tavern to tavern, while elves and goblins and a few Clockworks moved about on business of their own. The elves seemed to be making late-night deliveries, while the Clockworks swept the streets. She had no idea what the goblins were up to; they stalked about silently and secretively, glaring at any humans who looked their way.

Alexandra saw no hags, but she did spot a gang of hairy, dog-jawed creatures like the one she'd seen at the New Amsterdam Center for Chirurgy and Healing. They were a sinister pack, but a passing Auror sent them walking in the other direction. Alexandra tried to look inconspicuous, hoping New Amsterdam didn't have a curfew, and that the Auror wouldn't recognize her. The Auror instead seemed more interested in interrogating a goblin, who had just crossed the street carrying a sheaf of papyrus under his arm.

Alexandra walked into the Gorgeous Gorgon Inn. Behind an ancient wooden counter with several candles sitting on it, an elderly witch with her hair covered by an enormous babushka dozed snoring in a large comfy armchair. Alexandra tip-toed past her and up the stairs.

Her map wasn't precise enough to tell her exactly which room Mr. Mudd was in, so she held out her wand and wiggled it. She heard a thump and a curse from behind one of the doors, so she went to that one and knocked on it.

"Who's there?" asked a voice from the other side.

There was a closed eye painted on a plaque set in the door, so Alexandra just folded her arms and stared at it. The eye opened, then widened into a round circle, before snapping shut.

After a very long delay, the door opened, and Archibald Mudd, wearing a robe over his pajamas and a fedora on his head, stood in the doorway looking down at her. He held a wand in one hand.

Alexandra smirked, more at the fedora than the wand. "Gosh, Mr. Mudd. You're not afraid of me, are you?"

"You've earned a fearsome reputation, Miss Quick," said Mr. Mudd. He did look nervous, but also curious. "What are you doing here? How did you know where I'm staying? I warn you, threatening the press —"

"I'm not here to threaten you," Alexandra said. "But if you don't let me in, I'll scream and make a scene. That might be embarrassing for you. Not so embarrassing for me. I'm kind of shameless, if you haven't figured out by now."

Mudd said, "I am not letting an underage witch into my hotel room at this time of night. Especially not the daughter of—"

Alexandra Apparated past him, into the room. It was a rather dingy room, with an open suitcase sitting on the bed, and piles of clothes strewn about. Mudd's Eye-Spy, Snitch, and radio sets all sat on the desk by a lamp, exactly where Alexandra had seen him through her mirror. There was an old-fashioned typewriter next to the Eye-Spy, along with a stack of parchment, several tied scrolls, and a leather-bound journal.

Mudd ran over to his desk and closed the journal. "Get out!" he demanded.

Alexandra gestured with her wand, and the door slammed shut.

"Are you writing your story for tomorrow's edition of the *Wizard World Weekly*?" she asked. "What will the headline be this time? 'Enemy's Dark Daughter Tricks Poor Psycho into Another Murder Attempt'?"

Mudd picked up his microphone. "Would you care to give me your side of what happened tonight? I'll be happy to include some quotes from you."

"Did you get some good pictures?" Alexandra asked. She pointed at the Eye-Spy. "What kind of a pervert sends an Eye-Spy into the girls' bathroom? Maybe you shouldn't be afraid of my father. Maybe you should be afraid of the female students at New Amsterdam Academy."

The reporter turned to look at the Eye-Spy, then back at her. He laughed.

"Charming," he said. "Miss Isingrim told me I'd be interested in having the Eye-Spy follow her. I didn't know where she was going to take it, of course, or that she was going to... well."

"Try to kill me? 'Cause you'd totally have warned me if you'd known, right?"

Mr. Mudd folded his arms.

"I want you to stop slinging mud about me and my friends," Alexandra said.

"What you call mud — haha, very clever — is merely a matter of perspective. You don't have to like my perspective, Miss Quick. Maybe you should try being less newsworthy." He gave her a patronizing smile.

"What if I can give you something in exchange? Something even the Governor-General can't."

"What would that be?" asked the reporter.

Alexandra smiled back at him. "An exclusive interview with Abraham Thorn."

## \*Chapter 56\*: Mazes and Monsters

The next morning, Alexandra was joined for breakfast by Anna, Angelique, Magnificent, Awesome, Vanessa, Damien, and Albert-Louis and his younger sister. Everyone wanted to talk about Alexandra's duel with Harriet. Her table was nearly as crowded as the one where Larry, Rebecca, Seimei, and most of the other champions sat. Alexandra didn't see Adela anywhere.

Anna produced that morning's *Wizard World Weekly*. There was no mention of the duel at New Amsterdam Academy, and the reporting on the Junior Wizarding Decathlon only briefly mentioned the Mysteries challenge, then listed their respective scores. There were no libelous pictures or headlines about Alexandra.

After seven challenges, Larry was still narrowly in the lead, but Alexandra had moved up to fourth place, behind Magnificent and Albert-Louis.

"You've become popular," Anna said.

"I don't know about that," Alexandra said. "All the girls seem to be blaming me for the line at the bathroom on the lower floor."

"I can't imagine why," said Angelique.

"Why don't they blame Harriet?" Alexandra grumbled.

"Oh, Alexandra, I was teasing." Angelique took a sip of pumpkin juice. "Anyway, Harriet and her friends were expelled. Aren't you satisfied?"

"Sure. Three murder attempts and permanently Blood-Sealing a bathroom, and she gets kicked out of school." Alexandra stabbed the fried plimpy on her plate. "I got expelled from Charmbridge for less. I got sent to *wizard prison* for less. Just saying."

"That chickee had some squirming eels in her head, right?" Magnificent said.

"Right," Alexandra agreed.

As breakfast ended, Albert-Louis said, "Good luck today, Alexandra. I hope you do well in the Beasts challenge. Not as well as me, of course. But better than them." He gestured at the other champions, and winked.

"Yes, good luck," said Vanessa. "I'm going to beat you, but I hope you don't get eaten by a dragon."

"That was heartwarming," Alexandra said, as the other champions headed for the elevators.

"Are you actually going to fight a dragon, Mag?" asked Awesome.

"That's just the name of the challenge, right?" said Magnificent. "No way they'd bring a dragon to New Amsterdam."

"Sure," Alexandra said. "Be careful, rooster. You don't know what *they* might do."

Magnificent grinned at her, patting a nervous-looking Awesome on the shoulder as they walked away.

"We can't actually watch your next challenge," Anna said, when they were momentarily alone in the lobby between the dining hall and the elevators. "Only what Mr. Mudd shows us."

"I know," Alexandra said.

"Have you figured anything out?" Anna asked.

"I've figured some things out." Alexandra gave her friend a pained look. "Other things, not so much."

Anna looked into her eyes a moment, then put her hands on Alexandra's face, and leaned in to kiss her on the lips.

"For luck," Anna said. Her expression was wistful.

Alexandra smiled sadly, then took the elevator, this time down to the street instead of back to Crown Hall.

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For the Beasts challenge, the champions were directed to the busiest street in New Amsterdam, just down the block from the Governor-General's mansion. The site of their challenge turned out to be an enormous pit yawning between several tall buildings of newer and more magnificent architecture than the bricks that made up so much of older New Amsterdam.

Alexandra looked around at the shattered remnants of marble columns and huge, cracked blocks of granite, and realized that this had once been the New Amsterdam Gringotts branch. The largest bank in the New World, until her father destroyed it last year — emptying its vaults in the process, or so it was rumored. The Gringotts goblins had never confirmed or denied this.

There were goblins here now, and other little people who looked rather like the dwarves Alexandra had encountered in the Ozarks, all digging, clearing away rubble, and cutting stone. When Alexandra walked down the steep sloping path to the bottom of the pit, she felt their eyes on her, and suspected they knew who she was.

New Amsterdam Academy Proctors at the bottom of the pit directed Alexandra and the other champions to an intact stone stairwell, which led down into what had once been the Gringotts basement. From there, they had to take a very old-fashioned hand-cranked elevator operated by Clockworks to descend even deeper.

Alexandra assumed there must be more stairs somewhere, but the elevator was the only exit she could see when they reached a gray concrete tunnel, which was damp and musty and looked much more like a sewer than the cold, stone corridors of Charmbridge Academy's basements.

Professor Haster once again faced the assembled champions with a cheerful smile, but Alexandra noticed that everyone was tenser now, more suspicious. The other champions seemed uneasy.

*Maybe they're starting to feel like someone's out to get them, too,* she thought.

She had brought her magical backpack with all her gear this morning. She wasn't the only one who was prepared for an expedition; almost everyone had at least a belt pouch, a sack, or in Rebecca Good's case, a bulging purse, full of whatever extra items they thought might help them.

"I hope you feel adequately recovered, Miss Quick," Professor Haster said.

Surprised and suspicious at the show of concern, Alexandra said, "I'm great, thanks." She looked past him to the other judges. She didn't see Richard Raspire, which made her more wary. Governor-General Hucksteen was pretending not to notice her.

"Excellent," Professor Haster said. He cleared his throat and addressed the rest of the assembled champions. "This challenge is the first of two today, with your next challenge being 'Brooms' this evening. Traditionally two of the most exciting events, leading up to the final duels tomorrow." He seemed to be speaking for the benefit of the Snitch and Eye-Spy again, which were both hovering overhead. Archibald Mudd stood behind the judges, seemingly paying no particular attention to Alexandra or any other champion.

"Over the past week, wizards from the Department of Magical Wildlife, assisted by the Magical Masons Guild, have constructed a labyrinth beneath New Amsterdam. The labyrinth starts here, beneath the once and future site of Gringotts, but it extends further, into the sewers and subterranean tunnels of the Muggles."

Professor Haster held out one hand and opened it, revealing a pile of coins in his palm. They were of various colors, but they didn't look like Confederation Pigeons, Eagles, or Lions.

"Your challenge is a treasure hunt. You are looking for coins that the Magical Masons Guild has hidden about the labyrinth. They are, of course, guarded by a variety of Beasts you will have to overcome or outwit." He smiled. "There may be some tricks and traps to negotiate as well.

"You will lose points for any contact with Muggles that requires the intervention of Obliviators, as well as any damage you cause to Muggles or their property. Remember, Muggles are Beings, not Beasts."

"Muggles are people, right?" said Magnificent.

"Right!" said Alexandra. Magnificent grinned at her, and she smiled back. Larry snorted, but several of the other champions clapped their hands. This didn't seem to sit well with the judges.

"Thank you once again for sharing your views, Mr. Blaze," said Professor Haster. "You are each to go through that archway." He pointed at a hole in the tunnel ringed with stones that looked newer than the stone around it. "Take one stone out of the archway when you go. These special temporary Portkeys provided to us by Selene's Magical Moon Minerals will transport you to a random location in the labyrinth. Find as many coins as you can before you're recalled. Your Portkey can bring you back here if you say the word '*Redire*.' Lose your Portkey stone and you will be disqualified."

One by one, the champions walked into the tunnel entrance. The stones embedded in the arch came loose easily, and each challenger disappeared in the darkness.

"So, basically we're going into a dungeon to kill monsters and search for treasure?" said Rebecca Good, as she took a stone. "What a stupid challenge. Who came up with this?" She vanished as she went through the archway.

Larry put a hand on Alexandra's shoulder and pushed past her. "Watch your back, Quick."

*Still a jerk,* she thought.

She was sixth in line. She took one of the temporary Portkeys. It was round and gray and smooth; to all appearances, an ordinary river stone.

She took another step, and was jerked through space before falling into cold, black water with a splash.

She sputtered and surfaced, and realized after kicking her legs that the water came up almost to her chest. She could see nothing; it was absolutely dark. She held her wand over her head while tucking the Portkey stone into one pocket, and cast a Light Spell.

She was in a large tunnel, with an arched ceiling high above her head. Water filled a canal running through the middle of the tunnel, but there were walkways above the water line on either side. It didn't smell great, but the water didn't stink of sewage either. She was grateful for that. If Governor-General Hucksteen could have arranged to have her dropped into raw sewage, she was sure he would have.

Something bumped her, hard. She spun around, and saw a white shape moving through the water, quickly retreating past the circle of light cast by her wand.

