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Book One of the *Alexandra Quick* series

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Chapter 1 — The Naiad Pond

Not far from the Interstate, but through a fence, a field, a spur of woods, and over a small hill, three children were lying in the tall grass surrounding a sluggish green pond. They could hear the occasional rumble of a truck in the distance, but other than that they could almost pretend that they were all alone in the outdoors. In these last lazy days of summer, escape from adult supervision was more than enough reason to roam beyond the edge of town and into the surrounding fields and semi-wild woods. Having done so, normally they were content to sprawl out in the grass with the summer heat beating down on them and the drone of cicadas lulling them to sleep.

Today, however, Alexandra was fighting the temptation to lay her head down, knowing that she might soon doze off like the younger girl next to her. She was lying at the edge of the pond for a reason, pushing the tall grass aside to peer across the algae-covered surface with the watchfulness of a tiger staking out a watering hole. Her eyes were much brighter and greener than the water, and her straight black hair, yellow shirt, and jeans shorts contrasted with her pale skin, none of which made for particularly good camouflage in the brown rushes surrounding the pond, so her imitation of a crouching tiger was more fanciful than effective.

The sun was turning red, low to the horizon, and she would not have much time to take advantage of the dusk, which she considered to be the most likely time to catch a glimpse of what she was here to see. Like the two kids with her, she would be in big trouble if she returned home after dark. Home was not far, as the crow flies, but a fair hike for three children who would have to run through tall grass and thick underbrush and up a hill before they would be back within sight of Sweetmaple Avenue.

Brian Seabury was thinking about how long it would take them to get home and whether they could make it before dark. He was looking at his sister and thinking about poking her awake, and not at the pond which Alexandra was watching so intently.

"We're going to have to go soon, Alex," he said.

"Ssh!" she whispered.

"If there's something in there, don't you think it already knows we're here?" He was *trying* not to sound skeptical, he really was, but he must have failed miserably, because Alexandra turned her head to look at him over her shoulder, and her scowl made him swallow hard and close his mouth before he said something else to make her angry.

Alexandra Quick was Brian's best friend. Alexandra's mother had moved in down the street from the Seaburys when they were both five, and they had been playmates ever since. In this summer before the start of sixth grade, both of them were testing the limits of parental supervision more than ever before, but it was always Alexandra who was bolder and more likely to get them into trouble.

Alexandra was fearless, and Brian thought it was partly because she was an only child and had never had to take care of a younger sibling, partly because her parents were rather less watchful than his, but mostly it was because she could do magic.

This was something both of them had also known since they were toddlers. By unspoken agreement, they had never mentioned it to their parents. When they were little, it had hardly even seemed important. Their world was already filled with magic, like any child's world. Dreams and storybook characters and fairy tales and cartoons and all things imaginary blended together in the disordered creativity of childhood, before they learned, gradually, that what happened in a dream couldn't necessarily happen in real life, and that children's books and fairy tales were full of *made up* characters, and that cartoons were just animated drawings.

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But Alexandra could make things disappear, and she could make birds and butterflies (and once a plastic Splendid Stars Robot Space Warrior) appear in her hand, and sometimes she could make things move without touching them. When they were seven, Brian watched her jump off the roof of her house on a dare and land on her feet as lightly as if she had stepped down from her front porch. Another time when she got angry at Billy Boggleston because he called her a skinny little french fry, she made worms squirt out of his nose. Billy now denied this had ever happened, but he avoided Alexandra, and after that most of the other children in their neighborhood wouldn't play with her. She had gained a reputation as the “weird girl.” This didn't seem to bother her, as fiercely independent and full of mischief as she was. She still had Brian as her best friend, and together they explored the vacant lots, abandoned houses, and back alleys of Larkin Mills, with a fearlessness that only seemed possible because of Alexandra.

Lately, though, her adventurousness was beginning to worry him. She wasn't just bold, she was reckless, and her “mischief” was edging into criminality.

Brian would have been content just to ride around town on their bicycles, but Alexandra had the idea of seeing how fast they could accelerate down Whipping Hill Street, never mind the heavily-trafficked intersection at the bottom. She had just laughed at the screeching of brakes and angry honking horns they left in their wake, while Brian could hardly pry his white-knuckled fingers from the handlebars for several minutes after they pedaled away. He'd refused to shoplift candy bars and Dragon Battle trading cards from the drugstore, but pretended to appreciate Alexandra's deftness in doing so. He actually felt a little nervous about her increasing disregard for rules and boundaries.

And this summer, he was often stuck babysitting his eight year-old sister, Bonnie. He didn't like bringing her along, though Alexandra didn't seem to mind much. Brian wanted it to be just him and Alexandra, like before, but he was also worried about dragging Bonnie into whatever trouble Alexandra might get them into. Bonnie hadn't been along during their downhill racing experiment, for which he was grateful. But she was with them now. Bonnie liked tagging along after her older brother, whom she adored, and Alexandra, whom he suspected she adored even more. The fearless, troublemaking older girl who was always full of wild tales seemed quite impressive and fun to Bonnie.

Alexandra Quick was Brian's best friend, so he was not quite sure why the idea of his little sister looking up to her as a role model gave him an uneasy feeling. Maybe because Alexandra was too willing to let him take risks along with her – and her magic didn't always work. When she talked him into leaping off *with* her in a repeat of the rooftop-jumping feat, they both landed in the emergency room, she with a sprained ankle and he with a broken elbow and a concussion, and their parents angrily demanding to know “*What were they thinking?*”

At age seven, it had seemed like a reasonable thing to do. But Brian worried a little bit about Alexandra talking Bonnie into jumping off a roof.

Then there were the magical creatures that only Alexandra could see.

Brian had seen Alexandra do magic, so he believed in magic, past the age when most kids became skeptical of such things. He had not, however, actually *seen* any of the supernatural creatures Alexandra claimed inhabited Larkin Mills. Gnomes in her back yard, a ghoul seen through the broken windows of the upper floor of the abandoned Third Street Regal Royalty Sweets and Confections warehouse, a giant black bird, larger than an airplane, flying low over the town one evening, and now, a naiad in Old Larkin Pond.

“Are there really such things as naiads?” Bonnie murmured sleepily, and Alexandra hissed, “Ssh!” savagely again.

Although he hated to doubt Alexandra, Brian could not help thinking that it was awfully coincidental

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that just a week after she'd finished reading *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites and Fairies*, she was now seeing naiads. Old Larkin Pond seemed a particularly unlikely place to find water spirits. The water was brackish and smelled like old boots, with only a trickle flowing into it. Unlike Larkin Mills Pond proper, which was in the center of town with a nice park built around it, Old Larkin Pond was not a picnic site or a popular landmark. It was hidden from view and not even marked on most town maps. It was off the edge of what was known as Old Larkin, which was also not a particularly nice part of town. In short, it was somewhere children were not supposed to be at all, and this was emphasized by parents with wagging fingers and admonishing tones who told them that more than one errant, unsupervised child had drowned in "that nasty little pond."

Of course this was the sort of thing parents *would* say to scare children away from somewhere they didn't want them to be, and since no one would want to actually *swim* in the pond, or even go wading in it, Brian wasn't too worried about that. But Alexandra claimed she had seen a naiad, right there in the middle of the pond, one evening as she was running home. This had captured Bonnie's imagination, and she was more than willing to come along with Brian and Alex to watch by the water's edge. Bonnie's eagerness to see a naiad had quickly given way to drowsiness, though, and now Brian was thinking it would be a good idea to give up on naiad-sighting for the evening. Bad enough if they came home after dark, but they'd be in real trouble if Bonnie let slip that they had been at Old Larkin Pond.

Just to say he'd given the naiad a fair chance to appear, though (and to avoid Alexandra's wrath), Brian waited a while longer, one eye on the pond and the other on the setting sun. Alexandra didn't move or make a sound, and her unusual patience and single-mindedness almost made him believe there was something hiding in the water. Certainly he believed that she believed there was.

Eventually, judging that they had waited as long as they possibly could (they would have to run all the way back home as it was), Brian nudged Bonnie and said to Alexandra, "Maybe it won't appear if there are too many people around. Anyway, we really have to go."

Alexandra turned her head and glared at him again. Brian tried to meet her glare with a placating expression, but he held his ground. "You know we'll be in trouble if we wait any longer."

"Did the naiad show up?" Bonnie yawned, sitting up. Brian and Alexandra both ignored her.

"You go, then," Alexandra said.

Brian frowned. "Alex..."

"Go on. I'm waiting until sundown."

He looked over his shoulder at the setting sun, and back at her, now with real concern on his face. "It'll be dark before you get back. Your parents will tear you a new one for sure." (This was a new expression they had learned recently, and while they weren't exactly sure what would be torn, it sounded ominous.) "You want to spend the last few days of summer vacation grounded?"

"I don't want to stay here after dark," Bonnie said, her voice quavering very slightly, and while the older kids ignored her again, privately Brian agreed with his sister. Old Larkin Pond was just an old pond during the day, but he thought it would be a pretty creepy place to be at night.

"Then go!" Alexandra repeated. Her stubborn expression was one Brian had seen before. Alexandra was not to be crossed when she had her mind set. Vainly, he struggled for words that would make her see things reasonably, knowing how very unreasonable she could be. And a little shiver went through him as well. Alexandra was fearless and she could conjure butterflies and jump off rooftops (sometimes), but Brian did not at all like the idea of her remaining out here alone in the dark, outside town. He was only eleven, but just old enough to have some idea that ghouls and naiads weren't the dangers their parents really feared, and that as annoying as such rules might be, it wasn't really a bad idea for children to be home by dark.

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“Alex...” he whispered, pleading now, his voice trailing off. His loyalty to Alexandra warred with his responsibility for his sister. He did not want to leave Alexandra out here, if she insisted on not leaving, but he could already see that having dug in her heels, she would be admitting defeat if she let him persuade her now, and Alexandra Quick never admitted defeat.

“Go on. Take Bonnie home,” Alexandra muttered. Reluctantly, she turned away from him.

He looked at her a moment longer. She was angry, but she seemed to be absolving him for abandoning her. It was small comfort. “Promise you won't stay out here too much longer?” he asked, as he pulled Bonnie to her feet.

“Alex?” Bonnie asked, not quite believing that the older girl was really not coming back with them. But Alexandra didn't answer them. She stretched out in the grass, and rested her chin on her hands, still staring at the murky, greenish-brown water where she was sure she had seen a naiad. She tried to ignore the sounds of Brian and Bonnie tromping off through the brush, and the little tingles that were running up her back and down her arms as the shadows grew longer and deeper.



When she opened her eyes again, it was very dark. She sat up with a start, and realized, as she slapped at a mosquito, that she had fallen asleep after all. There was just a sliver of moon overhead, reflected in the pond below, and thanks to the isolation which had made Old Larkin Pond such a promising naiad lair in Alexandra's mind, none of the light from town was visible. At the moment, she couldn't even hear the distant rush and roar of freeway traffic, and she would have welcomed that small reassurance that she was not alone in the universe.

I'm not afraid, she thought. Yes, being out alone at night was a little spooky, and the pond was even less pleasant now, dark and silent and still smelly, than it was during the day, but she wasn't really in any danger. (Although *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites and Fairies* had been somewhat inconclusive on the matter of whether or not naiads were dangerous, the impression Alexandra had gotten, and chose to cling to now, was that unless you married one and then bragged about it, or tried to steal something that belonged to her, or insulted her watery dwelling place, she probably wouldn't hurt you.)

Her hand went to her left wrist, and she began rotating the gold bracelet that hung loosely there, a habit she'd developed recently when thinking or (more rarely) when nervous. It was a recent habit because her acquisition of the bracelet was recent. She'd found it while poking around in her mother's closet, and since it was covered by an old bag, a box of combs and dried-out cosmetics, and a high school yearbook, she'd assumed her mother wouldn't miss it – though she was careful not to wear it when her mother was around and might see it.

Deciding that she really wasn't going to see a naiad tonight, and trying not to admit to herself that Brian had been right (about her parents tearing her a new one, anyway – she was *definitely* going to be grounded), Alexandra began to stand up – and then froze.

She *wasn't* alone in the universe, because something else was moving through the grass along the edge of the pond. An animal of some kind, she thought at first, maybe a deer or a possum or even a coyote, or a feral cat. But it didn't sound like an animal. It sounded like footsteps. It sounded like people.

Brian thought of Alexandra as fearless, but that wasn't entirely true. She was bold to the point of recklessness, and found it exciting and interesting to do dangerous things, but she wasn't stupid, and only a stupid person felt no fear when there was good reason to be afraid. She knew that running into wild animals, or worse, people, creeping stealthily about in the darkness was cause for concern. But she did not panic or cry or gasp. Instead, she spent just the space of two heartbeats to decide whether she should loudly confront whoever or whatever it was (and likely scare it away, if it was an animal), try to

sneak away quietly (hoping that the intruder was not yet aware of her presence), or abandon stealth and run for her life.

In the space of two heartbeats, she heard voices uttering a little sing-song chant, and they sounded like they were coming from very close by:

*“I smell mortal flesh
I smell blood.
I smell a little girl
Up to no good.”*

Well, that settled the question of whether or not it was an animal and whether or not they were aware of her, so Alexandra turned and ran, and bowled right into someone. She went tumbling head-over-heels across the grass and landed with a thud in the soggy ground right by the water's edge. The person she ran into made a nasty, indignant squawking sound and she heard him also scrambling to his feet. In the dim light of the new moon overhead, she saw odd, elongated heads bobbing over the top of the tall grass, all around her. She was surrounded! There were at least half a dozen of them, and she noted that they did not appear to be any taller than her, other than the odd triangular pointiness of their heads, but she couldn't make out anything more. The sinister rhyme and the way they were closing in on her, however, was enough to tell her that they were the ones up to no good.

“Who are you?” she yelled angrily. She hoped she sounded angry, because she really didn't want to sound like a frightened little girl.

In reply, they chuckled, but it was a nasty chuckling sound, along with a grating, rasping sound like the gnashing of teeth, and they continued shuffling forward, until they were almost within arm's length of her. She thought they looked like children or dwarves, and that their skulls were pointy because they were wearing something on their heads. But she couldn't take a closer look because they were reaching for her with long, gnarled fingers, so she backed away, having no choice but to step into the pond, first one foot and then the other sloshing into the mud. She took more steps backwards and the little people pressed forward, right up to the water's edge, and Alexandra wondered if they would follow her, and then she tripped and fell backwards right into the water.

They were laughing as she sprang back up, dripping and muddy. What she'd tripped on was a tree branch sticking up out of the mud in the shallow water, so she grabbed it and swung it at the nearest ones.

“Leave me alone!” she yelled. She was afraid it sounded more like a scream. And angry that she was being chased by these strange little people, and that they had forced her to take a fall right into the dirty pond, and angry most of all at the fact that she was frightened, she suddenly saw bright blue and yellow sparks erupting from the end of the branch and whipping through the air over the heads of the little men gathered at the water's edge.

They were little people, very ugly little people, men with wizened, wrinkly faces and cruel expressions. Alexandra saw sharp teeth glinting dully in the light cast by the shower of sparks from her tree branch, and she saw that they were all wearing pointy caps that looked dark and wet sitting on their heads. They also looked as startled as she was by the sudden fireworks.

The fear they displayed galvanized Alexandra. She whipped the branch around even harder, willing it to produce more sparks, and this time not only did it spark, but little balls of fire erupted from it and went shooting into their midst. One struck the nearest little man right in the chest, and he howled as he was knocked off his feet. Another one screamed and turned and fled, snatching his cap off his head and

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beating his face with it as one of the fireballs singed his cheek. Alexandra didn't pause to think about where they were going or how she had made fireballs shoot out of a wet branch, but immediately swung the branch again, and more fireballs came spinning out, crackling through the air, hitting the muddy shore with a wet pop followed by an awful stench, or shooting amidst the ugly little men in caps who were now ducking and fleeing, making croaking, squawking, panicked noises.

She clenched the branch tightly in her hands as she stepped quickly back onto shore. The first few steps were painfully slow as the mud sucked at her feet and she almost lost a shoe, but once she was out of the water she was able to run, and she ran in loopy zig-zags as she kept swinging the branch around her. Sparks and a few fireballs continued to burst out the other end, and she kept running away from the pond, through the woods and up the hill, until she got to the top and could see the highway. Only then did she look once over her shoulder, and see that there was no sign of the little men behind her. Far away, she could see a tiny ripple where the moon reflected off of Old Larkin Pond, but she didn't spend any more time looking back. She dropped the branch and ran headlong down the hill towards the highway and its welcome flotillas of headlights and the sound of interstate traffic.

Someone less fearless than Alexandra might have balked at going through the underpass which was the only way to get back to town without actually running across the Interstate. Alexandra paused for only a second, but it was just an underpass and while it was dark, there was enough light that she could see there was no one lurking there, so she took a breath and ran on. Soon she was back in Old Larkin, which as shabby and suspect as its dingy streets might be, now seemed cozy and welcoming. She didn't stop running until she reached her own neighborhood.

By the time she turned the corner and arrived on Sweetmaple Avenue, Archie was already coming down the street towards her. Her mother and stepfather had by now called Brian's parents, who must have extracted a confession from Brian, so Archie was headed towards Old Larkin Pond to look for her. When he met her on the street, dripping wet, shivering, and smelling like pond-scum, he was too angry to say anything, so he just pointed, and Alexandra slunk into the house.



Her mother yelled at her for about ten minutes before the smell finally made her order Alexandra upstairs to the tub. After Alexandra had taken a very long bath (which didn't completely remove the algae and mud smell), both her mother and her stepfather yelled at her some more, before sending her to bed.

Of course Alexandra didn't say anything about naiads or little men with caps, or about sparks and fireballs coming out of a tree branch. She just bit her tongue as she received her grounding ("Until you're eighteen unless I change my mind!" her mother shouted), and then went to her room.

Under the covers, she opened *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites and Fairies* and paged through it until she found an illustration that most nearly fit the little men she had encountered:

Redcaps

Nasty little creatures related to goblins and elves, but with mean dispositions and a taste for murder. They have sharp fingernails and sharper teeth, and get their names from the caps they wear, which they soak in the blood of their victims. Most often found in Scotland and Ireland, but wherever in the world fairy folk can be found, Redcaps are sure to be lurking in the darkest caves and deepest forests. Children in particular should stay away from them, as Redcaps find human children easy prey.

After reading the description of Redcaps, she lay awake for a long time, and it was only as she drifted off to sleep that she realized that she'd lost her bracelet. Somewhere between the pond and

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Sweetmaple Avenue, it had slipped off.

Chapter 2 — Grounded

Alexandra hated being grounded. It happened with disturbing regularity, especially lately, and her parents had become ever more strict about the conditions they imposed. No TV, no going outside (not even into the back yard), no having Brian over to visit. About all she was allowed to do was read.

Which did not, of course, mean that that was all she was going to do. Grounding Alexandra was not terribly effective when she was left alone and unsupervised in the house.

Her mother sometimes admitted to some anxiety about leaving Alexandra home alone during the summer. She was only eleven, and while quite clever and resourceful for her age, she was also entirely *too* clever, and her sense of responsibility was not nearly as precocious. But her parents didn't have much choice. Her mother was a nurse and her stepfather was a police officer, and while they tried to arrange their work schedules so one of them was always home when Alexandra wasn't in school, it just didn't always work out that way. (Alexandra suspected that Archie didn't even really try very hard to get his schedule changed when her mother had day shifts.) Neither her mother nor Archie had any relatives in town who could watch Alexandra. When she was younger, she would go to daycare or a babysitter, but she had been kicked out of three of the town's daycare centers, and not many babysitters would watch her anymore. All her mother's yelling hadn't made Alexandra any better about taking orders or staying out of places she shouldn't be (and of which it was said she had an almost supernatural ability to get into), and anyway, some of the things that happened to the babysitters she didn't like couldn't possibly have been her fault.

So starting this summer, her parents had, reluctantly and with deep misgivings, allowed Alexandra to stay home by herself. Her mother called at least three times a day, and when Archie wasn't assigned to desk duty he would stop by in his patrol car now and then to fix himself a sandwich and make sure Alexandra wasn't getting into any trouble. For the most part, she behaved herself – when Archie was around.

Of course she could go over to Brian's house, and did frequently. Her parents encouraged this, since they liked the fact that Brian's mother would usually be keeping an eye on them. But Mrs. Seabury only barely tolerated Alexandra, finding her to be a nuisance and a troublemaker. She was polite enough when her son's friend visited, but it was clear that she was not about to volunteer to become Alexandra's unofficial babysitter, and had started discouraging Brian from inviting her to stay for dinner.

Being grounded, Alexandra wasn't even supposed to visit Brian, and she knew her mother would be calling frequently to make sure she hadn't left the house. She spent an hour rereading *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites and Fairies*, made herself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich (her mother rarely prepared lunch for her and Alexandra had been making her own lunches since she was seven), answered the phone when her mother called and assured her that she was still at home and not watching TV, and then went to watch TV.

She wasn't supposed to be able to watch TV since Archie had rolled the television and its stand from the living room into their bedroom. They didn't trust her not to turn it on just because she'd been forbidden. But locked doors hadn't stopped Alexandra for at least two years, so as soon as she got off the phone, she went to her parents' bedroom door and stood in front of it. She thought a minute, then said:

*"So I'm grounded, what a bore,
Let me in, unlock this door!"*

With the addition of a little flourish of her arms, the lock clicked and the door swung open.

She wasn't sure if she really *needed* to make up a spell, since sometimes she did magic without saying anything at all. But she had convinced herself that magic worked better when accompanied by a rhyme, and (according to other rules she had made up for herself), using the same rhyme twice was cheating, so she had to think up a new one each time.

Her parents' bedroom was never exactly neat. There were papers her mother and stepfather had both brought home from work sitting on the nightstand, and shoes and loose change on the floor. Her mother's bathrobe, the classifieds, and a magazine about health care workers was sitting on the unmade bed, and Alexandra noticed, wrinkling her nose disdainfully, that Archie's underwear had again missed the hamper sitting in the corner. Ignoring that, she jumped up on the big king bed, shoved the robe, newspaper classifieds and magazine aside, and grabbed the TV remote from the nightstand and lay back to watch cartoons and one of those silly talk shows where adults screamed at each other for an hour about who had had a baby and if its parents were going to get married or stay married, or something like that. Alexandra didn't quite understand all the issues involved, not finding them that interesting, but she always felt sorry for the babies.

Sprawled out on the bed, listening to yet another couple yell at each other, Alexandra was glad Archie and her mother didn't yell at each other like that. Alexandra was like some of those children on the show, in that she didn't know who her father was. Archie Green was just her stepfather. He had started dating Claudia Quick when Alexandra was about four years old, and married her two years after that. So she supposed she should think of him as her father, but she didn't, and despite still being naïve about adult relationships, she had a fairly sophisticated understanding of her role in Archie's life. It was her mother that he'd married, and Alexandra was the baggage that came with her. She didn't even blame him, particularly, as she had never been willing to call him *Dad*. He was always "Archie."

Her mother was not particularly generous with her affection either. Alexandra did know that her mother loved her, in a distracted, detached sort of way, but she worked so hard and her life had been so difficult as a single mother before she met Archie that she seemed to have never quite gotten over it. It was fortunate that Alexandra was so independent and self-sufficient. Her bursts of initiative could have frightening results, but if she ever suffered from the benign neglect of her parents, she was unaware of it.

The only thing she actively resented her mother for was refusing to tell her about her father. Alexandra knew that women who had babies with men they weren't married to were sometimes treated badly. She understood that from listening to the names women got called on that talk show. But as far as she could tell, her mother was treated like anyone else, even in a small town like Larkin Mills, and after all, it hadn't stopped Archie from marrying her. Maybe being an unwed mother had been the reason Claudia Quick moved to Larkin Mills from Chicago in the first place; Alexandra had been too young to remember that. But all Alexandra knew about her father was that her mother left him when she was still a baby. And that knowledge (which her mother had let slip once, when Alexandra was six) was very likely the reason she had failed to form an attachment to Archie. In her mind, somewhere out there she still had a father.

She'd queried her mother, of course. Alexandra had asked if her father was a bad man, if he'd been abusive, if he drank a lot or if he saw other women. (This was before she even really understood what that meant; she'd been learning too much from TV talk shows at a young age.) Claudia just shook her head to all those questions, and told Alexandra that she and her father didn't belong together and they were better off without him.

It was the more poignant questions that sent her mother into moody silences, as if to punish

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Alexandra for daring to be curious about her father. “Doesn't he miss me?” she asked once. “Don't you think he'd want to meet me?”

And to herself, she wondered if he even knew she existed. She was pretty sure he must have, though, since her mother had admitted that Alexandra had already been born when she left him.

The talk show was ending, and Alexandra was getting bored again. As was so often the case, boredom turned her thoughts in dangerous directions, and she thought about her mother's closet, where she had found that gold bracelet. It had seemed like a nice piece of jewelry, if rather plain, and Alexandra had wondered why her mother had it buried at the bottom of her closet. Maybe it had been a gift from her father? She had no evidence of that, and it was as likely that it had just been misplaced and forgotten, out of sight, but it was the reason she'd taken it.

She shouldn't have been in her mother's closet in the first place, of course, just like she shouldn't be in her parents' bedroom watching TV now. But after getting up to go look cautiously out the window, in case Archie might stop by for lunch (she thought he was working at the station this week, but she wasn't sure), she crept back into the large bedroom, and then opened the closet door again.

The closet was mostly filled with her mother's clothes, a lot of it stuff she hadn't worn in years. There were also old nursing manuals, Christmas decorations (and this was also where Alexandra's mother hid her Christmas presents every year, which was the reason Alexandra always knew what she was getting ahead of time), an old pair of tennis racquets, a cordless phone that didn't work, and under a quilt and a sleeping bag, the box with her mother's high school yearbook. In that box, Alexandra had found the bracelet, so now she wondered, pursuing her unproven but captivating theory that it had once been given to her mother by her father, whether perhaps her mother's high school yearbook offered more clues. Perhaps her mother and father had been high school sweethearts!

Pulling out the quilt and sleeping bag, and the little beaded bag on top of the box, Alexandra withdrew the yearbook. *Andrew Donelson High School, 1992*, it said on the cover. She opened the book and began looking through it.

She was able to find her mother fairly easily. Claudia Quick, three years before Alexandra was born, was a pretty girl with blond curls quite unlike her daughter's straight black hair. Alexandra learned that Claudia had played the flute, was a member of the Spanish Club, and made the Superintendent's Honor Roll. Whether or not she had attended the Senior Prom Alexandra wasn't able to determine, since she found no pictures of her mother in the prom photos. In fact, of the three photos Alexandra found of her mother in the yearbook, none of them showed her with a boy. She began reading what her mother's friends had written on the inside covers and throughout the pages of the yearbook. Katie P. wrote “Claudia, best of luck!” Sarah wrote “I will never forget taking biology class with you! Stay away from frogs! Hahahah!” Matt (or maybe “Mark”; his handwriting was really lousy) wrote something about Claudia being a really cool person, best wishes, etc. Alexandra squinted at that signature, and indeed, examined anything that looked like it had been written by a boy with particular scrutiny, but aside from a few who called her “Cutie” or “Babe,” her mother did not seem to have inspired anyone to profess his love for her or write about their future plans together.

Frustrated, she slammed the yearbook shut and tossed it back into the box. This knocked the beaded bag off the lip of the box where it had been resting, and a little gold locket tumbled out onto the floor of the closet.

Alexandra stared at it, with her mouth making a silent, surprised little 'O.' Why had she just ignored that bag before? She picked it up and shook it out, but the only other thing that came out of it was a chewing gum wrapper, a few pennies, and little piece of paper which turned out to be her mother's Chicago Public Library card, dated 1989.

She carefully scooped all these things back into the bag, and then picked up the locket and studied it. It was bright gold, though a little dusty, hanging on a fine gold chain. Alexandra buffed it against her shirt, and then examined it for a latch or some other means by which to open it. She could see a seam running along the edge and a tiny hinge on the same side as the fixture where the chain was attached, but no latching mechanism. So she gently tried to pull it apart, but it would not open. Then she tried not so gently, and then she was prying at with her fingers, suddenly frustrated that this new, mysterious piece of her mother's past was denying her access to its secrets. She stopped only when she feared she might damage it.

A car door slammed shut outside, and Alexandra jumped. Hastily, she tucked everything back into and on the box in the closet, except for the locket, which she stuck in her pocket. She hurried out of her parents' bedroom, hoping she hadn't left too much evidence she'd been there, and had just shut the bedroom door when Archie came through the front.

He was wearing his gray Larkin Mills Police Department uniform, and as he turned around after shutting the front door his face was a little red, so he must have been outside before stopping at the house. Probably he had been writing people traffic tickets, though sometimes he actually had to chase people and arrest them, mostly in Old Larkin. He wiped his forehead, and regarded Alexandra suspiciously. She was in the middle of the living room by the time he'd turned around, and was doing her best to look innocent and not at all like she had just been in the master bedroom two seconds ago.

"What have you been doing this morning?" he asked, gruffly.

"Just reading," she replied.

Archie was never precisely mean to Alexandra, and every once in a while he would take her fishing or drive her around in his patrol car, in an awkward attempt to be more fatherly. Alexandra was certain that such gestures were always at the urging of her mother. He was dutiful about buying her birthday presents, he was cooperative when she needed field trip permission forms signed by a parent, and he'd never spanked her, though she was pretty sure he'd wanted to more than once. But she frequently heard Archie referring to her, to his friends and coworkers, as "Claudia's daughter," and that about summed up their relationship. *Claudia's daughter*.

"Uh huh," Archie said, as if he knew that she had been up to something. He started towards the bedroom, and it took all of Alexandra's self control to remain casual and not betray herself with a glance at the door – which, she realized with horror, she had not locked behind herself. Oh, how she wished she could make it lock again magically! But even if she did, Archie would notice the click. Although he might have trouble actually accusing her of anything just because the door made a funny noise, he'd certainly give his bedroom a thorough inspection.

But midway to the bedroom door, he apparently changed his mind, and instead tossed his hat on the sofa and went to the kitchen to get a soda out of the refrigerator.

"Remember, no TV, no computer, no playing outside, and you can't have Brian or any of your other friends over," he called from the kitchen, popping open the soda can.

"I *know*," she replied, a bit irritably. It wasn't as if he and her mother hadn't already gone over her restrictions a zillion times already.

"Watch your tone," he said, coming back into the living room and picking up his hat. With effort, Alexandra just looked at him instead of rolling her eyes. Suddenly, she wondered if Archie knew anything about her father. She'd never actually considered the possibility that her mother might have told him more about her father than she'd told her.

He tilted his head a moment, as if trying to decipher Alexandra's odd, speculative expression. For her part, she knew if she were to ever ask him about her father, it wouldn't be now. He was already annoyed

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with her, and she was plenty annoyed with him as well.

“Well, I just stopped by to check on you,” he said, putting his hat back on his head with one hand and raising the soda to his lips with the other. After taking another sip, he said, “I’ll be out in the patrol car today, but you can reach me or your mother at the usual numbers, *if it’s an emergency*—”

“I *know*,” Alexandra said, even more exasperated. She really wanted him to leave so she could get back to examining the locket. She bit her tongue so she wouldn’t say anything more or make a face, and Archie narrowed his eyes at her, and then grunted, and headed out the door.



Alexandra watched out the front window and waited until Archie had actually driven away in his patrol car, before she returned to her parents’ bedroom and did her best to make the closet and the bed look like they had before she’d gone in there. Then she carefully locked the door behind her, and went upstairs to her bedroom and took out the locket. Once again it resisted all her efforts to open it. She found a nail file and tried gently inserting it into the crack along the locket’s edge, but was unable to pry it open even a little bit. For a moment she considered breaking it open. And then another possibility occurred to her.

She held it out in front of her, letting it dangle on its chain, while she composed a suitable rhyme in her head. Then, taking a deep breath, she said:

*“Locket, you’re hiding something from me,
So open up and let me see.”*

And with a tiny click, it opened.

She wasn’t sure why she’d been expecting it not to work, but a thrill of excitement went through her. Almost shivering, she held the locket with both hands and looked inside.

There was a small photograph of a handsome, dark-haired man with a mustache and a goatee. He looked older than her mother, but not slumping ungracefully into middle-age like her and Archie. His eyes were bright and his expression alert. He looked wise, and confident. Perhaps even a little arrogant. Alexandra stared at the picture, studying the man’s features, his eyes, his hair, everything about him.

“Are you my father?” she wondered aloud.

And the man in the picture winked at her.

She almost dropped the locket. Her fingers trembled a little as she clutched it and looked at the picture again.

It wasn’t obvious, because the picture was so tiny, but the man in the photo was definitely moving. He folded his arms and tilted his head to regard Alexandra imperiously, with a little smile, and as she turned the locket this way and that, he frowned slightly while his eyes followed her.

“Who are you?” she asked out loud. But the man didn’t answer, just kept watching her.

“I see you moving!” she said, a little angrily. “Who are you? Answer me!”

He just shook his head and waved a finger at her. His smug expression infuriated her; she could almost hear him saying, “*Tsk! Tsk!*”

Alexandra let the locket drop until it dangled at the end of its chain, and with her other hand she spun it about. Then she grabbed it and turned the picture towards her again. The man had his arms stretched out to either side, and appeared to be bracing himself against the edges of his picture. When the locket stopped moving, he returned to his previous pose with his arms across his chest. His expression returned to normal as well, though Alexandra thought he looked just a little annoyed.

Alexandra watched the man for a long time. He didn’t do anything else. He shifted a little, sometimes turned his head, and winked at her again, but he didn’t really seem to have much of a range of reactions.

Abruptly, she snapped the locket shut. She stared at it, and wondered if the man was now peering

around in the darkness, or looking angry. Then she wanted to open it again, but even after she tried several different rhymes, the locket remained closed.

That night, she had to endure another round of griping from her mother, who came home tired and hungry from the hospital where she worked, which meant microwaved dinners, as usual. Archie was poking dispiritedly at the formerly frozen meatloaf and potatoes, and while Claudia sputtered and fumed at Alexandra, he occasionally contributed a “Don’t you know people have *drowned* in that pond?” or “You need to start showing us we can trust you enough to leave you alone.” Alexandra wanted to snort and point out that they didn’t really have much choice unless one of them was going to quit working, but then the subject might have turned to why they could no longer find affordable daycare for her. Personally, she thought her mother was more angry at the fact that Mrs. Seabury would be even less likely to let her spend much time with Brian and Bonnie than she was at the possibility that Alexandra might have drowned.

Her hand slipped inside her pocket, and turned the locket over and over. She thought about the man in the picture, and how her mother had come to possess it, and she was burning to ask about it, but once again, she couldn't say what she wanted to say without getting into more trouble. But as her mother's incessant nagging wore on, accompanied by her stepfather's grating passivity as he agreed with everything she said, Alexandra's patience (and restraint) wore thin.

“Did my father have black hair?” she asked suddenly.

Claudia and Archie Green both became very quiet. Alexandra studied both their reactions intently. Then her mother slapped her cup down on the table and stood up. "If you think asking irrelevant questions at inappropriate times is a clever new tactic for getting out of trouble, you'd better think again!" She looked at her husband. "I'm tired. I'm going to bed. You do the dishes, would you?" And she turned and walked wearily into their bedroom.

Archie just looked at Alexandra and shook his head. “Why do you do that? Why can't you show some consideration for your mother and me? We work long hours so you can stay home and play all day.” He rose from the table. “And you're old enough to load the dishwasher, so you can take care of the dishes.”

After Alexandra put the dirty plates into the dishwasher, she could hear the TV in her parents' bedroom. Archie was probably watching TV while her mother slept in the bed next to him. Or maybe she was still awake. Maybe they were talking about her. Maybe they were wondering where Alexandra had gotten the idea of asking if her father had black hair. It made sense, of course, since she had black hair and her mother was a blond, but the timing of her question might have been suspicious, and maybe that might lead to her mother looking for a locket in a bag in her closet. But that was what her mother would call a "guilty conscience" nagging at her, although Alexandra didn't really feel guilty at all. She was *entitled* to know about her father. Her mother had no right to hide things from her.

She pulled out the locket and slowly walked upstairs, letting it dangle and twirl on its chain. Her mother did not burst out of her bedroom accusing Alexandra of poking around in her closet, or demanding to know where her locket was. How could her mother know about a locket with a photograph that moved and never mention it? Or perhaps it had never moved for Claudia. Maybe Alexandra's mother had never even been able to open it. Alexandra had more questions than ever before, and she knew one thing for certain. The locket looked like it was made of gold, just like the bracelet she'd also found in that box. She had to find the bracelet.

Her mother and stepfather were sullen to each other as well as to Alexandra the next morning. She

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wondered if they'd had a fight, maybe about her father, maybe because of the question she had asked, and she felt a little bit guilty. Only a little, though. Her feelings for Archie did not rise to the level of active dislike, but she knew if her mother ever left him, she wouldn't be sad, not really.

Archie reminded her again that she was not to leave the house, and then foolishly told his wife, in Alexandra's hearing, that he was going to be covering the desk all day because Sergeant Ridenour had called in sick. She suppressed a grin as her mother gathered her things, dressed in her green nurse's outfit, and gave Alexandra one last, harried look. "Please be good, Alexandra," she sighed, and then much to her daughter's surprise, leaned over to give her a peck on the cheek before heading out the door.

Alexandra waited an hour after Archie and her mother had left, and then turned on the computer (which she was never supposed to use when her parents weren't home even when she wasn't grounded, but frequently did). She could call Brian's house, but it was his mother who would probably answer the phone, and Mrs. Seabury might tell Alexandra's mother later that Alexandra had called. So she was hoping Brian might be online, which he often was when not running around outside with her.

Once the computer booted up, Alexandra was confronted with a familiar screen that said:

Digital Babysitter: Protecting Children from Computers and Vice Versa!

Please enter password:

Archie had installed the software when they bought the computer, believing it would keep Alexandra from using the computer when they weren't home. And it might have, if he hadn't used her mother's birthday as the password. Alexandra typed in the sequence of numbers, and hit Enter.

Password Incorrect. Please enter password:

She frowned and tried again, but got the same response. Apparently Archie had changed the password.

She cracked her knuckles and got to work, entering Archie's birthdate, her birthdate, her mother's middle name, Archie's middle name, her middle name, their Social Security Numbers, their phone numbers, and every other piece of personal information Alexandra could think of. She tried reversing and combining various possibilities, and finally had to admit that Archie had actually chosen a password she couldn't guess easily.

She glared at the computer as if it were to blame. There was one last possibility, though she'd never tried it with a computer before. But wasn't this just another kind of lock? She closed her eyes and thought for a few moments, then said:

"I need to chat, so let me log in,

Give me the password so I can begin!"

The computer screen turned blue and then the machine rattled, fizzled, and died. Alexandra stared, taken aback.

The computer would not restart, though it seemed to tremble every time she put her hands on the power switch or the keyboard.

Groaning with frustration, she stomped around the house a bit, trying to think of another way to contact Brian while bypassing his mother, and then hit upon the obvious – she would just go to his house. With luck, he or Bonnie would see her outside, if only she could avoid being spotted by Mrs.

Seabury.

She packed enough lunches for all three of them (sandwiches, chips, cookies, and sugary orange drinks pretending to be fruit juice), and then waited a little while longer for the call she knew her mother would be making. When Claudia called from the hospital, Alexandra said she was bored and she was going to take a nap.

"You could spend your time reading," her mother suggested.

"As if there's anything else for me to do!" Alexandra replied. "Can I at least talk to Brian on the telephone?"

"No, if you talk to him pretty soon you'll have talked him into coming over, and you're grounded. Maybe being bored for a while will curb your habit of doing whatever pops into your head without thinking about the consequences. I've got to go, there's a patient who's – oh, darn it!" And Mrs. Green hung up the phone.

Couldn't hurt to ask, Alexandra thought, and snuck out the back door, just in case one of their nosy neighbors was watching.



The Seaburys lived in a house down the street much like the Quicks', except that Mrs. Seabury stayed home all day (Mr. Seabury managed a bottled water distribution warehouse), and was proud of her lawn and garden. The front of their house was much nicer-looking than the weed-infested lawn in front of Alexandra's house, which was lucky if it got mowed twice a summer.