She began edging toward the side of the tunnel. There were no ladders or handholds, so she figured she'd have to pull herself up out of the water. Then she saw a glitter near her feet.

Something came rushing at her. She touched her wand to the surface of the water and said, "*Frigia!*"

The water in front of her froze into a giant mass of ice, and the thing coming at her slammed into it, shattering the miniature iceberg into pieces. Alexandra hastily backed away toward the concrete side of the channel, while chunks of ice bobbed and tumbled around her. She saw a gaping pair of jaws, and then a thick, scaly tail whipped past her. She had her backpack against the wall now, but she was afraid to turn around to crawl out; the pack slowed her down and the thing was too fast.

When the monster came torpedoing at her again, she held her wand underwater and said, "*Caedarus!*"

A green ball of light exploded beneath the surface, and the concussion almost threw her out of the water.

While she regained her footing, something pale white and massive floated to the surface and twisted slowly, bobbing with the chunks of ice.

Alexandra stared at it for a moment, then realized it was stunned, and turned around, placed her hands on the elevated portion of the tunnel, and pulled herself onto the concrete walkway. It was difficult, chilled and shaken as she was, but those huge jaws gave her motivation. She hauled herself up, kicked her legs out of the water, and rolled as far from the edge as she could squeeze herself before twisting around to put her back against the tunnel wall and stand up.

The beast was an albino white alligator, at least fifteen feet long. As Alexandra shivered from the cold and adrenaline, the alligator blinked and opened its jaws, emitted an eerie hissing growl, and thrashed the water with its tail before diving again.

Alexandra looked in the dark water where the beast had disappeared, then searched for the glittering reflection she'd seen before.

"*Accio coin*," she said.

With a little splash, the coin flew out of the water and into her hand.

"Well, that was easy," she said.

The water exploded a yard from her, and the alligator came surging up onto the walkway, jaws gaping wide. Alexandra had no time to hex it; it was almost upon her, so there was nowhere for her to go but back into the canal. Behind her, she heard a deceptively tiny splash as the alligator slid in after her.

When it came at her again, its jaws were already snapping shut on her before she regained her footing. With those terrible teeth coming down on her outstretched arm, the arm grasping her wand, she cast an Engorgement Charm on the wand itself.

It expanded vertically to the size and thickness of a staff and immediately bent beneath the crushing pressure of the alligator's jaws. Bent, but did not buckle. The alligator's head thrashed violently and it tore the wand out of Alexandra's grasp, then continued rolling and thrashing, trying to dislodge the spear of wood holding its jaws open.

Alexandra swam to the side of the tunnel and hauled herself out of the water again. She drew her yew wand, pointed it at the alligator, and hesitated. In her anger and near-panic, she'd been about to kill it. But the creature was just acting like the dumb animal it was, and it wasn't its fault she'd been dropped into its den as part of some stupid challenge. She remembered feeling manipulated by Sees-From-Laurel and his kith, and now she was about to do the same thing, kill something for the entertainment of others, in a contest that no longer mattered to her.

"*Petrificus Totalus*," she said. The alligator abruptly stopped thrashing, and floated stiffly on the surface of the water.

"*Accio wand*," she said, and her oversized wand jerked free of the gator's jaws and flew into her hand. It almost knocked her over when she caught it, but she quickly reversed the Engorgement Charm and took her black hickory wand into her other hand.

"Later, gator," she said, and began walking down the tunnel, dripping wet and cold and not very happy about this challenge.

She cast Drying Charms on herself as she walked, until she was merely damp and no longer freezing. After about fifteen yards, she found another tunnel that veered to the right and away from the water. She went that direction, and once she was far enough from the underground canal that she'd at least have time to react if the alligator came slithering after her, she sat down and opened her backpack.

She spread out a piece of parchment on the ground, took out her Portkey stone to weigh down the top edge, and laid her magic mirror on the bottom edge.

Her reflection in the flattering magic mirror managed to look adorably bedraggled even in the poor light. Alexandra shook her head at it, and said:

"*Mirror, mirror, on the ground,  
Show me what the Eye-Spy's found.*"

The mirror flickered and showed white and black bands of static, before resolving into a picture of another stone tunnel. Alexandra was pleased that the charms she'd cast on the Eye-Spy before returning it to Mr. Mudd were working. The Eye-Spy seemed to be following after Seimei Kamo, the Majokai champion, who kept glancing over his shoulder at it with an annoyed expression.

Seimei slowed his pace as he approached a branch in the tunnel with a soft glow of light illuminating it from down the bend. He snapped a fan open, peered at some characters on it Alexandra couldn't make out, snapped it shut again, and tucked it back onto the sash around his waist. Then he began moving more stealthily, creeping toward the tunnel opening with his wand held before him.

Curious, Alexandra leaned forward, wondering who or what Seimei was sneaking up on. The Eye-Spy floated closer until it was just over Seimei's shoulder and swung about a split-second after he did, showing a view down a smaller tunnel. At the end of it was a small figure crouched next to a backpack, illuminated by the glow from the end of her wand, which reflected off of something on the ground in front of her.

"Oh, crap!" Alexandra exclaimed, and dropped and rolled just before the curse zinged over her head.

She rose, casting a Shield Charm that deflected Seimei's next spell. Angrily, she cast a Porcupine Quills Curse at him, followed by several Blasting Curses. The Majokai wizard deflected these, but spun in the air and slammed into the side of the tunnel when Alexandra cast a Levitation Spell. Dazed, he was unable to prevent her from Summoning his wand into her hand, so when he staggered to his feet, Alexandra was advancing on her disarmed rival with her own wand at the ready.

"What's the big deal, trying to ambush me?" she asked. "Not very honorable, is it?"

Seimei snorted. "Honor? I'm trying to win like everyone else."

"Jerk." Alexandra cast an Incarcerous Spell, wrapping Seimei up in magical ropes, and gagged him out of spite. Then she took his Portkey stone and hurled it down the tunnel as hard as she could. It bounced and clattered until it went into the canal with a little splash. Seimei's eyes went wide and angry.

"You're lucky I don't break your wand," she said, tossing his wand down the tunnel in the opposite direction. She looked up at the Eye-Spy, which was now accompanied by the eavesdropping Snitch. "I'm racking up points ruthlessly, again." She waved her wand at the floating spheres, and



they both shot backward down the tunnel at high speed. She wished she could see the look on Mr. Mudd's face as he tried to figure out why his spy devices weren't obeying him.

She collected her backpack and other items and dragged Seimei back the way he'd come. The underground tunnel he'd snuck down to find her was much larger than the canal she'd fallen into. There was a tiny bit of light shining down from slots up in the roof, and Alexandra heard the distant rumble and honking of traffic.

"I'd stay put if I were you," she said to Seimei. "And beware of alligators."

She moved on, until she came to the end of the large tunnel. It tapered, becoming narrower and narrower. No more light filtered down from above, so she had to use the illumination of her wand again. Once safely out of sight of Seimei, she took out her mirror and parchment again and resumed what she had been doing.

In the mirror, she saw that the Eye-Spy seemed to be moving through near-pitch darkness, with only occasional alterations in the shades of gray indicating motion. But on her unrolled parchment, a red dot moved in a straight line. She cast another spell while holding her Portkey stone, and fifteen blue dots appeared on the parchment. She muttered an incantation for the other Portkey she had touched besides her own — Seimei's — and one of the fifteen blue dots turned green. She muttered an incantation for her own, and a second dot turned yellow, not far from the green one.

"Got you," she said. She was now tracking both the Eye-Spy and everyone else on the blank map she had enchanted the night before. The map did not show her the labyrinth itself, but it showed her where everyone was relative to one another. With that, and the spell she'd cast to look through Mr. Mudd's Eye-Spy in her mirror, she wasn't about to be surprised again.

"Hey, chickee." The voice came from behind her. Alexandra jumped and almost let out a strangled cry. She whirled and pointed her wand at Magnificent, who held his hands up, palms outward.

"How did you do that?" she demanded.

"What, find you? You and Seimei weren't exactly quiet, right?"

She looked down at her map. There was no blue dot next to her yellow one. "Where's your Portkey?" she demanded.

Magnificent leaned over to look at the map. "Well, that's some clever craft. 'Course everyone else is using every trick they can, too, right? So I guess you're just as crafty as them."

"What about you?" Alexandra said.

"Oh, I ditched the stone. 'Course I know where to find it again." He smiled, looked around, and said, "*Muffliato*." Then his expression grew more serious. "I believe you, chickee. They're out to get you. There's something seriously not righteous going on here. That Mysteries challenge was seven shades of black, right? You want to tell me why the Gov hates you so much?"

"It's a long story," Alexandra said.

"I'd like to hear it," Magnificent said. Pops, booms, and crackling echoed through the underground. "Maybe another time, though, right?"

Alexandra turned, still keeping an eye on Magnificent. "Sounds like someone else is trying to take out the competition."

"That Mudd warlock, with his Eye-Spy and Snitch, has turned this into a hexing spectacle, right?" Magnificent said. "We're not showing our craft, we're just putting on a show for the audience. And you notice how Professor Haster keeps mentioning all those wares?"

"It's called advertising." Alexandra sighed and lowered her wand. "I don't know what to do with you, Magnificent. You helped me, and I'd really like to believe you're not going to betray me."

They both heard a skittering sound, then a soft pattering like many small bodies moving quickly. This was followed by a scream off in the distance.

Alexandra knelt and picked up her map and mirror. In the mirror, she saw Vanessa Lightwood and Jonah Crawley dueling. Jonah was retreating as Vanessa blasted ancient, rusted iron pipes loose from crumbling brick walls. One wall almost collapsed on Jonah.

On the map, she saw another blue dot not far from her, which she presumed was the origin of the scream.

"I think that was Rebecca." She tucked the map and mirror into her backpack. "Do you want to see if she's all right?" She waved him forward.

"Right, you'd better let me go first so I don't betray you." Magnificent walked ahead, but drew his wand as they passed through a doorway and entered a corridor narrow enough for only one person at a time. "You are kind of paranoid, chickee."

"You admitted they're out to get me," Alexandra said.

"*They* are, not me, right?"

The two of them walked quickly down the corridor, with those scurrying sounds echoing ahead of and then behind them. Magnificent had lit his wand also. When they emerged into a larger chamber, he stumbled, then immediately yelped as something yanked him off his feet. Alexandra saw him disappear, and cast a Shield Charm before stepping cautiously into the open space he'd just vacated.

Tiny arrows, visible in the light cast by her wand and a dozen little torches, whipped through the air and bounced against her magical shield. Alexandra saw what seemed to be a swarm of large rats charging her, while Magnificent yelled from overhead. She spared a glance upward; he was caught in a net that hung from a ledge fifteen feet up. The chamber they were in was slanted toward a raised dais at the bottom, and resembled nothing so much as an ancient movie theater without seats. The ledge Magnificent dangled from could have been a balcony.

Alexandra cast a Nettle Hex, and the rats rushing at her scattered, screaming and chittering angrily as a cloud of black needles flew into their midst. Alexandra realized with horror that they were alternating between scampering about on all fours and standing up to wield tiny weapons. She saw now that there was a pile of gold coins on that raised dais. And something else.

Another arrow slashed through the air and grazed her cheek. Angrily, Alexandra conjured a noxious cloud of choking, stinking gas that sent the rats scurrying for the shadows.

With a thump, Magnificent landed on the ground next to her. "Ow," he groaned.

"Don't you know how to cast a Falling Charm?" she asked, helping him up. Charred strands of netting fell away from him.

The two of them continued magically deflecting rat-sized arrows and javelins as they proceeded down the slanted floor toward the stage-like elevation at the front of the chamber.

"Where did these rat-things come from?" Alexandra asked. "You know, it's really messed up for them to just... stock a labyrinth with creatures we're supposed to kill, especially if they're not just animals."

"Right," Magnificent agreed. Then he drew a breath. "Oh, Merlin."

Rebecca Good, still in her Salem Traditionalist garb even for this subterranean expedition, lay on her back next to the pile of coins that had been laid out as an obvious lure. Her eyes were open, and her mouth was filled with blood. A barbed shaft much thicker than an arrow had penetrated her from behind and gone through her body. The bloody point jutted out from below her ribs. Her black dress did not show the blood that soaked it, but Alexandra could see it spreading around her in a growing pool.