Alexandra could see Mrs. Seabury talking to a neighbor on her front porch, so she ducked behind some bushes which concealed her until she reached the Seaburys' back yard. It took her only a moment to hop over the small chain link fence. Brian's back yard wasn't quite as neatly maintained as the front, since it wasn't as visible to the neighbors. It had a little plastic wading pool that she and Brian had played in when they were younger. Now only Bonnie used it, but neither of them were in the back yard now.

Unlike Alexandra's bedroom, Brian's was on the ground floor. Alexandra crept across the yard to the window to his room and rapped lightly on it. After a few moments, Brian pulled up the blinds to look out from under them. He looked surprised (although, not terribly) to see Alexandra outside.

"Open the window!" she whispered loudly. Brian looked over his shoulder, and with what appeared to be a sigh, pushed the sill up so there was only a screen between them.

"Didn't you get grounded?" he asked.

"Yeah, but I need to find my bracelet," she said, as if being grounded were of no consequence. She held up her bare wrist. "You know, the gold one I showed you –"

"The one you took from your mother's closet," he said, and there was a faintly disapproving note in his voice. But Alexandra either didn't notice it or pretended not to.

"Yeah. Anyway, I must have lost it somewhere around the pond, I'm hoping it didn't fall off while I was coming back through Old Larkin –" She faltered a moment, thinking about that horrible possibility, knowing she'd almost certainly never see it again if that were the case. "So, can you come with me and help me search for it?"

Brian stared at her. "You've just been grounded and you're going to ignore your grounding and go *back* there?"

"I *really* need to find that bracelet." She lowered her voice again to a whisper. "I think it might have been my father's."

Brian's expression was serious as he regarded her. Alexandra didn't talk to him about her father a lot, but he knew she had been obsessed with learning about him for a long time.

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"It doesn't look like a man's bracelet," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I mean, I think maybe my father gave it to my mother. Look, are you going to come with me or not?"

"But you're grounded!"

"Well, *you're* not, are you?"

"I will be if I go back to Old Larkin Pond with you! My parents yelled at me for going there with you, and for bringing Bonnie along. You shouldn't have stayed there after dark. Something could have happened!" His tone was accusing, and Alexandra was annoyed that he was sounding so much like her mother.

"*Something could have happened!*" she mimicked, her voice high and sarcastic. "Well, nothing did happen, except I lost my bracelet."

Alexandra lied cheerfully to her mother and stepfather, but this was probably the first time she had ever told an outright lie to Brian. Although she felt a little guilty about it, his reluctance to accompany her had swept away any thought of telling him about the redcaps. She wanted her bracelet back and she needed help finding it, and that was all that mattered. Only later would she regret this.

Brian still looked unswayed, so she brought all her powers of persuasion to bear. She leaned closer, until her face was almost touching the screen, and gave Brian her most earnest look. "I *really* need your help. It could be anywhere between here and the pond, and I... I don't want to lose something that might have come from my father. *Pleeeeeease?*"

Brian still looked reluctant, but Alexandra could see his disapproving expression falter, and knew she had already won. "If I tell my mom I'm going outside, I'll have to take Bonnie with me again," he said. "And if she finds out I went anywhere with you, *especially* Old Larkin or the pond, I'll be *so* grounded!"

"Then don't tell her," Alexandra said impatiently. Brian was going to come with her, and she was uninterested in the details of how he negotiated it with his mother. She ignored the guilt and misgiving in his eyes, and held up the bag she had packed. "I've already got lunches for us."

Brian's shoulders slumped a little. "Okay, okay," he muttered. "Me and Bonnie will be down at the park on the corner in a little while. Meet us there. *Don't* let my mom see you..." But Alexandra was already waving, as she hopped the fence around Brian's back yard and made her way down the street.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Alexandra sat on the metal merry-go-round in the park, dragging her feet in the sand as she waited for Brian and Bonnie to arrive. She had already taken out a pack of Oreos and was munching on them when several other kids wandered across the grass towards the playground equipment. Billy Boggleston paused as he spotted Alexandra sitting there. She calmly took another bite from an Oreo and watched him decide whether to keep going or make an excuse to detour around her. He was with his friends, so he wouldn't want to appear afraid of her, but she knew he still remembered the experience of worms squirting out of his nose. The truth was, she had no idea how she'd made that happen, but she wasn't afraid of Billy Boggleston. She wasn't afraid of anyone.

Billy's friends were laughing in that unpleasant way boys did when they were making rude jokes about someone, and Billy forced a smirk onto his face as they stepped off the grass and into the sand across from her.

"Look who's all alone, as usual. How's it feel not having any friends?"

"How's it feel snorting worms?" she replied. Billy turned a little red while his friends laughed as if she'd said something nonsensical.

"Hey, she's got cookies," one of the boys with Billy said, and stomped across the sand towards her.

Alexandra regarded this boy with interest, as Billy swallowed, trying to conceal his nervousness. The other boy held out his hand. "Gimme one," he sneered, daring her to refuse.

"Sure," she said, and handed him a cookie.

Surprised and a little suspicious at her immediate capitulation, the bigger boy looked at the cookie, then popped it into his mouth. He began chewing it with a smug expression, turned to look over his shoulder at Billy and the other boys, and then his expression turned to one of horror. He doubled over, gagging, and spat out a mouthful of worms.

"You should've warned him," she said to Billy, who was now shuffling more nervously from one foot to the other.

The boy who'd demanded the cookie was hacking and spitting and trying not to throw up. The other boys watched with mixed expressions of fascination and disgust. "How'd she get you to eat worms, Tom?" one of them asked.

Tom stood up, eyes watering, looking furious. "You... tricked... me!" he sputtered, around more worm fragments. He looked a little green.

"Well, next time ask nicely," Alexandra replied sweetly.

"Let's go. Leave the little freak sitting here all alone where she belongs," Billy said, but Tom was unwilling to walk away.

"I dunno how you did that," he said, reaching for her, "but now I'm going to —"

Whatever he was going to do never happened. Tom expected girls to scream or cower or run away when bigger boys threatened them. Alexandra kicked him in the kneecap, and when he yelled and doubled over to clutch his knee, she stood up and kicked him in the other kneecap. While he cried out in pain, she shoved him hard enough to send him toppling backwards. He landed heavily in the sand, pulling both his knees close to his chest. "She kicked me!" he howled in disbelief. The roles of bully and victim had been horribly reversed, and his world was in disarray.

Alexandra kicked sand in his face. "Get lost or I'll kick you around some more and all your friends can watch you get beaten up by a girl!" she declared. She glowered at Billy Boggleston. "You want some more?" She fixed each of his friends with the same fearless glower. Billy quailed. The other boys weren't quite so terrified, but none of them looked as if they wanted to test their luck. Trying to intimidate the lone girl on the playground had turned out not to be much fun at all.

Tom staggered to his feet, and took a few steps away from Alexandra. "You're crazy! You're sick!" he growled, now spitting out sand as well as bits of worms.

Alexandra sat back down and resumed eating her Oreos as Billy and his friends walked away (except Tom, who limped), calling her even worse names over their shoulders.

She only realized Brian and Bonnie had been watching when they joined her on the merry-go-round.

"You shouldn't have done that," Brian said in a low voice.

"That was cool!" Bonnie exclaimed. She swung her foot out, imitating Alexandra's savage kneecap-hobbling kick, and Alexandra smiled, but her smile faded a little at Brian's expression. She knew he hadn't been talking about the kicking.

"He deserved it. You'd think after what I did to Billy last time, he'd—"

"Forget it," Brian said quickly, and Alexandra realized with a sudden burst of understanding that he didn't want to talk about magic in front of Bonnie. His younger sister had known they were going to Old Larkin Pond to see a naiad, but, Alexandra now realized, Brian had never really expected to see one. He'd been humoring her. Magical creatures were something fantastic and improbable that could be relegated to the land of make-believe. But what Alexandra could do was real, and Brian didn't want Bonnie to see it.

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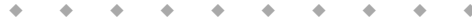
“Okay,” she said, not sure why she suddenly felt unhappy.

She handed Brian and Bonnie sandwiches and drink bottles, then said, “Somewhere between here and Old Larkin Pond, I lost my bracelet. So we’re going to walk back along the way I came home the night before last. Look on the ground or anywhere it might have rolled, okay?”

Bonnie nodded eagerly, taking a swig from her bright orange bottle, but Brian said, “If you dropped it anywhere on the street, there’s no way someone didn’t pick up a gold bracelet.”

“Maybe you could check lost and found,” Bonnie suggested. “Or you could ask your dad if anyone turned it in to the police.”

“Archie isn’t my dad,” Alexandra muttered, and stood up, not wanting to admit that Brian’s pessimism was probably justified.



They didn’t see a gold bracelet lying anywhere on the streets or sidewalks as they retraced Alexandra’s route backwards from Sweetmaple Avenue to the edge of town. They slowed down as they trekked across the dirt lots and fields between Old Larkin and the freeway underpass. Alexandra’s eyes darted back and forth, looking in every hole and clump of weeds, while Brian and Bonnie walked a criss-cross pattern to either side of her.

The grass was taller on the other side of the Interstate, and then they were hiking back through underbrush and light woods, and Alexandra’s mouth was set in a tight line as she realized just how large the area they had to search was, and just how easy it would be for a small gold bracelet to slip off somewhere where it would remain unseen even if they passed right over it. The distance from Old Larkin Pond to her house was probably not more than a mile and a half, but it was a mile and a half of infinite hiding places. Assuming she had not, as Brian had suggested, lost it in town. But she didn’t think so. She thought she had lost it while she was fending off the redcaps at the pond.

They were sweaty and itchy by the time they reached Old Larkin Pond. Even Bonnie had lost much of her enthusiasm and was no longer scrutinizing every square foot in her path with such diligence. The pond was still stagnant and covered with muck. Brian wrinkled his nose a little, but didn’t object to sitting down and breaking out the chips and remaining cookies to share.

“I was lying right here,” Alexandra said, pointing to the spot where she had fallen asleep and fancying that she could still, just barely, make out a depression in the grass. She also walked around the spot a little apprehensively before sitting down, but saw neither her bracelet nor any other tracks, such as footprints left by undersized boots.

“Then you probably lost your bracelet nearby,” Bonnie suggested hopefully. She stood up again to check the area, and Brian said sharply, “Bonnie! Don’t go wandering near the edge of the pond, you’ll fall in!”

Bonnie gave her big brother an exasperated look. “I’m not a baby!” she said slowly and haughtily. “I’m not going to fall in.” And then she looked at the water, and gasped. She pointed excitedly. “There it is!”

Alexandra was on her feet in an instant, followed quickly by Brian. Bonnie was edging closer to the water. “It’s right there! It’s lying in the mud right there!” she shrieked excitedly, and Alexandra could see it, a little circlet of gold only part-way buried in the mud, in the shallow water where she had fallen that night. Her heart leapt and she half-ran, half-hopped forward as she began pulling off her sneakers, intending to wade into the pond. Bonnie was leaning out over the water, as the bracelet was almost, almost within reach from the shore, and then Alexandra saw a horrid, ugly *face* below the surface, just before something green and slimy erupted out of the water and grabbed Bonnie and dragged her into the pond.

Chapter 3 — *Something Found, Something Lost*

Bonnie screamed, but she was cut off almost immediately as the green pond-creature wrapped a scaly arm around her throat. Its other arm was curled around her stomach, and it held her aloft as if she weighed nothing, though it was only child-sized itself.

It had a face like the ugliest monkey imaginable, but with scales instead of fur. It had green lips curled back in a ferocious grin, revealing sharp, pointy teeth. The top of its head looked as if a little bowl had been carved into its skull, and water sloshed around in the depression. Dark, glassy eyes regarded Alexandra and Brian as they both jumped into the water with a splash and advanced on the creature.

“Let her go!” Brian screamed, but he stopped when it squeezed Bonnie's throat, making her terrified eyes bulge in her head. She gurgled, trying to breathe.

“Look, look, who came back to my pond!” it cackled. “Three naughty children, now who'll be dinner? Mmm, so sweet and juicy!” It did a little hopping dance right there in the water, lifting one webbed foot then the other out of the mud, never taking its eyes off of Alexandra and Brian, nor letting up in the slightest on its grip on Bonnie.

“Let my sister go!” Brian repeated. He was paralyzed with fear, but Alexandra, though her heart was hammering in her chest, was trying to edge just a little closer. The creature was quite aware of her maneuvering and edged away by the same amount. Alexandra wondered why it didn't simply back away into the deeper water, and drag Bonnie under. It held the girl effortlessly, so it was likely strong enough to hold her down and drown her while they wrestled with it. No inspiration from *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites, and Fairies* came to her; this was definitely not a naiad.

“What are you? What do you want?” Alexandra demanded.

The creature cackled again. “Why, I have what I want! The only thing that could be better than one warm juicy child is three!”

“You can't have all three of us,” she said, and noticed that the bracelet was sitting in the mud between them. She also noticed that as the creature weaved this way and that, anticipating any sudden movements Alexandra or Brian might make, it was carefully keeping its head level.

“Just one then,” the creature replied. “I'll suck out her blood and suck out her marrow, and leave only her insides on her outside.” It smacked its lips with relish.

“No!” Brian gulped.

“You won't mind if I take this, then?” Alexandra inquired, pointing at the bracelet.

Its fishy eyes narrowed. “No, no, mine, you can't throw me beautiful shiny things and take them back, nasty, nasty child! And look what it lured into my pond!”

Alexandra jerked forward slightly, keeping her eyes locked on the creature's face. It twitched in response to her feint, and the water in the bowl in its head sloshed a little. Its lips peeled back to reveal more teeth. “Leave it, leave it!” Its fingers tightened around Bonnie's throat. She made a frightened little squeak, and then only a hiss escaped her. She was wriggling in its grasp, but weakly, and her face was turning purple.

“Alex,” Brian moaned. “D-don't make it angry! Look, you can h-have the bracelet! Just let my sister go, please...”

“No, the bracelet's mine,” Alexandra said. She straightened up, slowly, and the creature did too, matching her posture, eying her suspiciously.

“You can't have it! Go away now! The girl is mine, the bracelet is mine, if you stay you'll be mine

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too!” It hopped up and down, making ripples in the surface of the pond.

Alexandra lunged for the bracelet. The creature hissed angrily and let go of Bonnie with one arm, but it still held her by the neck, while it dived forward to try to snatch the bracelet with its other hand.

Alexandra abruptly changed direction and tackled it, wrapping her arms around its neck and pulling it even further forward. It screeched as the water in the top of its head spilled out.

“Brian, help me!” she screamed as the monkey-like creature thrashed in her grasp. It was very strong, yet she could feel it weakening with every passing second. It was still strong enough to hold onto Bonnie while clawing at Alexandra's face, though, and she could only spin in place and try to keep her feet while tilting her head back to keep its claws out of her eyes.

Brian's mouth dropped open, and Alexandra felt the creature's claws gouge her cheek, and then his paralysis broke and he lunged forward as well, wrapping his arms around its waist.

“Don't let it back in the water!” she gasped, while it hissed and thrashed and almost bowled them both over. And it was very hard even for Brian and Alexandra together to maintain their grip on the creature. It snapped like a turtle and only Alexandra's grip around its neck kept it from biting off her ear. It let go of Bonnie, who fell into the water with a splash.

“Bonnie!” Brian screamed.

“Don't let go!” Alexandra yelled.

The wrestling match between the two children and the ugly pond-thing only lasted minutes, though it seemed like an eternity to the two children. The two of them held it aloft like a great big ugly fish flapping and twisting in the air. Bonnie rolled over in the water and managed to halfway sit up, but couldn't move as she tried to recover her breath. Alexandra felt as if she were going to lose her grip and collapse beneath the creature's weight at any moment, and she thought that if they all went into the water together, it would regain its strength. Its thrashing became weaker, and its hissing tapered off to a piteous mewling sound.

“Let me go!” it pleaded, and Alexandra snorted.

“Now who's got what they want?” she asked. “Why should we?”

“I will do anything you ask!” it cried.

“You promise not to try to drown anyone else?” Alexandra demanded.

“Yes! Yes! Never again!”

“And you won't steal things anymore?”

“I didn't steal! I didn't steal! You left your bracelet in my pond!” it protested.

“I *dropped* it when I was chased into your pond by the redcaps! If something gets dropped by accident it doesn't mean it's yours!”

“Yes, yes, agreed! You can have it back!” the creature said hastily.

Alexandra wasn't at all sure the creature was trustworthy. It definitely wasn't a naiad and she didn't recognize it from any of the other descriptions in her book, and spirits, sprites, and fairies seemed inconsistently bound by their sworn word anyway. She supposed there was no guarantee that it couldn't break its promises, but on the other hand, she and Brian couldn't hold it forever, and they needed to get Bonnie out of the water.

“We'll toss it towards the shore, on the count of three, okay?” she said to Brian. He could only swallow hard and nod. Alexandra counted to three, and then with a heave, they threw it onto the banks of the pond, where it cried out as it landed with a wet thud.

Brian immediately put his arms around Bonnie and dragged her out of the water. She was shivering and sobbing incoherently.

Alexandra bent over to grab the gold bracelet. As she climbed out of the pond, she saw that the

creature was crawling to the water's edge.

"Don't ever let us see you again!" she commanded, with considerably more authority than she actually felt. She suspected once back in the water, they would have no further power over it, but she never intended to come near Old Larkin Pond again.



They walked without talking, dripping wet and still in shock. They stopped only when they reached the woods, out of sight of the pond. Brian finally sat Bonnie down, and then sat down himself as his trembling legs gave way beneath him.

"Are you okay, Bonnie?" Alexandra asked. The girl looked awful. Her face was white and she was still coughing up pondwater. She couldn't speak and looked as if she'd been frightened out of her mind. Alexandra felt bad for her. She twirled her bracelet anxiously around her wrist.

Brian eyed the gold circlet, as he put an arm around his sister's shoulders.

"You got your bracelet back," he said, and the bitterness in his voice was unmistakable.

"I didn't know that thing was in the pond. I thought... I thought maybe there was a naiad but... well you didn't really believe it either, did you?" Alexandra was more shaken than she wanted to admit. She looked at Bonnie, then at Brian. "I didn't think there would be any danger!"

"What are redcaps?" he asked.

She blinked. "What?"

"You got chased into the pond by redcaps. That's how you lost the bracelet. Right? So what are redcaps?" He was staring directly at her, and for once, Alexandra was having trouble meeting his eyes.

She had lied to Brian earlier, but she didn't see any way out of it but by telling the truth now. So she did. She told him about how she'd fallen asleep, and about how she'd been awoken by the sound of something creeping about, and then, half-fearing he wouldn't believe her and half-fearing he would, she told him about the horrid little men who had backed her into the pond until she produced fire from a wet stick and escaped in a blaze of magical pyrotechnics. And finally, she told him what she'd read about redcaps in *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites, and Fairies*.

He didn't say anything for a long time. Bonnie was still taking deep breaths, and had now buried her face in Brian's arms as he held her.

"You took us down there, knowing that these... fairy muggers were there?"

"Redcaps only come out at night," Alexandra said.

"Oh, your book says that? And I suppose it was written by someone who's actually seen redcaps? It's not just a book about fairy tale creatures no one really believes in?"

She opened her mouth, but she couldn't really explain why she'd been so certain that they wouldn't encounter the creatures that had harried her two nights ago. Any justification seemed feeble now.

"I didn't expect any trouble. I just..."

"You just wanted your bracelet back." Brian pronounced each word slowly, so it sounded like he was saying, "You. Just. Wanted. Your. Bracelet. Back." The words piled one on top of the other like little bricks, each one an accusation.

She looked at him, with an uncharacteristically guilty, pleading expression. In almost eight years of friendship, they had had fights and disagreements, and this wasn't the first time Brian had accused Alexandra of being thoughtless and reckless. But she had never seen a look on his face like the one he had now. He wasn't just angry. He looked as if he were seeing someone different. He had a look of betrayal.

"I'd never let you or Bonnie get hurt," she said, softly. And she meant it. She really did. She might not have realized it until now, but the last thing she would ever want to do was see her best friend or his

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sister come to harm. Yet even to herself, the words sounded a little hollow. In the back of her mind, a small voice was telling her that she hadn't even *thought* about Brian or Bonnie getting hurt. She'd only been thinking about her bracelet. And that was exactly what Brian was thinking now.

She knelt next to them, and turned to Bonnie, breaking away from Brian's angry, accusing stare.

"Bonnie, it's okay," she said quietly. She put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "You know I'd never let anything hurt you, right?"

Bonnie was still heaving, and didn't answer, nor did she look at Alexandra. But Brian said, "You don't get to *let* things happen or not happen, Alex. Just because you can... *do* things doesn't mean you can control what happens."

"I figured out how to beat it, didn't I?" she snapped. She was feeling defensive, and after all, hadn't they won? They'd rescued Bonnie, defeated the creature, and recovered her bracelet. Yet she knew immediately that was the wrong thing to say. Brian's eyes turned cold and distant, and he shook his head.

"Come on, Bonnie," he said gently, and he helped his sister stand up. "We're going home."

Alexandra walked along with them, but there didn't seem to be anything else to say. She didn't even want to think about what Mr. and Mrs. Seabury would do when their children came home soaking wet and smelling like the pond, nor about what Brian and Bonnie would tell them.

They trudged back into town, getting a few odd looks from people on the street. Bonnie was breathing normally again, though she was sniffing and had one hand clutched to her throat where the creature had grabbed her, while her other hand held tightly to Brian's.

They reached Sweetmaple Avenue, and Alexandra's house, and Brian and Bonnie kept walking.

"Brian," Alexandra said. He didn't stop or look back.

"Brian?" she repeated. "Bonnie?"

The other two children kept walking towards their own house, leaving Alexandra standing alone on the sidewalk.

She watched them until they reached their house down the street, feeling a lot of emotions she wasn't used to, like guilt and sadness, but also feeling a bit sorry for herself. And then, finally, she turned towards her house, and only then realized that Archie's truck and her mother's car were both sitting in the driveway. They were both home early, which meant there was no hope of Alexandra sneaking in and cleaning up. Not only had she violated her restriction, but she'd gone back to Old Larkin Pond *and* fallen in again (at least, she'd have to tell them she'd fallen in), and she was about to be caught red-handed. Their wrath would be unprecedented. She really was going to be grounded until she was eighteen.

However, as she shuffled up the walk, still dripping muddy green water, her eyes were not on the front door, behind which her mother and stepfather were no doubt lying in wait, ready to unleash a fit of screaming and yelling not heard on Sweetmaple Avenue since Alexandra had stolen Archie's keys and dropped a concrete block on his truck's gas pedal after starting it. (She was trying to use her magic to guide the truck by remote control. It hadn't worked.)

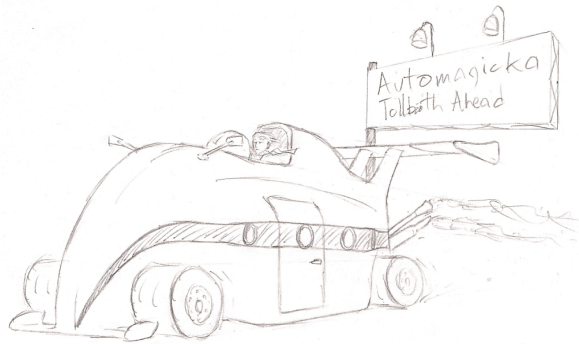
Instead, she was looking at the unfamiliar car sitting on the street in front of their house. It was a big, shiny, silver car that looked very new and expensive, not the sort of car one often saw in Larkin Mills, and certainly not sitting in front of the Green residence. It had a bright silver falcon as a hood ornament, and its windows were mirrored glass. The license plates said 'LILITH.'

She paused in her front yard, studying the impressive yet sinister-looking vehicle. She looked up and down the street. There was plenty of room for it to park in front of someone else's house. Mrs. Wilborough across the street was looking out through her curtains. She must have been curious about

Something Found, Something Lost

the strange car parked in front of Alexandra's house too. All of their neighbors would be.
Then their front door opened, and Alexandra's mother said, "Alex, come inside, please."

Chapter 4 — The Charmbridge Scholarship



Not able to put off the inevitable any longer, Alexandra entered her house. Her mother was standing by the door. She'd changed out of her nurse's scrubs, but Archie was sitting in the living room, still in his police uniform. Both of them stared at Alexandra, soaking wet, with algae in her hair, blood welling up from the cuts on her cheek, and as smelly as she had been the night before last. Someone else was sitting in the living room as well.

Their guest was a tall woman with jet black hair, as straight as Alexandra's but much longer. She was wearing a crisp white jacket and knee-length skirt and painfully high heels. Rings glittered on her fingers. There was a silver watchband and several bracelets around her wrists, and a matching silver chain around her neck. Alexandra wouldn't exactly have called her beautiful, but she was very handsome, with perfect chiseled features, high cheekbones, a sharp nose and an angular chin now raised in Alexandra's direction. She was holding a saucer in one hand and a cup of coffee that Archie must have brewed for her in the other.

"You must be Alexandra," she said.

Alexandra nodded.

"Alex... what... where...?" Her mother was on the verge of sputtering incoherently.

"It looks as if you've had a bit of an adventure," the woman said, nodding at Alexandra's muddy clothes.

"I guess," Alexandra said. She wasn't sure what to say, but she wasn't being yelled at, so for the moment she was more than willing to drag out introductions.

"Alex..." Her mother took a deep breath. "This is Ms. Grimm."

Nice name, Alexandra thought. "Hi," she said. Absently, she realized she was still wearing her bracelet, and thrust her hands behind her back, hoping her mother hadn't noticed.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Alexandra," said Ms. Grimm. She smiled, but Alexandra got the impression that smiling was something artificial and decorative Ms. Grimm did, like putting on her jewelry. "Perhaps you'd like to go upstairs and clean up a bit, and then we can all chat?"

"That's a good idea," said her mother, in a tone that reminded Alexandra of Bonnie's voice when the pond-creature was squeezing her neck.

"Okay," Alexandra said. She didn't take her eyes off of Ms. Grimm as she headed for the stairs, even though she knew she shouldn't stare. It was easier to look at her than at her mother or her stepfather, though, and Ms. Grimm merely met Alexandra's gaze without blinking, and did not seem to mind being scrutinized.

Alexandra took a long time in the bath. She poured half a bottle of bubble bath into the tub, and

lathered up her hair and rinsed it out three times, but after drying off, she still imagined she could detect the faint smell of algae and dead fish. She put on a clean shirt and one of her few pairs of pants that didn't have ragged cuffs or holes, white socks, and a pair of sandals, after placing her wet shoes on her windowsill to air out. Then she headed back downstairs. She took very careful steps, trying to be quiet, so she could overhear whatever the adults were talking about, but almost immediately Ms. Grimm said loudly, in a cheerful tone, "Alexandra, please come join us!"

When Alexandra reentered the living room, Ms. Grimm was still sitting where she had been before. Her mother had now taken a seat next to Archie on the sofa, and no longer looked as if she were about to engage in histrionics, but her expression was still mingled outrage and disbelief as she regarded her daughter. Archie just looked rather blank.

"Well, perhaps now we can be introduced properly," Ms. Grimm said, and she held out her hand. Alexandra took it. The woman's fingers were long and bony, and she had exquisitely manicured nails. "My name is Lilith Grimm, but you may call me Ms. Grimm, and if your parents agree to accept the scholarship that's been offered to you, you will be calling me Dean Grimm."

"Scholarship?" Alexandra repeated. So far, everything about today had been unexpected and disorienting. She knew she probably seemed rather stupid just now, giving one-word answers and looking confused, but it felt as if she'd been kicked around as thoroughly as Billy Boggleston's friend Tom. And she hadn't even been yelled at yet.

"That's right." Ms. Grimm smiled again. "I am the Dean of the Charmbridge Academy. It's a very exclusive school for gifted young men and women such as yourself, and I'm pleased to inform you that you're being offered a full scholarship, to be renewed annually so long as you maintain the required level of academic progress."

Alexandra's mind was still whirling. She'd always gone to Larkin Mills Elementary School, and while she was a decent student, she was hardly an academic superstar, and she didn't remember ever applying for any scholarships. Her parents had never discussed private school, ever. Even if they had wanted to send Alexandra to a private school, the cost would have been out of the question.

"I've never heard of Charmbridge Academy," she said.

"Very few people have. As I said, it's very exclusive. In fact, generally the only people who ever hear of it are those who've qualified for admission." Her smile remained firmly in place, but Alexandra could tell that Ms. Grimm was studying her closely, as if she might reveal by her reaction that she really wasn't suitable after all.

For the first time since returning home, Alexandra actually looked at her mother and her stepfather. They seemed as stunned as her. She licked her lips, then said, "What kind of a school is it? How am I... gifted?"

"I'm wondering that myself," Archie said. Claudia elbowed him, but Alexandra didn't even notice, because there was a look that passed between her and Lilith Grimm, and Alexandra suddenly felt certain that Ms. Grimm knew. And it bothered her that Ms. Grimm knew, though she wasn't certain why.

"Well," the Dean of Charmbridge Academy said, after a short pause during which she never took her eyes off of Alexandra, and then she broke eye contact with the girl and turned to look at her parents. "As you know, children are tested throughout the year, on a variety of subjects. Sometimes the results of those tests show an extraordinary aptitude for certain subjects, and when we find out that a child is gifted in certain areas, we want to make sure he or she is given every opportunity to develop those gifts. Charmbridge Academy is the finest private school of its kind in North America. I can assure you that Alexandra will be receiving an unequalled education."

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This was all grown-up speak, yet Alexandra was able to follow the gist of it, and she could already form the questions in her mind that her parents would ask. Gifted in what areas? Alexandra was very certain she'd never had any tests in school to measure her ability to conjure objects or turn Oreo cookies into worms. Where was Charmbridge Academy? How could it be the “finest private school of its kind” in North America if no one had ever heard of it? How did Ms. Grimm find out about Alexandra, and why would they give her a scholarship? Ms. Grimm had a very convincing spiel, but even Alexandra could see there were holes in her story. There was no way her parents were going to accept this at face value.

“Well, it sounds like a wonderful opportunity,” her mother said.

“Who'd have thought Alex would earn an academic scholarship?” Archie said.

Alexandra looked at them, disconcerted and confused. And, unexpectedly, hurt. Did they want to get rid of her that badly?

“Where is Charmbridge Academy?” she asked. “Is it like a boarding school?”

Ms. Grimm nodded. “Yes, you'll be residing there full-time, though of course you'll come home for summer and winter breaks. It's located out of state. Transportation will be provided, of course.”

Alexandra looked at her mother and stepfather again. Ms. Grimm's answers were implausibly vague. Out of state. Transportation will be provided. Didn't they notice? Didn't they have any questions?

“And everything – tuition, books, room and board – it's all covered by this scholarship?” her mother asked.

Ms. Grimm nodded. “Everything. There's even a discretionary fund for providing Alexandra with the initial school supplies she'll need.”

“This is... this is really quite unexpected,” her mother said. “And wonderful! I mean, an opportunity like this...” She looked at Alexandra. “Assuming Alex wants to go, of course.”

“Oh, you mean I have a choice?” Alexandra said. Resentment was stirring, generating anger that pierced through her confusion.

“Of course you have a choice, Alexandra.” Ms. Grimm wasn't smiling now. “You don't have to attend Charmbridge Academy. You can stay here.” She spoke lightly, but there was disdain in her tone. To Alexandra it looked as if she were on the verge of wrinkling her nose. And she fixed Alexandra with that penetrating, knowing look again. “But you see, your gifts are really quite exceptional and they'll never be properly developed at a... traditional public school. Moreover, they really shouldn't be exercised in an uncontrolled manner. With proper education and training, you will achieve extraordinary things. Without it... well, I'm afraid it's quite frowned upon to allow undisciplined youngsters to run amok in public. They inevitably get into serious trouble.”

Alexandra's bright green eyes met Ms. Grimm's slate gray ones. She wasn't sure she understood all the implications, but the underlying meaning was clear enough. Ms. Grimm was speaking for her benefit now. But it must have made no sense to Archie and her mother. Their passivity and lack of inquisitiveness concerned her. It was as if they didn't care at all, and were happy to go along with whatever Alexandra and Ms. Grimm said. Alexandra didn't even care anymore that they no longer seemed angry about her leaving the house while grounded, though maybe they were saving their reaction to that until after Ms. Grimm left.

“Some choice,” Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm smiled, and this time there was actually a glint of humor in her eyes.

“It's really not that bad, Alexandra,” she said gently. “In fact, I truly believe you will excel at Charmbridge Academy.”

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Alexandra sat quietly as her parents asked Ms. Grimm the most inconsequential questions while they signed the forms the Dean gave them. It felt as if they were signing Alexandra's life away. Perhaps she really was just baggage, an inconvenient burden that had to be fed and clothed, but now that this stranger had appeared on their doorstep offering to take her away, at least for eight and a half months out of the year, they were leaping at the chance.

She didn't feel any desire to cry, but there was a hot, hard lump in her throat. She said nothing and was as unlike her usual self as could be, remaining seen but not heard while the adults talked. She gleaned from the conversation that Charmbridge Academy was coed (a fact to which she was indifferent) and that all of the students boarded there throughout the academic year. It offered schooling for grades six through twelve. Larkin Mills Elementary School only went up to sixth grade, and then students went to middle school, and then high school. The idea of being at the same school with middle and high school kids might have made Alexandra intrigued and nervous at another time, but she was quite lost in self pity by the time Ms. Grimm spoke to her again.

"Alexandra? If I might interrupt your meditations for a moment?"

Alexandra looked at her sharply, but the raven-haired woman offered her an ingenuous smile, a rather more convincing one than her earlier smiles.

"I was wondering if you might like to go out for an ice cream? With your parents' permission, of course. Since I don't have to head back to school right away, it could be my little way of welcoming you to the Charmbridge family."

Nothing seemed more unlikely than that Lilith Grimm was in the habit of taking little girls out for ice cream to celebrate their enrollment at her academy. Alexandra could more easily imagine her luring small children into an oven to bake them. But she was sure that the Dean really wanted to talk about other things. She glanced at her mother, who nodded and said, "I suppose that would be all right," with a smile that suddenly made Alexandra want to scream at her.

"*Have you forgotten I'm grounded?*" she wanted to cry out. Never in a million years would she have imagined her mother letting her go out for ice cream after ignoring her grounding and coming home the way she did, yet all that seemed to have been forgotten.

"Sure," Alexandra said. And she followed Ms. Grimm out the door, to her big silver car. *This must be a curious sight for the neighbors*, she thought, who would surely be wondering about the regal-looking woman in the expensive car who was taking Alexandra for a ride.

The interior was all leather and wood. Alexandra had never been in such a car before. She sat down in the passenger's seat, and folded her arms defiantly as Ms. Grimm started the car.

Ms. Grimm snapped her fingers and the seat and shoulder straps whipped around Alexandra and clicked into place. Alexandra jumped.

"Really, that's mostly for the sake of appearances. This vehicle is fully certified by the Department of Magical Transportation. It has the latest anti-collision charms. But, I don't want you getting in the habit of thinking you can ride in Muggle cars without a seat belt."

Alexandra just stared at Ms. Grimm as she put the car in gear and pulled away from her house.

"You have questions," Grimm said. Alexandra was distracted for a moment as they drove past Brian's house.

"Cat got your tongue?" The woman smiled slightly, not entirely pleasantly. "Perhaps you're wondering where to begin. Shall I start?"

Alexandra remained silent, so she continued. "You are wondering why your parents acquiesced so readily to sending you to an out-of-state boarding school they've never heard of, paid for by a scholarship from sources unknown, for 'gifts' they have no knowledge of." She glanced at Alexandra,

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who was looking startled in spite of herself at the Dean's uncanny intuition. "Oh, don't look so surprised, dear. You've been sulking for the past half hour with the air of one feeling immensely sorry for oneself. Poor Alexandra, whose parents don't love her anymore and want to get rid of her, is that what you've been thinking?"

It wasn't *exactly* what Alexandra had been thinking, but it was very close, and she didn't like Grimm's dry, unsympathetic tone, so she said nothing.

"I'm going to have insist that you get in the habit of responding appropriately when a teacher or other member of the staff addresses you," Grimm said pleasantly. "I'm sure you've picked up many bad habits during your Muggle upbringing which we'll have to break, but let's start with basic courtesies. So, you may say 'Yes, Ms. Grimm,' or 'No, Ms. Grimm,' or whatever other answer pops into your head, so long as it's followed by 'Ms. Grimm.' Do you understand?"

Alexandra bristled inwardly, but all that came out was "Yes, Ms. Grimm," in a small voice.

"Good. Now, your parents aren't quite as dull or negligent as they appear. There are times when it's appropriate to explain the true nature of Charmbridge Academy, even to Muggle parents, but we make those decisions on a case-by-case basis. In the case of your mother and stepfather, it was clear to me that they are not ready to be fully enlightened about the world which you are about to enter. So, I used a bit of magic to... ease their concerns. Never fear, I did not *force* any decision upon them. That would be considered entirely inappropriate. Illegal, actually. But we are allowed the judicious use of Confundus Charms, when it's in the best interests of Muggles and wizards alike."

They seemed to be heading towards the Interstate, and not towards any ice cream shops in town, yet this concerned Alexandra less than it probably should have. Instead, she said, "I don't understand half those words you just used."

"You're exaggerating, surely."

Alexandra looked straight ahead, and then said, "You can do magic."

"Of course. As can you. You are a witch."

Alexandra gave her a sharp look. She'd never been insulted so directly by an adult before. "I am not!"

Grimm laughed. "It's not an insult, dear. In our world, men are wizards, women are witches. I'm a witch too."

I'll bet you are, Alexandra thought. "Like Sabrina," she said aloud.

"I'm not familiar. You know another witch?" Grimm turned towards her, raising an eyebrow. Alexandra thought perhaps she was putting her on, but the woman seemed serious.

"She's a TV character," Alexandra said. "A witch."

"Ah. Muggle entertainment. You're going to have to unlearn a lot of what you've picked up among Muggles."

"What are Muggles?"

"Non-wizards. People who neither know nor practice magic. Such as your parents."

"So what is 'our world'?"

"The wizarding world, of course."

And as they pulled onto the Interstate, Alexandra saw a sign she had never seen on the Interstate before when riding in a car with her mother or stepfather:

Automagicka

Tollbooth Ahead

She stared. "What's an Automagicka?"

"A network of magical roadways, overlaid atop the Muggle highway system, or parts of it. It's not nearly complete yet; they only started working on it a few years ago, and most people still prefer Portkeys or the Wizardrail for long distance travel. Private Automagicka-approved vehicles like this one are still relatively rare."

Alexandra looked at the scenery passing by outside the window, which still looked like what she'd see while riding on the Interstate. "You're using lots of words I don't know again."

"I know I am, Alexandra. And you're going to have to start learning them. You have a great deal to learn, and you're at a severe disadvantage compared to children who've grown up in the wizarding world. But you seem quite bright and I'm sure you'll adjust."

The car slowed down as Alexandra saw they were approaching a large purple tollbooth which definitely didn't exist on any of the highways around Larkin Mills. There was a large iron chain stretched across the road, rather than the white and red barriers that Alexandra has seen rising and lowering at other tollbooths. As they pulled up to the window, she gasped. The tollbooth operator was a large, ugly humanoid with green skin, a warty nose, and huge yellowish teeth.

Grimm rolled down her window. "Chicago," she said.

"One eagle," the toll-troll grunted.

Grimm handed it a gold coin, and it stuck the coin in its mouth, bit down hard on it, examined it, then tossed it into a basket with a clink and actually got out of its booth to unhook the end of the heavy iron chain and drag it out of the way of Ms. Grimm's car. She moved forward, leaving the tollbooth behind.

"We can't go to Chicago, that's like three hours away!" Alexandra exclaimed.

"Not via the Automagicka." Grimm smiled.

"Was that a troll?"

"Yes. You see, you are learning quickly."

Alexandra covered her mouth, feeling an urge to laugh in spite of herself. "You have... trollbooths!"

Grimm made a face that might have resembled a grin on a more pleasant person. "Yes, very clever indeed, Alexandra, though hardly original. Manning a tollbooth is dull and monotonous, especially when there is so little traffic. You wouldn't expect a wizard to do it? Properly trained, trolls do it quite well, and they also solve the problem of the occasional Muggle who wanders off the highway proper."

Alexandra stared at Ms. Grimm again. Was that a joke? She wasn't sure she wanted to know, so she changed the subject. "Why are we going to Chicago?"

"For ice cream, of course."

Alexandra was getting tired of Grimm's droll, uninformative answers, and her face showed it. "Why are we going to *Chicago* for ice cream? There's a Frosty Freeze in town."

"I thought I'd show you the Automagicka, and give you your first look at a troll. Seeing such things firsthand will, I hope, get us past a great deal of skepticism and denial so we can start talking about more important matters."

They didn't seem to be driving any faster than one normally drove on the Interstate, but Alexandra did notice that the scenery that whizzed past seemed blurry and unusually colorful, and she also didn't see any of the normal highway signs she was used to.

"We'll be home past my bedtime. I guess your Confunding Charm will take care of that too?"

"Confundus Charm. Yes, quite so. Don't think for a second that you're routinely going to get out of trouble by Confounding your parents, but under the circumstances, I think it's safe to say you've gotten yourself a free pass for the evening."

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Grimm was silent for a while, and Alexandra sensed she was waiting for her to make the next move. Rather than saying anything, Alexandra continued looking out the window for a while, but her curiosity finally got the best of her.

"How did you find out about me?"

"In the Registrar's Office at school, there is a scroll that records the names of all school-age children."

"You mean someone else enrolled me?"

"No, the *scroll* recorded your eligibility for enrollment. Of course we didn't recognize your name immediately, as you weren't part of a wizarding household. It took a little work, but we eventually tracked you down."

Alexandra toyed with her bracelet, trying to make sense of this. "How could this scroll know I'm *going* to be enrolled when you'd never heard of me and I didn't know anything about your school?"

"Some things you're going to have to take on faith, Alexandra, at least until you know more about magic. Suffice it to say that you must have some connection to the wizarding world, despite your upbringing."

That made Alexandra think for several long minutes, and Ms. Grimm seemed content to let her ponder this, until Alexandra said, "Archie isn't my real father."

Grimm nodded. "I know. He's your stepfather. Your parents told me." She waited expectantly.

Alexandra looked straight ahead again, her fingers still pushing the bracelet in a circle around her wrist.

"If I'm a witch, does that mean my father was a wizard?"

"It's very possible. Probable, in fact. It can happen that a witch or wizard is born to Muggle parents, though inevitably there is a wizard somewhere in the family tree." Ms. Grimm actually took her eyes off the road, and gave Alexandra an appraising look. "What do you know about your father, Alexandra?"

"Hardly anything!" she blurted out, more forcefully than she meant to, and blushed. Looking away, she shrugged. "My mother left him when I was a baby. She won't tell me anything about him."

"I see," Ms. Grimm said softly.

Lights appeared on the road from the opposite direction, which Alexandra noticed because they had been traveling for quite a while on the Automagicka without seeing any other vehicles. The car that went past was a rattling old jalopy that looked like something out of a black and white TV show, and the driver was a woman (a *witch*, Alexandra supposed) wearing a broad floppy hat that didn't look like it should have stayed on her head at the speed she was going. But Alexandra could see other cars now, and the bright lights of a big city ahead, though as she had told Ms. Grimm, she knew Chicago was over a hundred miles from Larkin Mills.

"Are there lots of wizards in Chicago?" she asked.

"Quite a few." Ms. Grimm swerved around a bright green and purple minivan that hurtled and bumped along on elephantine tires, looking as if it might flip over at any second. She shook her head. "The DMT is going to have to start cracking down on private vehicle licenses soon, I'm afraid." As they drove into the city, Alexandra could see offramps and onramps here and there, and most of the cars sharing the Automagicka with them were similarly odd contraptions that would draw stares on any normal Muggle roadway. She saw something that resembled a double-decker Formula One race car, and a huge black sedan with a sinister grill that actually snarled at cars in front of it, and as Ms. Grimm finally left the magical highway, they passed a bus that looked almost normal except that it had seven wheels.

“How come no one knows about wizards? How do wizards drive cars like... *that* and not get noticed? Why don't Muggles see the Automagicka if it goes right through Chicago?”

“You're asking good questions, Alexandra.” Grimm nodded approvingly, but Alexandra thought just a bit patronizingly as well. “The short answer to your question is 'magic'. The longer answer is the reason you need to attend Charmbridge, to learn how magic works and how we coexist with Muggles without upsetting them. There are spells, like the Confundus Charm, that help, but there are things we can't do, not without leaving a terrible mess and a lot of Muggles with unanswerable questions. That's why we have laws, Alexandra. Wizarding laws. And you're going to have to start following them.”

Ms. Grimm parked in front of a laundromat that was at the end of a dingy-looking strip mall. Alexandra got out of the car, and looked around a little suspiciously.

She'd only been to Chicago twice, once when her mother had had a job interview at a hospital there, and once when her parents took her to the circus. She didn't know the city well at all, but this didn't look like a nice part of town. However, if Ms. Grimm wasn't afraid, Alexandra wasn't going to be either. She assumed witches could protect themselves, and hadn't she protected herself against the pond-creature, without even knowing she was a witch? She did wonder a little that Grimm was going to leave such an expensive-looking bright silver car sitting there next to old beaters covered with dents and taped-up windshields.

“Aren't you worried about someone stealing your car?” she asked.

“No,” Ms. Grimm said, with a small smile. She looked around, as if to make sure no one was watching, and then withdrew a wooden stick from inside her jacket, and waved it at the car.

“*Repello furtificus*,” she said. Her beautiful car seemed to deteriorate before Alexandra's eyes. Its gleaming silver body became dull and rust-eaten, its sleek lines were warped and deformed by dents and gouges, and it shrank in place. One tire deflated and the others frayed and unraveled, cracks spread like a spiderweb across the windshield, and the license plates personalized with Ms. Grimm's first name became so caked with dirt that they were almost unreadable.

Alexandra realized she was gaping at the transformation, and shut her mouth quickly.

“Come along, dear. I promised you ice cream.” Ms. Grimm tucked her wand back into her jacket and beckoned to the girl. Alexandra followed her, but wondered how they were going to get ice cream in a laundromat.

She didn't say anything as they walked past the people who were putting coins into machines or folding their laundry (*Muggles*, Alexandra thought, the new word playing over and over in her mind). Ms. Grimm led her to a door in the back that said “Employees Only” and opened it. She gestured for Alexandra to precede her through the door.

Alexandra stepped through the doorway, and saw that rather than a storage room or office, the door opened directly onto another street. Glancing at Ms. Grimm, she stepped through. Ms. Grimm followed her, and closed the door behind her.



The street was brightly lit, but not with neon signs and electric streetlights like Alexandra was used to. Instead, she saw lanterns hanging from posts, and storefronts illuminated by glass jars that seemed to contain bottled fire of various colors. The street was quite busy, filled with men and women wearing costumes Alexandra would normally have associated with Halloween. She saw long, flowing robes in flamboyant colors, she saw staid black and white dresses and tunics, she saw wide-brimmed hats and bonnets large and small, plain and colorful, she saw leather and buckskin outfits, and she saw one fellow dressed like a medieval knight in jingling chain armor, carrying a sword. Almost everyone on the street was a grown-up; she saw a couple of women carrying babies and a few teenagers, but hardly

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anyone her own age. She did, however, catch a glimpse of some grumpy-looking humanoids with long ears and beak-like noses, and following after some of the humans, even smaller creatures who would barely come up to Alexandra's waist, skinny, with oversized heads and bulbous eyes, dressed in little more than scraps of clothing.

Ms. Grimm let Alexandra stand there staring for a while, then put a hand on her shoulder.

"Ice cream, yes?"

Alexandra was much less interested in ice cream than she was in the fantastic scene before her, but she let Ms. Grimm steer her towards a bright white and pink building across the street. The sign out front said *Goody Pruett's Witch-Made Pies, Cakes, and Other Confections*.

"We're at the very edge of the Goblin Market," Ms. Grimm said. "You'll have an opportunity to come back here, someday, but I just wanted to give you a little glimpse of the world alongside the one in which you have been living. And we still have some things to talk about."

Alexandra and Ms. Grimm entered Goody Pruett's, and for the first time she saw other children. There was a girl who looked a little younger than her, sitting on a chair licking something chocolatey off her fingers. Unlike her parents, the girl was dressed in what Alexandra would consider normal-looking clothes, other than her enormous fluffy pink slippers. There was a boy Alexandra's age dressed in long dark robes, standing next to a man in very similar robes. They were looking over a case full of pies. The boy glanced at Alexandra curiously, then looked at Ms. Grimm and gulped. The man saw Ms. Grimm and said, "Dean Grimm! What a pleasure to see you here!" His son didn't look nearly as pleased.

"Hello, Alastair," Ms. Grimm said pleasantly. "It looks as if Angus has just been fitted for his new school robes."

"Aye, he's been growin' like a weed this past summer," the older gentleman said. He had a long bushy black beard and was wearing a stovepipe hat. He reminded Alexandra strongly of Abraham Lincoln. "We thought we'd pick up some humility pie before headin' back to the homestead."

"How nice." Ms. Grimm gave an artificially warm smile, and looked at the boy. "Let's hope there's no need for humility when the new semester begins, Angus. I'll be expecting to see you on the Dean's List again."

"Yes ma'am," Angus gulped.

"This is Alexandra Quick. She's a brand new student. She'll be starting sixth grade."

"Pleased to meet you, Alexandra," said Angus's father somberly, holding out his hand for Alexandra to shake. She did so, and then Angus followed suit. "Hello," he said. "Angus MacAvoy. I'll be in the seventh grade." His expression was frankly curious as he looked Alexandra up and down from head to toe, taking in her "Muggle" clothing, but in Ms. Grimm's presence, he seemed too cowed to do more than introduce himself. Then the woman behind the counter handed Alastair MacAvoy a piebox. He gave her a handful of coins, took the box, and with a tip of his hat to Ms. Grimm, he and his son departed the shop.

Alexandra stared at the pastries behind the glass. There was a dazzling array of sugary treats, and some of them looked familiar, but others had very peculiar names. Besides Witch Apple and Huckleberry Pie, there was Humility Pie and Consolation Pie and a Schadenfreude Pie with a thick, gooey filling that looked as black as tar. Above these was a Blackbird Pie that actually moved and hopped on the shelf as if something inside were trying to get out.

"It doesn't really have blackbirds in it, does it?" Alexandra asked, making a face. Ms. Grimm only smiled and moved on, forcing Alexandra to follow, past small hard-looking Rock Cakes and a large sparkling Jubilation Cake, then a case full of Wizard Chocolates in red, yellow, blue, and green

varieties in addition to the more familiar-looking brown and white. An “imports” case held Chocolate Frogs, Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, and something called “Wizard Wheezes.”

They finally got to the ice cream counter, and to Alexandra's disappointment, there was only a single tub of what looked like vanilla, though the sign above it said “Goody Pruett's Now Proudly Serves Wyland West's Famous 99-Flavored Ice Cream!”

“Two scoops, please,” said Ms. Grimm to the young man behind the counter, who had bright red hair and a scraggly beard and a “Goody Pruett's” smock covered with sticky stains of all colors.

“How many flavors?” he asked, as he picked up the scoop.

“Oh, let's have all ninety-nine,” she said, and the server nodded. He clicked the scoop lever a few times and then dished two scoops into a pair of sugar cones, and handed them across the counter. Ms. Grimm took one and handed one to Alexandra.

“That'll be twelve pidges,” he said. Alexandra watched as Ms. Grimm handed another gold coin to him, and received a handful of smaller coins in change. Then she looked at the ordinary-looking scoop of ice cream in front of her nose, and cautiously stuck out her tongue to lick it.

Instead of vanilla, it tasted like spearmint. Surprised, she licked again, and this time her mouth filled with the flavor of... paper?

She looked up at Ms. Grimm, who was watching Alexandra's reaction with that bemused smile of hers.

“You'll get a different flavor every time you taste it,” she said. She licked her own ice cream, and her eyebrow twitched ever so slightly. “Hmm. Aged cheddar.”

There was an empty booth behind them, and Ms. Grimm indicated that Alexandra should sit down, so the two of them sat across the table from each other. Alexandra continued sampling her ice cream, tasting in succession grape, chocolate, asparagus, lemon, dishsoap, marshmallow, and baked beans.

She started to ask Ms. Grimm a question, then noticed the picture of a plump woman in glasses hanging on the wall, which said “Store Manager: Dee Finkleburg.” Ms. Finkleburg smiled cheerfully at Alexandra; not just in a static way, but actually *smiling*. Alexandra could see her cheeks move and her eyes follow the customers walking past. That made Alexandra think of her locket again.

“All these wonders you are seeing are just a small glimpse into the wizarding world,” Ms. Grimm was saying. “You'll be immersed in it soon enough.”

“And that's why you brought me to Chicago for ice cream?” Alexandra licked her ice cream cone again. Pistachio.

Ms. Grimm smiled, catlike. “That, and to talk, away from your parents. Do you recall I mentioned that we have laws you're going to have to follow?”

Alexandra eyed Ms. Grimm a little warily and licked cinnamon-flavored ice cream off her lips, and nodded.

“One of the most important is the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy. Can you guess what that means?”

“That we're not supposed to do magic in front of... Muggles?” Alexandra said slowly.

“Precisely.” Ms. Grimm nodded. “Not just in front of them, but in any way that risks exposing the existence of magic to them.” She gave Alexandra a stern look.

“As I've told you, we tracked you down once we became aware of you through the Registrar's Scroll. It is standard practice to put a Trace on all wizards who reside in Muggle communities, to monitor their magical activities. Particularly in the case of underaged wizards and witches. Irresponsible magic use can cause enormous problems for the Bureau of Magic Obfuscation.”

Alexandra wasn't sure what “obfuscation” meant, but she had a bad feeling about the direction of the

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conversation. She felt herself starting to slide lower in her booth, as Ms. Grimm leaned towards her.

“What that means,” Ms. Grimm continued, “is that we are aware of *every* spell you cast. Whenever you use magic while away from Charmbridge, we will know about it.”

“I didn't know about your... International Warlocks' Secrecy Confederation, or Bureau of Obfuscation!” Alexandra protested.

“Of course you didn't,” Ms. Grimm said smoothly. “But you do now. So to make it very clear, you are *not allowed* to use magic outside of school or the supervision of an adult wizard. You've been very lucky so far as it is, casting spells without a wand, untrained. But there will be no more transforming cookies into worms or using magic to open locks. Until you've earned your Magical Diploma, when you live among Muggles, you will have to live *as* a Muggle. Do you understand?”

Alexandra stared at her. Having just been shown the magical world of witches and wizards, she was now being told she had to pretend it didn't exist, except when she was in school? It seemed so unfair!

“What about if I'm in danger? What if I need to save someone's life?”

“Ah, yes.” Ms. Grimm licked at her ice cream cone. “Why *were* you throwing fireballs about, three nights ago?”

Alexandra stared again. “You knew about that?”

“We knew you did it, but not why. Since I was coming to enroll you anyway, it was decided to wait until now to question you, but an Obfuscation Officer was sent to Larkin Mills to investigate any potential breaches of magical secrecy.”

“What does an Obfuscation Officer do?”

“Mostly cleans up messes made by the reckless use of magic around Muggles,” Ms. Grimm replied, giving Alexandra another narrow look. “In extreme cases, they can even erase the memories of Muggles who've seen too much. Now, about those fireballs?”

Alexandra was surprised, annoyed, and a little relieved all at once. So she told Ms. Grimm how it all started, when she thought she'd seen a naiad in Old Larkin Pond, about the redcaps who had assaulted her that night, and then, about the creature who really lived in the pond and how she and Brian and Bonnie had escaped from it. By the time she was finished, Ms. Grimm had finished her ice cream cone, and Alexandra was down to her last dandelion-flavored bite.

“That is a remarkable story on many levels,” Ms. Grimm said. “To produce fireballs like that, spontaneously, with such an unsuitable wand substitute, indicates you have a rare talent. Of course you must have been panicked and desperate, which often brings out unprecedented bursts of magical energy, but still... And redcaps, and a kappa, in Larkin Mills? Fascinating indeed.”

“What's a kappa?”

“The creature in the pond. From your description, it sounds like a kappa, which is very strange as they are not normally found outside of Asia.”

“Do they really drown people and eat them?”

“Oh yes. They're very dangerous to Muggles. That you defeated it without using magic is really quite remarkable. Of course risking your life and that of your friends for a bracelet...” She shook her head. “Whatever could make that bracelet so important?”

Alexandra shrugged, sliding her wrist below the table, out of sight. “Dunno,” she mumbled. “I just wanted it back. It's not like I *knew* there was a kappa in the pond.”

“Hmm.” Ms. Grimm didn't seem to be in the habit of pressing for answers, yet Alexandra often had the sense the woman knew when she was hiding something.

“Is the Obfuscation Officer going to erase Brian and Bonnie's memories?” Alexandra asked, pronouncing “obfuscation” very carefully.

Ms. Grimm raised an eyebrow. "Do you think he should?"

Alexandra had ended her story with their escape from the kappa. She had not told Ms. Grimm about their conversation afterwards, or about how Brian had turned his back on her and walked away. And suddenly, a part of Alexandra wished very much that she could simply erase what had happened.

Except it wasn't just the kappa that Brian had seen. Alexandra had been doing magic for years, and Brian knew all about it. Would they have to erase everything he knew about her? Would they have to erase his memories of Alexandra entirely? Would they still be friends at all? She looked down at her lap.

"I don't think he'll tell his parents," she said quietly. "He'll... he'll probably talk Bonnie into telling them she just fell in the pond."

"He knows about you, doesn't he?"

Alexandra looked up, annoyed at Ms. Grimm's ability to parse out what Alexandra left unsaid. "He won't tell. We're best friends." *We were best friends*, she thought.

Ms. Grimm wiped her fingers carefully with a handkerchief.

"In recent years, the Bureau of Magic Obfuscation has become more cautious about Obliviating memories. They tend to do so only as a last resort. Children are rarely considered a serious threat to magical secrecy, even when they do witness actual magical phenomena. If Brian did tell his parents everything, it's not likely they'd believe him, is it?"

"No," Alexandra said. But they'd certainly believe that he'd be better off staying away from her.

"I think your friends are safe from Obliviation. But mark what I said, Alexandra. You cannot continue to use magic at home. We *will* know about it if you do."

"Can I talk to Brian about being a witch?" she asked, in a low voice. "Can I tell him where I'm going? Do I have to keep this secret from everyone? What about my parents?"

Ms. Grimm studied her a moment, and for the first time, Alexandra thought she looked genuinely sympathetic – just a little.

"Despite the Statute," she said at last, "it's really not practical to maintain perfect secrecy. There are many wizards and witches who, like you, have Muggle friends and relatives. It's discouraged to tell them too much, but it's tolerated, so long as they don't threaten to reveal us to the rest of the Muggle world. But consider, Alexandra – what good will it do either of you for you to tell Brian about a world he can never be a part of? And inevitably, you will no longer be part of his world either. We segregate ourselves from Muggles for their own good as much as for ours."

Alexandra was silent for a long while after that. "And my parents?" she asked at last.

Ms. Grimm smiled. "Your mother will always be your mother. And Mr. Green... well, he will always be your stepfather, I suppose. As you get older, you may see fit to tell them more, or not. But I think right now, they're better off enjoying blissful ignorance. Don't you?"

Chapter 5 — The Short Bus

Alexandra didn't say much on the ride home, and Ms. Grimm didn't push her. Alexandra was actually getting quite sleepy. In fact, she nodded off several times in the car.

As they reentered Larkin Mills, Ms. Grimm said, "Now, I want you to stay completely away from that pond. The Department of Magical Wildlife will be sending someone from Pest Control to deal with the kappa, and they'll probably try to track down those redcaps as well."

Alexandra nodded, suppressing a yawn.

"The day after tomorrow, the academy will send a bus to bring you back to Chicago, this time for an all-day shopping trip at the Goblin Market. You're going to need robes, books, a wand, a familiar, magical equipment, all things you can't buy in Muggle stores. Your scholarship provides you with a budget to be spent on necessary school supplies, and there are a few students like you who don't have the opportunity to shop for magical supplies on their own."

Despite her weariness and her thoughts about Brian and having to stop using magic, Alexandra was rather excited at the idea of going back to Chicago. A wand? A familiar? Her parents had never let her have a pet.

"Are you going to take us shopping?" she asked, a little dubiously.

Ms. Grimm smiled tightly. "I'm afraid not. I don't normally escort students around personally. This trip was... special. In any case, I'm going to be very busy getting ready for the new school year. There will be an older student volunteer and a Charmbridge staff member to chaperone you. I already explained to your parents about the need for this shopping trip – in less magical terms, of course – and they've agreed."

They pulled up in front of Alexandra's house. "It has been a pleasure to meet you, Alexandra. As I said, you show a great deal of potential, so I look forward to seeing you at Charmbridge." She gave Alexandra a stern look. "But remember –"

"I know," Alexandra sighed. "No magic."

Her parents were both still up when Alexandra entered the house, and she was a little surprised when she saw the time. It was past her bedtime, but not as late as she'd thought it was.

"So, did you and Ms. Grimm have a good time?" her mother asked. "That was a long trip for ice cream."

Alexandra studied her mother, wondering if she suspected anything, or if she was at all curious about this mysterious school and the scholarship that came out of the blue, or if the Confundus Charm Ms. Grimm had told her about simply made anything seem sensible and not worth questioning.

"Yeah. She's... interesting."

"Well, good." Her mother looked down at a puzzle she was doing in a little book of crosswords. "You'd better go to bed, then."

Alexandra nodded, and trudged upstairs. She lay awake in bed for long time, with ninety-nine unexpected flavors of ice cream still dancing on her tongue, and even more thoughts dancing in her head. If her father had been a wizard, was that why his mother had left him? Couldn't he have used magic to make her stay? Would she ever be able to ask her mother about him? And what had Brian and Bonnie told their parents?

Eventually, she did fall asleep, but she had dreams about the man in the locket, and the kappa in the pond reaching out of the water to drag her under, and eventually the two of them became switched so the kappa was hissing at her from a photograph and the dark-haired man was trying to pull her

underwater.



The next morning, Alexandra woke up later than usual for a summer day, but after washing her face she still got down to the kitchen before her mother had left for work. Archie was already gone.

“Am I still grounded?” she asked. She knew she probably shouldn’t. The outburst and disciplinary excesses that yesterday’s trip to the pond should have provoked had apparently been staved off by Ms. Grimm’s Confundus Charm, but Alexandra feared that might have only been a postponement. On the other hand, she’d never been reluctant to push her luck.

“Of course you are,” her mother replied, but at least she didn’t sound furious. “Other than going to get supplies for this trip tomorrow, you’re not to leave the house until school starts. You can spend the rest of your summer vacation thinking about rules and boundaries, which I’m sure there will be plenty of at Charmbridge Academy.”

“Okay,” Alexandra said, a little sulkily, though she made a funny expression when her mother again kissed her on the forehead before going out the door.

“I *will* be calling during the day and you’d *better* be home!” her mother said.

Alexandra decided to actually behave herself that day. Naturally, before the day was over, she would have broken every rule she’d just been told not to.

It started with the locket. More determined than before to see the magical, moving picture, she spent almost an hour try to squeeze, pry, twist, unscrew, pop, or even break it open. (She didn’t really want to break it open, but when she banged it on the tabletop in frustration, she didn’t care at the moment whether it did break.)

Defeated, at least using mundane means, Alexandra began pacing the house while swinging the locket from her fingers or twirling it by its chain. Ms. Grimm had said no magic. But surely the “trace” she had been talking about couldn’t detect every little thing Alexandra might do, even when it probably wouldn’t even work? And besides, she reasoned to herself, she was home alone, there was no possibility her parents or any other “Muggles” might see her, and it wasn’t as if she were going to throw fireballs or turn the kitchen table into a goat.

But just to be safe, she went upstairs into her room, locked her door, made sure the window was also locked and the blinds shut, and then for good measure, turned off the light. Now only a little light seeped into her room through the edges of the door and window. She held the locket in both hands, and rocked back and forth for a few minutes before chanting in a whisper:

*“You can stay shut, but don’t you hide,
Show me the picture I know’s inside.”*

And as it had the first time she tried opening it with a rhyme, the locket clicked and unlocked.

The man in the picture was in the same pose he had been in before. And when she stared at him, he again winked at her, while maintaining his smug expression.

Alexandra didn’t say anything at first. She just studied his face. It was hard to make out much in the darkness, so she moved over to the window and cracked the blinds open a bit so that sunlight fell on his face. He squinted and frowned, and held up a hand to shade his eyes.

Did he look at all like her? His hair was dark like hers, but he appeared to have dark gray eyes. His skin wasn’t as pale, but there was something about his nose and the way it turned up just a little that reminded her of her own nose. His chin was covered by his beard, so she couldn’t compare, and he had much bushier eyebrows. His cheeks were softly rounded, a little like hers. Alexandra could see a resemblance if she tried really hard, but it would be just as easy to conclude that any resemblance was superficial at best.

CHAPTER 5

“Why can't you just tell me who you are?” she demanded. “If you're a magical photograph, can't you talk? Don't you even care if I'm your daughter?”

But he didn't seem to care, or even hear her question.

Perhaps someone else did, though, as there came a sudden tapping on her window that made Alexandra jump. She stared at the blinds covering it, and then the tapping came again, erratic and insistent. Whatever could be outside her second-floor window?

Without thinking, she snapped the locket shut, and then cautiously peeked out from behind the blinds, to find herself staring at an owl.

This surprised her so much she abandoned caution, and pulled the cord to raise the blinds. The owl was a fairly small one, sitting on the outside windowsill. It blinked once at her, and then leaned forward to tap again on the window with its beak, a little more insistently this time.

Alexandra was too surprised to do anything other than stare. This seemed to annoy the owl. It half-spread its wings and made an irritable hooting sound, and rotated its head back and forth to glare at her, then tapped against the window again, harder.

“Okay, okay,” she said. She fumbled at the latch and pulled the window up, then had to detach the screen while the owl hopped impatiently. Once she did so, it flapped into her room and landed on the bedpost nearest her and held out a leg. Alexandra could now see that there was a piece of paper tied to it.

“Is this how wizards send messages?” she asked. “Why don't they just use the telephone?”

The owl hooted at her, and wiggled its leg insistently.

Carefully (because the owl looked annoyed now, and it had a rather menacing beak), Alexandra undid the knot that held the paper to the owl's leg, and pulled it free. It was a little slip of parchment, and when she unrolled it it read:

Dear Miss Quick,

It has come to our attention that at 11:14 a.m. this morning, you cast an Unlocking Charm in your home at 207 Sweetmaple Avenue. As you have already been informed, the use of magic in Muggle communities is a violation of the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy, and is strictly forbidden to underaged witches.

Consistent with our usual policy for handling first-time juvenile offenders, you are required only to take notice of and heed this written warning. However, this offense has been entered into your Permanent Record. Any further violations may result in more severe disciplinary action being taken.

Very truly yours,

Alcina Kennedy

Central Territory Trace Office

Alexandra was a bit disheartened by the fact that the Trace Office had known exactly what she'd done so quickly. The thought of such infallible surveillance being on her at all times was frightening. What if they started watching for other kinds of misbehavior, not just unauthorized use of magic?

The owl hooted again, as if to add its own disapproval, hopped back onto the windowsill, and took off.

Alexandra sat down on her bed, chin in her hands, and stared at the locket that was now sealed shut again.

"This sucks," she said.

In reply, there was another flurry of wings on her windowsill. She looked up, and into the beady yellow eyes of a bird of prey. It sat on the same spot where the owl had just departed, actually *flung* a bright red envelope that had been clutched in its talons at her, issued a screech that sounded almost like a sneer, and then launched itself away from the window.

Alexandra stared at the red envelope. It had fallen on her bedsheets, and was now beginning to smoke. She picked it up carefully between two fingers, afraid it might set her bed on fire, and tore open the flap over her wastebasket. Nothing came out, but suddenly Ms. Grimm's voice filled the room (and indeed the entire house).

"MISS QUICK! WHEN I TELL YOU NOT TO DO SOMETHING, I MEAN FOR YOU NOT TO DO IT! IMAGINE MY EMBARRASSMENT UPON BEING INFORMED BY THE TRACE OFFICE THAT THE STUDENT I VISITED TO WELCOME TO MY SCHOOL THE NIGHT BEFORE HAS JUST VIOLATED THE VERY FIRST RULE I TOLD HER NOT TO BREAK! LET ME VERY CLEAR, YOUNG LADY: RULES ARE MEANT TO BE FOLLOWED AT CHARMBRIDGE, AND IF YOU WISH TO ACTUALLY ATTEND CHARMBRIDGE, YOU WILL LEARN TO FOLLOW THEM! LET THIS BE THE LAST TIME YOUR NAME IS BROUGHT TO MY ATTENTION IN THIS MANNER, OR EMBARRASSMENT WILL BE THE LEAST OF YOUR WORRIES!"

By the time Ms. Grimm's speech had concluded, Alexandra was squeezed against the wall behind her bed with her knees curled up to her chest and her hands over her ears. As the last vibrations from Grimm's tongue-lashing faded, she looked cautiously out her window, almost expecting to see neighbors looking out their windows, or perhaps hear car alarms that had been set off.

"Well how secret was *that*?" she retorted angrily, but the red envelope that had produced the howling denunciation had burst into flames and was now crumbling into ashes.

She guessed that Ms. Grimm must have had some way of knowing that Alexandra was alone in the house, and that no one outside the house would hear her "message." But the irony of such noisy magic being used to scold her for one quiet little charm that no one else could possibly have noticed had her simmering with indignation.

For most of the rest of the day, she was bored and a little jumpy; when the phone rang with her mother's first call of the day, she started and looked at the windows. She felt trapped, confined to her house and watched at all times by invisible spying wizard-eyes. Her initial exhilaration at discovering the world of magic and wizardry was replaced by frustration at having to pretend it didn't exist. And she wasn't sure how much she was looking forward to attending Charmbridge Academy now; she already had one black mark against her, and she'd be completely under Dean Grimm's authority.

Late in the afternoon, she was sitting in the living room, watching out the window. Some kids were playing kickball in the street, including Brian and Bonnie. Alexandra wanted very much to be outside with them. She was a pretty good kickball player, so she was usually chosen early for teams, even though the other neighborhood children weren't eager to play with her otherwise. She watched Brian, who was also a fair player (but she was better, she thought to herself), and Bonnie, who was terrible but tried hard.

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When the game ended, as the late afternoon shadows stretched across Sweetmaple Avenue, Alexandra dashed to her front door and opened it, stepping out onto the porch. Brian glanced in her direction, but he and Bonnie walked down the street in the direction of their own house.

"Brian!" Alexandra called after him.

He didn't answer, so with a look over her shoulder to make sure her mother's car or Archie's wasn't coming around the corner, she ran across her front lawn, right to the edge of it (she was still on her own property so she wasn't *technically* violating her grounding, she thought, ignoring for the moment that her mother had clearly said she wasn't to leave the house) and yelled again: "Brian!"

He paused for a moment, and seemed to be struggling with some decision, then he said something to Bonnie and gave her a gentle nudge. Bonnie looked up at him and then over her shoulder at Alexandra. She looked worried and sad and (this was the part that struck Alexandra and gave her a funny feeling in the pit of her stomach) a little frightened. Brian pushed her again, and she reluctantly went on ahead. Brian turned to look at her, but he was standing on the sidewalk two houses down and made no move to come closer, so Alexandra made an exasperated sound and stepped onto the sidewalk. No owl swooped down to deliver a note from the Central Territory Grounding Office, so she continued down the street until she was face-to-face with Brian.

"Aren't you still grounded?" he asked.

"Well, yeah," she said, and looked over her shoulder again, but her parents still weren't returning home yet.

"Right. Why would that matter?" Brian didn't raise his voice or look angry, but his tone made her feel like she was being scolded yet again. She looked at him narrowly and said, "What's that supposed to mean?"

He shrugged. "Just that you don't care much what anyone tells you."

She glared at him. This wasn't going at all like she'd hoped. Brian had always been more cautious than her, and definitely more respectful of his parents, but he'd never criticized Alexandra openly for her devil-may-care attitude before. In fact, while she hadn't ever consciously thought about it, she had always been comfortable in her assumption that he rather *liked* the way she flaunted rules and did whatever she pleased. And to some degree, she had been correct. But something had changed, and she could sense it.

"Are you still mad at me about last night? Look, I'm *really* sorry. I really didn't think anything dangerous would happen. It's not like I wanted to scare Bonnie."

"Yeah, I know," he said. He was looking away from her.

"I promise I'll never talk you into anything again without telling you everything, okay?"

His eyes flickered back to her, but he didn't say anything. She decided to press forward. Surely her news would be exciting enough to get him to stop dwelling on their mishap at the pond.

"You'll never believe what happened when I got home!" she said, and she actually lowered her voice, as she took his elbow and walked with him, not towards his house, but back in the direction of her own house, where it would be easier for her to dash around the side and in through the back door if she saw one of her parents coming.

She hadn't been intending to tell Brian *everything*, but Grimm hadn't exactly said she couldn't, only implied that she shouldn't, and as she began to talk about Ms. Grimm and the Charmbridge scholarship, Brian simply listened. He didn't look disbelieving, but neither did he seem thrilled or curious, so Alexandra kept talking, wanting her friend to share in her excitement, and she ignored the grave look that shadowed his face more deeply the more she went on. She told him about their magically-accelerated trip to Chicago and back, the trollbooth and the Automagicka, Goody Pruett's and the

ninety-nine-flavored ice cream, and how she was going to go back tomorrow to buy a wand and a familiar and spellbooks and all sorts of other things, and how she was going to become a full-fledged witch. She did leave out the part about using magic to open her locket again today, and her subsequent visits by an owl and a hawk.

When she was finished, Brian stared off into the distance. For the first time since she'd started speaking, Alexandra faltered. "So, isn't that... kind of neat?" she asked. "I mean... I really *am* a witch! I'm really doing magic... and my father... he was probably a wizard..." Her voice trailed off.

"Neat?" Brian repeated. He looked at her. "So your parents know about all this? Your mom and Archie are cool with you being a... witch?"

She frowned. "Well, not exactly," she admitted. "Ms. Grimm said that they probably shouldn't be told all the details. I mean, they're grown-ups, they might get a little funny about magic and stuff."

"But it's okay for you to tell me? Ms. Grimm doesn't mind you telling all your friends about this 'wizard-world'?"

Alexandra opened her mouth, but Brian's reaction left her momentarily confused.

"Well... she said it's best not to tell M- non-wizards, except a few, you know, close friends, family, people who won't tell others."

Brian was looking at her again. Alexandra hadn't mentioned the Bureau of Magic Obfuscation, and she wondered if he was wondering the same things she had, about what wizards did about Muggles who found out about them.

"Brian, don't look at me like that. I'm telling you because you're my friend! I know you won't tell your parents. You shouldn't tell Bonnie either -"

"Of course I won't tell Bonnie or my parents!" he yelled at her, so suddenly she took a step backwards. "Are you crazy?"

She just looked at him. He shook his head. "Trolls, secret highways, magic ice cream, wands and, and familiars and -" He shook his head again, and stared at her, and there was both anger and fear in his eyes, and something else, as if he were looking at a strange magical creature shaped like Alexandra but which might be dangerous.

"When we were kids," he said quietly but very seriously, as if the age of eleven made them no longer kids, "magic was neat. You doing weird things, that was neat. 'Cause it was just little stuff and we were too young to know better."

Alexandra was truly flustered now. "What? I don't understand what you're saying."

"Magic isn't supposed to be real!" he shouted. "Redcaps and kappas and trolls, those things aren't supposed to be real! Wizards and witches, they're make-believe! They're Halloween costumes!"

"No, they're not," Alexandra said. "They're real."

"They're real for *you*, Alex," Brian said, slowly and deliberately. "Not for me." He shook his head, and backed away from her.

She stared at him, confused. "Brian, you're being stupid. You can't just say something isn't real because you say so. I'm not making this up."

"Yeah, I know you aren't."

He turned and walked away from her, then after a few steps, broke into a run. He ran all the way back to his house, and Alexandra watched him go, her thoughts too much in disarray for her to make sense of what had just happened. That hot, hard lump was back in her throat. She stood there for several minutes after Brian had disappeared inside, and only stirred from her spot when she heard a car coming around the corner. Instinctively, she knew it was Archie, and she ran back inside, barely entering the house before she heard him slam the door of his truck.

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Alexandra was so quiet that night that her mother actually commented on it, though of course she misunderstood the reason. “It’s all right to be nervous about going to a new school,” she said. “You’re going to have to adjust to a whole new environment, and I’m sure there will be a lot of rules that you’re not used to.” Archie seemed to smirk a little at that.

“It’s going to be a wonderful experience,” her mother continued. “This is such a great opportunity. And you can always call us if you need to talk. I’m sure you’ll make new friends right away.”

Alexandra looked at her mother, and wondered if she was just saying what she thought she should, or if her mind was still addled by the Confundus Charm. *How would you know it’s going to be a great opportunity or if I’m going to make friends?* she thought, and when her mother said she could call, Alexandra wondered what she and Archie would do if an owl started delivering letters to them.

Tomorrow was the trip to the Goblin Market, so Alexandra actually went to bed on time. She placed her gold bracelet and the stubborn locket carefully in the top drawer of her dresser before going to sleep. She didn’t want her mother to see them, but she wanted to be sure to take them with her when she went to Chicago.

The next morning, Alexandra’s mother stayed home to see her off to Chicago. “Ms. Grimm said a bus from the school would come pick you up,” she said. Alexandra was dressed in her best pair of jeans and a hoodie over a short-sleeved shirt. The hoodie’s ample pockets concealed the bracelet and locket. Her mother handed her a paper bag. “Here. I packed a sandwich and fruit roll-ups for you.”

Alexandra took the bagged lunch. “Thanks.”

Her mother then dug into her purse and pulled out her wallet, and handed her a pair of twenties. “You’re not supposed to need any money, since your supplies are coming out of your scholarship, but take this just in case you need some cash. I don’t expect you to spend this unless you have to! This isn’t spending money for you to buy games and junk food with.”

“Okay,” said Alexandra. She wasn’t sure they even accepted regular money at the Goblin Market, remembering the gold coins Ms. Grimm had used.

Alexandra was a little embarrassed when her mother insisted on waiting outside with her at the time they’d been told to expect the Charmbridge bus. But she was even more embarrassed when she saw the bus. She’d been expecting a fancy full-sized chartered bus; instead what came around the corner was a little orange schoolbus, like the ones that took handicapped students to and from her elementary school. She watched with dismay as it rolled up to the curb. It said “Charmbridge Academy” in plain black letters on the outside. The front door opened, and she saw a fat woman with frizzy white hair behind the wheel.

“Good morning, dear!” she said cheerfully. “Are you Alexandra?”

“Yes,” Alexandra replied. Her mother waved to the bus driver. “Hi, I’m Alexandra’s mother, Claudia Green.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Green.” The driver looked puzzled for a moment, but then smiled again. “I’m Tabitha Speaks. We’ll have Alexandra back home by eight p.m.”

Mrs. Green nodded. She looked at her daughter. “It’s going to be a long day for you; three hours each way is an awfully long bus trip. Make sure you behave yourself.”

“All right, mom!” Alexandra said, now eager to get aboard before any of their neighbors saw her getting on a “short bus,” and embarrassed that her mother would keep speaking to her like a child in front of whoever was watching from inside the vehicle.

She was grateful that her mother didn’t give her a peck on the cheek this time. She stepped up onto the bus, and Mrs. Speaks closed the door behind her.

Alexandra gasped as she got to the top step and looked down the corridor. Inside the bus was not the cramped seating of a tiny schoolbus, but a long row of comfortable-looking booths, each with a table that couldn't possibly have fit inside. Far down at the other end of the bus, Alexandra saw lavatory signs that said "Witches" and "Wizards." And there were steps at the far end as well, suggesting that the bus actually had an upper level.