Alexandra yelled in fury and hurled fireballs across the room as Magnificent knelt next to Rebecca. The fireballs exploded with a flash, casting dozens of rat-shaped shadows against the walls. The rats were in full retreat now. The rain of arrows stopped.

"Merlin, she's bad," Magnificent said. "I'm pretty good with healing craft, but..."

"How's your Apparition?" Alexandra asked. "Can you take her back, since you went and threw away your Portkey?"

Magnificent nodded. "Easy, chickee," he whispered to Rebecca. Gently, he slid his arms under her and lifted her off the ground. Blood pattered on the floor. Rebecca let out a long, soft sigh, and closed her eyes.

"What about you?" Magnificent asked Alexandra.

Alexandra frowned. What about her? She was no longer interested in the Decathlon — in fact, she wasn't even planning to finish it. She had begun making other plans. But she hadn't figured out how to execute them yet, and in the meantime —

Magnificent chuckled and shook his head. "I get it, chickee. You still want to win, right?"

"It's not like that," Alexandra said.

"Watch your back," Magnificent said. He and Rebecca disappeared with a pop.

"And stop calling me chickee," Alexandra muttered to the empty space he'd left behind.

## **\*Chapter 57\*: This is Bad**

The rats didn't pursue Alexandra from the strange theater-like chamber. When she felt she'd gotten far enough away, she cautiously examined her magic mirror again. The Eye-Spy was now following Albert-Louis, who was shooting down a tunnel on a broom, surrounded by a swarm of bat-like creatures with glowing red eyes. Alexandra saw tracks beneath them; he was in a Muggle subway tunnel, and flashing spells that burned the creatures out of the air around him.

"Jeez," she muttered.

Her parchment showed one fast-moving blue dot accompanied by the red dot representing the Eye-Spy. Albert-Louis was far from her and moving in another direction. There were at least three dots within shouting distance. She proceeded more stealthily, moving only when the nearest dot moved ahead of her. She entered a square corridor with walls, floor, and ceiling that looked made of single blocks of solid stone. Embedded in the stone ceiling, just out of her reach, was one of those silver-blue coins Professor Haster had displayed before the challenge.

"*Accio Coin*," she said.

The coin wiggled, and then the entire stone block dropped. Alexandra didn't even have time to utter an incantation. The descending ceiling struck her head and she fell. She landed on her back, staring directly at the stone surface inches from her nose. Dazed, she wondered why it hadn't crushed her.

"Quick!" someone said. "Get out of there!"

She sucked in a breath.

"Merlin's balls, hurry up!"

Alexandra began pushing herself with her legs along the smooth floor, dragging her pack behind her, keeping her wand in one hand. She crawled on her back for several yards before her head emerged from beneath the fallen stone ceiling. She found herself staring up at Larry.

He reached a silver hand down to help her up. She stood, rubbed her head, and stared at the stone block filling the corridor. Larry held his wand level in his other hand.

"*Levitas*," he said, raising his wand. Slowly, the stone block rose, and kept rising. Alexandra was impressed in spite of herself. She had never lifted such a massive weight with her Levitation Spell.

The block settled back into the ceiling, rumbled, and became motionless.

"Careless, Quick," Larry said. "Very careless. Don't you know a death trap when you see one?"

"They aren't supposed to be setting *death traps* for us!" Alexandra said. The irony struck her only after she said it. "Uh, thanks."

The ember glow of one of Larry's cigarettes bobbed in the darkness. He exhaled wizard tobacco smoke in her general direction.

"So, how's Adela?" she asked.

"Fine. She hates me again." Larry turned and began walking along a concrete tunnel that looked like it had been made by Muggles, rather than the featureless gray square corridor Alexandra had foolishly entered. She hesitated, then followed him.

"That Radicalist hobgoblin was right," Larry said. "You need looking after."

"Wait — Magnificent said what?" Alexandra stopped. Larry turned back and gave her a pitying look.

"He said 'they' are out to get you." Larry held up his fingers to make exaggerated quotation marks in the air. He still had a wand in one hand and a cigarette in the other. "Somehow he got the idea that we're friends, so he asked me to help keep you from getting killed. Merlin!" He threw his cigarette on the ground and stepped on it.

"How did you know where I was?" Alexandra demanded.

Larry smirked. "I put a Trace on you."

"You what? How?"

"My uncle works for the Trace Office. I learned a little from him. Don't worry, it's temporary. I had to touch you to put it on you."

They both heard the sound of stone grinding against stone, followed by a shriek.

Alexandra said, "Oh, crap!" She ran back to the death trap corridor, with Larry behind her.

The stone ceiling had fallen again, though only half-way. Alexandra projected the light from her wand down the corridor, and saw Hela Punuk squatting beneath the massive stone with her arms outstretched, somehow bearing the weight of it on her back and shoulders. Her entire body trembled, her knees looked about to buckle, and when she looked up, her face was twisted with pain.

Alexandra tried to raise the stone block with a Levitation Spell. It inched upwards, but then Hela collapsed and it fell again. She reached for her yew wand, but Larry sighed and cast a Levitation Spell also, and their two spells together pushed the block back up into the ceiling.

"How did you do that?" Alexandra asked, as Hela staggered out of the corridor and fell against the side of the tunnel beyond, catching her breath.

"Strength... of an elk," Hela said. "Not... enough."

"Why not strength of a mastodon, or strength of an Arctic Re'em?" Alexandra asked.

Hela gave her a disgusted look. "I would have to eat the heart of a mastodon or an Arctic Re'em."

"This entire challenge seems designed to kill someone," Larry said.

"I'm afraid it might have already," Alexandra said. "Rebecca Good was mortally wounded."

"Only Colonials would think this is entertaining," Hela said.

"Then why are you here?" Alexandra asked.

"I have my reasons." Hela straightened up. "Thank you," she said stiffly.

"Whatever." Alexandra belatedly tried looking with her Witch's Sight, but the trap seemed to be mechanical in nature. Trying to Summon the coin from safely outside the corridor didn't work, so she pointed her wand and said "*Dreadmors*." A glowing red skull and crossbones appeared on the stone floor, beneath the silver coin.

"What is that?" asked Hela.

"Something to warn any other idiots who try to get that coin, hopefully," Alexandra said.

Hela's expression was sinister in the dim red glow of Alexandra's Warning Mark. Larry was silent.

"What now?" Alexandra asked. "This isn't a team challenge."

"Maybe you're wrong," Hela said. "I think the judges want us to fight each other for their entertainment. The rules don't say we can't cooperate, and clearly many of these challenges are difficult or impossible to do alone."

"We're scored on how much treasure we bring back," Larry said. "How do you plan on splitting the loot?"

Hela shrugged. "We can figure that out if we find any. Or at the end."

"You mean when you turn on us, like you turned on me the last time I cooperated with you?" Alexandra said. "No thanks."

Hela gave her a flat stare, then reached into one of the pouches she was carrying and withdrew her stone Portkey. She handed it to Alexandra.

"Take it," she said. "Without it, I will be disqualified."

Alexandra regarded the outstretched hand for a moment as if Hela were offering her a curse. Then she took the Portkey and put it in her backpack. "Just because neither of us trusts the Confederation doesn't mean I trust you." She turned to Larry. "She's sneaky and I'm sure she's up to something."

"Really," Larry said.

"No one has been sneakier than you," said Hela. "I only tricked you when I had to. You're the one desperate to win at all costs."

"I don't even care about winning!" Alexandra snapped.

"Oh? Then why are you here?" Hela demanded.

"Why are you here? It's not like you have a chance — you're not even in the top ten."

"You don't care about winning, but you obviously care about our rankings," Hela said.

Larry shook his head. "Why am I here? To get between you two? Witches be crazy."

"Shut up," Alexandra and Hela said together.

They all looked at each other. Larry said, "Well, we can stay together, we can separate, or we can duel it out. It's all the same to me."

Alexandra took out her parchment again, and oriented it to their current location. She didn't show Larry and Hela the mirror, not wanting to reveal that she had cast her own spells on Mr. Mudd's Eye-Spy.

"No one has gone this way," she said, pointing in the direction where their tunnel narrowed.

The three of them walked in silence until they came to the top of some stairs that descended out of sight into darkness.

"You first, Quick," Larry said.

Alexandra looked at Hela. "I don't think so."

"Fine," Larry said. "You watch my back, then." He descended. Hela glanced at her, then followed Larry. Alexandra followed Hela.

Their Light Spells showed stairs that could not have been created by Muggles. They looked nothing like any of the regular subterranean architecture of New York. Alexandra wasn't even sure how deep it was possible to go beneath the city, and suspected this was a wizard-spaced construction. If so, however, it would have taken a prodigious amount of magic just for the Junior Wizarding Decathlon.

They went down over a hundred steps before they reached the bottom, a tiny stone-tiled courtyard in the shape of a half-crescent. It faced a very large grate, with black iron bars like a portcullis except they appeared to be solidly anchored in the stone. The barred opening was large enough for a tall man to walk through with his arms extended, if not for the grate. They could only see darkness through it. At either end of the mini-courtyard were open stone doorways leading into dark chambers beyond.

"Obviously we're supposed to go through the grate," Larry said, looking through the bars, when Alexandra and Hela joined him before it.

"Are you sure?" Alexandra asked. "If it's that easy, just Apparate — Hela, what are you doing?"

Hela walked around the curve of the courtyard and into the next chamber. Alexandra saw light from her wand shining from another grate between the black interior before them and the neighboring space Hela had entered. Then Hela cast a spell that sent the glow from her wand flying into the central gated-off chamber in a little ball of light. It showed a large circular stone-tiled chamber, with four grates spaced around it, and a large hole in the stone floor in the middle. As Hela's ball of light floated over the large hole, reflections from piles of glittering coins lit the darkness below.

"That's a lot of treasure," Alexandra said. "I'm sure there's nothing keeping us from just Apparating down there and making off with it, right?"

As if in reply, a massive head suddenly shot up through the hole in the middle of the central chamber, followed with incredible speed by a serpentine body that squeezed through it in the time it took the three teens to blink and step back.

With a roar, the enormous beast surged forward and slammed into the grate in front of Alexandra and Larry, baring teeth almost the length of Alexandra's forearm. She saw claws and wings in a flurry of motion, and then it whirled and snapped at the iron bars between it and Hela. The other girl uttered something that sounded like a curse in her language.

The dragon reared back, and its mouth glowed.

"Watch out!" Alexandra yelled.

Fire streamed from between its jaws and lit up the bars where Hela had been standing. Flames splashed through the doorway she'd exited.

"Hela!" Alexandra yelled.

"I'm all right!" Hela called, now from farther away.

The dragon roared, making a teakettle-like screeching noise, and its head snaked around until it was facing Alexandra and Larry once more.

"You can't just Flame-Freeze dragon fire!" Larry said.

The two of them retreated up the stairs, with both of their Shield Charms deflecting the worst of the dragon's breath, but they were red-faced and sweating by the time they ascended high enough that the dragon could no longer see them.

Hela Apparated to the bottom of the stairs and shrieked as flames from the dragon's last exhalation washed around her. She came running up the stairs with the edges of her fur coat and the cuffs around her boots glowing with tiny sparks and trailing black smoke. She slapped at a charred, glowing spot on her cloak.

"Did you see how much treasure they piled up down there?" Larry asked. "They really made an effort to create an authentic dragon hoard."

"Which we're supposed to loot," Alexandra said.

"I have an idea," Hela said.

"Dragon hide is pretty tough," Larry said. "It'll be hard to kill that thing."

"We don't need to kill it," Alexandra said.

"Seriously, Quick?"

"Do you want to hear my idea?" Hela asked.

"Aren't dragons an endangered species?" Alexandra asked.

"You're. Insane," Larry said.

"Would you listen to me?" Hela said.

"How did they even get a dragon down there?" asked Alexandra.

"Who cares?" Larry said. "What are you going to do, make a pet out of it?"

"SHUT UP!" Hela yelled.