It was quite impossible. The space Alexandra was looking at was many times the size of the bus she had seen when she got on.

"Never been aboard a wizard bus before, dear?" Mrs. Speaks asked as she drove away from Alexandra's house. Alexandra shook her head.

"It's bigger on the inside than on the outside," said a teenaged girl, unnecessarily, coming up the aisle towards Alexandra. "The Charmbridge buses aren't as luxurious as a Wizardrail car, but they're better than brooms. Hi, I'm Gwendolyn Adams. I'm going to be a senior at Charmbridge this year, and I'll be your student mentor and chaperone."

Gwendolyn was about seventeen. She had long straggly blonde hair, a slightly protuberant nose with a pimple on it, and she was rather plain-looking. She wore glasses and a pointed black hat, a yellow shawl, and a brown and yellow dress. She looked very "witchy," and would have blended right in at a Halloween party, except that Alexandra could tell her clothes were not a costume, but her normal everyday wear.

"I'm Alexandra Quick." She turned to look at Tabitha Speaks. "Are we going to take the Automagicka to Chicago?" she asked.

"Yes, we are," said Mrs. Speaks. "So it won't be nearly the three hours each way your mother thinks it is. Still, you should go sit down and make yourself comfortable. It will take us a little time to get there."

"I'll introduce you to the other students riding along on this trip," Gwendolyn said, smiling and holding out her hand. Alexandra took it, a little reluctantly. Gwendolyn seemed nice enough, if a bit patronizing.

"Do they all have, umm, Muggle parents like me?" Alexandra asked, as Gwendolyn led her down the aisle.

"Some do. Others just live too far away for their families to take them shopping somewhere like the Goblin Market. They arrive at school a few days early, so they can get everything they need before the semester starts."

They passed several booths with older students, who looked at Alexandra with expressions ranging from disinterest to curiosity to the taunting smirks older kids always gave younger ones. Some were dressed like her, in "normal" clothes, while others wore robes or dresses or thick coarse jackets, breeches, and boots. At one table, she saw several kids playing a card game she didn't recognize. One of the players laid the deck on the table, and it began shuffling itself. They passed by a booth where two younger teens were pointing wands at each other and laughing as they blurted out what sounded like nonsense words. Alexandra made a face when she saw that one of the boys had broken out in bright purple and green zits, while the other boy's eyebrows were now growing down past his chin.

"Stuart, Torvald, stop throwing hexes at each other!" Gwendolyn said, snatching their wands out of their hands. She shook her head. "I ought to tell Mrs. Speaks not to fix your faces when we get to Chicago!" She handed the wands back to them, and they sulkily put them away.

"That's not allowed," Gwendolyn said, leaning closer to Alexandra to emphasize the point.

Alexandra nodded solemnly, thinking that Gwendolyn seemed to like pointing out the obvious.

Almost at the rear now, Gwendolyn guided Alexandra to a booth that held five other girls who

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looked about her age. "Here, you can sit with the other new sixth graders. I'm sure you'll all be friends. Everyone, please introduce yourselves to Alexandra. She's Muggle-born, so be considerate and help explain things about wizarding society she might not understand yet."

Gwendolyn sounded so sincere that Alexandra could almost forgive her for the way she patronized the lot of them. She wasn't thrilled about immediately being introduced as "Muggle-born," either. She supposed it would probably be obvious anyway, but she would have preferred to try to figure out as much as she could on her own without everyone looking at her like some sort of clueless visitor from another planet.

However, none of the other girls looked unfriendly. They waited until Gwendolyn had left their table and headed up the stairs to the bus's upper level, and then two of the girls burst out giggling. "I'm sure you'll all be friends!" exclaimed one girl, mimicking Gwendolyn with an exaggerated, syrupy voice. She was pretty and had hair as dark as Alexandra's, styled in a wavy perm. She wore a glittery pink top and striped pants with flared cuffs. She would blend in easily at any shopping mall. Her friend, a black girl who was also very pretty, was wearing a dark green blouse, black pants, and a matching green robe. Both girls were adorned with makeup and nail polish and jewelry. Alexandra didn't know many girls her age who wore makeup, and no one at Larkin Mills Elementary School seemed as determinedly fashionable as these two.

The black girl held out her hand to Alexandra, wrist bent downward and nails facing outward. "Don't mind Gwendolyn. I think she wants to be a day-school teacher someday. I'm Angelique Devereaux."

"Alexandra Quick," Alexandra said, taking Angelique's hand, a little awkwardly as she'd never been presented with such a delicate, feminine handshake before.

"Darla Dearborn," said the white girl sitting next to Angelique. She batted her lashes prettily as she shook Alexandra's hand. "Don't worry about being Muggle-born. Lots of kids at Charmbridge are. My grandmother is a Muggle, so I know what it's like."

What it's like? Alexandra thought. Darla made it sound like being born missing a limb. But she just nodded. She was not very good at making friends with other kids, as she was much too boisterous, impulsive, uncooperative, and most of all, unusual. But she thought she shouldn't be so unusual here, among other witches, and with Brian on her mind, the thought of starting out at a new school friendless bothered her more than it normally would have.

"This is Anna Chu," Darla continued, gesturing at the small Chinese girl across the table from Alexandra. "She's from San Francisco."

Anna simply nodded. She wore a red cloak over a red dress, which Alexandra thought made her look like Little Red Riding Hood.

"San Francisco? That's pretty far away. Aren't there any schools for witches in California?" Alexandra asked.

"Sure, there are smaller wizarding schools around the country, but anyone from a good family or who can pass the entrance exams goes to one of the Big Four," Darla answered for Anna. "Local coven-run schools can't compare in terms of education, and of course, the social opportunities are much better at a place like Charmbridge." She said this last with an air of worldliness which had Angelique nodding in agreement, but Alexandra caught Anna rolling her eyes, just a little, and the other two girls at the table just looked at each other.

Alexandra saw that these last two were both dressed in the old-fashioned clothing she'd seen some of the witches in Chicago wearing. They had long colorfully stitched dresses on beneath their cloaks, and their blond curls were tucked inside white bonnets. Both of the girls were fair-skinned and blue-eyed,

and looked very much alike.

Seeing the question Alexandra was about to ask, Darla continued her role as self-appointed spokesperson for everyone. "These are the Pritchards," she said.

"I'm Constance," said one of the girls.

"I'm Forbearance," said the other.

"They're Ozarkers," Darla went on.

"Oh," Alexandra said, as if she knew what that meant, though the only thing that came to mind was a vague memory of the Ozarks being a place with mountains. In Texas, or maybe Ohio. Or was it Virginia? She would look it up later, but she wasn't going to ask in front of Darla, even if Gwendolyn had told everyone to "help explain things" to her.

"So how did you get into Charmbridge?" Angelique asked.

"I got a scholarship."

"Really!" Anna perked up. "You must have scored really well on the SPAWN"

"Spawn?" Alexandra frowned.

"Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge," Darla said with an "everyone-knows-that" tone.

Alexandra frowned some more. "Wouldn't that be SPAWK?"

"Well, yes, I suppose, but it's always been called the SPAWN. I guess someone in the Department of Magical Education back whenever thought that SPAWK sounded dumb. Anyway, are you saying you've never heard of it? How could you get a scholarship or even be admitted if you haven't taken the SPAWN?"

"I dunno. Ms. Grimm never said anything about a 'practical assessment.'"

Everyone looked at her. Even the Ozarker girls' eyes were wide. "You met Dean Grimm?" asked Anna, her voice almost a whisper.

"Yeah, she came to my house to tell me about the scholarship and about my being a witch. She had to explain things to my parents too, except she didn't exactly tell them about the witch part. They think I'm just going to a normal private school."

"What do you mean 'normal'?" Angelique asked.

"You know, a non-magical one. For Muggles." Alexandra was starting to dislike that word.

Darla and Angelique looked at each other. Constance and Forbearance looked at each other. Anna was still staring at Alexandra.

"Dean Grimm came to your house?" Darla asked.

"Yes!" Alexandra was becoming annoyed. "She took me to the Goblin Market too, although we only went to Goody Pruett's. She had to explain a bunch of things to me since --"

"Dean Grimm took you to Goody Pruett's," Angelique repeated, her tone and expression conveying disbelief.

"Yes!" Alexandra glared at Darla and Angelique until they both looked away, and then she stared down Anna and then Constance and Forbearance. "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No... of course not," Darla said, clearing her throat. "It's just... well, Dean Grimm never visits students' homes or, or takes them out for... ice cream." She looked at Alexandra quizzically. "Usually the only time you ever see her is at school assemblies, or if you get sent to her office, and trust me, you don't ever want to get sent to her office."

"How do you know so much about her if you're just starting at Charmbridge yourself?" Alexandra demanded.

"My sister is in the twelfth grade. She's told me all about the Dean. And anyway, Dean Grimm is

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kind of... legendary.”

“Notorious,” Angelique said.

“But how could you get into Charmbridge without taking the SPAWN?” Anna repeated.

“I don't know!” Alexandra said, almost gritting her teeth.

“Well, are you all getting along all right?” asked Gwendolyn sweetly. She had come down the stairs and moved to their booth while they were all talking. She smiled down at the younger girls, while she pushed her glasses up on the bridge of her nose.

Everyone nodded and murmured in the affirmative.

“Oh, good!” The older girl seemed genuinely delighted. “Well, we're about to make our last stop, in Detroit, to pick up another student who's a new sixth grader. Then we'll be off to Chicago. You all just keep making friends!” With that, she continued down the aisle toward the front of the bus.

After a brief, awkward silence, Darla whispered, “You all just keep making friends!” doing her impression of Gwendolyn again. Angelique giggled, Anna covered her mouth, and even Alexandra started laughing. Constance and Forbearance smiled and looked down.

The mood was a little lighter after that. Darla and Angelique explained that the SPAWN was administered annually, usually starting when a wizard or witch was ready to enter the sixth grade. There were Junior Spawns for those children who went to wizarding day-schools, but they were considered optional, although some parents had their children tested as young as six.

“My parents started testing me when I was seven,” Anna said. “And every year since then. They're obsessed with how well I rank compared to my peers. But the only SPAWN that really matters is the final one you have to take to get your Magical Diploma.”

Then they lapsed into silence, as the bus came to a halt. Gwendolyn came back up the aisle, this time leading a dark-skinned boy who was not much taller than the diminutive Anna. He had dark curly hair trimmed in a tight afro, and wore a sports jersey and jeans and sneakers. He was eyeing Gwendolyn suspiciously, and Alexandra noticed he had declined to let the teenager hold his hand. Instead, he was clutching a backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Girls, this is David Washington. Won't you make room for him? The seven of you will probably be starting most of your classes together.”

Alexandra, who was sharing her seat with Forbearance Pritchard, had remained at the far end of it, across from Anna Chu. She scooted over closer to Forbearance, allowing David to sit at the end with Alexandra between them.

“So this is a Wizard bus,” David said, looking around.

“It's bigger on the inside than on the outside,” Alexandra said seriously.

“Duh!” David snorted, squinting at her. Alexandra shared a look with Darla and Angelique and their shoulders all shook with suppressed laughter, as Gwendolyn looked at them, a little confused. “Well, enjoy the rest of the trip. We should be in Chicago in less than an hour.” She gave them all a little wave, which Alexandra, Darla, and Angelique returned, all plastering cheery smiles on their faces, until Gwendolyn had disappeared up the steps again.

“She talk to everyone like they're in preschool?” David asked.

“Pretty much,” said Darla.

Introductions were made again around the table. David seemed a little uneasy about being the only boy at a table full of girls, but he was obviously curious about the bus, Charmbridge, and his fellow students.

“You're Muggle-born too?” Alexandra asked.

David nodded. “Yeah. My parents thought someone was putting us on for a TV show when they got

the letter by owl, but they actually handled it pretty well. My mom says she always thought Great Aunt Ems was kind of bizarre, and this explains a lot.”

“What’s a teevee show?” asked Darla. David blinked at her.

“It’s sort of like the Wizard Wireless, but with pictures,” Anna said.

David looked at Alexandra. “Are they for real?”

Alexandra nodded. “I think kids who grow up in wizard houses don’t know much about the rest of the world,” she said deliberately. She felt a little bit of satisfaction when Darla frowned.

“Did you take the SPAWN?” Anna asked.

David shook his head. “How could I take a test for something I didn’t know anything about before this summer? They said I’d have to take it when I get to Charmbridge. They gave me a study booklet, though.”

“Ms. Grimm didn’t give me a study booklet. She didn’t even tell me about the SPAWN,” Alexandra said, disgruntled.

David turned and stared at her. “You’ve met Dean Grimm?”

“Yes!” He leaned away from her at her sharp tone. Alexandra decided to change the subject by asking Darla what else her sister had told her about Charmbridge, and Darla was more than happy to spend most of the rest of the journey to Chicago talking about the teachers, the subjects, and the amenities at the academy. The other girls didn’t say much (not that Darla gave them much opportunity to), but Anna occasionally piped up to talk about the classes they would be taking at Charmbridge, like Charms, Transfigurations, Magical Principles, Basic Alchemy, and Wizard World Studies. Apparently she was one of those children who’d been sent to Wizard day-school to begin her studies before her formal schooling began, so she had more book-learning than the rest of them. “I’ve never had a wand, though, so I’m really looking forward to actually being able to *do* magic,” she said.

“I can do magic,” Alexandra said, eager to prove herself as much a witch as any of them.

“Transformations and charms and I’ve even made fireballs.”

While David looked interested, the other girls just looked at each other, and Alexandra felt as if she’d said something unintentionally foolish.

“We can all ‘do magic’ like that,” said Angelique, not unkindly. “Even little children can cast spells accidentally. But it’s not the same as when you have a wand and you know what you’re doing. That’s why we’re going to Charmbridge. You’ll see. Once you’ve learned how to cast real spells, you’ll laugh at what you used to think of as magic.”

Alexandra was tempted to ask if any of them had ever fought redcaps or kappas, but was afraid they’d tell her that only children considered those things dangerous. Maybe there was a spell that “proper” witches could use that would just make redcaps disappear.

“We have wands,” said Constance. She pulled a long, polished hardwood stick out of her cloak. It looked as if it had been worn smooth by many years of handling.

“We’ve had them since we were eight,” Forbearance said, showing her own wand.

“Ooh!” Angelique breathed, and Darla and Anna both looked a little jealous.

“The Department of Magical Education doesn’t allow minors to have wands unless they’re either enrolled in a formal wizarding school or have passed the twelfth grade equivalent SPAWN,” Darla said, almost accusingly.

“That’s Confederation law,” said Anna. “Individual Territories can grant exceptions. Like for Ozarkers.”

Constance and Forbearance nodded. They had said little the entire trip, but they seemed to be enjoying the fact that for once, they were the center of attention. Or rather, their wands were.

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“Ozarkers usually get home-taught,” said Constance.

“Our brothers educated like that,” said Forbearance.

“But our parents decided to wizard-school us,” Constance went on.

“The first in our family!” Forbearance added, a little proudly.

“But we begun learning folk magic when we was little,” Constance continued.

“We know basic conjures,” said Forbearance.

“And we can even wish a few hexes,” Constance finished, dropping her voice to a whisper.

“Shame on you for boasting about it!” declared an older boy who'd come up the aisle to stand at their table. He was dressed in a home-spun tunic and jacket and thick, heavy trousers, and he had a bit of an accent similar to that of Constance and Forbearance. The two Ozarker girls flushed and hung their heads.

“Put those away! You're not a day from home and already a' blaggardin' like a pair of sorceresses!”

That made Constance and Forbearance flush an even deeper shade of red, simultaneously, and they hastily tucked their wands back into their cloaks and looked down. Alexandra noticed that the bossy older boy had been staring at Darla and Angelique when he said “sorceresses.”

Alexandra glowered at him, but he just muttered, “Better for girls to stay home,” and walked back to his own booth.

“What a jerk!” David exclaimed.

“The heck with him,” Alexandra said. “And girls rule!”

David rolled his eyes, but Constance and Forbearance both smiled a little, as Mrs. Speaks yelled out to the passengers, “Here we are, dears! Pick up your things and get ready to get off the bus!” They had arrived in Chicago.

Chapter 6 — The Goblin Market

The bus wasn't parked in front of the strip mall with the laundromat. Instead, they were in front of a Polish deli, though the neighborhood looked as shady as the one Ms. Grimm had taken Alexandra to. It might have been the same neighborhood, just a different block, but Alexandra wasn't sure.

"Now, please line up by grade," said Mrs. Speaks as the students filed out of the bus. It was still before noon and there were people on the street, some of whom looked in their direction, and Alexandra wondered that no one seemed to think it was unusual that a schoolbus was parked in front of a deli in a neighborhood like this, or that thirty-odd children were getting off a bus that didn't look like it could seat more than a dozen at most.

Alexandra's group of sixth graders lined up next to seven seventh graders. There were five eighth graders, including the bossy Ozarker boy who'd scolded Constance and Forbearance. Alexandra made a face at him. He scowled back at her.

Apparently not as many older students needed a bus ride to the Goblin Market. Besides Gwendolyn, there were thirteen other kids who ranged in age from fourteen to seventeen, and two of them were chaperones for the seventh and eighth graders.

"Ninth graders and above, you're on your own," Mrs. Speaks said to them, "but remember you're representing Charmbridge Academy. Behave yourselves. Make sure you're back behind Grobnowski's by six o'clock. Everyone else, stay with your assigned chaperone. Anyone gets lost, just head for the promenade in front of Grundy's and we'll meet up with you there eventually. Don't wander off or make us come looking for you!"

And with that, they filed into the Polish deli, which was called Grobnowski's Old World Deli. There were some very old men with wizened faces wearing woolen sweaters and sock-like argyle caps on their heads seated at tables inside, playing chess with moving pieces, or talking, or reading newspapers, which Alexandra noticed had moving pictures. Some of them ignored the children while others winked, and a couple of them waved to Tabitha Speaks, who waved back.

Behind the counter was an extremely thin, sour-looking woman and a much fatter and friendlier-looking man. Everyone here was old, except for the students traipsing past the glass cases and between the tables. The deli itself seemed old, even older on the inside than it looked from the outside, with smoke-covered wooden beams and rafters, an old iron pot-bellied stove in the center of the establishment, currently unlit, and the smell of oils and aged meat permeating the place.

Alexandra saw one case had cards stuck in front of the prosciutto and ham and kielbasa and sturgeon and roast beef. The cards all listed prices in Ps and Es and Ls rather than dollars and cents, and there was a sign above the meat counter that said "Guaranteed Wizard-raised meat." A cheese counter, however, had one half that said "Wizard cheeses" and another half that said "Muggle cheeses," and the Muggle cheeses were cheaper. Some of the Wizard cheeses were colored blue or green or candy-striped red and white, and one wheel with a wedge cut out kept changing colors as Alexandra watched. She would have liked to look around the deli some more, but the line was moving to the back entrance, and they filed out into the Goblin Market.

As before, there were witches and wizards and some creatures that were clearly not human, and there were more of them than before, since it was daytime. Alexandra thought she saw someone leading a winged lion down the street but they disappeared around a corner. She saw Goody Pruett's down the block, so they were on the same street she and Ms. Grimm had been on before, just entering it from another direction. As the other chaperones led their respective grades off, Gwendolyn said, "Well,

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everyone stay together so no one gets lost! We're going to visit Hoargrim's first, because I know you're all looking forward to buying your wands!" In fact, Gwendolyn looked more thrilled than any of them, as if she were announcing that she was taking them to get a pony. She even clasped her hands together. "I remember when I was matched with my wand. I was so nervous and excited!"

"Yeah, we're excited, now can we go do it?" David muttered behind Alexandra. The other girls smiled politely, then gave each other looks and giggled as soon as Gwendolyn turned her back to lead them down the street.

Alexandra slowed down to walk alongside Constance and Forbearance. "How do you get matched with a wand?" she asked them, since they had wands already.

"Well, every wand is different," said Constance.

"Unique," said Forbearance.

"Wands have humors and turns, like people. You have to find one what suits you."

"Actually, we're much eager to watch you-all buy yourn wands."

"We was given ourn, see."

"Ozarker wands are all hand-me-downs."

"Passed down everly from previous generations."

"Mine was brought over by one of our ancestors from Europe." It was Forbearance speaking now. At least, Alexandra thought it was. Their identical appearance and habit of picking up and continuing each other's sentences made it particularly hard to keep them straight.

"Mine hain't quite that old," said Constance. "It was cut 'n charmed over a hundred years ago, and belonged to our great-great grandmother."

"But Constance is the first one to wish with it since Great-Great Grandma passed on."

"That was almost thirty years ago, but it didn't kin to no one else 'til I picked it up," Constance finished.

"But how do you know when a wand suits you?" Alexandra asked.

"Oh, you'll know."

"I reckon they have scores of wands, and you'll get to try them all a piece."

"And when you find the one what kins to you, why, that's the one you'll buy!"

"But we've never seen how it's done by city witches."

Alexandra found this all both intriguing and unhelpful. She imagined walking into a store with cases full of wands on display, and picking up one after another and being expected to just know whether or not it was suitable.

Hoargrim's was small, almost unnoticeable, sitting between what looked like a toy store and a cafe. Its exterior was dark wood, unlike the brick buildings around it, and there was only a single sign in brass letters above the window: "HOARGRIM'S WANDS AND ALCHEMICAL SUPPLIES." In the window display, Alexandra could see several wands of different lengths sitting in velvet-lined cases, along with a small silver cup sitting next to a mortar and pestle.

They entered, and the interior seemed to swallow sound. Their footsteps became more muted and everyone naturally spoke in whispers without realizing they were doing it.

The shop smelled like old wood, shoe polish, and something pickled and slightly unpleasant. Lamps inside provided more light than what filtered through the dusty window. There were barrels throughout the store; pickled bear livers, dried batwings, hens' teeth, and earwig pincers. Alexandra saw a jar full of newts' eyes sitting on the counter staring at her. Behind the counter were racks full of powders and poultices and oils and minerals. A huge, ancient owl sat on a perch above the counter, staring at the children who'd filed in.

There were stairs leading down into the basement, with a sign overhead saying “Alchemical Supplies,” and underneath that, in red letters, “Children must be accompanied by a responsible adult.”

“You shouldn't need to go down there,” Gwendolyn said, as several of them looked in the direction of the stairs. “We'll give Mr. Finsterholz a list of the standard supplies you'll need and they'll prepare packages for each of you.”

Alexandra wasn't the only one who looked disappointed, as any place requiring an adult escort was bound to have interesting stuff in it.

A small man with a beak-like nose and little tufts of jet black hair standing out as stiffly as the bristles on a wire brush around an otherwise bald head shuffled out from behind the counter. He was wearing a white shirt and dark green vest, black trousers, and a dour expression.

“New students, jah? Sixth graders?”

“Yes, sir,” said Gwendolyn. “This is Mr. Finsterholz. He'll be matching you with your wands, so line up over here at the wands section.” She handed a list to the old man, who peered at it, squinting through a pair of reading glasses, then handed it to a younger man behind the counter who began taking bottles and jars down from a supply shelf.

The wands section was at the opposite end of the store from the stairs leading down to the alchemical supplies. It was a smaller room with no partition between it and the main floor, but unlike the rest of the store, it was carpeted. Wooden cabinets lined the walls from floor to ceiling. Finsterholz ambled over into this room, and beckoned the first one in line forward, which was Darla.

Darla took a deep breath, looking excited and nervous, exactly as Gwendolyn had described. All the other kids could feel her excitement. Finsterholz peered at her, looked her up and down, and then bent over to pull a wand out of a box in one of the cabinets closest to the floor. “Give this one a try, jah?”

Darla took the wand, which was long and had a reddish color. She held it in a tight fist, and gave it a little shake.

“Nein, nein, don't hold it like a drumstick!” Finsterholz snapped, making Darla jump. “That one's not right for you.” He snatched it out of her hand and put it back in its box, and then pulled another one out of a box that was closer to his waist level. “Here. Try this one.”

The new wand was shorter and thicker and almost black in color. Darla took it carefully and held it in a looser grip. She wiggled it tentatively.

“Nein.” Finsterholz snatched it out of her hand too. Darla looked as if her confidence were being drained rapidly. The old man didn't notice. He had her try out three more wands, with Darla becoming increasingly anxious with each one that was rejected, until she looked close to tears.

“Jah, that one is good, I think,” Finsterholz said, as Darla held a dark, tapered wand in a trembling hand. “Hawthorn with nogtail hair. Unusual combination. Not the most popular core, but very good for hexing and jinxing.”

“Or for Dark magic,” murmured Constance, behind Alexandra.

He grabbed a box and held out his hand to wrap it up, but Darla clutched it to her chest. “I'll hold onto it, if you don't mind,” she said, a little haughtily. She glanced at Gwendolyn. “I'm allowed, since we're enrolled at the academy now, right?”

“Well, yes,” Gwendolyn admitted. “But don't start waving it around or trying to cast spells with it, or it will be confiscated.” Finsterholz shrugged and gestured for Angelique to step forward.

As interesting as this entire process was, Alexandra was no more enlightened than before after watching Angelique and then Anna try out the wands that Mr. Finsterholz picked out for them, seemingly at random. Angelique received her match with the third wand, which was a thick black willow one with a dragon heartstring core. Anna found her wand with Finsterholz's first pick, which

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delighted both of them. Like Darla, Angelique and Anna both wanted to hold onto their wands.

David was next. He stepped forward, and Mr. Finsterholz squinted at him, as if not sure what to make of the boy. David folded his arms and looked back defiantly at the wand merchant, who was only an inch or two taller than him. Finsterholz turned around and drew a long beechwood wand from a box near a top shelf.

It was longer than any of the wands Alexandra had seen so far. David took it and held it lightly, letting it rest on the fingertips of both hands, and then snatched it with one hand and whipped it about. Finsterholz jumped. "Don't do that!" he snarled, and then said, "Well?"

"Feels good," David murmured. He smiled, and made a little flourish with the tip.

"Ach. Some times it just takes me a little longer than others to get a feel for them. I usually don't have as much trouble as with that girl." He jerked a thumb at Darla, who pouted and stuck her nose up in the air. Then he snatched the wand back out of David's hand. "If you're going to play with it then it stays in its box." Over David's protests, he wrapped it in a long box and handed the box to Gwendolyn.

Now it was Alexandra's turn. She stepped forward to take David's place (he was now arguing with Gwendolyn), and faced Mr. Finsterholz.

"Muggle-born too, aren't you?" he grumbled. "I can tell."

"Does that make a difference in what wand we get?" Alexandra demanded.

"Nein. Maybe it makes a difference in how you use it." But he was still squinting at her.

"Troublesome, you're going to be troublesome," he muttered. Alexandra narrowed her eyes but didn't say anything.

Finsterholz was right, if by "troublesome" he meant "time-consuming," as he placed one wand after another in Alexandra's hands. She held each one carefully while trying to feel something magical about it, but she felt no particular affinity for any of them. She tried birch, beech, ash, oak, yew, redwood, cherry, and apple, with Finsterholz muttering about unicorn and kelpie hair, and even something called a re'em. "Not scales or feathers or heartstring for you, no, definitely hair."

Alexandra was determined not to look worried the way Darla had, but she wondered if either Finsterholz or the wands were biased against her.

Finally he pulled a wand out of a box in a dusty corner, and handed it to her. It was a light-colored wood and felt hard yet flexible in her hand. She moved it in slow circles, careful not to whip it or snap it about.

"Troublesome, like I said."

She looked at Finsterholz. "Why?"

"Someone had to die to obtain chimaera hair, mark my words." He made to take the wand back from her, but remembering how he'd confiscated David's, she held it away from him. "I'll hold onto mine, too," she said defiantly.

"Ach! Fine." He thrust the box at her. It said "Hickory (*Carya illinoensis*)/Chimaera hair/10.5"" on the label.

"Everyone, put your wands away now," Gwendolyn said. She'd given David his wand box back. Darla and Angelique reluctantly put theirs back in their boxes, and Alexandra, after one quick flourish of her new hickory stick, did the same. Inwardly, she was delighted, her excitement dampened somewhat by the knowledge that she would have to take her new wand home and then do nothing with it. But Constance and Forbearance had been right; Alexandra couldn't wait to get her hands on it again.

"Well, chimaera hair *is* very rare," said Darla, as Gwendolyn herded them back into a line. "I've heard chimaera scales have also been used in wands. Of course rare materials don't necessarily make a wand more powerful."

The clerk to whom Mr. Finsterholz had given Gwendolyn's list of supplies had prepared seven tightly-wrapped packages, which he handed to each student as they came to the counter. Alexandra took hers, which rattled a little and gave off a faintly spicy smell.

Each of the other students had handed the clerk some coins in payment. "Three lions for the alchemical supplies, fifteen for the wand," he said to Alexandra. Gwendolyn stepped forward. "She's a scholarship student," she said, counting out coins from a little purse. "I'll need a receipt." She held out a small roll of parchment, and a quill sitting on the counter floated into the air and scribbled something on it.

"Time to get your schoolbooks now!" Gwendolyn said, turning to the younger kids, and she ushered them out of Hoargrim's in a single-file line.

Their next stop was Boxley's Books. This was a much larger store with posters in the front window advertising discounts on used textbooks, as well as bestsellers like "Quidditch and Quodpot Through the Ages, Revised American Edition" and "Surviving Wandless: A Journey to Empowerment for the Magically Occluded."

Alexandra was a voracious reader, and was looking forward to browsing the section on magical creatures. She presumed wizard books would have more accurate information about creatures like redcaps and kappa. She noticed that like all the other pictures she'd seen, though, the covers of the books were animated. Authors' photographs would smile at whoever picked the book up, while the people riding brooms on the cover of "Quidditch and Quodpot Through the Ages" zipped and zoomed about.

"I'll have to hide any books I take home with me," she said to David.

Gwendolyn let them browse the shelves a bit, and Alexandra found several books in the magizology section that had lifelike pictures of chimaera, dragons, and other beasts. An illustration of a kappa did indeed look like the creature she had seen in Old Larkin Pond. She read the accompanying text, which told her that if a kappa were tricked into spilling the water on top of its head, it would lose all its powers.

"Hah!" she said. "I figured that out on my own!"

Then she had to find the books on her class list. Most were from the "Young Wands Teaching Series." "Young Wands Teaching Series: Beginning Charms," "Young Wands Teaching Series: Beginning Transfiguration," "Young Wands Teaching Series: Basic Principles of Magic," etc. Her arms were full by the time she'd acquired all the books on the list.

"I'm afraid your scholarship doesn't include funds for non-required books," Gwendolyn said, pulling "Magical Beasts and Where to Find Them" and "101 Easy and Effective Hexes" off of Alexandra's stack. She scowled at the latter book. "You're too young for that," she added.

Darla and Angelique looked a little smug as they paid for their own books with the money they'd brought. They each purchased Witchteen magazine and some books about love potions and divination, in addition to their schoolbooks.

Alexandra noticed that Constance and Forbearance had purchased used textbooks, some of which were in rather battered condition, and looked a bit worried as they totaled up the cost.

"How did you get wizard money?" Alexandra asked David.

"School said there's a wizard bank that'll exchange dollars for eagles," David replied. "So my folks sent a check."

Alexandra envied David his ability to simply tell his parents about the wizarding world. She, apparently, would be unable to buy anything that wasn't specifically paid for by her scholarship. Then she remembered the money her mother had given her.

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"Is there a bank where I can exchange Muggle money for wizard money?" she asked Gwendolyn.

"There are Gringotts and CBNW branches down the street," Gwendolyn replied. "We can go there if you really need to."

"I'll trade you," David whispered.

Alexandra was curious to see what a wizard bank looked like, but Gwendolyn didn't look eager to take everyone on a detour, and Alexandra wasn't eager to endure Darla and Angelique's condescending looks while she tried to exchange her Muggle money. So she pulled the two twenty-dollar bills out of her pocket. "OK."

David took the bills, and handed her two gold coins with lions on them in exchange. Alexandra looked at them suspiciously. Having only dealt with normal American pocket change, it seemed like not a lot of money for forty dollars.

"They're made of gold, you know," David said, reading her expression.

Alexandra shrugged and muttered, "kay," and grabbed the copy of "Magical Beasts and Where to Find Them" back from Gwendolyn. She decided not to argue with her about the book of hexes. She ran back to the front counter, where a clerk took one of her lions and gave her eight coins with birds on them in change.

"One lion is ten eagles, which is twenty pidges," David said, as Alexandra inspected the coins in her hand.

"I'm going to ask Ms. Grimm why I never got a guide to any of this stuff," she grumbled.

"Now we're going to go to Grundy's!" Gwendolyn said. Darla and Angelique looked excited at this. They all filed out of Boxley's Books and down the street. They were rather weighed down now, with their alchemical supplies, wand boxes, and books. Still on their lists were robes, hats, gloves, boots, school clothes, a cauldron, quills and parchment, and a familiar.

Alexandra slowed her pace a little as they marched down the street, as this was her longest look yet at the Goblin Market. She was still intrigued by the odd fashions of witches and wizards, which looked like a cross between their traditional representations in children's books, and a hodge-podge of archaic American clothing styles. The non-humans were also fascinating, but didn't seem to appreciate being stared at. One little green man gave Alexandra a sour look as he hurried across the street into an imposing building with marble columns in front. She saw that this was Gringotts, which Gwendolyn had said was a wizard bank.

They passed Mahmoud's Flying Carpets, which advertised the latest imports from Asia and promised "a soft comfortable ride with every design, infinitely more stable than a broom." There was an animated poster in the storefront depicting an entire family enjoying a picnic while seated on a flying carpet, while decidedly uncomfortable-looking wizards riding brooms flew past them, grimacing and looking envious.

Across the street was Chicago's Broom Megastore, which had on its roof a large animated billboard on which a dazzling assortment of brooms were flying circles around some ragged, dusty-looking carpets. It looked as if Mahmoud's and the Megastore were engaged in a price war.

Alexandra noticed that there were no cars or other vehicles on the streets, and consequently, no traffic lights. She was about to conclude that wizards had no machines at all, when she saw a small clockwork figure marching down the street. Apparently these were not common as she wasn't the only person staring at it. Many wizards and witches were watching it curiously, but she noticed a couple of the small non-humans dressed in scraps of clothing were wrinkling their noses in disdain. The mechanical man pivoted on its metal foot and stepped into a greengrocer's that had sitting in bins outside both normal-looking vegetables and some angry plants that bared teeth and snapped at passers-

by.

All of these sights were wondrous to Alexandra. A few days ago, despite knowing about her own magical abilities, she would have considered a scene like this to be as fantastic as a Disney movie. Yet now she was being hurried along by Gwendolyn, and she noticed that while David was having a similar reaction, Darla and Angelique were watching the two Muggle-borns and giggling at them. At least Constance and Forbearance seemed a little wide-eyed at the Goblin Market as well. Alexandra supposed the magical shops and the people in their colorful garb and the non-humans didn't seem particularly strange to them, but they had never been in a big city before. She picked up her pace, and saw that their destination was just ahead.

Grundy's was the largest building in sight. It was even larger than the Gringotts bank building, and from the outside it looked like a department store. When they got inside, Alexandra saw that that was exactly what it was.

Grundy's had clothing sections, much like Muggle department stores, for men, women, boys, and girls. There was also an Ocular Department, a Household Charmed Goods Department, Furniture, Home Decorations and Remodeling, Wizard Appliances, Clockworks, Bath & Body Charms, and a Brooms and Carpets section. This was only on the first floor. Alexandra could see some old-fashioned elevators that went upstairs, and signs indicating that on the levels above were Glass and Potionwares, Cauldrons, Toys and Children's Charms, Sporting Goods, Wizard School Supplies, Wands & Wandcare, a Familiars and Pets Department, Muggle Imports, and so on. Grundy's was a huge grand exploratorium all on its own, a little miniature city within the Goblin Market, full of wizard wares and shoppers who were as interesting to watch as the things they were shopping for. Here and there around the store, Alexandra could hear bangs and pops and whistles, or chimes and eerie music, and see flashes of light or showers of sparks as some of the more spectacular items for sale demonstrated their effectiveness. There were pieces of paper flying overhead under their own power, as well as self-propelled balloons. One of these descended to float after the Charmbridge students, with letters running along its circumference, appearing and disappearing by magic: "Today Only – 20% off on all Quidditch and Quodpot Items (Not Including Brooms)!"

Alexandra had seen the book on Quidditch and Quodpot in Boxley's, and still had no idea what that was, but like everything else, she was determined to learn as much as she could by observation, rather than continually reminding the others of how ignorant she was and giving Darla an excuse to show off what she knew.

She did ask Gwendolyn, "If they sell wands here, why did we go to Hoargrim's?" but that made Darla give her a pitying look too, while Angelique snickered.

"Oh, Grundy's wands are all right, I guess," Gwendolyn said. "But they're made, err..."

"Cheaply," said Angelique.

"You'd have to be pretty poor to want a department store wand," said Darla. "Or someone with so little magical talent that it doesn't much matter what sort of wand you have."

"Now, that's not necessarily true," Gwendolyn chided, lowering her voice, but Alexandra saw from her expression that it probably was.

They headed into the clothes sections, which contained virtually nothing resembling clothes Alexandra saw in "normal" department stores, except for a small corner with a sign saying "Muggle fashions."

"All right, everyone needs classroom robes, hats, school clothes, gloves, boots, and goggles suitable for potions and herbology classes..."

"We have the list," David pointed out. Gwendolyn frowned a little, then said, "Fine, I'll let you go

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shopping then, but I'll need to check and make sure you've got everything on your lists before we leave. We'll be going to the Familiar Corner next. Let's all meet at the cafeteria in the basement at –” she checked her watch. “– one o'clock. Alexandra,” she added, “I'll have to come with you since everything you buy has to be charged to Charmbridge.”

Alexandra groaned inwardly. She wanted to explore Grundy's thoroughly, without their teenaged chaperone hovering over her shoulder. But all of them began hunting through the clothes racks together, though David split off to go into the boys' section. It seemed to Alexandra that witches mostly wore dresses, robes, and gowns. There were very few trousers available except in the girls' section.

Charmbridge did not have uniforms, for which Alexandra was very thankful, but it did have a strict dress code which amounted to almost the same thing. Girls could wear white button-down shirts or blouses, long-sleeved in the winter, short-sleeved in the summer, with jackets that were black or “suitably dark in color,” and matching skirts (hem not to rise more than one inch above the knee) or slacks. Shoes were to be black or dark brown, and “comfortable and practical.”

The dress code went on and on with specifications and prohibitions concerning socks, scarves, hair bands and ribbons, jewelry, and even underwear. Underlined at the bottom of the clothing list was “Muggle fashions are not permitted.”

Alexandra was never, ever going to wear a skirt, so she picked out several pairs of pants. She was used to wearing T-shirts and wasn't at all happy that these would not be permitted at Charmbridge, so she found the least frilly button-down shirts she could. Gwendolyn kept suggesting clothes she thought were “cute,” and Alexandra determinedly chose the plainest, darkest selections available. She was relieved to find that the underwear sold at Grundy's didn't differ noticeably from what her mother bought for her at the local SuperMart.

Darla and Angelique, meanwhile, seemed to spend inordinate amounts of time agonizing over minute differences in shades of dark green, or whether or not a particular skirt matched a pair of shoes, or whether to buy a blouse with three buttons or four.

Constance and Forbearance, on the other hand, bought hardly anything. Alexandra noticed the Ozarker girls seemed a little uncomfortable in the clothing section, especially when Darla and Angelique squealed over some colorful, gauzy (and forbidden, at Charmbridge) robes.

“Don't you need school clothes too?” she asked.

“We make most of our shifts at home,” Constance said quietly.

Darla and Angelique went from the clothes section to look at Bath and Body Charms, while Anna, Constance, and Forbearance went directly to Wizard School Supplies upstairs. That left Alexandra alone with Gwendolyn, so she began wandering towards Wizard Appliances and Clockworks, despite the older girl telling her that she should buy boots and gloves next.

Alexandra was drawn to a crowd of children and adults gathered in a circle in the Clockworks section. She pushed her way between a couple of witches in the back, ignoring Gwendolyn's objections, and forced her way to the front, elbowing past another boy a little older than her.