Larry and Alexandra stopped talking. From below, they heard the dragon hiss, and another burst of flames lit the bottom of the stairs.

"It's obviously easy to provoke," Hela said. "Albo and I can hold its attention while you Apparate down there and fill a sack with coins. If it comes back down into the lower chamber, you Apparate away."

"Why me?" Alexandra asked.

"Because you don't trust me," Hela said, as if the question was obvious. "How do you know I won't just Apparate away with the coins?"

"How do we know Quick won't just Apparate away with the coins?" asked Larry.

"Do you want to go?" Alexandra asked.

"Right, and rely on you to keep it busy instead of just letting it come after me," said Larry.

"Fine, I'll do it," Alexandra said.

Hela said, "See, this is an easy challenge if we cooperate, but you'd have to confront a dragon by yourself if you attempted it on your own."

"Right," Alexandra said. "It's a foolproof plan. I'm sure nothing can possibly go wrong."

Hela and Larry fortified themselves with flame-proofing charms, and prepared to charge down the stairs and split in two directions, both casting hexes to distract the dragon. Alexandra would then descend the stairs and Apparate into the chamber below.

"I still say we should just try slaying it," Larry said.

"You can try," said Hela.

Larry cast a look back at Alexandra, then he and Hela rushed the alcove, weaving Shield Charms as they dashed right and left. Alexandra saw the little crescent courtyard light up with dragon fire.

She descended the steps after them. The dragon was indeed occupied with trying to get at its two tormentors. Before it noticed her, she concentrated: *Destination, Determination, Deliberation*. She Apparated with a crack, and landed on a pile of coins that made a distressingly loud jingling sound as she stood up.

Down here in the dragon's den, it stank with an odor Alexandra wasn't familiar with. It was damp and surprisingly warm for being so deep underground, making the chamber unpleasantly humid. Alexandra eyed the circular opening in the roof through which the dragon moved between its den and the grated prison up above, but the dragon did not come down after her. She could hear it roaring up where Larry and Hela were baiting it with hexes.

There was just enough light from above to see what she was doing, but not to peer into the recesses of the den, and she didn't want to cast a Light Spell for fear the dragon would notice it. She began scooping coins into her backpack.

She paused when she realized she no longer heard the dragon raging. She stood and listened. There was only silence, and it had also gone dark above.

"*Lumos*," she said, lighting her wand.

She was alone in the dank dragon's den. She saw that one of the things she'd smelled was a half-eaten cow carcass. Against the wall were piles of rotting refuse. There were also scales everywhere, and where the dragon's claws had raked the stones, they were black and filthy.

Hesitantly, ready to Apparate the moment the beast's head reappeared, she called out, "Larry? Hela?"

A pop ten feet from her made her jump. Hela appeared, holding her wand.

"What's going on?" Alexandra asked. "Where's Larry?"

Hela spoke an incantation Alexandra didn't recognize. A crippling wave of nausea and despair washed over her. Her knees buckled along with her will, and she fell to the ground, unable to defend herself as Hela cast a Disarming Spell that sent Alexandra's wand flying. Then Hela said, "*Incarcerous*," and bound Alexandra in ropes, before kneeling next to her to rummage through her backpack.

When she stood, she was holding the Portkey she'd given Alexandra. The black tide of sickness lifted, like a wave that had rolled over her and then pulled back, leaving Alexandra still shaken but once again able to think and speak.

"I knew it," Alexandra said. "You are such a bitch!"

"You don't know half as much as you think you do, Alexandra Quick."

"You set me up. You put a curse on your Portkey before handing it to me."

"Yes. I also put a counterspell on it so that when your Portkey activated, it wouldn't pull you back to the Gringotts basement."

Alexandra struggled against her ropes. "So you can leave me to get eaten by a dragon? You b—"

Hela kicked her, cutting her off. "You are not going to get eaten by the dragon. I used Universal Solvent to dissolve the bars and release it."

"Larry," Alexandra said, gasping from Hela's kick.

"I did nothing to him. I just waited for him to disappear when they activated everyone's Portkeys. The Dark Convention is attacking New Amsterdam at this moment. He's probably fleeing with everyone else."

Alexandra blinked, and tried to sit up, or at least roll over where she could face Hela. "You," she said. "You're part of the Dark Convention."

"Oh, no. We just share their loathing of the Confederation. But you should thank your father. He's behind this." Hela smiled without humor. "I was not to harm you."

"Why are you attacking New Amsterdam?" Alexandra asked.

"Ask your father. I'm just doing what my elders told me to do. Really, I assumed you and your father were planning this together all along." Hela shrugged. "Anyway, now I can go home and leave this terrible city. Good-bye, Alexandra Quick. It really wasn't personal, you see?"

"This is," Alexandra said. Squeezing her eyes shut and forcing all her concentration through the yew wand under her shirt, she projected a Porcupine Quills Curse at Hela. The other girl screamed as spines erupted all over her body, puncturing her skin and tearing her clothes. Quills also sprouted out of Alexandra's body, but they tore through the ropes Hela had conjured around her, and while Hela fell writhing on the ground, screaming in pain as the quills stabbed deeper into her flesh, Alexandra managed to loosen her bonds enough to pull them off of her and stand up. She was in pain also, but once her hands were free, she grabbed the yew wand and made her own quills disappear.

While Hela thrashed around on the ground, Alexandra retrieved her black hickory wand. She raised it and sent a Cutting Spell winging through the

air at Hela. Hela screamed and closed her eyes, shuddering as the magical silver blades flashed past her head with a "snick" sound.

Slowly, Hela opened her eyes. She held up her hands, which still had all their fingers. She looked down at her blood-soaked body, still skewered from knee to shoulder with sharp black spines. Then she saw that Alexandra's spell had sliced off both of her long, black braids. They lay severed in the dirt next to her.

She opened her mouth and screamed again, this time in rage. "You... BITCH!"

"Takes one to know one," Alexandra said. "Why did you let the dragon loose?"

Hela could hardly speak for several moments. Finally, she took deep, gulping breaths and said, "Chaos. Confusion. Distraction."

"What if it eats someone?"

"Muggles? Who cares?" Hela raised her head to glare at Alexandra, with tears running down her scarred cheeks. "I told you — blame your father."

Before Alexandra could reply to that, Hela Apparated away.

Alexandra shook her head, then spun and raised her wand when she heard another pop. It was flaring when Larry held his hands up, gripping his own wand, and holding a broom in his other hand. "Stand down, Witch-Private!"

Alexandra lowered her wand. "Witch-Private? I'm not in the JROC anymore. What are you doing here? What happened?"

"New Amsterdam is under attack by the Dark Convention," Larry said. "There are warlocks fighting Aurors and ROC officers, practically out in the open. Even the Muggles are going to notice lightning and tornadoes in the middle of their city."

"They're about to notice something else in the middle of their city." Alexandra reached into her pack, and pulled out her broom and Lost Traveler's Compass. As an afterthought, she said "*Accio braids!*" and Summoned the long black braids she'd cut off of Hela's head, which flew through the air and into her pack. "How did you get back here? *Why* did you come back here?"

"I told you, I put a Trace on you. I saw Hela was up to something, just before I got yanked back. Then neither of you showed up. Where is she?" Larry watched the braids disappear into Alexandra's pack with a puzzled frown.

"Gone. She was up to something." Alexandra turned to face Larry. "What are you doing? You should be helping get the kids out of there. And Adela, and Anna, and Angelique..."

"Why aren't *you* going back to help your friends?" Larry asked.

"I have something else to do." Alexandra got on her broom, and rose into the air. "Hela freed the dragon. If it gets up into the sewers and tunnels, or worse, reaches the street, people are going to die."

Larry got on his broom and rose alongside her. He grabbed Alexandra by the arm. "Just how are you going to stop it?"

"I have a plan." In fact, she had just conceived of a plan, so fresh and so crazy she doubted she could pull it off. Except she didn't have any better ideas.

"You're insane!" Larry said. "Leave the dragon to the Department of Magical Wildlife, and the Muggles to the Obliviators."

Alexandra looked down at the silver fingers on her arm. Slowly, Larry released his grip.

"Why are you here, Larry?" she asked.

He stared at her. Then he asked, "How did you create that silver thread?"

She opened her mouth, confused by the sudden shift. "What?"

"You created a connection to Adela with the ring I gave her and took back. You said I had to feel something for her."

"Yes..." Alexandra said slowly.

Larry's eyes were shadowed, in the dim light cast by their wands. She was grateful that he couldn't see her expression clearly either.

"You created another thread connecting us." He held up his silver fingers.

Alexandra closed her eyes. "Just kill me now," she muttered.

When she opened her eyes again, Larry was still hovering next to her, studying her.

"I have to stop that dragon," she said. "Go back to New Amsterdam Academy." She pointed her broom upward, climbed almost vertically through the round hole in the ceiling, and immediately shot through one of the large openings in the round cell above that had once been blocked with iron bars. She flew up the stairs she and Larry and Hela had descended, following the trail of stone scored by massive claws.

When she reached the tunnel above, she sat on her broom a moment, trying to figure out which way the dragon had gone. From somewhere even further up above, she heard a screeching, teakettle roar.

"Okay," she said. She'd failed to think of a better plan before now. She was going to have to go with what she had. "It's time for your exclusive, Mr. Mudd."

She waved her wand, tugging at the Eye-Spy and the Snitch, wherever they were.

Larry came shooting up the stairs and stopped alongside her.

"Merlin," he said. "You're really going to chase a dragon to save a bunch of Muggles."

"You don't have to come." A flush still burned her cheeks, and her eyes were alight in the darkness. She took off again.

"What's your plan?" Larry yelled, following after her.

The dragon's roar echoed down to them again. Alexandra gripped her broom and shot upward, flying through wider and wider tunnels until she reached a branch that terminated in what had once been an old stone wall reinforced by wooden beams. The beams were now charred and aflame, the stone wall smashed and battered down, revealing a gap through which a vehicle, or a dragon, could pass. Beyond, Alexandra saw electric lights, and heard screams.

"This is bad," Larry said. "Wait — Quick!"

Alexandra was already flying through the gap.

She rocketed across a subway station, scattering people in her path. She stayed as close to the ceiling as she could, but it wasn't a very tall station. There were more claw marks on the tiles, and a wall with advertising banners had been set aflame. The turnstiles at the platform's entrance had been smashed aside.

Everyone was screaming, and now they were pointing at her. At least she didn't see any bodies. From her elevated height, she could see down into a ticketing booth where a uniformed agent behind melted plexiglass was cowering and speaking into a phone.

"Quick!" said Larry, catching up to her. "Are you insane? We're violating so many laws — Alexandra!"

Alexandra flew on.

They shot up a stairwell, mercifully free of pedestrians. But when they got to the top level, they saw it.

They were in a subway station courtyard, surrounded by glass-fronted stores, vendor booths, and ticketing counters, and it was chaos. People ran screaming in all directions.

The dragon plodded clumsily over the tiled floor, its claws raking whatever they touched, its wings extending and retracting, breaking storefront windows and knocking over food stalls and trees in cement planters. Its lashing tail came down on a new car that was parked in the middle of the station for some sort of promotion, and crushed its roof.

"This is really bad!" Larry said.

The dragon suddenly roared and charged. Alexandra chased after it as it ran beneath fluorescent lights, almost trampled a mother and her baby carriage along with a dozen other people, and then threw itself at the freedom it saw through a floor-to-ceiling glass display between the station and the street outside, shredding banners and smashing mannequins and windows.

It exploded onto the street in a spray of glass, spread its wings, and glided over traffic to land on a parked SUV. Its weight crushed the vehicle with another spray of bursting glass, and it sat there, looking around and blinking.

Alexandra and Larry emerged onto the street as well, and gasped at the spectacle.

They were at a traffic intersection. There were stores on every corner, and enormous five-story billboards lit up with neon, with skyscrapers towering over everything. The dragon seemed momentarily dazed by it all. So did Larry.

The sky was heavily overcast, rapidly turning from gray to black, with ominous rumbling and flashes of lightning. Heavy mist filled the streets, so the cars that had come screeching to a halt before the dragon were blocking lines of traffic. The cars behind honked angrily at the vehicles in front of them, unable to see what was causing the blockage.