A large golden balloon overhead flashed the words “Clockwork House-Servants!” Beneath it was a banner over a row of the mechanical men Alexandra had seen outside: “Grundy's is the Exclusive Distributor for Tockmagi ® Household Clockwork Golems!”

Before the audience, one of the clockwork golems was dancing what looked like an Irish jig. It was all gleaming copper and brass, with a smooth metal mask for a face. The dancing golem was wearing a child-sized tuxedo that concealed its inner workings, but the display models on the stand behind it were bare metal, and Alexandra could see that their joints and torsos were full of what looked like hundreds of tiny gears and sprockets.

“Walk on your hands!” ordered a boy in front of Alexandra, and the golem on the floor stopped dancing and flipped over onto its hands, and began walking about as easily as it had on its legs.

“It's nothing more than a glorified Muggle toy!” grumbled a fat bearded wizard behind her. “It can't Apparate, it can't charm, it can't do anything a proper house-elf can!”

“They'll never replace house-elves,” agreed another man.

“But it's so much more humane to use golems than house-elves!” said a witch who appeared to be the second man's wife.

“Humane for whom? The house-elves?” The fat wizard chuckled derisively. “Have you seen how the poor creatures look at these clockwork replacements? They're horrified, as well they should be! Don't tell me you take those moonbats from ASPEW seriously?”

“They're a lot less ugly than house-elves,” said the boy next to Alexandra. A younger girl gave him an offended look. “We have a house-elf! Her name is Gilly and she's like part of the family. Who'd want a *thing* instead of an elf?”

Alexandra watched the performing golem with interest. It looked like a robot to her, but she was pretty sure you couldn't buy a robot like that in a Muggle department store. She'd read about elves in *An Encyclopedia of Spirits, Sprites and Fairies*, and now she thought she knew what “house-elves” were.

“Alexandra!” said Gwendolyn sharply, trying to squeeze past the people in back. “We can't spend all day here, you know. Let's go get the rest of your school supplies.”

Reluctantly, Alexandra faded back into the crowd, and rejoined Gwendolyn.

They purchased a pointed black hat that Alexandra thought looked just like what she might buy for a Halloween costume, and a black cloak that delighted Alexandra because it had pockets everywhere. Then they bought boots and heavy gloves, which made her wonder what sort of things they'd be doing in alchemy and herbology class that required fire-, fang-, and acid-proof gloves.

Upstairs, Alexandra was quite surprised to find that Wizarding School Supplies included quills and fountain pens but no pencils, and nothing resembling the markers or ballpoint pens she was familiar with. Likewise, there were rolls of parchment, and much more expensive Steno-Scrolls (which Gwendolyn said were forbidden in school), but no notebooks or pads of ordinary paper.

Then they went to the Cauldrons department, where David was also looking at shelves full of cauldrons ranging from teapot-sized to large enough for a grown-up to take a bath in. Most were iron, though they had bronze, copper, brass, and silver as well, and each bore stamps indicating capacity, thickness, and “charm rating” according to the International Confederation of Warlocks Standards Organization.

“Our list says half-inch, two gallon capacity minimum, cold iron,” said David. “Dang, these things are gonna be heavy to carry.” Then his face brightened as he saw a more expensive model on the end. “Check it out! Built-in Holding and Apportation charms!” At Alexandra's quizzical look, he said, “That means you can put all your other stuff in the cauldron and carry it like it weighs nothing.”

“Eleven lions is an awful lot to pay for a cauldron,” said Gwendolyn, looking at the price tag.

David shrugged, and pulled the apportating cauldron off the shelf. It did indeed seem to float weightlessly in his hand, and Alexandra watched enviously as he began throwing his books, clothes, alchemical supplies, and everything else he'd purchased into it, which held them all despite their volume being much greater than that of the cauldron.

“Make sure you take everything out at the counter and don't try to leave the store without paying for anything,” Gwendolyn said.

David looked up, and his face twisted into a scowl. “You think I'm gonna *steal* something?” he

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demanded incredulously.

"No, no," Gwendolyn said, taken aback. "I was just warning you that everything has a Thief's Curse on it, and if you -"

"Why are you warning me about a Thief's Curse if you don't think I'm gonna steal something?" David asked furiously.

"I just meant, I thought you might not know -"

"Not to steal things?"

Gwendolyn was terribly flustered now, and Alexandra almost felt sorry for her, except that the older girl's patronizing attitude had been getting on her nerves too, and she didn't blame David for losing his patience.

"It's just that you, you might not be familiar with how things are in, in our society -" she stammered.

"Cause I'm black?" David drawled.

"No!" Gwendolyn looked genuinely shocked, and then said, "Because you're Muggle-raised!"

However she had meant that to sound, it didn't sound any better, and the words hung in the air for a moment while David glared at her. Despite being much older and taller than him, Gwendolyn was almost cowering now.

"Yeah, well, I know you're not familiar with *Muggle society*," David said, his voice dripping with sarcasm, "but stealing isn't allowed there either. So thanks for the warning." He picked up his cauldron and stalked away.

Gwendolyn's face was flushed. Alexandra just looked at her expressionlessly, wondering what other prejudices people who'd grown up in wizarding society had about "Muggle-raised" children.

"I didn't mean to offend him," Gwendolyn said, as if hoping for absolution from Alexandra.

Alexandra shrugged, and Gwendolyn just fanned her face with her hand for a moment.

"Can I get one of those?" Alexandra asked, pointing at the expensive cauldron David had taken.

"I'm afraid not," said Gwendolyn. "You'll have to choose a basic model."

By the time Alexandra had checked off everything on her school supplies list except the familiar, she was uncomfortably weighed down. With a look at Gwendolyn, who merely pressed her lips together and didn't say anything, Alexandra had shoved all her clothes into her cauldron, but unfortunately it didn't simply swallow them up like a bottomless closet, the way David's charmed cauldron did. So now she had the cauldron full of clothes slung over her shoulder, the alchemical supplies under one arm, and her wand, writing supplies, and boots and gloves and cloak under the other. Gwendolyn offered to help carry some of her things, but Alexandra shrugged her off. She knew it wasn't really nice or fair to keep making Gwendolyn feel uncomfortable, but after putting up with so much patronization and Darla and Angelique's superior attitudes, Alexandra was feeling a petty sense of satisfaction in making her chaperone squirm a little.

They made their way to a counter, where a salesclerk wearing a black scarf on her head and a button on her blouse that said "Ask me about the Grundy's Christmas Club Account!" smiled patronizingly at Alexandra. "Buying school supplies, are we?" she said brightly.

"Yeah," Alexandra said.

"What school are you going to?" the clerk asked, as she began pulling things out of Alexandra's cauldron. On the counter in front of her, an abacus began clicking as its beads started moving by themselves, totaling up her purchases.

"Charmbridge."

"Oh, really? That's an excellent school!"

Alexandra nodded, not really interested in chatting with the saleswitch.

"Twelve lions and three eagles," the clerk said. Gwendolyn handed the clerk fifteen coins, took a receipt, and then she and Alexandra rode one of the rattly caged elevators down to the basement.

Grundy's cafeteria was an enormous open space with long rows of tables surrounded by deli and buffet counters. The smell of food made Alexandra's stomach rumble. She hadn't eaten since breakfast, and while she still had the lunch her mother had packed, she was much more interested in what the cafeteria might serve. She and Gwendolyn found David, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance already seated at a table, and Alexandra piled her things next to David's cauldron, which sat by itself on the table.

"I want to get something to eat," Alexandra said. "Can you watch my stuff?"

"Sure," said David, "if you trust me not to *steal* anything." Gwendolyn winced and looked a little wounded. Alexandra just shook her head at him, and ran to the nearest buffet table.

While much of the food looked familiar, there were also things like crispy fried batwings, roast snipe, peppermeat, hot witchbuns, various cauldron stews, butterbeer, and also a little Goody Pruett's concession, with a sign above the dessert pies saying "It's Not Nearly as Good if It's Not Goody Pruett's!"

Alexandra decided to get a plate of fried wizard-raised chicken, mashed potatoes with peppermeat gravy, witchbuns, fizzypop, and a slice of Goody Pruett's witch apple pie with ninety-nine-flavored ice cream. Pocketing her change (and telling herself that she hadn't really spent all of the money her mother had given her, although she wasn't sure how her mother would react to being given a handful of gold lions, eagles, and pidges back), she returned to the table, and saw that Constance and Forbearance were unpacking lunches they had brought. Gwendolyn was gone.

"Gwen the Goony Witch went to talk to some friends of hers," David said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. Alexandra saw that Gwendolyn was now sitting at a table with some other teenagers. Anna frowned, and Constance and Forbearance paused to look at David for a moment, then resumed unwrapping their own rolls and little jars of jam.

"She didn't mean to insult you," Alexandra said, digging into her fried chicken.

"She insulted *us*," David pointed out, then added, "Although I didn't notice her warning *you* not to steal things."

"That's 'cause she's been with me the whole time. I can't get away from her!" Alexandra complained.

"Hello!" said Darla brightly, as she and Angelique appeared, both carrying several shopping bags. "Did you get all your shopping done? It's almost impossible with what little time we have," she sighed, before anyone else could answer. "Oh, you didn't buy very much," she continued, looking at Alexandra, Constance, and Forbearance's purchases, and then her eyes settled on David's cauldron. "Oh! That's one of the Holding models, isn't it?" She seemed surprised.

"Yeah," David replied. "With an Apportation Charm too."

"Well, I'm sure that's very convenient, although you know, it's a little... gaudy to buy such an extravagant cauldron just for potions class," Darla sniffed. Alexandra thought she saw a trace of envy, though. Darla didn't exactly seem opposed to gaudiness on principle, judging from all the extra clothes she'd bought which were bursting with non-Charmbridge-approved colors.

Darla and Angelique sat down, piled their things on the table. It was now too crowded with food and shopping bags, so they moved everyone's purchases to the adjacent table, and then the other two girls went to buy lunch as well.

"Gaudy!" David snorted.

Alexandra grinned, and shoved a forkful of mashed potatoes into her mouth. The gravy's strong peppery flavor almost burned the inside of her mouth, and she hastily gulped down some of her

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fizzypop.

The older boy in Ozarker clothes who had scolded Constance and Forbearance on the bus walked over to their table and said, "You'uns, come sit with us." Alexandra set down her butterbeer, and saw that there were three other boys at the table he had come from. One of them also wore Ozarker clothes and looked almost identical to the first boy, while the other two, who looked like they were even older, were wearing stiff black cloaks and hats. They didn't exactly look like Ozarkers, but they were dressed in what Alexandra thought was also a pretty old-fashioned style, not unlike what she had seen Alastair and Angus MacAvoy wearing.

Constance and Forbearance hesitated, and Alexandra said, "Who are you bossing around?"

The Ozarker boy scowled darkly at her. "Mind your own business, sorceress!"

"Make me." Alexandra met his gaze without blinking, and her own expression was dark as well. Who did this boy think he was?

"Please," said Constance.

"Don't be fussing," said Forbearance.

"Do you *want* to go sit with this bossy jerk?" Alexandra asked. Both girls flushed, while the boy began turning purple.

"They should be sitting with their own kind," he growled.

Now David's face was turning even darker. "What's that supposed to mean?" he snarled.

The other boys from the table were drifting over. Anna glanced over her shoulder, but neither Gwendolyn nor any nearby adults seemed to have noticed the confrontation brewing.

"Ozarker girls ought not be consortin' with furriners or sorceresses or Muggle-borns with no breeding," the older boy said.

"Foreigner?" squeaked Anna indignantly.

"Sorceresses?" Alexandra repeated.

"Breeding?" David growled.

"It's all right," said Forbearance.

"We'll go," said Constance.

"Like hell!" David snapped.

"David!" Anna whispered, as now some of the adults around them *were* turning their heads.

"What are you, like from the last century or something?" David said. "People can hang out with whoever they want!"

"And they're known by the company they keep!" retorted the Ozarker. He glared at Constance and Forbearance. "Do you really want to be seen with *Mudbloods*?" His lip contorted into a vicious sneer, while all the girls except Alexandra gasped.

David's reaction was volcanic. "What did you call me?" he yelled, leaping to his feet.

Alexandra didn't know what a mudblood was, but she was sure it was bad. She stood up also, and ignored Gwendolyn's cries of "Children! Please, lower your voices! What are you doing?"

She imagined big, fat worms wriggling out of the older boy's nostrils. He looked cross-eyed for a moment, then snorted, wiped at his nose, and glowered at Alexandra. "What did you just contrive?" he said, gritting his teeth and stepping closer until he towered over her. "Did you make to hex me, you little Mudblood brat?"

"Children!" Gwendolyn cried out, and then Alexandra kicked the boy in the kneecap.

He yelped and hopped on one leg, and then his three friends arrived, looking angry and confused. One of them grabbed Alexandra. "What are you doing?" He half-lifted her off the ground, and then with a yell David launched himself across the table and tackled the other boy, who seemed to be the

first one's twin, even though he was almost twice David's size. The two of them tumbled to the floor together. People shouted and Constance and Forbearance hunched over with their hands over their heads, while Anna shrieked and ducked under the table to avoid the food and drinks David had sent flying. Alexandra saw Darla and Angelique, returning with trays of food, practically drop them in shock, and then the boy she had kicked slapped her across the face.

"How dare you!" he bellowed at her. Alexandra's face stung, but it was nothing compared to the fury she felt, and she kicked him again. Only this time, she didn't kick his kneecap. Her foot connected higher, and all his breath went out of him in a wheeze. He began sagging at the knees with a strained expression on his face, before she threw her shoulder into him with all her might and sent him sprawling.

"*Revulsio!*" someone yelled, and David and the boy he was wrestling with suddenly tumbled apart on the floor, while another purple flash threw Alexandra backwards away from her adversary. Then they were all surrounded by store employees, a couple of adults from nearby tables, and a red-faced Gwendolyn, who grabbed everyone and hauled them to their feet.



Gwendolyn's outrage was nothing compared to that of Tabitha Speaks. The bus driver was incredulous, and practically speechless. Everyone had been evicted from Grundy's, and everyone involved in the brawl had been Barred, which Gwendolyn explained (as she led them all, trembling and tight-lipped from the store) meant that they were magically prevented from reentering the premises until such time as the Bar might be lifted.

Gwendolyn marched side-by-side with the seniors who were chaperoning the older boys, and found Mrs. Speaks chatting with another witch in front of a store called Hats For All Seasons. She was not at all pleased to be interrupted, and even less pleased when the chaperones stammered out an explanation of what had happened.

With all of the sixth, seventh, and eighth graders lined up before her, she shook her head and said, "In my twenty-three years as a bus driver for Charmbridge, I have *never* been so embarrassed! Can you imagine, Charmbridge students brawling on the floor of Grundy's cafeteria like... like Muggles!"

Alexandra and David both bristled.

"Better not say anything," Anna murmured in a tight voice behind them, sounding terrified.

"Your behavior is inexcusable! Reprehensible! Gwendolyn and Peter, what were you doing while the students you were supposed to be in charge of started brawling?"

Surprised to have this blamed on them, Gwendolyn and Peter both looked flummoxed.

"I was only a few feet away—"

"I just turned my back for a minute—"

"I certainly wasn't expecting—"

"Never mind!" Speaks glared at them all. "What caused this?"

"I just asked my kindred witches to join us at our table," said the Ozarker boy. "And those... savages set upon us—"

"You lying -" David snarled, and looked like he might start another fight right in front of Mrs. Speaks.

"He used the m-word," said Anna suddenly from behind.

Speaks paused. "Muggle?" She looked confused.

"No. The other one," Anna said quietly.

After a moment, Mrs. Speaks's face wrinkled more as her eyes widened.

"Benjamin and Mordecai Rash, did you use such foul language?" She glared at the twin Ozarker

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boys, until their eyes joined Constance's and Forbearance's on the ground. Then she stared at Alexandra and David.

"Be that as it may, your behavior was inexcusable. Inexcusable!" she repeated. "You are aware that Charmbridge Academy students are expected to conduct themselves as if representing the school at all times? And that cursing, hexing, jinxing, and most certainly engaging in Muggle fisticuffs with other students is absolutely forbidden?"

No one said anything.

"You have embarrassed yourselves and this school today. Rest assured, I will be informing the Dean of this incident immediately. I'm sure she'll have a great deal to say, so I'll say no more."

A collective shudder went through all the students. Alexandra tried not to wince, but imagined another one of those howling letters being delivered to her bedroom, maybe this time while her parents were home. Would she be expelled? Her scholarship taken away? The thought filled her with more dread than she wanted to admit.

"Have they purchased all their school supplies?" Mrs. Speaks asked the chaperones.

"Yes," said Peter.

"Everything but familiars," Gwendolyn said quietly.

"Go get your familiars, and then have everyone return to the bus," said Mrs. Speaks.

So the sixth graders followed a silent, sullen Gwendolyn down the street, past many interesting shops that they knew they would not be visiting any time soon, to The Familiar Corner, which was a white-bricked building on a corner opposite the Colonial New World Bank.

Inside, it looked much like a pet store. There were cats and rats and bats and toads, and a reptile section with snakes and lizards, and a large aviary. Dogs were noticeably absent, and Alexandra also didn't see any fish. Nor, besides rats, were there any other rodents typically found in pet stores, such as hamsters or guinea pigs.

The shopkeeper was a friendly older gentleman named, appropriately enough, Mr. Jolly. "Feathers, fur, or scales?" he asked Darla jovially.

Darla and Angelique had been a bit shaken by the fight in the cafeteria, but since they'd managed to avoid direct involvement (and thus, punishment), they were considerably more cheerful than the other students. Darla said, "I've always wanted a cat. We have cats at home, actually, but none of them are *mine*."

Alexandra noticed that unlike Muggle pet stores, the animals in the Familiar Corner were mostly wandering around free. Although there was a wire cage around the enclosure for rats, which evidently protected them from the cats and the owls overhead, and the toads, lizards, and salamanders were likewise in a large glass terrarium, with a glass wall separating them from the snakes, it seemed to Alexandra that a large number of animal species were coexisting in a relatively open space. The many cats lounging on carpeted shelves overhead or prowling the floors and counters did eye the smaller creatures now and then through the protective barriers, but she was still surprised not to see more stalking, chasing, or fighting going on. Some of the birds looked rather edible from a cat's perspective.

"A familiar isn't *required*," said Gwendolyn, noticing that Alexandra was looking around a bit wistfully. "They're very useful for certain things, but of course they come with obligations as well. If you have allergies or you just can't keep one at home, there's no need to choose one right now."

"Make sure you find one that suits you," said Mr. Jolly. He scratched the ears of a ginger tabby sitting on the counter next to him. "They're a little like wands, that way."

Well, Darla was certainly catty, Alexandra thought, as Darla held a sleek black cat in her arms. Angelique was looking at ferrets, while Anna and David were both looking at birds.

Constance and Forbearance had not said a word since they left Grundy's, and both girls were standing quietly near the front entrance. Alexandra drifted over to them and asked, "Don't you want a familiar?"

"We have familiars," said Constance.

"Barn owls," said Forbearance.

"We left them at home." Neither girl met Alexandra's gaze.

"I'm sorry I got you two in trouble too," Alexandra said, and then couldn't help adding, "But your friend was kind of a jerk."

The Ozarker girls looked at each other for a moment.

"He ain't our friend," Constance murmured.

"Only a fellow Ozarker," said Forbearance.

"Kinfolk."

"Only that."

"So does that mean Ozarkers are kindred, and everyone else is a mudblood?" Alexandra asked. The two girls flushed and looked down.

Anna walked over, holding a young owl on her arm. It was small and gray, but already looked rather formidable, with a hooded skull and bright yellow predatory eyes.

"Mudblood means someone with Muggle parents," she said in a hushed voice, apparently having overheard Alexandra's question.

"Like me and David," Alexandra said angrily.

"And me." The small Chinese girl looked at Alexandra seriously. "Mudblood is a really a bad word and polite people don't use it, but some families are still really old fashioned and think being pureblood is important."

"*Most* Ozarkers don't use that word," said Constance.

Anna smiled slightly. "Ozarkers have a reputation for being purebloods and really old-fashioned, most of them, and not liking to marry outsiders. But my father's a wizard and you should hear what his family says about him for marrying a Muggle. Trust me, Chinese wizarding families are worse than Ozarkers."

"That's a Great Horned Owl," said Mr. Jolly, ambling down the aisle to join the girls, which cut their conversation short. He looked at the young bird on Anna's wrist. "He may be cute and manageable now, but he'll be nearly your size when he's full grown." The shopkeeper chuckled.

"I'll take him," Anna said, and the owl hooted. She smiled, and as Mr. Jolly went over to check on David, said, "My mother is going to have a cow!"

This did not seem to worry Anna; in fact, it seemed as if Mr. Jolly's warning had made the Great Horned Owl even more desirable to her. Alexandra was starting to like Anna. She still wasn't quite sure about the Ozarker girls.

David was looking at raptors himself, but rather than owls, he seemed intrigued by a falcon seated alone on a perch. Mr. Jolly was warning him that falcons were extremely difficult and demanding birds to take on as familiars, and that they considered delivering messages to be beneath them.

"Are you going to get a familiar?" Anna asked.

"I want to," Alexandra said, and then decided that there was no reason for her to be less brave than Anna. "I haven't decided what sort suits me, though."

"Well, owls are always a popular choice," Anna said, following Alexandra as she walked between the rodent and reptile habitats. "Snakes and toads are... well, easy to care for and you can just tuck them in your robes and take them anywhere. Same with rats. Cats are nice, I suppose."

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Alexandra stopped to look at a solitary bird standing on top of an empty cage, looking down at her. It was a big black raven.

"Hi," Alexandra said. She held up her hand in a closed fist. The raven cocked its head, regarded her with its black eyes, and cawed at her.

Gwendolyn joined Alexandra and Anna and hovered over the younger girls. "I don't think you want a raven," she said.

"Why not?" Alexandra continued holding up her hand.

"Well, they're..." Gwendolyn hesitated, looking up at the bird and adjusting her glasses uncomfortably.

"Ravens have a reputation for being Dark birds," said Anna.

"Of course they're dark!" Alexandra scoffed.

"No, *Dark*," Anna emphasized. She seemed a little unnerved by the raven's scrutiny, as did Gwendolyn. It was watching them as if listening to and understanding their conversation. "Ravens used to be popular with warlocks. Wizards who studied the Dark Arts."

"Sounds like wizards have a lot of stupid superstitions," Alexandra said.

With a flutter of black wings, the raven descended to land on Alexandra's fist. Anna made a startled noise and took a step backwards. Alexandra was now nose-to-nose with the bird, and looked directly into its eyes. It opened its beak and cawed loudly, spreading its wings to balance itself as her arm wobbled a little under its weight.

"How do you like the name Charlie?" Alexandra asked.

The raven cawed again.



David took the falcon, while Darla bought her black cat and Angelique chose a large ferret, which rather surprised Alexandra for some reason. Everyone had to purchase carrier cages for their familiars, as well as an initial supply of food, although Mr. Jolly told them that familiars were generally quite capable of hunting for food on their own, assuming they were let out.

Charlie cawed indignantly at being thrust into a cage, and spread its wings to make it more difficult, but didn't resist after Alexandra promised not to lock the door. Anna's owl was docile enough, but David had to put a hood over his falcon. He'd also been obliged to buy a heavy leather glove to handle the bird.

Everyone was feeling rather cheery with their new pets, though Gwendolyn was still wearing a stern expression. They were all weighed down with their day's shopping, and Anna in particular was having difficulty carrying her cauldron, her owl cage, her books and potion supplies, and all her clothes.

When they got back to the Charmbridge bus, Tabitha Speaks was waiting for them, arms crossed.

"Gwendolyn and Peter, I assume you'll be keeping a close eye on your charges so there will be no more outbreaks of name-calling or Muggleish brawling on the bus?" she said.

"Yes, Mrs. Speaks," the two teenagers replied.

"I'll be sitting with them all the way back," Gwendolyn added. The sixth graders all exchanged looks and sighed.

"Good. After what happened today, I'm expecting a very, very quiet ride back to your homes, and that's what I'd better have. You all may be done shopping for the day, but believe me, Lilith Grimm isn't done with you!"

With that threat hanging over them, the grim-faced bus driver allowed them to board the bus. The Rash twins walked past them with dour looks but their mouths shut.

"I think it's best if none of you talk if you don't have to," said Gwendolyn stiffly, as they sat down at

their table again and then crowded in to make room for the older girl. Most of their supplies were stashed in an overhead rack, but their familiars could not simply be packed away, and so three birdcages, a cat, and a ferret were all occupying the table with them, which made it quite crowded.

With Gwendolyn suppressing any conversation (she kept her nose buried in a book called *Thaumaturgical Careers*), they were reduced to exchanging looks and a few subtle gestures on the ride home. Alexandra passed the time by letting Charlie play with her gold bracelet, which the raven was greatly enamored of. Anna opened up one of her schoolbooks and began reading it, while David was reading a book on falconry. Constance and Forbearance did little but stare out the window, while Darla and Angelique looked the most bored, holding their familiars on their laps and stroking them.

Everyone was dropped off in the reverse of the order in which they'd been picked up, so David was taken home first. "See you all in about a week!" he said, waving as he carried off his supplies.

"Assuming we don't get expelled," Alexandra thought, but she waved back.

And well before eight p.m., the Charmbridge bus pulled up in front of her home on Sweetmaple Avenue.

"We'll see you again in four days," said Mrs. Speaks as Alexandra made her way to the front of the bus to exit it. "And you'd better make sure you're on your best behavior between now and then. I'm sure the Dean will be in absolutely no mood to receive any notices from the Trace Office."

"Don't worry," Alexandra said. "I won't be doing anything the Trace Office might notice."

Chapter 7 — The Invisible Bridge



Charlie was not a welcome addition at 207 Sweetmaple Avenue. Alexandra's parents immediately made it clear that they had expected her to return home with schoolbooks and uniforms, not a cauldron and a crow.

"Charlie's a raven, not a crow," said Alexandra.

"Same damn thing," said Archie. "They're just noisy pests. Good for nothing but target practice."

Charlie screeched angrily, and Alexandra stood between the cage and her stepfather. "You're not shooting Charlie!" she said furiously.

"Archie," Claudia said, and her husband snorted and fell silent. She looked at Alexandra. "Why on earth would you bring home a bird?" she demanded. "What made you think we'd suddenly change our minds about a pet, especially considering you're already in trouble?"

Alexandra had been rather hoping that her parents wouldn't ask any awkward questions, but apparently that Confundus Charm only went so far. "We're going to study... birds and things at Charmbridge," she said, improvising a story she had only partially concocted in her mind as a backup plan while riding the bus home. "Nature, plants, you know, like when we collected leaves in third grade?"

"There's a big difference between collecting leaves and keeping a pet crow – raven!" her mother exclaimed.

"We have to take care of a bird so we can learn about them," Alexandra said. "About their nests and diets and mating habits and everything." Charlie clucked softly. "Anyway, I'll be taking Charlie to school with me, so it's only for a few days and I promise there won't be any noise or mess and Charlie will stay in my room." She said it all in a rush. She didn't think her stepfather would *really* try to shoot Charlie, but the comment had made both bird and girl rather tense.

Her mother made an exasperated sound, and threw her hands in the air. "You're *still* grounded!" she said. "And you'd better take care of that bird!"

Not waiting for her to have second thoughts, Alexandra hurried upstairs carrying Charlie's cage and her other things.

"And if it makes noise or leaves a mess around the house..." Archie added as Alexandra retreated up the stairs, and he raised his hand with an extended forefinger and thumb, but Claudia immediately slapped it down. "Archie!"

Once safely in her room with the door closed, Alexandra set Charlie's cage on her desk and opened it. The raven hopped to the bottom edge of the open cage door, and then stepped out onto the desk.

"Don't worry, Charlie," Alexandra said. "Archie isn't really going to shoot you. He's just kind of a jerk like that sometimes. And if he does try anything..." She slid the box from Hoargrim's out of her stack of school supplies, and opened it. "I have a wand now." She smiled as she held it up, and Charlie made an approving chuckling sound.



Both Alexandra and Charlie behaved themselves for the next four days. Alexandra left Charlie's door open, and the raven actually seemed to prefer sleeping in the cage so long as it was always possible to exit it. Alexandra also left her window open, and Charlie would fly in and out during the day.

Alexandra was envious of the bird's freedom, since she was now observing the terms of her restriction. Since she had no one to play with in Larkin Mills, there really wasn't much point in her going outside anyway, a thought that made her unexpectedly gloomy. Without Charlie's company, she might have become even more lonely, but she spent some of her time reading more about ravens, and some of her time studying her locket, which she still seemed unable to open without magic. She had a feeling that with a wand, it would now be much easier to open it magically, but she dreaded receiving another owl from the Trace Office, or worse, a screaming lecture from Ms. Grimm.

She was half-expecting to receive one of those anyway. After the trouble she'd already gotten into, she wasn't looking forward to hearing what the Dean would have to say about her fight with Benjamin Rash. She spent a couple of days worrying that she might still be expelled from Charmbridge before she even started, while watching her window anxiously for the arrival of bad news, but none came. It was too much to hope for that the incident might be dismissed or forgotten, but after four days had passed without a word, Alexandra did start hoping that.

Charlie remained fascinated with both the bracelet and the locket. Actually, the raven seemed fascinated with anything shiny, and Alexandra was careful to keep her bedroom door closed, for fear that Charlie might begin "collecting" things from the rest of the house. But Charlie was particularly delighted when Alexandra would relinquish the golden locket and bracelet, and squawked unpleasantly when she took them back out of the raven's cage.

"They're *mine*, Charlie," Alexandra admonished her familiar. "You can watch them, but I still have to have them back." But she got the feeling that Charlie was not in complete agreement about ownership of the items.

Monday morning, Alexandra dressed herself according to the Charmbridge Academy Dress Code. In her dark slacks and white shirt with black jacket, she thought she looked like a waitress in an expensive restaurant (the sort her mother never took her to), and grimaced at the thought of having to always dress this way for class. At least according to Gwendolyn, they were allowed to wear normal casual clothing when the school day was over.

All of her books and other clothes had been packed by her mother the night before. Perhaps as a lingering side effect of the Confundus Charm, her mother had never gotten around to asking about the cauldron, though she did give it odd looks. Alexandra reached into Charlie's cage to retrieve her locket and bracelet, and after a brief tug-of-war over the bracelet, which she won, she tucked them both into her jacket pocket with her wand. "Stop sulking, Charlie. You'll see them again," she said, and picked up the bird's cage and carried it with her cauldron downstairs.

Alexandra hadn't really been nervous about the first day of school since her first ever day of school, as every year since then had just been a repetition of previous years, with more or less the same people at the same old elementary school. But now she was going to get on a bus and go to a school she'd

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never been to before, where she only knew a handful of kids, and she would not be seeing her mother or Archie again until Christmas. It was the furthest she'd ever traveled, and the longest she had ever been away from her parents. She wasn't scared, not really, but the new experience looming before her (and the thought of the reception Ms. Grimm might have waiting for her) did set her heart to pounding a little harder than usual as she came downstairs to eat breakfast.

Archie and her mother were both at the table. Archie was drinking coffee and wearing his police uniform, and gave Charlie a nasty look (which the bird returned) before squinting and going back to his newspaper.

Her mother seemed pleased at Alexandra's appearance, and laid her hand on her daughter's head to smooth her hair down. "You look just like a schoolgirl," she said.

"I am a schoolgirl," Alexandra replied, thinking that this was a rather stupid thing to point out. But her mother just laughed, which was also unusual.

"Have some eggs. I also made sausage, and orange juice, and there's some toast and cereal too."

Such a grand breakfast was a rarity. Alexandra sat at the table and ate heartily, her appetite not at all diminished by the nervous fluttering in her stomach. She stuck some sausage and bits of toast through the bars of Charlie's cage. The raven gobbled the handouts down eagerly, over her mother's objections.

And finally it was time to go outside to wait for the Charmbridge bus. Alexandra was a little surprised when Archie picked up her suitcase and bookbag and carried them for her.

"I want you to call or write, at least once a week," her mother said, as they walked down the steps in front of their house.

"I will," Alexandra said, but she was distracted by the knot of kids waiting at the corner, a few houses down. There was Brian and Bonnie Seabury, and Billy Boggleston and his friends, and everyone else who would be getting on the Larkin Mills School District bus to Larkin Mills Elementary School. Normally, Alexandra would be there with them, goofing off with Brian or exchanging insults with Billy.

She took a few steps away from her mother, towards the other kids, and stopped. Billy saw her, scowled, and turned his back on her, while he made some sniggering comment to his friends. Eyes and pointed fingers swung in her direction, and she heard mocking laughter. She guessed that they were probably making snide jokes about how she was dressed, but she didn't care what Billy Boggleston and his friends said.

Brian looked up, and their eyes met for a few seconds. Neither of them said anything.

She remembered Ms. Grimm telling her that she would no longer be part of Brian's world, but she hadn't quite expected that separation to happen like this. She saw Bonnie looking at her too, and then Brian, expressionlessly, turned away.

"Aren't you going to say good-bye to Brian?" her mother asked behind her.

"No," said Alexandra. "We've already said our good-byes."

She turned away from the kids at the bus stop.

The Charmbridge Academy bus was coming up the street now. A few days ago, Alexandra had been horrified at its external appearance, but now even the derisive hoots that rose from Billy Boggleston's crowd didn't bother her.

"I'll miss you, Alex," her mother said, and drew her into a tight hug, squeezing her harder than Alexandra could ever remember being hugged by her mother, and this did embarrass her a little.

"I'll miss you too," Alexandra mumbled, and realized she hadn't thought about whether or not she would until now.

"Be good, Alex," Archie said gruffly.

Alexandra nodded, and got on the short bus.



Darla Dearborn and Angelique Devereaux were already on the bus, so Alexandra sat down with them. It turned out that Anna Chu and the Pritchards were already at Charmbridge Academy, as they had been staying on school grounds since before the shopping trip to Chicago. But there were many other students who hadn't been along for the trip to the Goblin Market, so the bus was more crowded than last time.

"Wizard children used to mostly attend smaller local schools or be educated at home," Darla said. "More and more students from other parts of the country are attending Charmbridge because of the Automagicka."

"I almost went to Baleswood," said Angelique. "It's closer to New Orleans, but –"

She was holding her ferret, which suddenly hissed, "Who cares, you stuck-up little brat?" Darla jumped, but Angelique only grimaced.

"Shut up, Honey!" she snapped.

"Your ferret talks?" Alexandra asked, amazed.

"Duh! Not the sharpest knife in the drawer, are you?" sneered the ferret.

"It's not a ferret," Angelique said through clenched teeth. "It's a jarvey. Apparently, the Familiar Corner *somehow* managed to sell a jarvey which *somehow* kept silent until *someone* was foolish enough to take her home."

"Jarveys look like ferrets, but they can talk," Darla said, a statement which Alexandra thought was more deserving of the jarvey's last comment. "Unfortunately, they mostly just memorize rude phrases."

"Do you ever stop yapping?" the creature interrupted.

"Her name is Honey?" Alexandra found this quite amusing.

"Mudblood!" screeched the jarvey.

"Yes," Angelique sighed. "Of course I didn't know she was a jarvey when I named her."

"Bunch of hens squawking, cluck, cluck, cluck!" mocked the jarvey.

"Shut up, Honey!" Angelique snapped again.

"Shut up! Shut up! Shut up!" Honey repeated.

Angelique was fumbling with a pouch, and finally withdrew a little piece of candy from it which she offered to the jarvey. It snapped it up, and then began pawing at its face as it fell silent.

"A bit of imported Ton-Tongue Toffee," Angelique sighed. "Fortunately, jarveys aren't very bright. I can't wait until I learn the Silencing Charm."

"Neither can anyone else," said Darla.

"Why don't you just return it?" asked Alexandra.

Angelique held the animal up, which slid slinkily about in her hands. Its growing tongue was flopping around in front of its face.

"Well, I sent an owl explaining their... mistake," she replied. "And Mr. Jolly wrote back that of course they'd refund my money and take Honey back, but since obviously no one wants a jarvey as a pet, she'd be, well –"

From inside the cage Alexandra was still holding, Charlie suddenly made an ominous, lethal-sounding "Kk-kk-kk" noise.

Angelique shoved Honey back into her own cage. "Anyway, I did have a Silencing Charm put on her cage, so we can't hear her while she's in it. I just have to let her out now and then."

Alexandra looked at the obnoxious creature that was now circling about in its cage. It stuck its tongue out at her, which was now swollen to (relatively) enormous proportions.

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"It called me a Mudblood," she said.

Angelique winced. "They just pick up any bad words they hear. It wasn't personal. She's called me worse."

The bus repeated the route they had taken on the previous trip, stopping at Detroit to pick up David. He was wearing another sports jersey and a cap this time, as well as baggy pants and expensive-looking sneakers. He had earphones on and practically swaggered down the aisle. Heads turned as he passed by, until he sat down next to Darla, across from Alexandra and Angelique. "Yo, wassup?" he said, pulling his earphones out.

"Trying to look like the biggest Muggle around?" Alexandra grinned.

David grinned back, but it was a rather belligerent grin. "Just wait until some punk calls me a Mudblood again."

Angelique nervously pushed Honey's cage to the other side of the table.

"You shouldn't use that word," said Darla primly. She leaned forward and said in a low voice, "Don't worry, no one important is going to hold it against you two that you're, you know, Muggle-born."

Darla, with her lipstick and glittery eyeshadow and perfectly coiffed hair, was obviously trying to look older than she was, and Alexandra thought she was talking to them almost the way Gwendolyn did.

"You said your grandmother is a Muggle," Alexandra said abruptly. "Wouldn't that make you a... m-word also?"

Darla sat up, and a dark flush spread beneath her cheeks. "Well, not, I mean, some very nasty, very old-fashioned families might say so, I suppose," she stammered. "Not that it matters! I'm not ashamed of having Muggles in my ancestry at all! But technically, that is to say, in the Confederation Wizard Census my family is listed as pureblood. I suppose *technically* I might be listed as a three-quarters blood, but my grandmother wasn't part of the census so I don't know why anyone would bother to research our blood status in that much detail. Of course blood status is so old-fashioned, no one really pays attention to it anymore anyway."

David and Alexandra looked at each other as Darla's words poured out in a rush, and she could tell David was thinking the same thing she was. Darla was awfully defensive about something that "didn't matter."

"One drop," David muttered. "Don't kid yourself, girl."

Darla looked as if she wanted to be offended, but wasn't quite sure what David meant, and Angelique and Alexandra didn't get the reference either, so they spent the rest of the ride talking about school. David had been informed that all Muggle-raised students who had not already taken the SPAWN would be given the test the next day. Darla and Angelique said that everyone would be assigned to a dorm room, usually two to a room. Alexandra wondered if she'd wind up with them as roommates. The prospect didn't thrill her, especially not if it would include Angelique's jarvey. Anna would be all right as a roommate, she thought, and the Ozarker girls Constance and Forbearance seemed nice enough, although if Ozarkers tended to be concerned about "blood status" like Benjamin Rash, they might not like having "Mudblood" roommates.

After a while, Alexandra thought the bus had left the Automagicka, as they were not traveling as fast, and the road seemed narrower. She had no idea where they were, as there was no city in sight and they seemed to be driving up a long, green valley.

"Oh, I think we're almost there!" said Darla. And indeed, a few minutes later, the bus pulled off the road onto a shoulder at the top of a long, steep incline.

"Everyone off!" said Mrs. Speaks. "Make sure to remove all your things from the bus."

They filed out of the bus, and found themselves standing on a bluff overlooking the valley Alexandra had seen out the window. Behind them was a rocky cliff face through which the road had been carved, rising only a little further above them before the road curved around and headed back down the other side of the mountain. The valley was vast and full of lush summer greenery that hadn't yet begun to change colors for the fall. It extended as far as Alexandra could see in either direction, and it was nearly a mile across to the rose-colored cliffs on the other side, and half a mile deep. While the valley floor was mostly tree-covered, here and there she could see segments of a river wending its way along its length.