But the dragon was clearly visible to the hundreds of Muggles at the large intersection. There was a great deal of screaming and stampeding away from the creature, but not everyone was doing that. Dozens of people were pointing their phones at it and taking pictures, and then some of them noticed Alexandra and Larry hovering on their brooms, and turned their cameras on them too.

"This," Alexandra said, "is bad."



## **\*Chapter 58\*: Storm King Mountain**

"We have to get out of here," Larry said through clenched teeth.

"You have to get out of here," Alexandra said. She looked at her Lost Traveler's Compass. "New Amsterdam Academy is that way." She pointed.

Larry grabbed her arm. "I'm not going to let you pull one of your insane stunts just because you think being reckless and bold always works!"

"You're not going to *let* me?" Alexandra tried to shake free of his grip. "And since when do you care?"

Larry flushed, but didn't let go.

Alexandra looked over her shoulder. The dragon was shaking its head, and its great, muscled, serpentine neck swiveled about, sizing up the people, the vehicles, the buildings.

"Okay, Larry," she said. She leaned over, put her hands on either side of his face, and kissed him.

Their lips met briefly. His teeth grazed her lower lip. Then he pulled away.

"That wasn't *Amortentia* this time," he said.

"No." Alexandra reached into her backpack and pulled out a small bag. "Hold this for me."

"What?" Without thinking, he held out his hand, and Alexandra dumped her Portkey into his palm.

"*Redire*," she said. He vanished with a startled expression on his face. "Sorry, Larry."

She wheeled her broom about and threw a hex directly at the dragon, which was just about to unleash a stream of fire at the nearest group of Muggles. The hex flashed against its snout and the dragon roared.

"Get out of here!" Alexandra screamed at the spectators. "What is wrong with you?"

She flew in a circle around the dragon, pelting it with more hexes until it was whipping its head around to track her.

Through the breach the dragon had made in the subway station's glass streetfront, two small orbs came flying out into the intersection.

Alexandra shot up into the air.

"Come get me, thunder lizard!" she yelled, and threw a Stinging Jinx in the dragon's eye.

The beast howled and its jaws opened wide. A torrent of flames shot up two stories, lighting the intersection with a fiery display that drew appreciative and startled Ahs from the crowd.

Then, just when Alexandra began to fear it wouldn't move, the dragon crouched. The SUV it was perched on collapsed as the dragon leaped into the sky. It came at her fast, much faster than she expected; she shot straight up and still felt a wash of hot air against her back as the dragon spat more flames.

The dragon flapped its wings in angry pursuit, and Alexandra kept flying up, up, higher and higher, rising past the twentieth, thirtieth, fortieth floors of the buildings on either side of her, occasionally seeing someone inside pointing as she and the dragon continued ascending, until the street was hidden in the mist below and they were finally higher than any of the buildings. Still Alexandra climbed, now surrounded by even denser fog.

To the west, where New Amsterdam Academy sat in its hidden block next to a forgotten park, there was only darkness and howling wind and the crackle of lightning.

The dragon screeched at her. Alexandra tossed another hex to keep its attention, and leveled off. She glanced at her Lost Traveler's Compass, and pointed herself north.

She began leading the dragon away from the city, out over the river, and toward Storm King Mountain. Behind them flew the Eye-Spy and the Snitch.

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A dense fog bank beneath a layer of storm clouds had descended not just over the city, but the entire river valley. Alexandra could see nothing above or below her. Occasionally she heard distant horns from boats and trains far below. Much closer, the dragon's wings beat the air as it kept veering and swooping to catch up to her.

It was difficult staying close enough that the dragon wouldn't lose her, but far enough away to avoid getting roasted or snapped up in its jaws. Clumsy but fast on the ground, the dragon was a nimble, powerful flyer, and Alexandra had to perform aerobatic tricks to keep drawing it onward. Sometimes she dropped altitude and slowed to a crawl, then rose behind the dragon to let it fly straight ahead until its confusion led it to swerve off-course. Then she would throw another hex at it, and the beast would roar in fury and come at her again, and she had to once again dive and zoom out of reach and let it chase her in the correct direction.

She worried about it tiring before they reached her destination, but it showed no sign of giving up. As she plunged onward through the fog, she also felt a welcome presence ahead of her.

*Charlie.*

Charlie had found her father. She didn't know if the attack on New Amsterdam had been precipitated by her message — that wasn't what she'd intended. But rather than coming back to her, Charlie was waiting at the destination she'd given her father, which meant he must have directed her familiar there somehow.

Did that mean Abraham Thorn was waiting for her at Storm King Mountain? Or was he back in New Amsterdam, joining the warlocks of the Dark Convention in wreaking destruction?

*I'm coming, Charlie,* she thought.

Her familiar and the Lost Traveler's Compass guided her onwards, though she was flying blind, glad that neither wizard nor Muggle was likely to be out flying over the Hudson in this unnatural fog.

Eventually, even the dragon began gliding more, conserving its strength. Alexandra worried it might finally be tiring and would look for someplace to land by the side of the river. She hit it with another Snapping Jinx, and it responded with another snap of its jaws, followed by a screech like a teakettle and a gout of flame.

It hated its tormentor. Alexandra couldn't blame it.

It was chilly. Alexandra had been dressed for the underground, so the fog didn't bother her much, but she was glad when Charlie's presence grew stronger and she saw in the firmer positioning of the Lost Traveler's Compass's needle that they were nearing the end of their flight.

Storm King Mountain was not very impressive compared to the mountains in Dinétah, or even the Ozarks. It rose like a hump in the fog, and Alexandra circled it once in its entirety, while the dragon followed her. Alexandra banked and flew into the fog, while pointing her wand in the opposite direction to cast an Echo Charm. Her words taunted it from the direction of Storm King Mountain: "Come get me, thunder lizard!"

The dragon's roar echoed off the mountain as it flew after her voice.

Alexandra continued circling the mountain. She sensed Charlie even before she heard the raven's wings flapping nearby.

"Stay away, Charlie," she said. "We've both flown a long way. But I'm not done yet."

"Fly, fly!" said Charlie.

"Shh," she said, and commanded the bird away.

Storm King Mountain sat in the middle of the Hudson River, and was visible to Muggles every day. They hiked up and down it, but none of them saw what Alexandra could clearly see with her Witch's Sight, even through the fog: a path at the top of a steep rock face that would require a broom or Apparition to reach.

She could also see the other thing she was looking for — a crack in the world. She thought it might be the same shimmering seam that ran all the way back to New Amsterdam. All the way up the Hudson, it had gleamed and faded beneath her, like a ribbon that twisted in and out of sight, closer then farther, a fissure between this world and a world away.

She landed on Storm King Mountain at the top of the hidden path, in front of a humble wooden door set far back in the stone mountainside. Only a very intrepid Muggle rock-climber would ever reach this spot, and that not very likely because of the Muggle-Repelling Charms. She was alone, surrounded by rocks and bushes, with the river on either side obscured by fog and the dragon somewhere lower on the slopes — she could hear its claws scraping rocks loose as it lumbered around. She hoped no one would actually be hiking here on such a foggy day.

Alexandra saw no guards or anything else protecting the door. But she remembered Drucilla telling her that she probably couldn't simply walk in there.

She took out her yew wand. It was uncooperative and temperamental, but it showed its temper most generously when invoked with proper fury.

"*Defodio!*" she said, and blasted the wooden door. The yew wand was amenable to the destruction, and wood and chunks of stone flew.

The dragon roared again, and Alexandra heard its wings flap as it took off, rising toward her. She flicked a Stinging Jinx through the air with her other wand, and the dragon, attracted by the commotion of her Gouging Spell, roared in indignation as the jinx struck it on the snout.

Alexandra carved the entrance wider. Robed wizards within ran to see what was happening, and Alexandra advanced with a barrage of hexes that sent them ducking for cover. One reached for his wand, and she Disarmed him. She ran into the entranceway that she'd just made considerably wider, as the walls and ceiling shook.

The entranceway led into a corridor cut through stone, probably with Gouging Spells much like the ones she was using now. She looked behind her and saw the dragon trying to squeeze through the mouth of what was now a small cave.

In front of her, two older wizards looked over her shoulder in horror.

"Better run," Alexandra said. She tried to Apparate back outside. It didn't work, and the attempt caused a spasm of pain to run through her fingers and toes and teeth. Anti-Apparition spells, as she'd figured.

"You're under arrest," said the wizard she hadn't disarmed yet. He pointed his wand at her. The other wizard ran away in terror.

"Whatever," Alexandra said, and opened the crack in the world.

The wizard in front of her turned green. Everything around the crack turned an unnatural green, except her. Green flames washed over him, and he screamed. Alexandra shuddered, and said, "I told you to run." Before she could see any more, she walked through the crack, and Storm King Mountain twisted and bent around her, making her dizzy. When she stepped out of the world away, she was elsewhere.

It was dark, but she was still in a stone corridor. A different one, lit by a single torch. She moved cautiously forward. There were a couple of doors, all thick, dark wood that looked as if they hadn't been opened in centuries, but as she stood there, one of them opened. A witch in gray and brown robes stepped out, holding an armful of scrolls, and stopped when confronted by Alexandra.

Alexandra pointed her wand at her. "Hi. Can you tell me where the Accounting Office is?"

The witch frowned. "I don't think you're authorized to be here."

Alexandra said, "*Incendio!*"

The other witch screamed as her scrolls burst into flames. With another incantation, Alexandra levitated the witch upside-down into the air, her feet kicking against the ceiling.

"Where's the Accounting Office?" Alexandra asked.

"You're not allowed to be here!" the witch cried out.

Alexandra bounced her several times against the stone floor, head-first, and asked again.

The witch, dazed, said, "This... is... the Accounting... Office... All of it..."

Alexandra let her fall to the ground.

She heard a teakettle roar echoing from above. She cast an Incarcerous Spell on the witch, then went into the room the woman had just exited.

It was a records room of some sort, with racks stuffed full of scrolls from floor to ceiling. Alexandra unrolled a few and looked at them. They seemed to be Confederation census records. Names and addresses, Territories, birthplaces, family trees. She shook her head, frustrated. She wasn't even sure exactly what she was looking for.

She stepped over the unconscious witch on her way out, and walked to a door at the end of the corridor. It didn't open when she tried it, so she tried an Unlocking Charm. To her surprise, this worked. She went down the steps on the other side and found herself in another stone corridor practically identical to the one she'd just left. Several robed wizards scurried up and down it. A younger man in a red vest and cloak contrasted with the gray and brown robes worn by the others. He already had his wand out. Alexandra Stunned him first. One of the other wizards drew his wand and tried to cast a Body-Bind Spell at her, but Alexandra deflected it and Stunned him too, followed by the other wizards, who were too startled to defend themselves.

She stood in the corridor listening, but no one else came running.

She chose the oldest of the wizards she'd Stunned, a plump, gray-bearded warlock whose brown and gray robes were worn and faded, and said "*Rennervate!*" The old man blinked and lifted his head.

"I'm looking for records that were relocated from the Territorial Headquarters Building of Central Territory," Alexandra said.

"How did you get down here past the Aurors and Doomguards?" the old man asked.

"They're busy with a dragon. I took a shortcut." Alexandra stuck her wand in his face. "I probably don't have much time, though, so I'll feel guilty for interrogating an old man, but not *too* guilty, if you know what I mean."

His mouth opened, and he was speechless for a moment. Then he said, "You look familiar."

"Alexandra Quick, daughter of Abraham Thorn. Nice to meet you. Records?" Sparks crackled at the tip of her wand. The wizard turned pale.

"They could only have been relocated by an Actuary," he said.

"Okay," Alexandra said.

"Unless I know the name of the Actuary, I wouldn't be able to find your relocated records."

Alexandra frowned. "Franklin Percival Brown."

"Ah," said the wizard. He held out a hand. "Help an old man up?"

"*Expelliarmus!*" Alexandra said, and the old man cried out as the wand he'd been reaching for with his other hand went flying down the hallway. She grabbed his hand and yanked him to his feet, and conjured a cloud of gas that billowed over the unconscious bodies she'd left scattered about.