It was spectacular, and Alexandra wasn't the only student to be awed at the sight. Even some of the older students, who had presumably been here before, were hushed as they took in the view.

Only after soaking in the scenery for several minutes did she realize that there were no signs of human activity. Other than the road they'd climbed to get to this point, there were no other roads or trails in sight, no buildings, no telephone poles or power lines, nothing she could see from one end of the valley to the other.

Alexandra had never been to any national parks like Yosemite or the Grand Canyon. The most wilderness she'd ever seen was in the woods around Larkin Mills. She'd seen scenes like this on TV and in books, but this was different. She could have stood there with the wind whipping her hair for a long time, and she felt the cage she was holding shiver as Charlie hopped around inside, making impatient noises. She wanted to let the raven out, but wondered if Charlie would soar out over the valley and never want to return.

"Quite a view, ain't it, Starshine?"

Alexandra blinked and turned around. There was a tall man with long blond hair in a ponytail and a beard and mustache, looking down at her with a kindly smile. He had bright blue eyes and looked like he had probably been quite handsome when he was younger, though his face now was now weathered and his ponytail and beard were going gray. He had a brightly colored scarf tied around his head, and beneath his long and faded leather jacket he seemed to be wearing a tie-dyed t-shirt. His jeans and boots were also very Muggleish in style, but he was carrying a broom over his shoulder, and she saw a wand sticking out of one of his jacket pockets.

"Ben," he said, extending the hand that wasn't holding the broom. "Ben Journey."

"Alexandra," she said, taking his hand. "Not Starshine."

Ben laughed. "I call all the girls Starshine. Welcome to Charmbridge, Alexandra-not-Starshine. I'm the custodian, groundskeeper, and dude who tracks down students who get themselves in trouble. Got a feeling I may be seeing a lot of you." He winked at her, and ambled away to join Tabitha Speaks, who was starting to call the students into lines by grade.

"He looks like a hippie," David snorted.

"He seems nice enough," Alexandra said.

"He's probably a Radicalist," Darla sniffed, joining them.

"A Radicalist?" Alexandra hated constantly being educated about the wizarding world by Darla, but had to admit she did seem pretty well-informed.

"Years and years ago there was some Muggle fad for dressing in rainbow clothes and dancing naked and smoking herbs that make you have visions and stare at the sky," Darla explained. "They thought they were actually learning magic. Some wizarding families in Alta California – they've always been a little odd out there, my mother says – actually began imitating the Muggles. They had a lot of strange ideas, like ending the Confederation and trying to teach Muggles magic. Total nonsense. They even started a wizarding school. It's still running but of course no one who cares about their reputation

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would want to attend Sedona.”

“Of course,” David said, exchanging another look with Alexandra. They rolled their eyes together and Alexandra had to stifle laughter. She had a feeling Darla's account might not be completely reliable, and perhaps she should find another source of information about Radicalists. Maybe Anna would know better, since she was from California.

“Everyone is to cross the bridge in a single file line,” Mrs. Speaks was saying. Alexandra saw that she and David weren't the only sixth graders to look confused, but the older kids were all grinning at the youngest students. “Now, for those of you who have never crossed the Invisible Bridge before, I know it may seem scary, but I assure you it's perfectly safe.”

“Yeah, it's been almost ten years since the last kid fell off!” called an eleventh grader, provoking laughter and hoots from his friends.

“John, would you like to start the school year with detention?” Mrs. Speaks snapped. “*No one* has ever fallen to their death from the bridge since it was completed, and the stabilization and windbreaker charms are reinforced every year.” She smiled at Alexandra's group. “This is a sort of rite of passage for new Charmbridge students. You can hold hands if you like.”

Alexandra noted that Mrs. Speaks had not refuted what John said about a kid falling off. But she wasn't afraid, and she certainly wasn't going to hold anyone's hand like a kindergardener. She stepped forward, determined to be the first to set foot on the Invisible Bridge.

Charlie chose that moment to burst out of the cage, cawing and flapping manically. Alexandra spun around and yelled at her familiar. “Charlie! What are you doing? Get back here!” She actually pointed at her cage, but the raven flapped up to perch atop the Charmbridge bus.

“Mr. Journey, would you please help Miss Quick secure her bird?” said Mrs. Speaks, sounding a bit exasperated as every student on the bus stared at her. Alexandra heard laughter and snide comments as she ran to the side of the bus and glared up at Charlie. “Do you want me to lock the door to your cage from now on?” she demanded. Charlie cawed at her while Journey ambled over.

“Ravens are smart birds,” he drawled, looking up at Charlie. “You know some say they're smarter than dogs?”

Charlie made a disparaging sound.

“Well, Charlie's acting like a birdbrain!” Alexandra said. Charlie squawked. She looked over her shoulder, and saw that the first group of sixth graders had started across the Invisible Bridge. With some nervousness (and a bit of nudging from their friends in a few cases), they simply stepped off the cliff, and now appeared to be walking on air across the valley. She looked back up at her familiar.

“Now look what you did! I wanted to be first across the bridge!” she said angrily. The raven cocked its head.

“Don't you worry, Starshine,” said Journey. “The walk's just as spectacular if you go last as if you go first. Charlie!” He addressed himself to the raven. “You be a good bird, now, and get back in your cage. You get to see what the earth and sky look like every time you take wing. You going to deny Alex a view like that?”

He spoke in a lazy drawl, and Alexandra thought he really was a little odd, his eyes not really focused on the raven but at some middle point in the distance. To her surprise, though, Charlie made an acquiescent chirping sound that she hadn't heard before, and hopped off the bus and landed on her shoulder.

“I'm already in enough trouble,” she said quietly. “Could you please try not to get me in any more?”

Charlie squawked softly, which she decided to interpret as an apology. Alexandra held up the cage, with the door open, and Charlie reluctantly hopped back in.

The Invisible Bridge

There had been over a hundred students on the bus, and they were now streaming across the bridge. Alexandra moved forward to join them.

"Looks like your friend is waiting for you," he said. David had hung back, and was standing at the edge of the cliff waiting for Alexandra.

"Thanks," said Alexandra, hurrying over to join him. "I guess Charlie's had enough of being caged after being cooped up for the whole bus ride."

"Yeah, Malcolm is getting pretty edgy too," David said.

The two of them looked over the edge of the cliff. It was a vertigo-inducing straight drop. Alexandra could see rocks and a tiny bend in the river coming close to the base of the cliff, far, far below. The Invisible Bridge was directly in front of them, but it was truly invisible. She thought it might be transparent, like glass, but they could not see even the faintest trace of an outline.

Alexandra saw David hesitate. Before anyone could "encourage" her, or think she was afraid, Alexandra stepped off the cliff, into thin air.

The Invisible Bridge was solid underfoot, and without pause, she immediately took another step. Now both of her feet were on the bridge. She didn't know what it was made of, but it felt as solid as concrete. She kept walking, and then casually looked over her shoulder at David.

David swallowed hard, and stepped out onto the bridge. He wobbled a bit as he walked, and slid his feet to either side as he moved forward, as if trying to figure out how wide the bridge was.

"Who the heck thought of this?" he muttered, as he reached Alexandra.

"I'll bet it keeps Muggles out," she replied.

He snorted, and the two of them proceeded out over the valley.

The view from the bluff was nothing compared to the view suspended half a mile above the valley, surrounded by nothing but air. It was, Alexandra thought, almost like flying. She held her arms out to either side, dangling Charlie's cage from one hand and her cauldron from the other, and imagined that she was a raven also, soaring through the sky. She couldn't do it for long, because her cauldron was heavy, but for a few moments she felt completely free and truly magical. She was walking on air.

Then suddenly there was nothing underfoot, and she was falling through the air.

David screamed in fear as the two of them plummeted straight down. Charlie and Malcolm both screamed in their cages. Alexandra heard people screaming high above them, as the wind rushed past.

She remembered jumping off the roof of her house. She remembered making fireballs come out of a wet branch. She didn't know how to stop falling from a height like this. Charlie's cage door flapped open and Charlie tumbled out, screeching, wings spread. She was glad.

Looking down she could see her feet against the sky above, and looking up she saw the green valley floor rushing up at her. Her cauldron and books were tumbling away. Her hand slipped into her jacket pocket and curled around her wand. She was sure there was some magic that could save them, but she didn't know any spells. Only the rhymes she made up at home, and there was so little time. She whipped out the wand, but had no idea what to do with it.

"Charlie save us, or we'll die!

Bigger, stronger, faster fly!"

In her fevered imagination, Charlie turned into a giant bird and plucked them out of the air. But she knew that her rhyme wasn't even proper English and that Charlie was after all, just a raven, and that she was still falling – it had been a stupid idea, but she couldn't think of anything else, except to grab one of David's flailing arms.

There was a deafening beating of wings. A shadow blocked out the sun and giant bird talons wrapped around Alexandra's waist. She felt a little like a worm.

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“David, hold on!” she cried out.

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” he gasped. He wrapped both arms around hers, with Malcolm’s cage still clutched in one hand.

They were jerked upwards. Alexandra was having the breath squeezed out of her, and her arm felt like it was going to break. She clenched her teeth as her head swam and prickly pinpoints of light began filling her vision. She heard other voices over Charlie’s booming caw, and felt hands on her, but she was too breathless and numb to even look around, until Gwendolyn and Mrs. Speaks and another older student laid her down on the far side of the valley, at the other end of the Invisible Bridge.

Chapter 8 — Remedial Magic



“Where's Charlie?” she gasped, lying on her back.

“Charlie's fine,” Mrs. Speaks said. She had her wand out and was waving it over Alexandra. “I think you'll be fine,” she said, “other than a few bruises.”

Alexandra flexed her arm, winced, and sat up. David was also being helped by some older students, and by Mr. Journey, who was trying to pry the boy's shaking fingers loose from their death grip on his falcon's cage.

“Whoever thought up that Invisible Bridge should be locked up!” David said.

“It's never done that before,” said Mrs. Speaks. “But obviously we're going to need to reinspect all the charms on it. I don't understand how this happened.”

“You should've had nets underneath it!” David insisted. “Or you people with your brooms should've been riding alongside us! We almost died!”

“Now, Mr. Washington, you're understandably upset,” Mrs. Speaks said soothingly. “I assure you, our safety precautions have always been sufficient and as you saw, people *were* standing by with brooms just in case. Even if, err, that giant bird hadn't caught you, I'm sure we would have reached you in time.”

Alexandra didn't think Mrs. Speaks looked nearly as certain as she was trying to sound about that last part, and from the look in David's eyes, he was not convinced either. She had lost Charlie's cage along with everything else she'd been holding in her hands, except her wand. She looked around and could see no sign of the raven.

“Where's Charlie?” she demanded a second time.

“Charlie is fine,” Mrs. Speaks repeated. “The bird flew away after being... persuaded to let go of you.”

“Flew away?” she exclaimed. “What do you mean, persuaded?”

“Calm down, Miss Quick. Familiars always return.”

They helped her to her feet. It was still a little painful to take in a breath – she was sure Charlie hadn't meant to hurt her, but those talons had been strong. And her arm felt like it had been stretched an extra inch or two.

Everyone looked shaken. Gwendolyn, still holding onto her broom, was trembling, and all the

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students who had preceded Alexandra and David across the bridge were standing around in a large gathering, watching them.

Alexandra wasn't shaky, just sore, but she wasn't pleased to be the center of attention again.

"I lost my cauldron and my books and my robes and my potion supplies," she said glumly. At least she still had a few changes of clothes, packed into the bookbag on her back.

"We'll get replacements for you, don't you worry," said Mrs. Speaks. "At least you still have your wand." Alexandra was still clutching it. She leaned closer and whispered, "You can put it away now, dear," not unkindly. Alexandra tucked it back into her jacket pocket, and felt it bump against her bracelet. Then with a sinking feeling, she thrust her hand down into the pocket and felt around for the locket. It was gone. The bracelet had somehow remained in her pocket, but the locket must have tumbled out.

"All right, everyone, obviously this gave everyone a horrible scare, but no one's hurt. The excitement is over! Get back in line!" Mrs. Speaks clapped her hands and Mr. Journey began coaxing the other students away from the bluff and back onto a trail that Alexandra hadn't been able to see from the far side.

"Are you all right now, Miss Quick? We can have someone carry you, or send a carpet out —"

"I'm fine!" Alexandra said quickly. She looked at David, who nodded and walked over to join her, though he looked a little more wobbly.

"I am *not* telling my parents about that!" he said. "They'd have me back in Detroit by nightfall!" He was holding up Malcolm's cage as he spoke, and inspecting his familiar. Malcolm didn't look too much the worse for wear, though the poor falcon was now bobbing its hooded head back and forth and partially unfolding its wings, obviously agitated.

"You sure you don't want to go back?" Alexandra said, grinning. David gave her a sharp look.

"No," he said. Then added, "Not yet. I'm not so sure about these people. Girl, I can't believe you. You think that was a joke?"

Alexandra's grin faded, and she looked unusually thoughtful for a moment. "No," she said. "I think someone tried to kill us."



Alexandra wasn't actually sure anyone was trying to kill them. She supposed magical invisible bridges could collapse just like normal bridges. But she was naturally prone to imaginative explanations for unnatural events, and the idea that someone might be trying to kill her was more exciting than a mundane magical mishap. She tried to imagine who would want to kill her and why, but the only explanation she could come up with was that she was a "Mudblood," which would fit David almost being killed as well. Of course, she knew that many of the older students who'd passed across the bridge safely were also Muggle-born.

Speculating about a plot to murder her also distracted her for a little while from the loss of her locket, and her still-missing familiar.

"That was the most horrible thing I've ever seen!" Darla exclaimed, as Alexandra and David caught up to the other sixth graders. There was a larger group of them now, not just the ones who'd been sitting with Alexandra at the table on the bus.

"We're okay," said Alexandra.

"I've heard kids have been blown off the bridge before, or fell off while horsing around," said another sixth grader, looking at Alexandra and David as if wondering whether they had fallen off as a result of horseplay.

"But the seniors or one of the faculty always catch them," said Angelique.

“We weren't horsing around!” David snapped.

“And we didn't fall off,” Alexandra added. “We were dropped.”

“I've heard the Dean arranges for someone to fall off every few years, just to keep anyone from messing with it,” another boy said. “It's made to vanish most of the time, you know, but sometimes kids sneak out here and try to rematerialize it.”

“That's ridiculous!” said Darla. “Dean Grimm would never deliberately make someone fall like that! Can you imagine what parents would say?”

Alexandra didn't exactly share Darla's faith in Ms. Grimm, but it did seem unlikely that the Dean would randomly schedule falling accidents.

As they talked, they were walking along a trail that wound through some woods. The trees weren't as dense as those Alexandra had seen on the valley floor. Sunlight shined through the leaves, speckling the shrubs and groundcover. They could hear birdcalls and see squirrels and rabbits scampering about. It bordered on idyllic, and Alexandra wondered if there was a fairy castle waiting for them.

Instead, as they emerged from the woods onto a nicely manicured lawn, they saw a large brick building that sprawled across at least twenty acres, surrounded by grass, sandlots, and athletic fields that were many times that area. Charmbridge Academy seemed to be built in a roughly circular structure at least three stories high, making it impressively large, many times the size of the high school back in Larkin Mills. The enormous lawn the school sat on appeared to be surrounded on all sides by woods.

The students all walked through an ivy-covered arch that curved above a large set of stone steps taking them through the main entrance. Large wooden doors opened to greet them, and Alexandra saw a line of adults waiting beyond in a foyer whose high ceiling reached up to the third floor. There were balconies and hallways running along the edge of the foyer, from which people on the second and third floors could look down at the people entering, and Alexandra saw quite a few students clustered there leaning over the railings to watch the new arrivals.

Older students that had arrived on the bus immediately called up to friends they recognized, and the foyer was soon filled with yelled greetings and excited chatter. Both the adults and the students were dressed as diversely as she had seen back at the Goblin Market. Cloaks and robes and long jackets with lots of pockets predominated, and there were an awful lot of hats, especially on the adults, but some of the students were wearing clothes that seemed to conform more closely to the school dress code. Alexandra didn't see anyone dressed just like Constance and Forbearance, or Benjamin and Mordecai Rash, but there were others wearing buckled shoes, stiff dark tunics, bonnets and long skirts beneath multilayered blouses, or knee pants and suspenders. Lined up on the ground floor, behind the teachers, Alexandra saw a group of boys (and a couple of girls) wearing uniform jackets, white and navy blue with large gold buttons. These students also had their wands hanging on their hips from little leather straps.

A few of the students could have walked into the normal parts of Chicago, or Larkin Mills, and passed for Muggles, but most witches and wizards seemed to have a personal style that would raise eyebrows anywhere else.

Ms. Grimm was not present. A thin-faced woman dressed in a black dress and hat stepped forward to look down her nose at the circle of arriving students, and then clapped her hands briefly. This did not immediately quiet the room, so she drew her wand and said, “Sonus!” When she spoke again, her voice was amplified as if her wand were a microphone.

“Welcome to Charmbridge Academy, or back to Charmbridge Academy, as the case may be!”

Conversations died down as her voice drowned out all others, and students turned to look at the

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witch addressing them.

"My name is Hephzibah Price, and I am the Vice Dean in charge of the Sixth Grade," she said. She gave a stern look at a few eighth graders who were still talking, waited until they fell silent, then continued.

"I understand there was some trouble at the bridge today." Her eyes briefly flickered in Alexandra's direction. "Rather than spreading rumors, I'll ask you to please wait until the general assembly tomorrow morning, when the Dean will address all your concerns and give you all the facts. In the meantime, everyone should return to the dormitories assigned to your year. New students, there are volunteers waiting to show you the way. Dinner will be served in half an hour, so don't take too long putting your things away."

She murmured something, and her voice went quiet again.

"Yeah right, that'll stop people from talking," David scoffed.

Alexandra trudged after the other sixth graders. She was still thinking about the loss of her locket, and she worried about Charlie. How could they just let her familiar fly away? And would he stay giant-sized?

The sixth graders were lining up in front of a pair of older students, divided into two lines, one for boys and one for girls. The boy and girl at the head of each respective line were both wearing green and white sashes across their chests, with a variety of ribbons, buttons, and patches decorating them.

"There are Scout troops at Charmbridge?" she asked aloud. She had been briefly interested in the Brownies when she was eight, but the other girls hadn't appreciated it when Alexandra staged a pitched battle between their dolls and their stuffed animals that inflicted extensive casualties on both sides. Alexandra had been annoyed that they wanted to stay indoors baking and sewing instead of going camping.

"Rangers," said another sixth grader.

"Hi, I'm Marguerite Millicent Murray," said the girl wearing the sash, sounding even more cheerful than Gwendolyn. "I'll show you to the girls' dorms for your year. I'm also the Witch Ranger Coven Leader for Charmbridge Academy, so if anyone is interested in joining the Witch Rangers, please see me after dinner!"

The boys and girls walked side-by-side down a long white corridor which had photographs hanging on the wall. Some were of Charmbridge Academy and its grounds, apparently taken at various stages in the school's history, while others were of groups of students and faculty. In all of the pictures, people moved and talked, and some of them even turned to wave at the students walking past. They passed under a particularly severe-looking warlock whose portrait hung above an arch with Greek letters carved into it: ΔΔΚΤ. "Delta Delta Kappa Tau" was inscribed in English below them.

"Boys' dorms are downstairs, girls' upstairs," said the two Ranger guides, and Alexandra and David waved to each other as they were separated, and Alexandra followed the girls upstairs.

The dorm rooms turned out to be rather small, with two girls to a room, and two rooms to a suite, which included little else besides a bathroom and a common storage area.

Marguerite informed the girls that they could choose any unoccupied bed, which led to a great deal of scurrying up and down the hall, and a buzz of conversation, as those girls who didn't already have a friend they planned to share a room with hurriedly tried to work out who they wanted as a roommate... or who they didn't. No one approached Alexandra, so she just marched forward looking through open doors for a room that was empty. She passed Constance and Forbearance standing in one doorway. The Ozarker girls smiled demurely at her, and Alexandra greeted them, but since they had their own room, she moved on. She paused when she saw Anna Chu sitting at a desk, her back to the door and her red

cloak hanging on her chair behind her. The other bed in her room was unoccupied.

"Hi," Alexandra said. "Do you have a roommate yet?"

Anna turned around, looking shy. "No," she replied.

Alexandra stepped through the door and shrugged her bookbag off and dropped it on the empty bed. "Is it okay if I'm your roommate?"

Although she knew she wasn't really giving Anna much choice, she was glad when the other girl smiled and said, "Sure."

Since Alexandra didn't have much baggage, having lost most of it in the Invisible Bridge accident (which she spent a few minutes telling Anna about), it didn't take her long to put away the few books and clothes she had remaining. She saw Anna's Great Horned Owl sitting on a perch next to an open window looking out over Charmbridge's grounds, and wondered if Charlie would be able to find her here.

Anna followed her gaze and must have known what she was thinking. "I'm sure Charlie will come back," she said. "Once the Engorgement Charm wears off. How did you do that, anyway?"

"I just made up a rhyme, and waved my wand. I didn't really have much time to think about it."

"Made up a rhyme?" Anna looked puzzled. "You need to pronounce the correct incantation to make a charm work."

Alexandra shrugged. She had never learned any incantations, and right now, didn't really care how she'd cast her spell.

In the next room, they heard excited chatter, giggling, and then a familiar voice saying, "What a dump!" followed by Angelique snapping, "Shut up, Honey!" Anna and Alexandra looked at each other with similar expressions. It seemed that Darla and Angelique would be their suitemates.

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Marguerite the Witch Ranger led all the sixth graders to the cafeteria, where long tables were lined up in neat rows from the outward-facing windows to the inner wall. This was the first time Alexandra had seen the entire student body of Charmbridge Academy together in one place, and the echoes of hundreds of conversation was a dull roar filling the room. The cafeteria was enormous, larger than most gymnasiums, and the dozen tables arrayed in front of the serving lines each looked like they could accommodate nearly a hundred people. It appeared that students generally sat with their own year, though there was some mingling going on. The tables were already set with plates of bread, bowls of soup, and other appetizers, but there were long lines of students streaming past the serving counters to get their meals, trays floating magically in front of them.

Alexandra noticed immediately that with the exception of a few supervisors, most of the servers were clockwork golems. They ladled out stew, carved roast beef, and dished up potatoes and vegetables with stiff, mechanical motions, yet they never spilled or dropped anything. There were smaller golems walking back and forth from the kitchens, carrying more bread and soup. Trays flew on their own back to the kitchen, loaded with dirty dishes.

Alexandra stood in line with a floating tray, asked the brass golem behind the counter for mashed potatoes and peppermeat gravy, and watched with interest as it whirled into gear, dishing up a large serving for her. It also added an unasked-for serving of peas and carrots. She overheard some older students speculating as to how much the new golem serving staff had cost. "My father says all this modernization is going too far," one boy said. "He says it's more like 'Muggleization.' What's wrong with house-elves? We never had to stand in line for meals when they were serving food!"

Alexandra walked back to her table. She had been sitting with Anna, Darla, and Angelique, and now Constance, Forbearance, and David had joined them.

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"I suppose Clockworks are adequate servants," Darla said, with a sniff. "But they're so cold and impersonal."

"I agree," said Angelique. "At Baleswood, they have house-elves doing all the work. They cook and wash dishes and even clean your rooms for you. You wouldn't think Dean Grimm would allow herself to be pressured by those silly ASPEW people."

David was frowning. "What's ASPEW?"

"The American Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare," said Anna.

"House-elves are those little guys we saw in Chicago, right? The ones who were following some wizards around dressed in rags, like slaves?"

"Yes," Anna said nervously.

Darla didn't notice David's reaction. "House-elves have served wizards for centuries," Darla said as if this were simply a natural fact. "They like it, it's their purpose in life – what?" she broke off, as she'd finally noticed David's ugly expression.

He glowered at her, and then turned to look at Angelique. "Are you listening to this?" he demanded.

Angelique shifted uncomfortably. "House-elves aren't like humans," she said. "They're a magical race. They've been enchanted to serve. If you ask one, it will tell you it *wants* to have a wizarding family to look after."

David was staring at her. "That's what they used to say about *us*!"

"Us?" Angelique blinked. Alexandra wondered if she was being deliberately obtuse.

"What, you think because you're a witch no one sees color?" David asked.

"Oh, don't talk like a Muggle," said Darla. "We don't have those kinds of problems in the wizarding world."

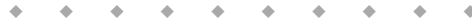
David narrowed his eyes. "Really?" he said slowly.

Everyone was uncomfortable now, and they ate in silence, until Anna said, "There's probably a student's ASPEW chapter here."

David looked at her. "Maybe I'll check it out."

"Me too," said Alexandra.

"Me too," said Anna, after a pause.



Back in their dorm room, Anna told Alexandra, "I don't really know much about ASPEW. My family has never had house-elves. Nowadays it's only the old Colonial families that do... or new wizarding families who want to imitate old Colonial traditions. That's what my father says."

"Are these old Colonial families the same ones who care about whether you're a pureblood or not?" Alexandra asked.

Anna pursed her lips. "Some, probably."

Anna's owl suddenly hooted and flapped its wings excitedly, and then a normal-sized raven came through the window and landed on Alexandra's desk.

"Charlie!" she exclaimed. Her heart leaped, and it soared higher when she saw what was clutched in the raven's beak.

"My locket!" She reached out and tried to take it from the bird, but Charlie tugged back hard, making a cracking sound deep in its throat.

"All right," she said. "You can keep it... for now."

Charlie seemed perfectly content not having a cage, and sat on a second perch above the window. Anna told her that there was an aviary in the school, but they could keep their familiars in their rooms if they chose.

Anna put on a nightdress. Alexandra had only shorts and a tank top to wear to bed, and looked glumly at the few clothes she had remaining that hadn't fallen into the valley. She noticed that Anna's owl was now hooting as it gazed out the window, while Charlie seemed to be trying to go to sleep, and kept opening one eye to glare at the owl. It also kept the locket clutched in one talon. Alexandra wanted to try opening the locket again, now that she was on school grounds and had a wand, but she was tired. She also didn't want to fight with Charlie. She put the bracelet around her wrist, however, and slid under the covers.

"G'night," she said, and Anna said good-night back. Charlie made a soft sound deep in his throat, and Anna's owl, with a hoot, took off through the open window to do a night's hunting.



The next morning was rather frantic, as Alexandra had not gone to much effort to sort and put away her clothes the previous night. She also discovered that sharing a bathroom with Darla and Angelique was going to be problematic. Both girls spent what seemed like ages brushing their air and making up their faces.

"My mother wouldn't even allow me to wear make-up," Anna said.

"Would you want to?" Alexandra asked, her face scornful.

Anna shrugged. "Not really." She sighed as Angelique finally exited the suite's shared bathroom. "But my mother would really have a cow if I did."

Anna's mother, Alexandra thought, must have had a cow when she found out Anna was a witch. But at least she knew, unlike Alexandra's mother.

She was still buttoning her jacket as she hurried down the hall with Anna. The sixth graders were now streaming towards the cafeteria along with all the other students. This time, however, no one was waiting in line to be served by the clockwork golems. Instead, sizzling griddles and trays lined their tables, producing stacks of pancakes and waffles, and piles of sausages, eggs, and bacon, while pots bubbled full of grits and oatmeal. These, along with pitchers of milk and orange juice, appeared to magically replenish themselves. Alexandra helped herself, while watching the kids around her to see if there were any rituals or dining customs she was missing.

"You saw our SPAWNs are this morning on the bulletin board, right?" David asked, sitting down opposite her and Anna.

"What bulletin board?" Alexandra asked, and was annoyed at David's exasperated look.

"Every hall has a bulletin board. You passed right by it on the way to the cafeteria."

Alexandra hadn't noticed, and was a little disgruntled that neither Anna, Darla, nor Angelique had mentioned a bulletin board to her, though she knew it was really her own fault for not paying attention.

"After the assembly," David continued, popping a sausage link into his mouth. "We have to take our SPAWNs so they can place us."

Alexandra wasn't normally made nervous by tests, because she didn't normally care much about them. She was, however, annoyed that she was going to be tested on something she'd never been told about or given a chance to study for. Darla saw her expression and said, "Don't worry, it's just to place you correctly. A lot of students need remedial instruction, especially when they come from Muggle households." Her voice trailed off at Alexandra's look.

Alexandra thought that though Darla had probably meant that to be reassuring, she was still awfully smug.

As students finished eating, they rose from their tables and made their way, not to the internal corridor they'd arrived by, but through another set of doors that opened to the outside, or rather, the hub at the center of Charmbridge Academy. When Alexandra followed the rest of her grade into what

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turned out to be a very large courtyard surrounded on all sides by Charmbridge's wings, laid end-to-end, she saw that the building was not circular, but polygonal. She turned around in a circle and counted seven sides, before everyone was directed forward, through another set of large doors across the courtyard.

They were now entering an auditorium, but rather than the fold-up carpeted seats Alexandra was familiar with at her elementary school, Charmbridge's auditorium was an amphitheater consisting of row after row of plain wooden benches in concentric semi-circles, anchored to a stone floor that descended towards the stage in the center. It also seemed to her that this auditorium was too large to fit within one of the building's wings, and she wondered whether the same enchantment that made Charmbridge's short bus so large on the inside made the academy itself even larger than it appeared.

Hundreds of students took their seats, all wearing dark cloaks or jackets over the rest of their school-approved clothes. Each grade sat together, with the youngest closest to the stage, which meant Alexandra was in the second row from the front, seated between David and Anna.

There was a great deal of talking, which meant noise filled the amphitheater, until with a series of pops, a dozen adults appeared on the stage in front of them, including Ms. Grimm. Everyone instantly fell silent. Alexandra had never seen her grade school principal be so successful in immediately silencing a roomful of children.

Dean Grimm was dressed in a severe-looking dark suit with a knee-length skirt, making her the only faculty member before them who could have passed for a Muggle. Alexandra recognized Hephzibah Price, still dressed in black robes and conical hat, but the other six women and four men were unfamiliar. They were mostly wearing robes, though one of the women was actually wearing a hoop skirt, while another, who had a short haircut and a long scar across her face, was dressed entirely in black leather. One of the men was wearing a plaid kilt, another looked like a fur trapper, covered in pelts.

"Good morning, students, and welcome to a new year at Charmbridge Academy," said Ms. Grimm. Alexandra hadn't seen her pull out a wand or use the spell Mrs. Price had used last night, but the Dean's voice was amplified loudly enough to carry to the furthest row back. "Mr. Murphy, I'll see you afterwards about that jinx. Miss Batson, hand that mistletoe wand over to Mr. Journey, please." Alexandra twisted around to see Ben Journey, who was circling the auditorium, extending a hand to confiscate a wand from a tenth grade girl who looked horrified and embarrassed.

"Why'd she have her wand taken away?" Alexandra muttered to Anna.

"Mistletoe wands are illegal," Anna whispered, then squeaked as the Dean's gaze turned on them, though they'd been speaking very quietly under their breaths.

"Are you quite finished, Miss Quick and Miss Chu?" Grimm asked pleasantly, in a voice that boomed throughout the auditorium and caused all eyes to turn in their direction.

Anna swallowed and nodded, shaking. Alexandra just slumped in her seat and glowered at the Dean.

"Now then," Grimm continued. "Most of you should have received your class schedules already. There are lines outside the Vice Deans' offices every year, of students wishing to change their schedules, and I will remind you this year as I do every year that adjustments will be made only for valid academic reasons, *not* because you dislike a particular subject or teacher, or because you want to be in the same class as your friends."

The Dean went on for several minutes discussing school policies, sounding much like the principal of a normal school lecturing students on appropriate behavior, though a Muggle principal wouldn't have needed to go over cleaning up after familiars, leaving wands and potion supplies out, or which charms and enchantments were disallowed. Alexandra heard about something called the Glade which was off-

limits to everyone but juniors and seniors, and learned that sixth graders apparently had most of their day rigidly scheduled, with little room for deviation.

"I must also remind you that shamanism, mysticism, pagan rituals, and other forms of so-called wandless magic are strictly forbidden unless you have been granted a Cultural Practices Exemption by the Department of Magical Education," said Ms. Grimm. "Also note that voodoo remains classified a Dark Art by the Confederation Wizards' Congress. Every year some group of students forms a little coven to experiment with 'forbidden' magic, and every year someone winds up jinxed, cursed, or worse, and someone winds up expelled. Do not meddle with magic you don't understand. I assure you, whatever you've heard to the contrary, all of these 'native' or 'alternative' traditions are nothing more than crude approaches practiced by ancient cultures who had not yet refined the principles upon which modern magic is based."

Alexandra wondered if Ms. Grimm realized how curious she'd just made Alexandra and probably dozens of other kids about these forbidden practices.

"Finally," Grimm went on, "I know you have probably heard about the mishap at the Invisible Bridge yesterday." Alexandra felt eyes turning in her direction again.

"The bridge has been thoroughly inspected by wizards from the Department of Magical Transportation. They've determined that it is completely safe, but nonetheless, all of its enchantments have been have been reinforced. I can assure you, this was a fluke accident."

A fluke? Alexandra thought. She narrowed her eyes suspiciously at the Dean. She sure liked "assuring" people of things.

"With that, I shall turn this assembly over to Vice Dean Darren Ellis. And I sincerely hope to see none of you in my office this year, unless it is to be commended for making the Dean's List." Ms. Grimm's smile was shiver-inducing, and then she sat down, surrendering the podium to Mr. Ellis.

It was left to the Vice Dean to introduce the other faculty on the stage: Deans for each grade, the Dean of Academic Affairs, Department Heads, Counselors, and so on. Alexandra's attention span was being taxed by all the administrative rambling, and she could see that she was not the only student becoming restless. Ellis finally finished talking, and then students were told were rise and exit the amphitheater by grade level. They went in reverse order from how they'd entered, so Alexandra and her fellow sixth graders were left sitting the longest. Ms. Grimm disappeared with a pop soon after the seniors began filing out, followed by most of the other adults. Alexandra wondered when she would get to learn to appear and disappear like that.

Outside in the corridor again, one of the teachers who'd been on the stage called her name along with David's and several others. Alexandra only remembered her last name being Middle. She looked around to see the other students who were, presumably, from Muggle homes like herself. There were four besides her and David.

"Now, we'll be administering the SPAWN so that we can assess your level of magical education prior to arriving at Charmbridge," said Mrs. Middle, leading them down yet another corridor. She spoke in an officious, clipped tone. "The first part will be a written test. The second half will be a practical assessment of your magical skills. There's nothing to be worried about, this is only for placement purposes and has no bearing on your grades."

"Shouldn't we get a chance to study for it if we've never had any magical education before?" Alexandra asked. Mrs. Middle looked at her, nonplussed. "Why, that's the point of the SPAWN, dear, to determine how much you don't know."

Alexandra was tempted to tell Mrs. Middle that since she didn't know anything, it was pointless to measure it, but then decided that maybe she did know something after all. She had been doing magic

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since she was little, and she had read a lot about magical creatures, so perhaps she'd turn out to be naturally gifted.

The six of them were led into an empty classroom that was large enough for over fifty students, so they spaced themselves out, feeling rather solitary surrounded by empty desks. Middle gave each of them a writing quill and a roll of parchment. "You can begin when ready," she said. "No hurry, just do your best."

Alexandra unrolled the parchment, and began reading.

"*Sixth Grade Level Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding Knowledge*," said the parchment, and below that, "*Section One: Magical Theory*."

Any hopes Alexandra had that her "natural gifts" would help her on the SPAWN were quickly dispelled.

Magical Theory started out by asking her to match definitions for "Charm," "Jinx," "Hex," "Curse," "Enchantment," and "Spell." Alexandra had figured out from listening to the other kids that jinxes, hexes, and curses were bad, but beyond that could only guess which was which as they all seemed essentially the same to her. There were more matching and multiple choice questions, asking her to identify the critical components of a proper spell, the reasons why wands were necessary, what differentiated Muggles from wizards, things magic could not do, and so on. Alexandra guessed as best she could, but all of her information came from fairy tales and a few days of exposure to the wizarding world.

Next was "*Section Two: Alchemy and Herbology*." If she had been guessing before, she was now picking answers almost at random. She knew nothing about potions, elements, transmutations, or magical herbs. The only question she had a faint hope of getting right was one concerning the metals which could be used in cauldrons, and only because of visiting Grundy's during her shopping trip.

Alexandra was optimistic when she turned to "*Section Three: Arithnomancy, and Geomancy*," as she was pretty good at math, but this section was even worse. She had no idea what the magical properties of the numbers six, seven, or thirteen were, what shapes were most effective for warding against curses, or whether Roman or Arabic numerals were better for inscribing on gravestones.

In frustration, she turned to "*Section Four: Wizard History*." The history resembled nothing she had learned in school (and Alexandra had not been much interested in Muggle history in the first place). What were the names of the first four Colonial New World Territories? When was the Confederation Congress established? What caused the California Disunification, and which new Territories resulted? The Voodoo Wars and the Wizard Pow Wow of 1838 sounded interesting, but Alexandra knew nothing about them.

At the end of two hours, Mrs. Middle collected their parchments. Alexandra was feeling frustrated and aggrieved. She'd never particularly cared about tests in school, but she hated feeling ignorant. Middle told them that the practical portion of the SPAWN would be administered after lunch.

"I don't think there's anything *practical* about this stupid test!" Alexandra said to David, as they ate fried bread and chili in the cafeteria.

David shrugged. "I didn't think the Alchemy and Herbology part was too bad. I'm not sure if the wizards on the West Coast split California into two or three Territories, though. There wasn't much about that in my study guide."

Alexandra glowered at him, and finished her fried bread, trying to ignore Anna's pitying look.

When the sixth graders taking their SPAWNs returned from lunch, Mrs. Middle had been joined by three other teachers. Two of them had been among those seated at the podium with Ms. Grimm during the assembly, including the scary-looking woman in black leather. She squinted at each of the students

as if looking for some defect. Alexandra stared back at her unflinchingly, and was surprised when one corner of the woman's mouth twitched upwards, just for a moment.

"Each of you will meet individually with Mr. Grue, Mr. Hobbes, Mr. Newton, and Ms. Shirtliffe to demonstrate your knowledge of charms, transfigurations, alchemy, and basic magical defense. I assume you all have your wands with you, so –" She paused as Alexandra raised her hand. "Yes, Miss Quick?"

"If none of us is supposed to have ever used magic before, we just got our wands, and most of us grew up as Muggles, then how are we supposed to have learned any of that stuff?" Alexandra asked.

Middle smiled, though she looked a little thrown off. "Well, I'm sure you've done some magic growing up, that's what makes you a witch, after all! And children who've grown up in wizarding households usually get a basic education in spellcraft at home before they're sent off to school. Don't worry, Miss Quick, you won't be expected to know as much as other children. This is just a standardized test to establish a baseline."

Alexandra had heard that before, and it still sounded like officious grown-up talk for pointless testing. But she resolved that she would do as well as any of the other kids; she was tired of being treated as if having grown up "Muggle-born" were a handicap.

She took out her wand while she was waiting in line to see Mr. Grue. Hickory with chimaera hair, Mr. Finsterholz had said. It felt good in her hand, and she knew now what Constance and Forbearance had meant by knowing when a wand was right for her. But it was still a mysterious and untested instrument. She began rehearsing rhymes in her head, trying to guess what she might be asked to do. Transform animals? Start a fire? Make it rain? And "magical defense"? Did that mean she'd have to fight?

She was surprised when Mrs. Middle pulled her out of line and said, "You can go ahead and see Mr. Hobbes now, dear."

"I thought Mr. Grue was supposed to test me on alchemy," she said, looking at the other kids.

Mrs. Middle smiled benignly. "After reviewing your score on the alchemy section of the written test, it's apparent that won't be necessary."

Alexandra bit her tongue, but her expression was stormy as she shuffled through the door into an empty classroom. "*It's just as well,*" she thought, "*since my cauldron is still lying somewhere on the valley floor,*" but it was one thing to know she really didn't know anything, and another to be told that she was so unknowledgeable that they weren't even going to bother testing her.

Mr. Hobbes was an older man with frizzy white hair. He looked a bit like a mad scientist in green robes. Even his smile was eccentric, lopsided and showing too many teeth. "Alexandra... Quick, is it?" he asked, reading from a scroll. "Come in, come in!" He beckoned her further into the room. She saw that on the table in front of him was a glass of water, a rock, a stick, and a small white mouse in a glass cage.

"There's a good girl," he wheezed, as she walked over to stand on the other side of the table from him. "Now, don't worry a bit if you're not actually able to succeed at any of my simple tests. Transfigurations are very difficult, very difficult! One third of the sixth graders I test can't even manage a single-element inanimate-to-inanimate transfiguration."

"Oh," she said, not feeling reassured, and definitely not wanting to be in that one-third.

Hobbes pointed at the glass of water. "Let's start with a basic liquid transformation. Turn this glass of water into milk, if you would."

Compared to what Alexandra now knew was possible with magic, this seemed like a trivial test, but she'd never attempted anything like it before. She licked her lips, looking at the glass of water, and she was silent for several moments.

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"That's all right, my girl," Mr. Hobbes started to say, but she shook her head.

"No, wait, I can do it." She frowned in concentration and said:

"Water's cold and clear and cheap,

Turn to milk as white as sheep."

The glass of water clouded and turned white.

"Oh dear," tutted Mr. Hobbes, making a note on the parchment. Alexandra's triumphant smile faltered. "What's wrong?" she demanded. "I did it!"

"Yes, yes, certainly," he said, with the same soothing tone he'd used when he thought she wasn't even going to be able to attempt it. He waved his wand over the glass and the milk immediately turned clear again. "That wasn't really a *proper* transfiguration, but certainly you've demonstrated the raw ability."

Alexandra tried mentally transforming her face into stone so she wouldn't glower. How was it not a proper transfiguration if she transformed it? She waited for Mr. Hobbes to give her her next test. He pointed at the rock.

"I'd like you to transform this rock," he said, "into anything you please. A piece of candy, a dandelion, even a change of color if that's all you can manage. Now, if you can do something more impressive, such as, say, enlarging it or making it vanish... but almost no one your age is that accomplished, and you, ah –" he caught himself, because Alexandra *did* glower that time, but then he just smiled encouragingly. "Go ahead, whatever you can do, my girl."

She stared at the rock, and thought about all the things that rhymed with rock – lock, chalk, stalk, clock, sock – but then wondered if she'd get any credit if she transformed it with another rhyme. She took out her wand instead. If Mr. Hobbes could transform things just by waving his wand, then it was possible.

But she had no idea how. She imagined it turning into a mouse like the one in the cage, and waved her wand, but nothing happened. She screwed up her face in concentration. She'd turned cookies into worms without making a rhyme, but that had just sort of happened, like a lot of the spells she'd cast back home, and suddenly what came naturally without thought back in Larkin Mills seemed enormously difficult with a teacher watching her. Mentally, she begged, pleaded, and threatened the rock, but it remained unmoved and untransformed.

Alexandra would have stood there trying to transform it long past sunset, but Mr. Hobbes finally cleared his throat. "That's all right –"

"No! I can do it!" she insisted.

"Well, we don't have unlimited time," he said gently, and Alexandra snapped her wand in the rock's direction again in frustration, and it jumped and then a shower of rocks flew in all directions, bouncing off her and Mr. Hobbes, raining down on the table, knocking over the glass of water, and hitting the mouse's cage hard enough to crack the glass and send the poor creature running frantically around in circles.

Embarrassed, but relieved and proud at the same time, she looked up at the teacher. "There! See?"

"Mmm, hmm, yes," he mumbled, brushing a rock off his sleeve and then making a note on the parchment. "We're going to have to do something about that wild magic of yours. Unpredictable and uncontrolled transformations can be very dangerous, you know."

Alexandra bit her tongue and clenched her teeth, as he calmly waved his wand and conjured a small broom out of thin air, and directed it to sweep up the extra rocks. Then he righted the glass, refilled it with water, and repaired the mouse's cage, all with similar casual wand gestures.

He smiled at her. "Now, my girl, you're doing just fine, given your previous education."

She was becoming accustomed to feeling insulted by attempts to reassure her, so she just stewed

while Mr. Hobbes said, "Next, if you feel you're up to it, see if you can make this stick grow legs and walk."

Alexandra didn't waste time. She stared at the stick, and composed a silent rhyme in her head. But try as she might, waving her wand this way and that, it lay on the table motionless. She ignored Mr. Hobbes's several attempts to persuade her to desist, and finally he coughed and said, "For your final test, Miss Quick, I'd like you to transform the mouse."

She paused, but Mr. Hobbes misunderstood the reason. "Now, living creatures are the most difficult subjects to transform, so there's no need to exert yourself or spend too much time if it's too difficult."

"What if I hurt it?" she asked, looking at the mouse. Alexandra was neither squeamish nor particularly soft-hearted, but she'd never used her magic maliciously on animals before.

"Oh, I have a cage full of them!" Hobbes replied cheerfully, gesturing at a larger cage on the floor behind him, which Alexandra now saw was indeed full of more white mice just like the poor creature in front of her. "But don't worry, I can undo most damage you might do to it."

Alexandra sighed, and considered the mouse for a moment. Then she held out her wand over it. The mouse looked up at her. She waved the wand, but nothing happened.

"Guess I suck at transfiguration," she said, and dropped the wand back to her side.

"Tut, tut! Language, my girl! Don't feel bad, as I said -"

"Yeah, transformations are very difficult," she said, a little sullenly, thinking about all the transfigurations she'd accomplished in the past without knowing how difficult they were supposed to be. She looked at the mouse, which she had not even attempted to transform. "*I hope you appreciate it,*" she thought, but the mouse merely scampered about its cage, oblivious.

By now, Alexandra was wondering what they did with witches they decided were too "wild" or "uneducated." Would she be sent back home, or to one of those "day schools" she'd heard about? In the hallway, Mrs. Middle pointed her to the next room, where she was to be tested in charms by Mr. Newton.

Newton was much younger than Hobbes, though he had prematurely graying hair. He also wore large, thick spectacles, and he peered at Alexandra almost suspiciously. He had no props on the table in front of him, only a stack of parchments.

"Name?" he asked.

"Alexandra Quick," she replied.

He pulled a new sheet of parchment off the stack and scribbled on it, with a frown.

"Let me see your wand," he said.

She held it out to him, and he inspected it.

"Good." He handed it back to her. "Now, are there any charms in particular you have learned previously and might be capable of performing?" His quill hovered over the parchment.

"Well, I jumped off the roof of a house and landed without getting hurt, I've made birds and butterflies and chipmunks and plastic toys appear, I pushed a kid off the swingset once from across the playground, but he deserved it, I made my Splendid Stars Space Robot walk across my desk and jump off it, I open and close my bedroom window without getting out of bed, I can unlock doors, umm, I know I'm not supposed to," she added a bit sheepishly. "I tried making a computer give me a password but that just killed it. I turned cookies into worms but I guess that's transfiguration, and I don't know why that shouldn't count for the SPAWN. Oh, and I made a branch shoot fireballs. A wet branch! And I cast an Engorgement Charm on my raven."

It was a pretty impressive list, she thought, and surely Mr. Newton couldn't claim that all those spells didn't count, but he just frowned and scribbled a few words on his parchment. "Any standard, *approved*

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charms?" he repeated.

"Well, if we're underaged and been living with Muggles and haven't been in school before, then aren't all charms '*unapproved*'?" she replied crossly.

The teacher finally looked up at her. "Don't be smart, Miss Quick. All young wizards and witches can cast spontaneous charms even without education, but learning how to perform magic in a *consistent, reliable* fashion is why you're here."

Alexandra thought and said, "I know what a Confundus Charm is, and a Silencing Charm, and an Apportation Charm -"

"I didn't ask for a recital of charms you've *heard* of. Can you perform any of them?"

She thought back to the letter she'd received from Ms. Kennedy at the Trace Office. "I can do an Unlocking Charm." Then added, "And I did an Engorgement Charm too." That's what Anna had called it, anyway.

"Indeed?" He waved his wand, and suddenly a padlock appeared on his desk. "Please."

She pointed her wand at the lock.

*"This is something I know how
To do so padlock unlock now!"*

The padlock popped open. Mr. Newton frowned and scribbled on the parchment.

"What's the difference between using a rhyme and using Spanish or Italian or whatever you use for charms?" Alexandra demanded.

Mr. Newton looked up at her again. His eyes narrowed. "Most incantations are derived from Latin or Greek, and if you pay attention in your Magical Theory classes, Miss Quick, you will learn why true wizards use incantations that have been perfected for centuries, not doggerel verse." He gestured with his wand again, and this time a feather fluttered out of its tip and landed on his desk.

"Let's see how you do with a very simple charm that many students already know before coming to school. The incantation is *Wingardium Leviosa*. If performed correctly, you should be able to levitate this feather into the air. Like this." And Mr. Newton gestured with his wand and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!" and the feather rose straight into the air almost to the ceiling, and then gracefully fluttered back down to the desk.

Alexandra was sure she could do that with her usual method, and thought she might even be able to do it without saying anything, but apparently she was being tested on her ability to do "proper" charms. So she tried to move her wand exactly as Mr. Newton had done, and said, "Wingardium Leviosa!"

Nothing happened. Mr. Newton scribbled something on his parchment. "Too much emphasis on the first syllable and it's obvious you've never used a wand before. That's all right, Miss Quick. That's why we have remedial magic classes."

Alexandra was gaping at him, outraged, but Mr. Newton didn't seem to notice. He made a dismissive gesture, and said, "That will be all, Miss Quick."

She stomped out of the room, and almost ran into Mrs. Middle. "Finished already?" the teacher said, sounding surprised in a way that suggested that finishing so quickly wasn't a positive sign. "Well then, I don't believe there's anyone waiting yet to see Ms. Shirliffe. You can go get your Basic Magical Defense practical out of the way."

Alexandra stalked into the next classroom, already glowering, and stood in front of Ms. Shirliffe defiantly. Shirliffe wasn't as old as she'd first appeared, but her short, severe haircut and serious expression made her seem older. Her black leather jacket, jeans, and leather boots were incongruous at Charmbridge; she looked less like a witch than a biker. Alexandra noticed the teacher wore a pair of earrings set with blood-red stones.

Surprisingly, the teacher gave Alexandra an amused smile. She was leaning against the desk with her arms folded across her chest. Alexandra didn't see any props here either; in fact, there was no table to separate the teacher from the student being tested as there had been in the other two classrooms.

"Not having a good day?" she asked. "You're Alexandra Quick, right? The girl who fell from the Invisible Bridge."

"The bridge disappeared," Alexandra said. "And these tests are bogus!"

Shirtliffe arched an eyebrow. "Really?"

"I've done lots of magic!" Alexandra said heatedly. "I've even fought redcaps and a kappa, and when the Invisible Bridge *disappeared*, I saved myself and David by making Charlie, my raven, big enough to carry us! Mr. Hobbes said transfigurations like that are so difficult most students can't do them when they come here. But everyone keeps telling me I'm 'uneducated' and not casting 'proper' charms because they're not 'derived from Latin or Greek.' How about if you drop all the other sixth graders off the Invisible Bridge and see how many of them can save themselves? That would be a practical test!"

To Alexandra's amazement, Ms. Shirtliffe laughed. "Yes, I guess it would, but I don't think the parents would approve." She pulled out her wand. "Have you ever been jinxed, Alexandra?"

"Umm, no." Alexandra eyed the teacher's wand warily.

"λόζιγκας!" said Shirtliffe, flicking her wand, and Alexandra hiccuped violently. "Hey!" she exclaimed.

"Geeyuvlok!" Shirtliffe said, and this time her wand moved more lazily in a circle. Alexandra's mouth stretched open in an enormous, involuntary yawn. "Knock it off!" Alexandra protested.

"You were just bragging about fighting kappas and redcaps," Shirtliffe replied. "Surely you can deal with schoolyard jinxes?"

Worms, Alexandra thought, and pointed her wand at Ms. Shirtliffe. She poured all her concentration into the stream of worms she wanted to make pour out of the teacher's nose.

Shirtliffe held her wand up at an angle, and for a moment something twitched and roiled in the air, like a barely-visible squirming mass, and then it faded.

Shirtliffe smiled. "Hah! The best defense *is* a good offense," she said. "But most children learn basic counter-jinxes to deflect or reflect the jinxes their friends put on them. You've only learned how to go on the attack."

"I learned all by myself," Alexandra said. "And I've never been attacked with magic before. I'm tired of being told how much more I'd know if I'd grown up with wizards!"

"Well, it's true, you would have learned more growing up with wizards. But that doesn't mean you can't learn as well as any other student here." Shirtliffe pulled out a roll of parchment that had been tucked into her jacket, and instead of a quill, a fountain pen floated out and began writing on the parchment, without Shirtliffe holding it.

"That's it?" Alexandra protested. "Did I fail this test too? You hardly even tested me!"

"Who said you failed anything?"

Alexandra scowled. "All I get are stupid questions about things I don't know, then I do some magic and get told it's not the *right* magic. I hope this isn't how you usually teach."

Shirtliffe raised an eyebrow again. "Do you talk to your Muggle teachers like that?"

"Sometimes," Alexandra said, after a pause, and Shirtliffe laughed.

"I'll bet you do," she said. "And I suspect you're going to see more of Dean Grimm than you'd like."

"I've already seen more of Dean Grimm than I'd like," Alexandra muttered.

"Have you?" Shirtliffe replied. She grinned toothily. "Yes, you're definitely going to be one of those students every teacher knows by name in a hurry. I look forward to seeing you in class, Alexandra."

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Alexandra wasn't sure what to make of Ms. Shirtliffe, and wasn't sure if she was looking forward to seeing her in class. She shuffled out of the room, and saw that all the other students were in line to see one of the four testers. She was the first one done.

"How was it, dear?" asked Mrs. Middle, ambling over with her hands clasped at her waist and a fatuous smile on her face.

"A waste of time!" Alexandra proclaimed. Middle's smile faltered.

"Why, Miss Quick, how else can we know where to place you if we don't test what you know?"

"But you already know I don't know anything! So what's the point? You just give me stupid tests you know I'm going to fail!"

Middle frowned. "But it's a *standardized* test, dear," she said, very slowly, as if Alexandra's comprehension abilities were uncertain. "That's the point, you see."

Alexandra didn't see the point at all. Middle, nonplussed, conjured a hall pass and sent her to the library, telling her to return to the study lounge in Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall by four-thirty.

The Charmbridge library was enormous. Like other spaces Alexandra had seen, the inside of the library was much larger than it seemed from outside. In particular, its shelves stretched up to head-craning heights, which should have put it well into the third floor of the halls above and maybe through the roof of the building. Alexandra also noticed, as she walked around the library, that different sections had different views out the windows. The desks closest to the main entrance were beneath windows looking into Charmbridge's interior courtyard, and opposite them, across the library, were windows on the other side with a view of the vast grassy lawn that stretched to the woods surrounding the academy. But when she went between the stacks in the "History and Social Wizardry" section and emerged into a somewhat smaller study area with fewer desks, the windows had less light pouring through them, because outside was a dark, tangled forest that didn't look at all like the woods Alexandra had seen on her way from the Invisible Bridge.

She wandered around, looking at the bookshelves. Most of the books were wizardry-related. The categories dividing the rows bore no resemblance to the Dewey Decimal System the Larkin Mills Elementary School librarian had spent one tedious afternoon explaining to the fourth grade. However, in a section titled "Muggle Literature," Alexandra found an assortment of books and magazines that seemed to have been culled from Muggle libraries. Alexandra pulled a few off the shelf at random, and discovered that that was how they seemed to have been shelved – at random. Or if there was any order to them, she couldn't figure it out. A high school science textbook from 1963 was surrounded by paperback romance novels, and there was a pile of fishing magazines next to a volume of the complete works of Shakespeare. They all had a musty, unread smell.

She shoved the science textbook back onto the shelf, and went looking for the librarian. She found a stocky woman with pale yellowish-gray hair tied up in an enormous bun, pushing a cart at a clockwork golem. "You can't sort books by *color*!" she said disgustedly. She swished her wand back and forth, and labels appeared on each book. "Just put each one on the shelf according to its label," she sighed. "And pull the labels off first!" The golem jerked backwards, pulling the cart with it.

"Awful, just awful!" the librarian moaned. "They can manage well enough at cooking and cleaning, but Clockworks don't belong in libraries! They don't even understand books, let alone appreciate them!"

"Then why use one?" Alexandra asked.

"It's all that nonsense from ASPEW. They've been pressuring us to stop using elves altogether, but the Dean reached some sort of compromise with them. So now our library elves have to stay out of sight during normal library hours!"

“You have elves who work in the library?”

The librarian looked close to tears. “Poor Bran and Poe are only allowed to work in the library when you children aren't here. Of course they've always stayed out of sight, but now they have to do nothing for most of the day! It's awful for them, simply awful!”

Alexandra considered that, and then the librarian wiped at her eyes and sniffed. “What can I do for you, dear?”

“Well, actually, I wanted to find out how you find things here, and how to check books out.”

Alexandra started to tell her she was Muggle-born, but then decided not to. Surely even kids from wizarding homes didn't automatically know how to use a wizarding library.

The librarian brightened. Alexandra read her name from a plate on her desk: Mrs. Minder. She seemed genuinely pleased to have a student wanting to know more about the library. In short order, Alexandra had a library card, and had been taught how to use the Card Catalog, which was a tall, polished wooden cabinet with dozens of little drawers, each full of small white cards.

“It's only as helpful as your instructions,” Mrs. Minder said. “If you say something vague like 'Quodpot,' you're going to get a whole flock of cards that you have to narrow down.”

Alexandra faced the Card Catalog, and said, “Books about kappas and redcaps in America.”

At Alexandra's words, half a dozen drawers opened and closed, and several cards flew out of them and fluttered in front of her nose.

“Why, I don't believe there are any kappas in America,” said Mrs. Minder. “They're Japanese water demons, if I recall.”

“Yeah, so I've heard,” said Alexandra. She was reading the titles of the books and tapped two with her wand. Immediately those cards began flying off towards the shelves, while the Card Catalog opened its drawers and the remaining cards flew back inside.

“Thanks, Mrs. Minder!” she said, and ran off after the cards.

“Don't run in the library, Miss Quick,” Mrs. Minder called after her.



Alexandra spent the rest of the afternoon in the library, reading about kappas and redcaps and other magical beasts. There was no explanation for how a kappa could have found itself in Old Larkin Pond, though; the only kappas previously seen in the United States had been brought to the West Coast by some Japanese wizards in the 1930s, and by 1950 it was thought the Department of Magical Wildlife had rounded them all up and either disposed of them or shipped them back to Japan.

It was past four-thirty when Alexandra realized she was supposed to have returned to the study lounge, so she hastily stacked her books on a table and ran out of the library, down the halls, past the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall beneath the scowling wizard, who looked particularly disapproving as Alexandra sped past below him, and into the study lounge she'd been told was where sixth graders came to do their homework. She saw that all the other sixth graders who'd taken the SPAWN with her were already there. Mrs. Middle frowned at Alexandra as she took a seat at the end. “Four thirty means four thirty, not four forty, Miss Quick,” she said. She cleared her throat.

“As I was saying: your teachers and the Vice Dean will be scoring your SPAWNs now. There are only a few of you, and we need to give you your class schedules, so they should be done by dinnertime. Thus, you will all return here after dinner to receive the results of your SPAWN and your schedules for the coming year.”

Alexandra walked with David to the cafeteria. “Where did you go when you finished your test?” she asked.

“Outside. They've got a bunch of athletic fields, and some wicked broom games,” David replied. “I

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think I'm gonna try out for Quodpot. I wish they had Muggle sports, though."

"I was in the library. It's huge! You know, they have elves who work in the library too. Mrs. Minder, the librarian, says they *like* working here."

David glared at her. "Sure, slaves *love* being slaves. That what you learned in your history classes?"

"I'm just saying... well, house-elves aren't exactly human, are they? Maybe it's not quite the same. I mean, you wouldn't call those clockwork golems slaves, would you?"

"Those golems aren't *alive*!" David snapped. "They don't have feelings. They're just a bunch of metal parts held together by magic. You want to tell yourself house-elves don't mind being slaves 'cause they're not human, go ahead! I'll bet your great-great-great-grandfather said the same thing about mine!"

"I just meant –" Alexandra paused, as David angrily picked up his pace, leaving her behind. She sighed. She wasn't sure David was right, and she wasn't sure he was wrong.

By the time she caught up to him in the cafeteria, he was seated at another table, talking to some older students. The group he was mingling with was multiracial, a striking contrast to Charmbridge Academy overall, which was, she realized suddenly, awfully white. Larkin Mills was not exactly a diverse town, but there were many more blacks, Hispanics, Asians, and other minorities at her elementary school than she had seen here.

"David hasn't been here for a week and he's already associating with radicals," said Angelique.

"Really, I don't see why just because someone is Muggle-born they have to make a fuss about it. We're all equal."

"Really?" Alexandra said. She had heard this often enough that its repetition was making her skeptical.

"So how did your SPAWN go?" Anna asked, obviously trying to change the subject.

Alexandra shrugged. "I don't know Latin or Greek. I'll bet I can do magic as well as any of you, but since I haven't learned the *proper* incantations, they said something about remedial classes."

Anna, Darla, and Angelique all looked at her with exactly the sort of pitying expression she hated.

"I'll bet they do that with all Muggle-borns!" she said hotly.

"Well," Angelique said, and exchanged looks with Darla.

"Not really," Anna said quietly. "I mean, if you studied for the SPAWN beforehand..."

"I didn't have anything to study!" Alexandra said hotly. "I keep saying that! I didn't even get the study guide David had! How am I supposed to know... wingardium leviosa or whatever it is?"

Her plate rattled and shifted an inch in front of her.

"Well, that wasn't bad," Darla said, apparently trying to be placating. "I'm sure you'll learn it quickly and be out of remedial classes in no time." Her smug smile, however, made Alexandra want to levitate the plate into her face.

Alexandra ate the rest of her dinner in silence, listening to Darla and Angelique prattle on endlessly about classes, extracurricular activities, and boys. Anna was also quiet, but she usually was. After they finished, she caught up to David again as he was walking back to the sixth grade study lounge.

"Look," she said quickly, before he could cut her off or speed ahead. "I wasn't saying house-elves *aren't* enslaved or that it *isn't* wrong. I just meant, maybe you should actually *talk* to one before you assume you know how they really feel?"

He looked at her, and for a moment she thought he was just going to snort and turn his back on her again. Finally he said, "Maybe," grudgingly. "But do you think you can just go ask a slave 'Hey, do you like being enslaved?' and expect to get a straight answer? When you're one of the enslavers?"

She thought a moment, and said, "No, I guess not."

“You have any black friends back home?”

“Not really.”

“You think I'm making a big deal?”

She hesitated. “No. But I still want to *talk* to some elves.”

“Good luck with that. I hear the staff tries to keep them away from the students. Guess if they're not seen and not heard, no one has to think about them too much.”

They arrived at the lounge once more. Mrs. Middle was there, with a row of parchments lined up on a table. The students all sat down.

“When I call your names, please come forward and take your scroll, which has both your SPAWN results and your class schedule,” said Mrs. Middle. “And remember that the SPAWN is purely an evaluation tool. It says nothing about your intelligence or your desire to learn. It's only natural some of you will start out with certain... advantages others do not, but you will all be taught to the same standard here at Charmbridge, and we expect all of you to excel!”

David folded his arms and waited, stonily. Alexandra narrowed her eyes a little, unconvinced by Middle's cheery tone, and glanced at the other kids, most of whom were Muggle-born as well. They all looked nervous.

Middle began calling them forward, in alphabetical order by last name. When she got to “Quick,” Alexandra went to get her scroll and walked back to her seat without looking at it.

“Well?” David demanded.

She frowned at him, and opened her scroll while turning towards him so he couldn't see it.

Sixth Grade Level Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge

Assessee: Alexandra Octavia Quick

Academic Assessment

Section One: Magical Theory	H
Section Two: Alchemy and Herbology	M
Section Three: Arithnomancy and Geomancy	M
Section Four: Wizard History	M

Practical Assessment

Transfigurations	U
Charms	U
Alchemy	H
Basic Magical Defense	A

Explanation of Scores:

Superior (S): Student performs one or more full levels above grade.

Excellent (E): Student performs above average grade level.

Average (A): Student performs at grade level.

Underperformer (U): Student performs below average grade level.

Hocus Pocus (H): Student possesses only rudimentary knowledge or ability.

Muggle (M): Student shows no discernible knowledge or ability. (Squib testing recommended.)

Alexandra wanted to crumple the parchment up and throw it away, though she was pleased that at

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least Ms. Shirtliffe hadn't rated her badly.

"It's stupid for them to test us on things we haven't even started learning yet," she said to David, but then David was being called up to receive his results. When he returned, he opened it and his face fell.

"See?" she said. "Of course we'll score the same as a Muggle when we've lived as Muggles all our lives!"

He looked at her. "You got Muggle scores?"

She flushed slightly. "Only for history," she said quickly. "I mean, I didn't have your study guide to read."

"You had the books you bought at Boxley's," he said, then shrugged as Alexandra glared at him.

"Anyway, I guess two remedial classes for a Muggle-born aren't that bad," he said, pronouncing "Muggle-born" with the same distaste Alexandra felt for the phrase. She looked at the second slip of parchment rolled up with her SPAWN results, which had her class schedule:

Basic Charms (Remedial level)

Basic Transfiguration (Remedial level)

Basic Alchemy (Remedial level)

Basic Principles of Magic (Remedial level)

Wizarding World History (Remedial level)

Practical Magical Exercise

"How many remedials did you get?" David asked.

"A couple," she mumbled.

"I've never really practiced charms or transfigurations," he said, "so I guess it won't be too bad learning the basics."

"Haven't you been doing magic since you were little?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, "though I didn't know it was magic until we got the owl from Charmbridge. Me and my parents just thought I was incredibly lucky. I mean, I never realized I was actually *making* things happen."

Alexandra wondered about that as they walked back to their dorms. There was obviously a big difference in how she and David had experienced their magical gifts. He had used his magic unconsciously; it had never occurred to him he was a wizard. She had known at a young age what she was doing, and as far as she was concerned, she'd been learning spells for years, even if they weren't what the Charmbridge teachers considered "proper" spells. Yet David had obviously scored better than her on the SPAWN. She didn't think that made him a better wizard, especially since he'd had a study guide and she hadn't. Who had saved whom at the Invisible Bridge?

The unfairness rankled, as did the constant reminders that being Muggle-born was supposed to be a disadvantage. When Anna asked about her scores and what classes she was taking, Alexandra gave her a scathing look and then said haughtily, "I think standardized tests for witches are stupid! If you ever get attacked by redcaps, they're not going to ask what you scored in Magical Theory on your SPAWN!"

"Attacked by redcaps?" Anna repeated.

Charlie made a harsh croaking sound, and Alexandra held out her hand. The raven flapped over to land on her wrist and peck at the bracelet around it. She smoothly reached out and snatched her locket, and Charlie cawed indignantly.

"If I can outthink a kappa, I can outthink you, birdbrain," she said, in the same haughty tone, but then her face broke out into a smile she couldn't help, and she stroked the raven's feathers

Remedial Magic

affectionately. Charlie only seemed slightly mollified, but allowed her to continue the petting.

Anna just looked at Alexandra, with an odd expression. She didn't ask her anything more that night.

Remedial classes indeed! Alexandra went to bed still simmering, with both indignation and determination. The next morning, she rose with a chip on her shoulder and something to prove, and went to breakfast prepared to show her classmates, her teachers, and even Dean Grimm that there was nothing “rudimentary” or “remedial” about her.

“We’re already in enough trouble,” mumbled Anna.

them all a stern look as they entered the school's office, and pointed to a hard wooden bench. "Wait there, please," she said. While she was very severe-looking with a sour countenance, Alexandra guessed that the portrait had been painted much earlier than 1932, since Miss Marmsley didn't look nearly one-hundred and eighteen years old.

They all sat down on the bench, opposite a heavy wooden door with a brass plate on it that said "Dean's Office." On either side of the door were more paintings, but these had no people in them; they were mostly landscapes, though Alexandra recognized the Academy building in a couple of them.

They sat quietly for five minutes. Then Alexandra realized Anna was crying.

"Hey," she said. She put an arm around her roommate, a little awkwardly. "C'mon. Haven't you ever been in trouble before?"

"No!" Anna whispered. "When my father finds out, he might make me go back to San Francisco!"

"Ssh!" said Miss Marmsley, suddenly appearing in what had been a painting of a copse of woods opposite them.

Alexandra waited until the woman had slipped out of the woods and back to her own portrait, and said, "Look, I'll tell Ms. Grimm it was all me and David's fault –"

"Hey!" said David.

"All of you be quiet!" snapped the secretary, returning to scowl at them from the nearest painting.

After she'd disappeared again, Anna said in a very low voice, "You don't seem to think this is a big deal, Alexandra. Being sent to the Dean's office *is* a big deal! It'll go on our *permanent record*!"

"It's no trifling matter," whispered Constance.

"Our parents barely agreed to let us come to Charmbridge," Forbearance whispered. Alexandra realized the twins were barely holding back tears as well.

The Dean's door opened. Benjamin and Mordecai Rash emerged, both looking sullen and red-faced. Following them was the boy whom Alexandra had brawled with. She had never caught his name. He had curly black hair and didn't look like an Ozarker. All three of them gave Alexandra venomous looks, but none of them said a word as they skulked past, out of the office. Constance and Forbearance both looked down rather than meet any of the boys' eyes.

The Dean's door swung shut without giving Alexandra even a glimpse inside. The silence that followed was even more ominous, but Anna continued to tremble, with tears running down her cheeks. Constance and Forbearance had their heads together and were holding one another's hands. David had slumped on the bench, folding his arms across his chest and staring at the opposite wall, but his tapping foot betrayed his nervousness.

Alexandra stood up and walked over to the Dean's door and knocked on it loudly. Anna gasped, the twins looked up with open mouths, and David hissed, "Are you crazy?"

Miss Marmsley appeared instantly in the painting nearest the door and said, "Young lady!"

Alexandra opened the door. Inside, Ms. Grimm was seated behind a large oak desk, signing something. She looked up with an expression of mingled irritation and amazement.

"Excuse me," Alexandra said, and she slipped inside and closed the door.

Outside, the secretary squawked in disbelief, and then Alexandra heard her voice coming from what appeared to be a much smaller picture frame sitting on the Dean's desk, facing her. "I'm sorry, Dean Grimm, I didn't expect her to – to simply barge into your office!"

Ms. Grimm nodded. "It's all right, Heather." Her voice was cool and unperturbed. "Tell the others to continue waiting."

Other than the nod, the Dean had barely moved a muscle since Alexandra had entered, except to turn her head very slightly. Now her eyes fixed on the girl like two slate-gray gun barrels, and Alexandra

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could almost feel a chill settle around her.

“Well, Miss Quick,” said Ms. Grimm softly. “You must be in a very great hurry to leave Charmbridge Academy.”

Alexandra swallowed, then said, “No, not really.” And added, “Ms. Grimm.” She squared her shoulders and faced the Dean across her imposing desk. There were portraits on the wall behind Ms. Grimm, some of the Dean herself, some of other men and women, and together they made up quite an imposing wall of disapproval as they all scowled down at her over Ms. Grimm's shoulder.

“I just wanted to say, Anna and Constance and Forbearance, they're the other ones who got called to your office along with me and David, and they didn't do anything. They just happened to be sitting at the table when we got in the fight at Grundy's. Now they're sitting out there terrified that you're going to expel them or turn them into pigs or something, and they shouldn't be, so I figured if you're going to expel me anyway then how much more trouble can I be in if I decided not to make them wait any longer?”

She said that all in one breath of air, and then put her hands behind her back and shifted from one foot to the other, watching Ms. Grimm. The Dean's expression didn't change, and her eyes continued to reflect only coldness back at her.

Ms. Grimm didn't move or speak for several seconds, and Alexandra felt the silence stretching and testing her nerves. Her hands fidgeted a bit behind her back, but she didn't take her gaze away from the Dean's face. Finally Ms. Grimm set down the pen and folded her hands on her desk.

“Well, you've had an eventful past few days, haven't you?” she said conversationally. “Violating the rules against underage use of magic not twenty-four hours after I cautioned you not to, getting in a public brawl in Grundy's, and now invading my office because what you had to say was just *so very important* it couldn't wait until I was ready to talk to you.”

“I didn't like seeing Anna and Constance and Forbearance –”

“Yes, you were concerned for your friends. Admirable.” Ms. Grimm's voice was dry, devoid of any humor whatsoever. “Do you often find yourself worrying about the consequences of your actions to your friends only in retrospect, Miss Quick?”

Alexandra closed her mouth, feeling her face burning. But she didn't look away.

“So far you have violated the law and embarrassed this institution, and now you've shown great disrespect to me personally.” Alexandra didn't think it was possible for Ms. Grimm's voice to become colder, but it did, and she finally dropped her gaze.

“I didn't mean to disrespect you, Ms. Grimm,” she said. “I just –”

“Did whatever popped into your head without thinking about the consequences,” said Ms. Grimm. “I suspect you do that rather a lot.”

“Are you going to expel me?” Alexandra looked up at her again.

Ms. Grimm seemed to be considering. “Should I?”

Alexandra hated it when adults asked loaded questions like that.

“Well, if you do, you still shouldn't punish Anna or Constance or Forbearance. But you should definitely expel Benjamin and Mordecai Rash and that other boy along with me, since they called me and David Mudbloods.”

Ms. Grimm's eyes glinted. “And that excuses your behavior?”

“No,” Alexandra replied, after a pause. “Ma'am.”

Ms. Grimm was silent again, long enough to make Alexandra resume shifting from foot to foot, and wonder if the others outside were in an agony of suspense.

“Benjamin and Mordecai Rash and Larry Albo have received their punishments, including for the

use of derogatory language that goes against Charmbridge's non-discrimination policy," said Ms. Grimm at last. She regarded Alexandra impassively for a moment, and then picked up her wand and with a little wave, caused her office door to open.

"The rest of you, come inside, please," she said.

David, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance filed in, all looking extremely nervous. Anna was sniffing and wiping at her eyes.

"Miss Quick has taken responsibility for her part in the events at Grundy's," said Ms. Grimm, "and absolved the rest of you, except for Mr. Washington." She stared at David. He was less successful than Alexandra at holding the Dean's gaze, and he dropped his eyes after a moment.

"Do you agree that all the punishment should fall solely on Miss Quick and Mr. Washington?" she asked.

Alexandra wanted to open her mouth and protest that this was another unfair, loaded question, but for once, she managed to hold her tongue. Anna looked down, while Constance and Forbearance looked at each other.

"We should've tried to calm things down," Anna mumbled in a small voice, still trembling.

"It started over us to begin with," said Forbearance meekly, looking at the floor.

"If we'd simply done like our kin asked..." said Constance, just as meekly.

"That's where you're wrong," said Ms. Grimm briskly. "The Rashes had no business telling you whom to socialize with or where to sit, and they certainly had no business using hateful language. They did, however, admit their own responsibility in this shameful episode. Their accounts verify Miss Quick's assertion that the three of you played no material part in the brawl."

She looked at the three other girls reprovingly. "I do, however, expect all of you to do a better job in the future of being responsible classmates, particularly when it comes to helping students such as Mr. Washington and Miss Quick to learn the ways of the wizarding world."

Alexandra simmered some more. Ms. Grimm was making them responsible for her and David behaving!

"Yes, Dean Grimm," the other three girls all answered in unison, still looking down.

"You three may leave."

Anna, Constance, and Forbearance were still trembling a little as they filed out. David looked as if he were having trouble swallowing while he stood next to Alexandra. Ms. Grimm stared at them until the others had disappeared, then gestured with her wand again. Her office door closed with a bang that made David jump.

"You two..." Grimm rose from her seat, and though her massive desk was still between them, she seemed now to be impossibly tall, leaning across and over it and towering over them both, almost filling the room. "Someday, you will earn the right to consider yourselves full members of the wizarding world. Someday when you can behave like a witch and a wizard and not like *uncivilized savages*!" She glared at the two of them, and her voice was like a whip.

"You have powers the Muggle children you grew up with can only dream of. You were born to do great things, if you so choose. Behave again as you did in Grundy's, and you can return to Detroit, to Larkin Mills, and spend the rest of your lives regretting the opportunity you threw away."

Alexandra felt herself shrinking despite herself, beneath Ms. Grimm's scathing disapprobation. Part of her wanted to cry, to run away, or to beg for forgiveness. She had never felt so intimidated and ashamed before, not when sent to her principal's office for the fourth time in one month, not when her mother caught her going through her purse looking for evidence of her father, not when she put Archie's truck in reverse through the neighbors' garage. But she held her head up and though her eyes

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stung and her throat was a tiny knot, she didn't cry.

David was trembling and clenching his fists until his knuckles turned white. He looked like he might throw up.

Ms. Grimm's voice suddenly dropped back to its normal icy-calm intensity, and she sat down again. Her presence still filled the room, but no longer seemed to be suffocating them.

"You will both serve two weeks detention, write apologies to Grundy's Department Store, and an essay on the subject of how your behavior in public reflects upon Charmbridge Academy and why it is therefore doubly-imperative for Charmbridge students to conduct themselves like proper young witches and wizards. Your essays will be posted on the all-grades bulletin board."

Alexandra kept her face still to suppress a grimace. It could have been much worse, and as if reading her mind, Ms. Grimm added, "And just to be clear, you are getting off very lightly, owing to your recent traumatic experience at the Invisible Bridge."

"Yes, Ms. Grimm," Alexandra and David both said together.

"Now get out of my office!" she hissed. Her door opened without her looking up or touching her wand. "And collect your belongings from Miss Marmsley." David turned and hurried out. Alexandra followed him, measuring her steps with great effort. The Dean's office door slammed shut behind her.

"Man, she's scary!" whispered David, wiping his brow.

"Hm," Alexandra said, noncommittally.

In the office outside, Miss Marmsley looked down at them and then, with a disdainful sniff, pointed at a closet next to a desk with an ancient typewriter on it. Both desk and typewriter were covered in dust. "There are some things for you in Lost and Found," she said.

David walked over to the closet door hesitantly. Alexandra opened it. The closet inside was dark – in fact, Alexandra got the impression that it was yet another cavernous space larger on the inside than the outside, but they couldn't even see the walls or ceiling of the closet or anything beyond the light cast on the floor from the open door. Sitting on the floor were a stack of books, clothes, and two very battered cauldrons.

"Guess they picked our stuff up off the valley floor," David said. He picked up one of his books and grimaced. It was waterlogged and almost falling apart. Alexandra's books had fared no better. Her cauldron had a small concave indentation, but David's was cracked. They both scooped up the damp piles of clothes that had also been retrieved.

"Well, don't stand there talking!" said Miss Marmsley behind them. "Get on to class!"

Alexandra felt increasingly relieved the more distance she put between herself and the Dean's office.

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David and Alexandra didn't have a chance to talk to anyone else again until lunch. They had to go straight from the Dean's office to their first class, and since they were late, the teacher and everyone else stared at them when they walked into their Basic Charms class. They took their seats and shoved the piles of retrieved belongings they were carrying under their desks. Alexandra was disappointed but not surprised to see that the remedial Charms teacher was Mr. Newton. There were only four other students in the class, and all of them seemed bored and inattentive. Alexandra, however, was determined to get out of remedial classes as quickly as possible, so despite Mr. Newton's exasperated tone and patronizing repetition of every word and gesture, she paid close attention as he taught them the basics of wandwork. They didn't actually cast any spells that day, but spent the entire hour following along with the illustrations in their book as they learned the Six Basic Wand Movements and Seven Basic Wand Positions.

"When are we going to get to cast spells?" she asked David, as they walked to their next class, Basic

Transfigurations.

"I guess when Mr. Newton thinks we know the difference between a flick and a snap," David replied. Alexandra frowned, as it had been her whom Newton had accused of snapping her wand instead of flicking it.

Mr. Hobbes was the teacher in their next class, and as if to confirm his earlier claim that transfigurations were difficult, the remedial transfiguration class was much larger, with over a dozen students besides her and David. Some of them looked like older kids as well.