"Don't piss off a Dark sorceress," she said. "I've had a really difficult day."

The wizard rubbed his hand and glared at her. Then he turned and walked down the corridor, holding his sleeve up over his mouth and nose. Alexandra followed, using her wand to dispel the mist around her.

The corridor was very long — ridiculously long. It was an unending stone hallway without a door in sight. Alexandra thought they must be all the way across the river, and was suspecting another trick, when she finally saw a wooden beamed door at the end of their long trek. The wizard led her to it, and said, "Through here."

There was something surreal about this door at the end of a long empty corridor. It reminded her of a movie she'd once seen about Alice in Wonderland. Her orientation was quite confused now — she had no idea if they were still under Storm King Mountain, or if the tunnel they'd hiked had taken them under the river and elsewhere, or if they were in some wizard-space that didn't match outside geography at all.

"You first," she said, gesturing with her wand.

The old wizard sighed, and opened the door. Cautiously, keeping her wand leveled at him, Alexandra followed him into the room on the other side of the door.

It looked much like the room she'd seen on the floor above, the one the other Accounting Office witch had emerged from, except much, much larger. Racks of scrolls and ledgers, stacked and piled in shelves from floor to ceiling, but here the ceiling was high overhead. The smell of ancient papyrus and leather and dust was thick enough to make her sneeze.

There were no gas lamps or chandeliers here, only torches set in the walls. Alexandra found this a strange choice for a room full of paper and

leather. She assumed that magic kept the torches burning.

The chamber was much larger than the Census and Records Office back in Central Territory's Headquarters Building, and the number of volumes stored here was immense. Alexandra couldn't even imagine how many years' worth of records were being kept here. But as she followed the wizard in gray and brown robes, she realized that all the shelves were arranged around the edges of the room, and at its center was a large stone table on an elevated dais. Sitting on the table, lit by all the torches, which were arranged radially around the room so their light fell upon it from all directions, was a huge, leather-bound book. It lay open, and each half was over a foot thick. An ink quill stood straight up over one of its pages, motionless, as if held in place by an invisible, steady hand.

Still watching the wizard warily, Alexandra approached the dais. The wizard said nothing, but tucked his hands into his sleeves and folded his arms.

Alexandra asked, "What is it?"

"That book contains the Confederation's actuarial tables," the wizard said.

"Actuarial tables?" Alexandra frowned. "Like, for insurance and stuff?"

"I am not sure what you mean by insurance. But any names and records that were... relocated here will be recorded in that book."

Alexandra stared at the book and the motionless feather. Curiosity almost impelled her to step up onto the dais to get a closer look. Then she turned to the wizard and raised her wand again.

"Get it," she commanded.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"Pick it up."

The wizard scowled, and she thought she detected a hint of disappointment. But with a nonchalant expression, he walked over to the dais, stepped up to the table, and very carefully slid it out from beneath the feather. He grunted with effort as he carried it to her, holding it open with both arms.

"Here you go," he said. "Whatever name you're looking for, say it aloud, and it will turn to the appropriate page."

"You're an Actuary, aren't you?" she said.

"No, only an Estimator."

"What *is* this book?" she demanded.

He held up the book, almost shoving it in her face. She turned her face aside, and pointing her wand, cast a Blasting Hex. The huge book tumbled to the floor, and the old man went flying. She stalked over to where he lay doubled-up on the ground.

"What would happen if I looked at it?" she asked, pointing her wand at him.

The old man's face reflected pure malice in the torchlight. Gritting his teeth in pain, he said, "It's cursed, of course. Read it, and your eyes will melt from your skull. Touch it, and your hands will blacken and rot away. You're already doomed, sorceress. The Doomguards are on their way."

Alexandra knelt, and held open her backpack. "*Accio liber.*"

The book slid across the floor, its covers slapping shut, and Alexandra carefully maneuvered it into her pack without touching it.

The wizard laughed, a harsh, coughing sound as he clutched his ribs.

"Do you think you can Apparate out of here?" he asked. "Even if you could, the book is anchored here by the strongest of curses. It's impossible to remove it from this room."

"Impossible," Alexandra said. "I hear that a lot."

She stood, and heard something else. A rhythmic clanking sound, like armored joints in motion, and metal-shod feet stomping over stone. She had last heard that sound on Eerie Island.

"Whatever you do to me, the Doomguards will be impervious to your hexes," the wizard said. "If you throw down your wand, I *might* be able to hand you over to the Aurors first."

"No thank you," Alexandra said.

She opened the crack in the world, and stepped through.

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The top of Storm King Mountain was aglow. Alexandra could see it from where she stood in a little flat clearing overlooking the river. She didn't think it was from the dragon's flames — she suspected that something she'd done had caused it. The glow was an unearthly color, and it shimmered eerily.

She'd emerged from the World Away tingling all over, and when she first looked at herself, her skin was dark, limned in white, like a photographic negative, while her dark pants glowed brightly. Her wand radiated a strange, flickering, blind-spot aura, as if she'd been dipped in glowing ink in some black-and-white mirror universe.

Charlie landed on a rock next to her. The inky black of the raven's feathers were like an anchor of solidity in a ghostly world.

"Alexandra," Charlie said.

Alexandra was afraid to touch Charlie. But as she examined her hands, she saw they were beginning to revert to normal.

"It's all right, Charlie. It will be all right." Alexandra said this more for her own benefit than Charlie's. She closed her eyes to shut out the flickering inverted hues.

"Father," Charlie said.

Alexandra opened her eyes.

Abraham Thorn stood before her: a dark, imposing figure as always, bearded, gloved, wrapped in a long cloak. His eyes were raised to the top of Storm King Mountain.

"What hast thou wrought, daughter?" he asked, sounding almost proud.

"I've wrought a lot." She looked herself up and down. "Am I going to be okay?"

Abraham Thorn inspected her. "I... am not exactly sure what you did to yourself." The admission seemed to trouble him. "What *have* you done, Alexandra?"

"I did what I told you I was going to do," she said. "I went to Storm King Mountain."

Abraham Thorn was incredulous. "Even I could not enter this place and leave again, at least not without considerably more force and preparation." He folded his arms. "I was quite intrigued by the letter your raven brought to me. You asked for a 'distraction,' and for me to meet you here, but you were quite vague about details."

"Yeah, I was quite vague on the details myself." It was a first for Alexandra, to face her father and find him puzzled, not in possession of all the answers. But she had questions of her own. "You attacked New Amsterdam. Again."

"Yes," he said. "It seemed an opportune time to strike. I hoped whatever you were up to might be distracting, and a distraction was what you desired —"

"You attacked New Amsterdam *while I was there!*" she said, raising her voice and causing him to frown. "While my friends were there! What are you doing, you and the Dark Convention?"

Abraham Thorn was silent for a moment. He looked up at the mountaintop again, still glowing in the gathering gloom of evening, surrounded by the persistent heavy fog.

"We are waging war against the Confederation," he said at last. "And given what you did yourself, my dear — not that I am displeased. Indeed, I'm rather impressed. But it's a bit cheeky of you to be taking me to task for causing calamity. I daresay you've done your part today."

"Maybe more than my part," Alexandra said. "I did go into Storm King Mountain. And I brought something out."

In the dark, Abraham Thorn's expression was hard to read, but she thought she sensed his eyebrows going up.

"Do you know what an actuarial table is?" she asked.

Her father was silent, but his head moved slightly and she thought he was examining her somehow.

"What did you bring out of the Accounting Office?" he asked.

Alexandra opened her pack, and dumped the enormous book on the ground.

"Be careful, it's cursed," she said. "One of those wizards in gray and brown robes said if you touch it, it'll rot your hands, and if you read it, it'll melt your eyeballs."

"I see." Abraham Thorn leaned over the book. "Yes, indeed."

He made some complicated wand motions and uttered incantations whose meaning Alexandra couldn't begin to understand, despite listening as hard as she could. The book jumped once, then burst into white flames, which did not consume it, and then Abraham Thorn raised his hand and it levitated into the air.

"Be careful!" Alexandra said, concerned in spite of herself.

There was a flash of light where Abraham Thorn's fingers brushed its cover, and a wisp of smoke curled around the book. He chuckled. "How very archaic... and absurd of them."

He held up his wand and said, "*Lumos*." Then he opened the book, which was now floating in the air before him.

Alexandra watched him. Her father's eyeballs did not melt as he scanned the pages of the great volume. His face transformed, however, his expression darkening, then glowing with wonder.

"So," he whispered. "The Dark Lord was right."

At last he turned to her. "How?" he asked. "How did you do this?"

"No," she said, standing tall and facing her father. "You answer my questions now. Explain this to me. Tell me what it's all about. Tell me why you're doing all the things you're doing."

Abraham Thorn held the huge book in one hand, and with his wand in his other hand, still ran his fingertips over whatever was written on the pages before him. He stared at Alexandra for a long time.

Finally, he asked, "Are you truly ready to know?"

Alexandra shrugged, trying to dispel her nervousness. "If I'm not now, I never will be. I think I've earned it."

Abraham Thorn nodded.

"What is the Deathly Regiment?" he asked.

Alexandra frowned. "I know what it is. You know I know."

"Tell me," he insisted.

Alexandra looked around, as if she might find eavesdroppers who should not hear. "Every seven years, a child of the Elect is sacrificed to the Generous Ones," she said. "It's part of some... compact the Confederation made. The Generous Ones send one of our children to the Lands Beyond. The Confederation gets to keep the gates to the Lands Below closed. Is that right?"

"Yes," Abraham Thorn said. "That was the original purpose of the Deathly Regiment."

"The original purpose?" Alexandra frowned.

"The power to control the Lands Below did not end with the defeat of the Indian wizards who opposed the Confederation," Abraham Thorn said. "An entire world apart, filled with magic. Magic in its soil, magic in its stones, magic in its creatures... And Colonial wizards needed far more magic than they brought with them to create a new wizarding world."

"So they used the Lands Below to build the New World?" Alexandra wasn't sure how that would work — it wasn't as if magic were something you could mine or harvest. Yet... didn't you need magical materials to create wands? And the Ozarkers, storing all their accumulated magic every seven years, demonstrated that magic could be preserved, so why couldn't it be taken?

Her father nodded as she began to understand. "Sending trains through the Lands Below was only one of the cruder uses to which it was put. The purpose of the Deathly Regiment is to power the machinery of the Confederation. To preserve the magic that sustains it. To keep it hidden, keep it running, keep it secret and safe. Wizard schools atop gates, in the middle of Muggle cities. Wizard rails running through mountains, across the continent." Now his eyes fairly glowed, the way hers sometimes did, burning in the dark so she seemed to be facing something more than a man.

"Now tell me something, Alexandra. I know you have not studied Life Magic or its darker branches. You would not know the equations for the weight of a soul, or the value of a Dram of Life. But you did take basic Arithmancy at Charmbridge Academy, did you not? And you have studied magical theory? Lucilla and Drucilla tell me you are an apt pupil, when you apply yourself."

Puzzled, Alexandra said, "Yes?"

"There is a reason Life Magic, the basis of the Healing arts and many others, is also easily turned to the darkest of Dark Arts," her father said. "A human life, sacrificed and rendered for its power, is great and terrible. But it is not without limit. It is still just one human life. Do the sums in your head, Alexandra. Even the wildest approximation is sufficient. You know the span of the Confederation. Could one child every seven years account for all that?"

Alexandra opened her mouth. She stood there, mouth agape for a moment, as the implications hit her.

"It... doesn't seem like enough," she said weakly.

"Not nearly enough," Abraham Thorn said. He handed the book to her.

Alexandra held it open and read what was written on the pages in front of her, as her father held his wand overhead.

It was a list of names.

*Lilian Celina Ainsworth...11/4/2002 — 5/30/2012.*  
*Ambrose Cuthbert Moen...6/19/2002 — 5/31/2012*  
*Kimberly Jane Meyers...4/3/2001 — 6/1/2012*  
*Fabian Michael Drew...5/23/2002 — 6/2/2012*

"I... don't understand," Alexandra said. She flipped the pages back.

*Lila Rose Hill...3/24/2000 — 10/21/2011.*  
*Forrest Fleming...5/23/2000 — 10/22/2011*  
*Amberlee Crescent...8/16/2000 — 10/24/2011*  
*Gisela Ellefson...6/3/2001 — 10/25/2011*

"What is this?" She grabbed a handful of pages and flipped further back.

*Wendy Adelaide Harriman...12/30/1954 — 4/14/1965*  
*Robert Samuel Prozensky...11/1/1954 — 4/15/1965*  
*Nikita Elena Petrovich...6/2/1954 — 4/16/1965*  
*Herbert Grant Creevey...7/11/1953 — 4/17/1965*

"Oh my God," Alexandra said, as realization sank in. She continued flipping back through the actuarial tables.

*Lydia Lane Llewellyn...7/22/1868 — 7/23/1879*  
*Ygnes Collinsworth...2/10/1875 — 7/24/1879*  
*Magnus Jonathan Smith...5/11/1868 — 7/25/1879*

"No," she said.

*Susanna Boyd Earl...8/8/1775 — 9/11/1787*  
*William Harp Cothren...8/12/1776 — 9/12/1787*  
*Quiet Elk Tokinah...-/1776 — 9/13/1787*

On every page was a list of names. A name for every date: every day, every week, every year, year after year, decade after decade, century after century...

*William Friedrich Hansel...4/-/1648 — 7/7/1660*  
*Artur Danelagh...10/17/1648 — 7/8/1660*  
*Cassandra Michal Thorn...5/19/1650 — 7/9/1660*

To the beginning of the Confederation.

## **\*Chapter 59\*: The War Has Begun**

Alexandra stood facing the river, trying to take it in. The accursed book lay in the dirt where she'd dropped it. Her father stood behind her, saying nothing.

"All those children," she said. "They just... take someone, every day?"

"Yes," said her father.

"You knew about this?"

"I *knew* only what I was unable to tell you because of my Unbreakable Vow. I suspected the rest, and now you have brought me proof."

"How do they do it?" Alexandra asked. "The Actuaries? How do they sacrifice the children?"

"I have my suspicions about the means. I will know more after studying this deathly register."

Alexandra frowned.

"They must record enough deaths to balance the tables," he said. "A daily sacrifice is required, but no doubt they ensure sufficient excess to compensate for occasional shortfalls, or in case a day comes when a sacrifice somehow fails to happen, and the occasional surplus requirements —"

Alexandra turned to face him. "You talk like it's just Arithmancy! Balancing numbers! It's gross!"

Her father smiled grimly. "Indeed. But you see, Alexandra, to the Accounting Office, this *is* just Arithmancy. That is how men have always justified evil. Add the sums, solve the equations, calculate the benefit, write off the harm. As long as it is just columns and figures, not your own living children, it is a necessary sacrifice that happens every day, but elsewhere, to someone else. Even among the Elect who think they know the truth, few know the true cost."

"They usually choose Muggle-borns, don't they?" Alexandra said.

"No, they usually choose Muggles."

Alexandra's mouth opened in shock.

"How many wizarding children do you think could disappear in a year without being noticed?" Abraham Thorn asked. "I believe a certain number must be magical, but it is the life that matters, and whose lives matter least?"

Like an icy spike sliding into her brain, Alexandra felt a terrible intuition then, bringing with it a dread even greater than her dawning horror at seeing that list of names and realizing their meaning.

Praying she was wrong, she knelt in front of the book, reached a trembling hand out, and opened it again to the more recent entries. Her father watched, but said nothing.

She looked at the entries for Lila Hill and Forrest Fleming again, and realized there was a name missing: Roger Darby. This puzzled her, but it was on the page before that that she found what she was looking for. That dread horror closed icy fingers around her heart.

*Bonnie Elizabeth Seabury...1/3/1999 — 8/5/2011*

"Bonnie," Alexandra whispered, and tears spilled down her face.

Her father laid a hand on her shoulder. "Now you see, Alexandra. You see why I fight. Why we have gone to war, to end the Confederation. With this cursed register, I will not only be able to work out their calculations, I will sabotage them. The Accounting Office will carry on, but we have caused them some difficulty."

She was sure he didn't really understand why she wept. But he wasn't trying to comfort her. He was just justifying his own actions again. That brought another realization to her. She rose to her feet and wiped at her face with the back of her hand. "The Roanoke Underhill."

His hand fell away.

"Yes," he said. "It was an attempt to expose the Accounting Office's work. I thought if I made the wizarding public pay the price instead of letting the Actuaries do their work in shadows, enough Arithmancers and others who understand Life Magic would realize what happened. I could force awareness of the Deathly Regiment despite my Unbreakable Vow."

"So what happened?" Alexandra asked.

"It didn't work." When Alexandra turned back to him, Abraham Thorn was frowning. "I still don't know why."

"So you killed all those people for nothing."

"It still served a purpose. It began the destabilization of the Confederation and the Governor-General's power—"

"You know," said Alexandra, "you're as bad as them in your own way. You added the sums and calculated the harm and decided what you were doing was worth it. Now there's going to be a war and people are going to die. Innocent people, and not just wizards either. Isn't that right?"

"That's right." Abraham Thorn's mouth formed a tight line. "And what did you think would happen when you came to Storm King Mountain? Did you think whatever you accomplished, it wouldn't have consequences? You don't plan ahead as I do. You are clever and impulsive, and you act without strategy, but you know better than to claim you are blameless for what you've done. You asked for a 'distraction.' What did you have in mind,



fireworks? And we haven't even discussed what you did on Eerie Island, or in the Ozarks."

"Yes, let's not discuss that," Alexandra nodded. "You're right. I did what I did."

"For what I've done, I will be judged someday," Abraham Thorn said. "But I will bring judgment upon Elias Hucksteen, and the Confederation, and the Deathly Regiment, first." He folded his arms. "So, Alexandra. What will you do now?"

"I'll see to it that everyone knows," Alexandra said. "No more keeping secrets. I'm ending the secrecy now."

Her father laughed ruefully. "And how will you accomplish that, my daughter?"

"With a little help from Mr. Mudd," Alexandra gestured with her wand. Her father turned around to stare at the two floating spheres hovering in the mist behind him.

Alexandra smiled and waved at the Snitch and the Eye-Spy. "I hacked them," she said. "Sorry, Mr. Mudd. I know this isn't what you had in mind, but you sure got an exclusive, didn't you? You might want to go into hiding now. Welcome to the resistance. I'd feel a little worse about this, but those articles you wrote about me were really terrible."

"An Unnoticeability Charm?" her father said incredulously. He snapped his fingers, and the Eye-Spy and the Snitch both ignited in a halo of green sparks and then fell to the ground.

"I do too strategize," Alexandra said, as her father turned back to her with a terrifying scowl. Charlie flapped nervously to a nearby bush.

"You should have asked me first," he said. "You should have told me your plan."

"Sorry. I learned from you that it's better to ask forgiveness than permission." It took all of Alexandra's nerve to face him without flinching, and meeting his gaze was the hardest thing she'd had to do in a week of hard things.

"Do you know what you've wrought?" he asked.

Alexandra swallowed, at his expression, and at the knowledge that she would be responsible for whatever happened next.

Then, slowly, the thunderous look on his face faded, to be replaced by a small smile. And Alexandra realized that he had never been been surprised at all. He'd known her plan all along.

"What would you do now, daughter?" he asked. "Will you join me?"

Alexandra felt such a storm of emotions, she could hardly answer. "The way Lucilla and Drucilla have?"

"That way and more. You know there is no returning to your old life. The war has begun."

"Governor-General Hucksteen is going to want revenge, and now there isn't much to stop him, is there? Which means everyone close to us is in even more danger."

"I will protect my children," said Abraham Thorn.

"Can you protect all of us? And our friends, and their families? If you could protect everyone from the Confederation, you wouldn't have become the Enemy, would you?"

His expression didn't change, but for the first time, Alexandra saw her father as mortal and fallible. He had always been flawed, but he had seemed somehow incapable of doubt or failure. But he was still just a man, and she knew she was right — he couldn't control everything.

Still reeling from everything that had happened to her and all that had been revealed, she finally said, "What would you have me do?"

"I would have you choose freely, Alexandra. I could have compelled you long ago, but I want your allegiance, uncoerced and without reservation."

She looked up at the still faintly glowing top of Storm King Mountain. "I'm not very good at taking orders," she said. "You might have noticed. And I still don't know how I feel about you. Or the Thorn Circle. I don't mean to sound self-centered. I know you're right; the war has begun, and this is a lot bigger than me or my feelings."

"It is," her father said. "And I do need your willingness, and your obedience."

"Right." She sighed. She finally looked at him again. "Can you give me some time? Just a little. I've got a few things I need to do."

She couldn't tell whether he was displeased, but he nodded. "Put your affairs in order. When you call upon me again, be ready to join me wholeheartedly."

She met his gaze. "I will."

"Until then —" he said.

Alexandra took a breath. "Two more things."

His eyebrows rose, as if he weren't sure whether to be amused or angered at her audacity.

Carefully, Alexandra slid her yew wand out from beneath her shirt. "Do you recognize this wand?"

Her father stared at it. When he reached for it, she let him take it. He turned it over and over in his hand.

"It's my mother's wand, isn't it?" Alexandra said.

"Yes." He looked from the wand to her. "It was in my possession. How did you get it—" His expression darkened again. "MEDEA!"

Medea appeared, slinking out of the shadows of the hillside sloping away from them and up the side of Storm King Mountain.

"You didn't tell me she was here," Alexandra said.

Her father ignored her, scowling at his companion. Medea, wearing dark robes cinched at her waist to show off her figure, and stylish high-heeled boots, tossed her black hair back and smiled at him. "She needed a wand, and she was refusing to accept anything from you. You would have given it to her had she asked."

"She didn't ask and I didn't give it to her!" Abraham Thorn's voice was loud enough to carry out over the river. "You had no right!"

Medea quailed only a little, then she smiled again and laid a hand on his chest. "Better to ask forgiveness than permission?" she said softly. She leaned into him, and lowered her head. Her voice was silky. "Abraham, I only wanted to help. Please don't be angry. It is her birthright."

"That's not how wands work. Hecate is still alive." Despite his scowl, Abraham Thorn's anger seemed to be dissipating. He held the yew wand up, and regarded Alexandra as if measuring her for it. "It cannot ever truly be yours, Alexandra. And you had a new wand crafted for you by the Ozarkers, didn't you?"

"Yes," Alexandra said. "But it's my mother's, and I'd like to keep it. Please."

He sighed, and with a saddened expression, handed it back to her. "Carrying two wands is unwise. It can split your attachment and the cores will not harmonize."

Alexandra nodded, and slid the yew wand back down her shirt. She didn't like Medea's amused expression, but ignored it.

"What was the other thing?" her father asked. His arm was around Medea's waist now, and Medea's smile seemed to Alexandra more triumphant than sympathetic.

"Your signature," Alexandra said. "So I can get a tattoo."

Her father's eyebrows went up again. "A... tattoo?"

"Even Sojourns won't give a juvenile a tattoo without parental permission." She gestured to Charlie, and the raven came to her, landing on her arm. With her other hand, she reached into her pocket and withdrew a palm-sized piece of parchment. "Just sign here, please?"

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The office was full of oak and mahogany, lushly carpeted, and lit by golden lamps. All the furnishings were gilded, and huge, leather-bound books with complicated titles filled the long wooden cases behind crystal glass panes.

Sitting behind an immense desk, Governor-General Hucksteen rested his hands on his belly with a weary expression while the balding little man in the dark Muggle business suit yelled at him.

"No, we cannot just 'Obliviate the Internets!'" the suited man shouted. "Good God, how do you stay so ignorant? You have an office overlooking Wall Street, you can look out your window and see technology every day! Just because you people still use gas lamps and papyrus —" He swung his arm to take in the Governor-General's office, his lip curling. "There's no excuse for you not to have some clue about how things work in our world!"

The Governor-General reached his hand down to scratch behind the ears of the terrier-like beast that sat at his side. Its forked tail wagged back and forth, and it momentarily stopped growling at the Muggle.

"Really, Mr. Johnson? And how well do you people understand how things work in our world?" asked Hucksteen.

"I understand that you seem to be having trouble keeping your world contained," Mr. Johnson said. "There have been too many freak tornadoes and lightning storms and mysterious ghost-train derailments in the past few years. If you can't keep your people and these bizarre creatures under control — what is that thing, anyway?" He pointed at the canine. It snarled at him and seemed ready to lunge at any moment, yet its eyes kept rolling back to the Governor-General, as if pleading for permission. With none forthcoming, it remained rooted to the floor.

"It's called a Crup, Mr. Johnson. As for my people and our bizarre creatures, there have always been encounters between the wizarding world and yours. The Muggle capacity for self-deception has always served us even better than Obliviators in keeping the occasional incident from disturbing your blissful ignorance."

Mr. Johnson's teeth ground together. "Stop using that M-word. It sounds racist. I've told you before, the official census designation is 'No-Maj.'"

Hucksteen's bushy white brows furrowed. "Not our census. That is an absurd term."

"Blissful ignorance is to both of our advantage," Johnson went on, "and frankly, we're beginning to have doubts about your ability to keep your end of our understanding."

"Indeed?" The Governor-General's tone was casual, as he resumed scratching behind the Crup's ears.

"We're starting to think," Mr. Johnson said, "that maybe you people need a change in leadership."

"And how do you imagine that works, Mr. Johnson?" The Crup was growling again.

"We can read the Confederation Charter," Mr. Johnson said. "You're not Governor-General-for-life, you're Governor-General until the other Governors decide to replace you. Or the Ministry of Magic," he added smugly.

Governor-General Hucksteen laughed. "That's a purely formal construct, and an archaic one. It's been centuries since the Ministry of Magic has had any authority over us. They would have to get their *Queen* to demand my replacement, and in the unlikely event they were ever foolish enough to try, we'd just rewrite our charter. We are as fully independent from the Old World as you are, Johnson."

"Well, you're not fully independent from us," Mr. Johnson said. "You live in *our* territory, Hucksteen, and *our* laws apply to you. Not the other way around."

"Is that so?" the Governor-General asked. "That sounds very much like a threat. Are you sure you want to disrupt the 'understanding' we've had for all these centuries?"

"*You're* disrupting it!" Mr. Johnson shouted. "You let loose a *goddamned dragon* in Times Square!"

"Not that many people saw it," Governor-General Hucksteen said.

"A hundred million people are seeing it right now on the Internet!" Johnson yelled. "Get that through your thick skull! We've stood up an entire movie production company and bombarded the news with trailers and news items to distract the public, but there are still people out there who aren't buying the official story, and those people are starting to collect all your other 'occasional incidents' and post them on blogs and newsgroups, and we can't shut down all of them!"

"Well then," said Governor-General Hucksteen, "maybe it is time for our understanding to come to an end."

Mr. Johnson stopped yelling for a moment. His mouth gaped open and shut, like a fish. Then he began shouting again: "Listen to me, you fat, pompous —"

The Governor-General picked up the wand on his desk and pointed it at Mr. Johnson. He spoke a word, and the man disappeared right out of his suit with a pop. What fell to the carpet where he'd been standing was a fat black rat with large, terrified eyes. The rat scampered in a circle on the crumpled folds of the suit, confused.

"Go, boy," said the Governor-General.

The Crup leaped forward eagerly.

Over the sounds of the rat's terrified squeak and the Crup's snarls, Governor-General Hucksteen said, "Richard!"

Richard Raspire opened the door from the side office. "Sir?"

The Governor-General heaved himself out of his chair.

"Come along, Richard," he said, reaching down to scoop up the Crup in one arm. He scratched it under the chin despite the blood dripping from its jaws. "It's time for us to get rid of some vermin."

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The oversized pickup truck was the only thing moving for miles in all directions. From one end of the horizon to the other, there was little to see but rolling brown desert, with the occasional jutting protrusion of rocks and clumps of saltgrass. Spring was almost over, and there had been little rain. It was a hot day, so all the more sensible creatures were hiding underground or in shade somewhere.

Henry Tsotsie wasn't one of the more sensible creatures.

As his truck moved through the inhospitable lower valley, he eyed the mountains off in the distance. His destination was a little village up in the northeastern corner of Dinétah, where witches had been reported.

Stories of witches filtered back to the Dinétah Auror Authority all the time. Usually it was non-magical people getting superstitious, or feeling jumpy about a new neighbor, but occasionally there really were witches or other Beings causing trouble, so someone always went to check it out. Today, it was Auror Tsotsie's turn to make the long drive.

Something caught his attention off the one-lane road ahead. He lowered his eyes from the horizon, and spotted a dust cloud moving across the desert. It was small and very, very fast; definitely not caused by the wind. Something was kicking up dust as it raced across the sands at high speed, on an intercept course for his truck.

"Huh," said Henry Tsotsie.

He pulled the truck to a stop on the edge of the road and got out. He lowered the brim of his cowboy hat to shade his eyes, squinted at the approaching dust cloud, and held his wand loosely at his side.

With a blur of motion, the dust cloud came to an abrupt halt a few yards away. When the dirt and sand settled a bit, it revealed a slim white girl with long, black hair tied back from her face, wearing jeans, boots, a loose-fitting long-sleeved shirt, and a backpack strapped over both shoulders. Her hands were empty.

"Alexandra Quick," said Henry Tsotsie.

"Hi, Mr. Tsotsie," said Alexandra. "They told me at the Auror Authority HQ you were out here. Billi Tewawina said you'd be thrilled to see me again."

"Billi Tewawina has a Hopi sense of humor," Tsotsie said.

Alexandra grinned.

Tsotsie didn't grin. "What brings you to Dinétah, Miss Quick? I hope you didn't bring trouble with you this time."

Alexandra's grin faded. "Not on purpose."

The Navajo Auror made a chuffing sound as he blew air through his nostrils. "As I recall, you do a lot of things not on purpose."

Alexandra sighed. "All right. I won't be long. But I wanted to warn you."

"Warn me?"

Alexandra nodded seriously. "My father has declared war on the Confederation. The Dark Convention has joined him. Independent Cultures are probably going to be caught in the middle. Hopefully it won't reach out to you guys in the Indian Territories, but..." She shrugged.

"It always reaches us guys," said the Auror. "We'd like to stay out of Colonial business, but the Confederation doesn't really allow fence-sitting. I already knew about your father declaring war, Miss Quick. Did you know that any Auror who sees you is supposed to arrest you on sight?"

"Oh." Alexandra eyed Tsotsie's wand, but she didn't reach for hers. "So... what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to tell you you should be on your way," Tsotsie said.

Alexandra said nothing, but her expression was glum.

Tsotsie sighed. "You hungry? I got a sandwich in the truck."

Without waiting for her to reply, he walked back to his truck, retrieved a lunchbox, and set it on the hood. He took out a sandwich and some grilled steak and eggs wrapped in foil, along with a thermos of water.

Alexandra walked over and politely accepted the sandwich. He poured some water into a cup for her.

"Where's your raven?" he asked.

Alexandra smiled. She turned and slid her shirt off one shoulder, revealing a vivid blue and black tattoo, so fresh that the skin around it was still red. It was an intricately detailed, near-perfect likeness of a raven, and as Henry Tsotsie watched, it came to life. The inked feathers moved and rose from Alexandra's skin. The raven emerged from the tattoo, and sat upon her shoulder.

Charlie cawed. Alexandra handed the raven a piece of sandwich.

"Huh. Nice. Convenient," Tsotsie said.

Alexandra nodded, and took a sip of water. "Thanks for the food," she said. "And for not arresting me. So, what will happen in the Indian Territories?"

"I don't know," Tsotsie said. "I figure some of our bad folks, the real witches, will join your Dark Convention. Some of us will want to fight the Confederation, and others will just want to keep the peace."

"I heard some Territories are already kind of splitting up," Alexandra said. "Like, they're talking about seceding. It's gonna be a wizard civil war."

"Yup." Tsotsie chewed on his steak. "It'll be bad. All wars are bad. A wizard war is going to be especially bad. No one benefits."

"You heard about the Deathly Regiment, right?"

"Yes." For the first time, emotion crossed Henry Tsotsie's face. It was disgust mixed with anger. "We should have known that was the Confederation's secret."

"I knew about it," Alexandra said, looking off across the desert. "It's why my brother died. My father sent us to find out how the Confederation got its power. I found out, but only I came back."

"Maximilian," said Charlie mournfully.

Tsotsie said nothing for a long time, just sat against his truck with Alexandra, eating his steak and eggs and watching the sun move across the horizon. Charlie didn't like the hot sun, and Alexandra made a gesture. The raven ducked its head, and then in a shrinking motion, sank back into her shoulder and became a tattoo once more. Alexandra pulled her shirt back up over her shoulder.

"That pale skin of yours is going to turn redder than mine," Tsotsie said. "You'd probably better get going."

"Did you just make a joke, Mr. Tsotsie?" Alexandra looked at him with a raised eyebrow and a small smile, but didn't move.

He sighed. "So what are you going to do in this wizard war?"

"I'm going to do the same thing you do, Mr. Tsotsie. I'm going to protect my friends and family."

Tsotsie looked at the slender teenage girl next to him, with her earnest, serious expression. She was the same girl he'd chased across Dinétah last year, still a reckless, troublesome *belagana* who didn't always know what she was getting into, but he saw that she was well on her way out of childhood now. If the experiences of the previous year hadn't marked her with the wisdom of adulthood, she had certainly grown considerably since then. There were marks both physical and mental upon her.

He felt pity for the girl. She really had no idea what was coming.

"You know people are going to die, right?" he said sadly.

"Yes," she said, and when she looked at him again, there was something frightful in her eyes. "People have already died. I'm responsible."

Tsotsie met her gaze, reassessing her. She might be determined to cause trouble, but it wasn't the reckless, raging fury he'd seen before. He sensed a bottomless well of grief and guilt and anger. It might not be her who had no idea what was coming.

"Are you sure you're not taking more responsibility than you should?" he asked.

"Maybe. But someone has to." She looked away again. "Before I'm done, I'm going to see that all debts are paid."

"If you want to do what I do, Miss Quick, then forget about debts and revenging yourself on the Confederation. That's not how you protect your friends and family."

"I don't suppose you could teach me the Patronus Charm?" she asked. "The one you used at Witches' Rock? I tried learning it from a book, but it's really hard."

"You can't learn it from a book. It's only taught in Auror training. Some can't learn it at all."

"I'm not some people." When Tsotsie said nothing, she added, "I have some time."

"I'm not looking for an apprentice," he said. "Or a sidekick."

Alexandra frowned, then said, "I did come for another reason."

"I figured." Tsotsie waited.

"I came for Nigel."

Tsotsie frowned. "Your snake? You can't keep him. He's probably the most venomous thing on this continent."

"He's *mine*," Alexandra said, eyes blazing. "He's my familiar, and I want him back."

The Navajo Auror ran a hand through his hair, which was longer than Alexandra's. "Now, look Miss Quick — Alexandra — your Nigel is happy where he's at. I've been taking good care of him. I have a medicine bag for him where he's safe and everyone else is safe from him."

Alexandra nodded. "I know. But he's mine. And if you won't let me have him..." Tsotsie waited for her to finish, eyebrows raised. Alexandra's shoulders slumped. "He belongs with me," she said, in a smaller voice.

Tsotsie shook his head, not so much in denial as in resignation. "Even if he does, where would you keep him? That magical backpack of yours isn't like my medicine bag."

Alexandra smiled. "Mr. Tsotsie, you didn't see my other tattoo."

She lifted her left arm and pulled back her sleeve. Coiled around her wrist and forearm, so lifelike it could have been alive already, was a perfect likeness of a brown snake.

#### End Year Five

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Thank you for reading *Alexandra Quick and the World Away*. Please leave a review, if you are so inclined. Special thanks to my betas, and to my patient long-time fans, who waited much longer than they should for this book. Shout-out to the [/r/AlexandraQuick](#) subreddit, and the Dark Lord Potter forums. Follow me, and my progress on the next book, *Alexandra Quick and the Wizard War*, at my LiveJournal (yes, I still use it).