"Ah, Miss Quick, so nice to see you again, my girl, so nice indeed!"

While Mr. Hobbes was friendlier than Mr. Newton, Alexandra wasn't as enthusiastic to see him again. It seemed that most of the other students in the Remedial Transformations class were just plain dull. They spent some time trying to turn matchsticks into needles, and rocks into candy, and none of them were too successful. Alexandra was surprised at how patient Mr. Hobbes seemed to be. In her head, she composed several rhymes that she was pretty sure would effect the desired transformations, but she tried using only her wand. She got her rocks to change color at least, which was better than David could do.

Feeling a bit smug, she frowned when Hobbes then told them they'd spend the rest of the hour reviewing Militades's Elementary Transformations. She wanted to *do* magic, not read about it. At the end of the hour, Hobbes asked, "All right, who can tell me the four most elementary transformations and an example of each?"

Several students raised their hands. Alexandra didn't, but Hobbes called on her anyway.

"Inanimate to inanimate, like rocks to candy. Inanimate to animate, like a rock into a mouse. Animate to inanimate, like a bird into a music box. Animate to animate, like a fish into a cat," Alexandra said.

David looked at her with surprise.

"What?" she whispered.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to start *reading* your books," he whispered back. She glared at him.

Then the class period ended, and David said, "Well, Magical Theory's next."

Alexandra shuffled her feet. "Yeah. I guess I have a different schedule." She didn't want to admit that her next class was Remedial Alchemy. David had apparently scored well enough on his SPAWN that he'd be taking alchemy and magical theory and all the other classes with the rest of their grade.

He squinted at her, and she could tell he was wondering why she had a different schedule than him, since sixths weren't given any electives. "I'll see you at lunch," she said cheerfully, and walked away down the hall, brushing past several older students.

In Remedial Alchemy, Alexandra finally got to meet Mr. Grue. He was a very large man, wearing a thick black robe that looked almost like a cassock, and heavy black scaly gloves. Grizzled salt-and-pepper hair and a tangled black beard obscured most of his face, but what was visible of it – his bulbous nose, plump cheeks, and broad forehead – was covered in scars from blisters and burns.

He peered at Alexandra suspiciously, and looked at a scrap of parchment on his desk.

"Alexandra Quick?" he rumbled.

"Yeah," she said. There were nine other students, most of which she'd seen in one or both of her previous remedial classes. She took a seat next to a mousy-looking girl who hadn't spoken at all during Remedial Transfiguration.

"That's 'Yes, Mr. Grue!'" the teacher boomed.

Alexandra paused in pulling things out of her dented cauldron. "Yes, Mr. Grue," she muttered.

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He walked over and scowled at her cauldron. "That is not how you maintain your equipment, Miss Quick," he growled.

"It's how my equipment looks after falling half a mile," she retorted sullenly.

Grue's face seemed to swell up. "Did you sass back to your teachers in the Muggle world?"

"Sometimes," she said, knowing she shouldn't. Already everyone was staring at her, but she was annoyed at having been singled out immediately.

Grue leaned closer until she could smell his breath.

"Say something else insolent," he growled threateningly, in a low voice.

Alexandra said nothing, but didn't look away from Grue's bushy-browed stare. After a moment, he stood up, exhaling heavily, and told everyone to empty their cauldrons and open their textbooks, "Young Wands Teaching Series: Beginning Potions." Alexandra's was still wet and made a squelching sound as she slapped it open on her desk. Grue paused to stare at her again, and then began writing the same standard potion staples on the board that were listed on the first page of their books.

Lunch was after Grue's Remedial Alchemy class. Alexandra ran to her room to dump her cauldron and books, and noticed that Charlie had gone, though Anna's owl was still on its perch. She made sure the window was still open so the raven could return when it pleased, and then hurried on to the cafeteria.

The others were already at a table talking, but fell silent when Alexandra arrived, sitting between David and Anna.

"What?" she asked wearily, seeing everyone's eyes on her.

"I can't believe you just busted into Grimm's office like that," David said.

"I'll bet no one's ever done that before," Anna said.

Alexandra shrugged uncomfortably.

"You're lucky all you got was detention and an essay," Darla said from across the table. "You could have been expelled."

"Yeah, I keep hearing that," Alexandra replied.

"I think it was awful brave of her," said Constance quietly.

"Not very wise," said Forbearance.

"Ill-considered," Constance agreed.

"But brave," Forbearance repeated.

"*Bravery* doesn't impress Dean Grimm," sniffed Darla. "If you keep behaving like that –"

"Constance and Forbearance are right," Anna said. "It wasn't very smart, but she did it to save us from getting in trouble."

"She could have gotten you into more trouble," Darla pointed out.

David rolled his eyes.

"How were your remedial classes?" Angelique asked.

David shrugged, while Alexandra hastily shoved a some meatloaf into her mouth. "I'm sure I'll get the hang of all this wand stuff soon enough," David said.

"We can tutor you," said Anna. "We're supposed to help you, after all." She glanced at Constance and Forbearance, who nodded.

"I won't need tutoring," said Alexandra. "I'll be out of remedial classes in no time, you'll see."

She didn't notice the exasperated looks that the others exchanged as she swept up her books and said, "See you later!"



Basic Principles of Magic was taught by a phlegmatic wizard named Mr. Adams, who looked as

much like a pilgrim as any of the students Alexandra had seen. He wore black knee-length breeches, black stockings, black shoes, and a black coat over a white linen shirt that looked starched almost to inflexibility. He had a long nose that he wrinkled frequently when regarding his students, which was practically the only expression Alexandra saw on him. He had them open their books and take turns reading from it. It was, in fact, somewhat educational, as by the end of the class Alexandra knew a few more things about spells and wands and how magic was performed in the wizarding world, but she felt the pace had been unnecessarily slow and she thought she could have just as easily read everything herself in less time than they took in class. Mr. Adams would occasionally ask someone to repeat some fact read earlier, and when a student was caught daydreaming, he would wrinkle his nose and make the inattentive student read the entire passage over aloud.

Wizarding World History was taught by a very old witch named Ms. Grinder, who began by having them open their textbooks to the first chapter, as Mr. Adams had done. It was titled “Wizards and Warlocks in the Ancient World.”

Ms. Grinder cleared her throat, squinted at the title through a pair of thick glasses, and then declared, “Well, what do you think of that? Do you suppose there were no *witches* in the ancient world?”

Alexandra looked around at her classmates, who were mostly bored, though several looked confused.

“We’ve been using this same textbook for over twenty years!” Grinder exclaimed. “Every year I write a letter to the Department of Magical Education, and every year they foist this standardized collection of patriarchal fairy tales on us!”

Alexandra raised her hand, which was something she rarely did in school back home.

Grinder squinted at her, surprised. “Yes, Ms....?”

“Quick. Alexandra Quick. What’s ‘patriarchal’ mean?”

“It means that men think they invented everything, discovered everything, and did everything that was ever important in the world!” sneered Grinder. “Oh, we always hear about Paracelsus and Ptolemy and Hermes Trismegistus and for Goddess’s sake Merlin, Merlin, *Merlin*! As if Thetis and Circe and Morgana and Nimue were just bit players in magical history! I’ll bet none of you have ever even heard of Himiko, Groa, Nadia of Wallachia, or Elizabeth Bathory? Not that Elizabeth Bathory was a particularly nice person, mind you...”

Alexandra thought all of these people sounded fascinating, but she didn’t actually get to hear about any of them because Ms. Grinder just kept complaining about how sexist and out-of-date their textbooks were. While the teacher was going on about them, Alexandra paged through the book and saw some of the names Grinder had mentioned. Of course Alexandra had heard of Merlin, Morgan Le Fay, Nimue, and Circe, since she read lots of mythology, and was rather surprised to discover they were actually historical people.

Though Alexandra sympathized with Grinder’s point of view, when class ended she still wished they’d actually spent more time learning about famous wizards and witches.

Finally she had her first non-remedial class, Practical Magical Exercise. She arrived in a large room with a hard dirt floor in a wing of the academy separate from the other classrooms she’d been in. There were many more students here than in any of her other classes, and not just sixth graders. She saw some tall metal poles with hoops atop them, and a line of barrels, and several circles and rectangular dividers sunk into the dirt to mark out sections of the floor.

“Hi,” she said to David as she found him standing next to Constance and Forbearance. “This looks like a stable, kind of.” She gestured at the large wooden doors that she thought opened to the outside, though with Charmbridge Academy’s layout, she was not always certain exactly where she was facing relative to the outside.

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He nodded. "Practical Magical Exercise... I think we do activities like wizard sports and learning to ride brooms and things. Hey, what classes did you have if you weren't with us in Magical Theory, Alchemy, and Wizard Social Studies?"

"That must be the teacher!" Alexandra said, pointing at a short, fat man nearly as rotund as a ball who was waddling towards them, his cloak dragging in the dirt behind him. He looked like a very unlikely teacher of sports or broom-riding, but he was a welcome distraction from David's query.

"Good afternoon, students," he wheezed. "I'm Mr. Bludgeleg. This hour will be devoted to practical magical exercises in a fun environment! Some of you may already be interested in team sports, or the ever-popular Dueling Club, and this class is where you may hone your skills in preparation for Quidditch and Quodpot tryouts next month."

After that, Bludgeleg sorted all the students according to grade level, and sent the sixth graders to join another young witch named Miss Gambola who looked barely older than Gwendolyn. Although they'd all been hoping to have broom lessons, they were instead told to stand in a circle around one of the rings embedded in the dirt floor, and the witch emptied a sack of balls onto the packed dirt. There were over a dozen, of varying sizes and colors, made of wood, metal, clay, and rubber.

"Plunkballs," groaned Darla.

"I'm sure many of you have played plunkballs at home," said Miss Gambola. "But it's an entirely different game when you use wands, and this is an opportunity to practice your wandwork."

"It's a *children's* game," Darla sniffed.

Despite Darla's discontent, the other children were enthusiastic enough about having something to actually use their wands on, and soon they were cheering as pairs or teams took up positions around the circle. From what Alexandra could gather, plunkballs was similar to marbles, except the players used magic to push the balls out of the circle while trying to prevent their opponent or opponents from doing the same. It soon developed that there were many byzantine rules about how and when a ball could be moved and how many points they were worth, and when other players could join in, and many rules seemed to be made up on the spot, causing arguments as intense as the plunkball conflict itself. Since most of them were new to using wands, their ability to magically push the balls around was limited. It was readily apparent that some kids were much better at it than others. Alexandra was pleased to discover that she could generate a fair amount of force compared to most of the other sixth graders, though her aim left something to be desired. She tried not to look pleased as well when Angelique was barely able to make even the smallest, lightest rubber ball wobble. After that, Angelique joined Darla in standing apart from the circle, aloof and chattering about much more *interesting* and *mature* topics than some *silly children's game* (as they repeated several times, loudly).

Alexandra was now paired with David, who was doing fairly well though he didn't seem to have Alexandra's flair for plunking the balls, but when Constance and Forbearance stood across the circle from them, they found themselves staring in amazement as the Ozarker twins began plunking, spinning, and bouncing the balls in every direction with deft flicks of their wands. They soon cleared the circle, then turned bright red as everyone cheered.

"You two are awesome!" exclaimed Alexandra, running around the circle to congratulate them. Alexandra was fiercely competitive, but she was not by nature a sore loser. The twins blushed even more.

"Oh, please don't much over us so!" Constance said.

"It's unseemly," said Forbearance.

"Most Ozarker children play plunkballs," Constance explained.

"We'uns passed many hours playing one another," Forbearance nodded.

"Since ever we was little," Constance added.

"Well, you should join the gobstones club," said another kid.

Constance and Forbearance both wrinkled their noses in dismay. "Gobstones is a horrible game!" they exclaimed.

"It's vile!" said Constance.

"Disgusting!" said Forbearance.

"I don't blame you," sneered a familiar voice, loudly enough to silence the other kids. "Oh, you were talking about your two new remedial classmates, weren't you?"

Alexandra turned and saw Larry Albo, the curly-haired older boy she'd last seen exiting the Dean's office just that morning.

David tensed up and looked ready for another fight, while Anna looked nervously around and realized that Miss Gambola was with another group of students at another ring.

"Is it true that you're in *five* remedial classes, little m-" Larry said, lingering over the 'm' sound for a beat, just long enough to make them think he was going to say something else before he finished it with "Miss Quick?" He shook his head. "I've heard that Muggle-borns tend to be a bit slower and less magical than the rest of us, but you must have set a new record for bottoming out in a SPAWN. Did you get anything above Hocus Pocus? Or was it all Muggles right down the line?"

"Take off!" barked David. He was practically quivering with fury.

Larry laughed, and looked down at the younger, smaller boy. "Or what?"

"Or you'll get in trouble with the Dean again," Anna squeaked.

"Or I'll get in trouble with the Dean again?" Larry repeated, in a falsetto imitation of Anna's voice, covering his mouth and raising his eyebrows in an expression of mock horror. Anna turned red.

Alexandra was already furious, and knew her face was turning red as well. Many of the other sixth graders had given her startled looks when Larry revealed her remedial class quotient, and she'd caught Darla hiding a little smirk out of the corner of her eye.

She stepped forward until she was chin-to-chest with Larry, and glowered up at him.

"Walk away now or I'll slug you," she said.

Larry smirked. "Want to go back to the Dean's office that badly?"

"No, do you? 'Cause if we do end up fighting again, you think the Dean is going to believe that it was all my fault? Whatever happens to me will happen to you too. I'm not afraid of the Dean. So go ahead, say something else. I'll bet I could beat you anyway."

Larry stared down at her. Alexandra's fists were balled up, her eyes were baleful and unblinking, as icy-green as a pair of emeralds, and he knew that she meant every word. That he was bigger than her didn't matter, that ending the day that had started in the Dean's office with another fight didn't matter. Alexandra wasn't bluffing and, at least at that particular moment, she didn't care about the consequences.

His mouth opened as if to snarl something, and Alexandra's voice had the same lethal calm of Ms. Grimm's when she said, "One more word."

Larry's eyes bulged a bit, and his face contorted with fury. More than anything else, he would have liked to finish what they started in Grundy's. But he could see that Miss Gambola was starting to come their way. Calling Alexandra's bluff would gain him nothing but a brief scuffle in front of another teacher.

And he *was* afraid of Dean Grimm.

He tried to tell himself he was taking the high ground, not lowering himself by letting the filthy little Mudblood girl drag him down to her level, as he spun around and stalked off, but with the eyes of most

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of the sixth grade on his back, and his own friends now watching his retreat as well, he knew that wasn't how everyone else saw it.

Alexandra felt everyone around her letting out a collective sigh of relief, but her face was still burning, and she was still half a heartbeat away from trying to send a plunkball flying after Larry Albo.

"Alex," David said, touching her arm.

She turned and looked at him, unnerved.

"Is there a problem?" Miss Gambola asked. Everyone mumbled in the negative and resumed playing plunkballs until the Practical Magical Exercise hour ended.

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It wasn't until David caught up to Alexandra and Anna, heading from their room to dinner, that he was able to talk to her again.

"Hey, Alexandra. You mad at me?"

She shook her head. "No. Why would I be?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. You seemed upset when I called you Alex. Sorry, you know, if you don't like that name."

She thought about it a moment.

"Only my mom calls me Alex," she said. "And my friends."

But what she was thinking was that only her mother and Brian and Bonnie called her Alex.

David hesitated. "Aren't we friends?"

Alexandra hesitated a moment too, and then smiled at him. "Yeah. Of course we are. You can call me Alex." She looked at Anna. "You too, Anna."

"Okay," said Anna seriously. But for just a moment, a pleased smile crossed her solemn face.

"We've got detention tonight with that dude Ben Journey," David sighed.

"I know. He calls me 'Starshine,'" said Alexandra, and they entered the cafeteria together. She was uncomfortably aware that many eyes were on her. The hateful gazes of Larry Albo and Benjamin and Mordecai Rash didn't bother her, but she supposed by now everyone knew that she was taking *five* remedial magic classes.

At their usual table, Darla only said, casually, "Well, I'm certainly glad you didn't manage to get yourself into any more trouble, Alexandra."

"You're getting quite a reputation," said Angelique.

Alexandra glared at her. "What do you mean, a reputation?"

"For being troublesome, I suppose," said Angelique.

"I'm not troublesome," said Alexandra. "I didn't start it."

"Troublesome often doesn't," said Constance, from a few seats down.

Alexandra looked at Constance in dismay. "You too?" The Ozarker girls were rarely so forthcoming with their opinions.

Constance blushed. "I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean that quite as it sounded."

"But you know, you *are* much like Troublesome," said Forbearance.

Alexandra frowned. "You make it sound like Troublesome is a person."

"She is," said Constance.

"Perhaps not a real person," said Forbearance.

"But famous in Ozarker lore," said Constance.

"A girl named Troublesome."

"Born to trouble and named for trouble, for trouble is what she is."

"No boy will court her."

Troublesome

“No man will marry her.”

“And wherever she goes, trouble follows.”

The twins were speaking in tangent, finishing each other's sentences as usual, but Alexandra interrupted. “Great. Like I want any boys courting me?” She snorted. “So does Troublesome always get blamed for trouble she didn't start?”

“Sometimes,” Forbearance said.

“Often,” Constance admitted.

“But she gets blamed for trouble she did start as well.”

“For she does start her fair piece of it.”

Alexandra was certain that Constance and Forbearance were both looking at her with something like amusement.

Constance said, “It's true, no one wants their daughter to *be* Troublesome.”

“But some say, there *has* to be a Troublesome,” Forbearance continued.

“Or there might be far worse.”

And to Alexandra's surprise, the twins began reciting what sounded like a children's rhyme, in unison.

*“Troublesome vexes, Troublesome woes,
Troublesome's trouble wherever she goes.
Troublesome's wicked, high-headed, and vain,
Troublesome's awful, a trial and a pain.
Troublesome's misery, misfortune and malady,
Troublesome's dangerous, doleful calamity.
Troublesome's reckless, ruthless, and bold,
Troublesome never minds, nor does as told.
Troublesome's stubborn, but brave as can be,
Troublesome stays when others would flee.
When trouble's afoot, and all ills are set free,
Troublesome's finally where she ought to be.”*

When they finished, there was silence, as everyone at their table had been listening, and several other tables were as well. A few kids clapped, some laughed sarcastically, and more fingers pointed in Alexandra's direction. Constance and Forbearance blushed, having once again brought attention to themselves.

Alexandra was a little indignant at first. It still sounded to her as if Troublesome got an undeservedly bad reputation. How could she not when she was given a name like that to begin with?

But from then on, the nickname followed Alexandra around. Darla and Angelique giggled as they used it, other kids called her that tauntingly in the hallways, and those sixth graders who'd seen her face down Larry Albo whispered it with both dismay and admiration behind her back. And Alexandra decided that as nicknames went, “Troublesome” wasn't really so bad.

Chapter 10 — Chicken

Detention with Mr. Journey turned out not to be so bad, although Alexandra grimaced a little every time he called her “Starshine,” and then glared at David, as he found it highly amusing. Much worse was the fact that she and David had to see the Rash twins and Larry Albo every evening, as they all arrived to serve their detentions.

Journey seemed to be the only custodian and groundskeeper for the entire academy, though as he explained to David and Alexandra, he got a lot of help. “Usually from misbehaving students,” he said with a wink.

But much of the work was also done by house-elves, or had been, until recently. Now, Clockworks did many of the routine chores such as dusting, sweeping, mopping, polishing, hauling trash, and cutting the grass on Charmbridge Academy's extensive lawns.

The metallic golems were not very smart, though, and Journey explained that while for certain routine tasks they could be left unsupervised, anything that might present a challenge either confused them enough to make them freeze up, or else they would continue doing what they were doing irrespective of the difficulty, often with disastrous results.

“Some kids like to leave Disappearing Stains and Apportating Puddles around when the Clockworks are cleaning,” Journey said. “The little fellers will chase them until their gears wear down if someone doesn't deal with that nonsense. They're also terrible at de-gnoming.”

“De-gnoming?” Alexandra was curious about this. She'd seen gnomes back in Larkin Mills, but had never considered trying to get rid of them.

“Don't worry, I won't make you do that. It's usually a job for some of the older kids. Clockworks are too slow to do it, and not smart enough. Never thought I'd be dealing with something that could be outsmarted by a gnome.” Journey chuckled.

“Neither did Troublesome's teachers,” whispered Larry, just low enough that the custodian didn't hear him. The Rash twins snickered.

“I thought jarveys are good at getting rid of gnomes,” said David. “That's what Angelique says.”

“I'm sure she'd like Honey to be good at something,” Alexandra snorted.

“Your mother would like you to be good at something,” Larry whispered. Alexandra turned on him with a murderous look, but he adopted an expression of studied interest in the clockwork golems as Journey marched them out.

“We don't use jarveys, not anymore,” said Journey.

Each of them was put in charge of a group of Clockworks. David was sent with his Clockworks to clean the cafeteria, while Alexandra supervised her cleaning golems as they scrubbed floors and walls in corridors outside the sixth's dorms. Albo and the Rash twins were sent to the aviary and the stables. This was how they spent each evening for the rest of the week, while the other kids changed out of their school clothes and went outside or to one of the student lounges.

Darla and Angelique waved, with sympathetic expressions, as they passed by. Constance and Forbearance nodded to her, looking guilty. Alexandra shrugged. Anna would come by to chat with her in the hallway, but one of the teachers patrolling the hallways usually chased her off, saying, “Miss Quick is serving detention, not socializing!”

Then there were the kids who smirked and said, “Make sure you don't miss that spot over there, Troublesome!”

After the first evening, it didn't bother Alexandra so much. No doubt having to stand there in full

view of the rest of the school was supposed to be part of her punishment, but soon it was more tedious than anything else. All she was really doing was watching Clockworks clean. The work was simple enough that she suspected they didn't really need her supervision. Only once did she have to direct one around an obstacle. Mostly she seemed to be there to prevent other students from messing with them.

By the time she returned to her room each evening, it was almost time for bed. She heard Darla and Angelique talking about wizard chess or Exploding Snap or musical wands, while Anna seemed to spend her evenings studying.

Alexandra had never spent much time studying, but she did read a lot, and her textbooks were as interesting as the books of mythology and fairy tales that she read at home. She also had a burning desire to escape her remedial magic classes and the stigma thereof. With this incentive, she actually did her homework diligently, and even read ahead in her textbooks. Her parents and her teachers back at Larkin Mills Elementary School would have been amazed.

It seemed to Alexandra that she was much smarter and more talented than the other kids in her classes, but she usually thought that in Larkin Mills as well – she just didn't care enough about grades or schoolwork to worry about it. Now she resented the fact that she was learning magic more slowly than if she were in a regular class. She was sure that even Mr. Hobbes, Mr. Newton, and Mr. Grue had to be noticing her efforts. She wasn't so sure about Ms. Grinder, who continued to go off on tangents in her Wizarding World History class, complaining about the Department of Magical Education, the Wizards' Congress, or the Governor-General, who was apparently an insufferable, hidebound, sexist pig.

In Practical Magical Exercise, they continued playing games that involved using their wands to move or transform things. Alexandra noticed that the older kids were often playing similar games, but with much more impressive results. She also heard a lot more talk about Quidditch and Quodpot. Team tryouts were in a couple of weeks. David was determined to go out for Quidditch, despite the fact that they wouldn't even be having their first broom lessons until Friday. Alexandra was uninterested in team sports until she found out that Quodpot involved an exploding ball.

At dinner, near the end of the week, she and David were talking about broom games. Benjamin and Mordecai Rash walked past and chanted in low voices:

*“Troublesome's wicked, high-headed, and vain,
Troublesome's awful, a trial and a pain.”*

Constance and Forbearance blushed and looked down as the Rash twins continued on to their table.

“We're plumb sorry,” Constance said quietly.

“It's all right,” Alexandra said, cutting them off before they could begin another back-and-forth volley of self-abasement and apologies.

“Why are you so interested in this Quidditch thing anyway?” Alexandra asked David. “Anna said it's mostly played in Europe.”

“It's played here too. It's just that Quodpot is more popular. Why are you so interested in Quodpot?”

“Because it has an exploding ball!” Alexandra replied enthusiastically.

“Do you even know the rules to Quodpot, or just that it has an exploding ball?” David asked sardonically. Angelique giggled a little, across the table.

“Quidditch sounds like a sissy game,” said Alexandra. “Who wants to chase a 'Golden Snitch'?”

David scowled. “Don't even start with me, Troublesome. And for your information, Quidditch is dangerous too. Players get chased around by these homicidal balls called Bludgers that come after you like guided missiles.”

“What's a missile?” asked Darla.

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"Like a cross between a Bludger and a Quod," said David. "They chase you and then explode."

"And Muggles play games with them?" Darla asked, sounding dubious.

Alexandra and David looked at each other, and shook their heads.

"You know," Darla said airily, "I'm not sure they even let students in remedial classes play team sports."

"Especially not if they're doing detention," Angelique said. "Nice essays, by the way." She giggled again. David and Alexandra both flushed.

Their essays on the importance of proper behavior for young wizards and witches had been posted on the bulletin boards in all the dormitory corridors for grades six through twelve, along with similar essays by Larry Albo and Benjamin and Mordecai Rash. Alexandra had had to "revise" hers several times. Her first draft had concluded with: "Even if some stupid arrogant jerk really, really deserves to have his face pounded in, it's wrong, especially in public, because even if it would teach the ugly, nasty, bad-smelling idiot a lesson, doing it front of witnesses is really stupid and also makes Charmbridge Academy look bad."

Miss Marmsley informed her that this was not quite the level of contrition the Dean was expecting, and it took several more tries before Alexandra's essay was deemed suitable.

"We'll be out of detention next week," said David, but he looked a little worried.

"And I'll be out of remedial classes soon," Alexandra declared confidently.

David looked at her, as surprised as the other kids, and demanded, "Says who?"

Alexandra shrugged. "I'll bet if I retook the SPAWN right now I'd score better. They can't make us stay in remedial classes forever, can they?"

"Only a Dean can get you out of remedial classes," said Anna.

"Then I'll ask the Dean," said Alexandra.

There was silence at the table, and then David chuckled. "Yeah, right."

Alexandra glared at him again.

"Oh, come on," David said. "There is no way you're going to go ask the Dean."

"Wanna bet?" she replied, defiantly.

"It's only been a week," said Darla. "You wouldn't dare go bother the Dean this soon, especially not now." She laughed, but the laugh turned uncertain when Alexandra fixed her gaze on the other girl.

"I'm not afraid of Ms. Grimm," Alexandra said.

"Everyone's afraid of Ms. Grimm," said Anna.

"I'm not!" Alexandra said.

"Yeah, right," snorted David, no doubt remembering their encounter in the Dean's office, when Ms. Grimm had loomed over them like an angry spirit of retribution, radiating thunderbolts and malice.

Alexandra's face turned stormy. It was a look Brian Seabury would have recognized.

"Okay, do it," David said. "Prove you're not chicken."

"Chicken?" Alexandra exclaimed angrily.

David sighed and shook his head. "I'm just kidding. Come on, you know --"

But Alexandra wasn't hearing any more. "Tomorrow," she said. "You just watch."

"Heck no I'm not going to watch!" David stared at her. "Don't be stupid, Alex. I was joking!"

"Why would she have to prove she's not a chicken?" asked Darla, confused. But Alexandra was already leaving the table, done with dinner and determined to spend what little time she had before they had to meet Ben Journey for detention studying her textbooks.

"Hard-headed," David sighed, shaking his head as they all watched her go.

"Troublesome," whispered Constance and Forbearance.



When Alexandra got to her room, she opened her desk to get out her textbooks and writing parchment, and immediately noticed something missing: the locket she had also left there.

“Charlie! Where’s my locket?” she demanded.

The raven cawed and flapped its wing, agitatedly.

Alexandra looked around and in and under the cage, and then searched the room she shared with Anna, and finally rounded on her familiar angrily. “I told you you could hold onto it, not hide it!” she said. “Now give it back!”

Charlie cawed again, this time with a more shrill and angry tone as it leaned forward, its beak jutting out at her.

Alexandra scowled, studying her desk and then looking back at Charlie. She hadn’t thought to lock her desk drawer, but she wasn’t sure if Charlie was actually strong enough to pull it open. On the other hand, she knew ravens were smart, and maybe Charlie was still a little stronger than normal after the charm she had cast at the Invisible Bridge.

“I *really* want my locket back, Charlie,” she said. “It’s one thing for you to play with it, but it’s important to me and you shouldn’t be stealing things from me.”

Charlie made a low, trilling sound, looking at Alexandra from a head tilted sideways.

She frowned unhappily. “I’d hate to have to start locking your cage,” she said, and carried her books out of her room, into the sixth grade lounge.

She was only able to read a chapter from “Beginning Potions” before it was time for detention. She ran back into her room, and noticed Charlie was gone when she tossed her books back into her desk, but so was the locket, still. Then she ran to Ben Journey’s office for that evening’s duty babysitting Clockworks.



Alexandra was the very model of diligence and attentiveness in her classes the next day. David said little but seemed bemused by her uncharacteristic placidity in remedial charms and transfiguration. After a week, Mr. Newton was still spending much of the class drilling them in basic wand positions and motions, but he was beginning to talk about incantations and promising that next week they might be permitted to actually cast a few spells.

Even Mr. Grue could find no fault either with her behavior or with her worksheets, on which she correctly listed the six ingredients found in all Sixth Grade-Level potions and the properties of eleven of them (one more than he had asked for). She was impatient, though, because they had yet to actually lay hands on anything but their books. Grue’s supplies cabinet remained locked and his cauldrons stayed cold and on the shelves during remedial alchemy class, though Alexandra knew from what David had told her that the regular sixth grade class was now actually mixing their first Minor Medical Tinctures.

Alexandra was still in a confident, cheery mood when she and the other sixthgrs gathered for Practical Magical Exercise. She saw that most of the students were gathered around a large bronze statue. It was towering over them all, and Alexandra thought the fat, bearded man looked familiar, then realized he was the same warlock whose portrait hung over the entrance to the Delta Delta Kappa Tau hallway.

Alexandra was surprised to see Ms. Shirtliffe as well. She hadn’t seen Shirtliffe since her SPAWN, and was not sure what class she actually taught.

Still clad in black leather, Shirtliffe smiled tightly at the gathered students.

“Good afternoon. I understand that you’ve spent this entire week playing games in which you practiced moving things. That’s good practice for today’s challenge, which is simple: move this statue.”

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"Is she kidding?" David murmured, looking up and down at the bronze statue, which must have weighed as much as a good-sized car.

"No, I am not kidding," Shirliffe said. David started, though Alexandra thought she might have been responding to the looks of disbelief and dismay reflected on many of the students' faces. "Of course I don't expect many of you to be able to move it at all, and I don't expect any of you to be able to move it very far. Even many juniors and seniors will have trouble with this task. However, it's good to take on a daunting challenge now and then. So everyone take a turn. There's no shame in failing, only in not trying."

One by one, the younger students, from grades six through eight, lined up and pointed their wands at the bronze statue. The seventh and eighth graders used incantations, trying to cast Hover or Lightening Charms, with very little effect, while the sixth graders, who had had little opportunity to learn many charms, mostly just concentrated and pointed their wands, with even less effect. Darla and Angelique gave up after a few moments. David concentrated until sweat broke out on his forehead, but the statue barely wobbled. Anna tried levitating the statue, and then uttered an incantation in Chinese. She was the most crestfallen of all at her failure.

Constance and Forbearance stood together in front of the statue and pointed their wands at the same time. "Levostatua!" they said in unison. Some of the older students had tried that incantation, and it seemed the Pritchards were imitating them, but the statue moved, just a couple of inches.

"Well done!" said Ms. Shirliffe.

"They cheated!" Larry protested. "It's supposed to be one at a time!"

"This isn't a contest, Albo," said Shirliffe. "Why don't you give it a shot?"

Alexandra smirked at him as Larry raised his wand. He spared her a sneer, and then said, "*Accio Statue!*" The bronze figure teetered a little in his direction, and then sunk back onto its base.

"Good thinking, Albo," said Shirliffe. He smiled, but failed to note the sarcastic tone of her voice. His smile faded when she went on. "Did you think about what would happen if that had actually worked? There's a reason why Summoning Charms aren't taught until ninth grade."

He slunk back into the crowd amidst nervous laughter. Next the Rash twins stepped forward, looking at Constance and Forbearance with irritation before raising their wands and bellowing at the top of their voices, "*LEVOSTATUA!*"

It wobbled, but didn't move. Constance and Forbearance looked away, their expressions carefully neutral. Alexandra laughed out loud, causing the Ozarker boys to turn in her direction, red-faced, still clutching their wands.

"Well, Quick, let's see what you can do, then," Ms. Shirliffe said sharply. The Rashes lowered their wands and stepped back, smirking.

Alexandra was conscious of everyone watching her as she looked up at the heavy bronze statue. She stared at it a moment, then raised her wand and said:

*"This big old statue weighs a ton,
Moving it is not much fun,
But it'll be easier when it's smaller,
So shrink until I'm much, much taller!"*

Everyone laughed, but many kids were startled when the statue actually shrank down to the height of Alexandra's knees. She stepped forward and picked it up, with some effort as it was still pretty heavy, and carried it over to Ms. Shirliffe.

"You didn't say *how* we had to move it," she said.

Ms. Shirliffe smiled thinly at her. "No, I didn't."

A lot of kids were still laughing, though. "She used doggerel verse!" someone said.

"That's baby magic!" said Larry.

Shirtliffe gestured with her wand, and levitated the statuette out of Alexandra's hands and back to its spot on the ground, then with another charm, restored it to its previous size. "Keep practicing!" she said to the other students.

"What's doggerel verse?" Alexandra asked Ms. Shirtliffe.

"Casting spells using an impromptu rhyme, as you did," said the teacher. "It's not usually done except by small children and the occasional uneducated hedge witch."

"I don't see why it's not proper magic if it worked!" Alexandra said, annoyed.

Shirtliffe looked down at her.

"Thinking outside the box, Quick, is a valuable talent," said the teacher. "And doggerel verse or not, that was quite impressive, especially at your age." She looked up and watched some more eighth graders trying to move the statue, succeeding in budging it a few more inches. "But as irritating as the drive towards 'standardization' may be, there are reasons for it. If you tried that same spell again, do you think it would work?"

Alexandra thought a moment, and said, "Probably not. I have to make up a new one each time I want to try to do something."

Shirtliffe nodded. "Maybe in a few more years when you're taking Advanced Magical Theory, you'll understand why. In any case, a properly-trained witch could move that statue with a word or two, rather than a nursery rhyme. And if you continue to rely on doggerel verse, it will become a crutch. Don't let me hear you using it again, or I'll make you write another essay."

Alexandra looked disgruntled as she rejoined her friends.

Anna looked sympathetic, rather than impressed. "You really don't want to be seen using doggerel verse. It's considered..."

"Low class," said Darla.

"Or babyish," said Angelique.

"What kind of a rhyme was that, anyway?" asked David.

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "You weren't complaining about my rhyming when it saved your life," she pointed out.

David actually looked abashed. "Yeah, that's true."

The class hour ended,. Normally this gave them a little time before dinner, but Alexandra hurried off in a different direction than towards Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall.

"Where are you going, Alex?" David called after her.

"To see Ms. Grimm!" She marched on towards the academic office, leaving her friends staring at her back.



Miss Marmsley was not amused. "Have you been sent here to be disciplined again already?" she demanded, from her portrait above Alexandra's head.

"No," said Alexandra. "I want to see Dean Grimm."

Miss Marmsley looked taken aback. "You *want* to see Dean Grimm? What for?"

"I want to talk to her about my classes." As Miss Marmsley stared down in disbelief, Alexandra straightened up and tried to look properly supplicating. "I mean, it doesn't have to be right now, Miss Marmsley. I could make an appointment."

"Of course it won't be right now!" snapped the secretary. "Surely you don't think you can expect to see the Dean at your convenience? But the Dean of the Academy does not get involved in individual

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student schedules. If you need to talk about your classes, then the Dean of your grade level is in charge of that. Are you *absolutely certain* you want to speak to Dean Price, young lady? If this is a waste of her time she is not going to be any more pleased than Dean Grimm would be!"

"I'm certain," Alexandra said.

Marmsley gave her a cross-eyed look from her position overhead, then sighed. "Very well." She turned towards the desk painted behind her, and opened a drawer to withdraw a scroll, which she unrolled and peered at, through her glasses. "Mrs. Price has Monday morning available. Be here after breakfast but before your first period class."

"Yes, Miss Marmsley," said Alexandra, and turned to head back for the dorms.

Anna was waiting, nervously.

"Relax," said Alexandra. "I made an appointment. Miss Marmsley wouldn't let me see Dean Grimm. She said I have to talk to Dean Price."

"Oh," said Anna, looking relieved.

Before they left for dinner, Charlie cawed at her. Alexandra noticed something sitting at the raven's feet. Her locket.

"Thanks, Charlie," said Alexandra. She reached for it, and this time Charlie didn't fight her for it as she took the locket away, though the bird's beady black eyes tracked the glittering gold piece greedily. Alexandra put the locket in her pocket. "Don't take things of mine anymore, okay?" Charlie made a raucous, ugly sound.



Technically, the detention Alexandra was serving with David, Larry, and the Rashes ended each evening when their designated areas were clean. For each of them it took about the same amount of time. But that night, Alexandra's Clockworks seemed to be slower than usual, and worse, their cleaning was haphazard. They left streaks on windows and dirty puddles on the floor, which they kept mopping over and over again to no avail. Alexandra tried to direct them to clean properly, and even took a mop into her own hands, which earned her extremely odd looks from passing students.

One thing Alexandra had noticed in her brief time at Charmbridge Academy was that wizard children didn't seem to do a lot of work, even to the extent of cleaning their own rooms. Apparently even in those wizarding households that didn't have elves or Clockworks, nearly everything was done with a wand and a few charms (usually by their mothers). Even Anna had looked at Alexandra like she was crazy when asked if they'd have to do their own laundry. Anna took it for granted that their dirty clothes would magically disappear from the hamper and magically reappear clean and folded in their dressers. Whether this was done by elves, Clockworks, or a laundry witch never even crossed the other girl's mind.

Now Alexandra was trying to help her Clockworks finish scrubbing Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, and after working for an hour, the walls and floors were still dingy and streaked. The time that they were normally finished came and went, and Alexandra feared she'd be there all night when Ben Journey finally came looking for her.

"Hey there, Starshine," he said kindly. "Your friends are all done. What's keeping you?"

"These stupid Clockworks aren't cleaning right!" she said. "They're just slapping the mops around and they keep forgetting to pour out the dirty water and get clean water, and it's taking forever!"

"The enchantments on these fellers sometimes need to be adjusted," Journey said. "And so do their gears. I'll take a look at 'em. In the meantime, no sense in you cleaning the same spot for the rest of the night." He winked at her and took out his wand, which was long and surprisingly slender.

"Scourgify!" he said, repeatedly pointing his wand at puddles and streaks and smears. They vanished

one by one.

Alexandra's mouth dropped open. "If you can just clean everything with a few spells, why do you need Clockworks?"

Journey chuckled. "Well, you can't expect me to spend all my time cleaning up after you kids. Besides, what else would misbehaving students have to do?" The hallway was now not exactly sparkling, but at least clean. "All right, you can run along now, Starshine. I'll take the Clockworks back where they belong."

"Thanks, Mr. Journey!" she said, waving to him as she returned to her room.

She spent the time she had left until lights out studying. Even Anna was impressed, as usually Alexandra was playing with Charlie (trying to teach the raven to talk) or reading about Quodpot or magical creatures while the other girl was studying. Alexandra was determined to be ready, once she persuaded Mrs. Price to let her retake the SPAWN.

However, the next day was Saturday, and unfortunately Alexandra's detention included the weekend. She was able to spend the first part of the day with David and Anna (Darla and Angelique were socializing with other, more popular children, and Constance and Forbearance rarely ventured into the common areas during non-study time), but after dinner she and David once again had to go collect their Clockworks and cleaning supplies, and scrub the halls and kitchen, respectively.

Alexandra noticed Larry and the Rashes smirking at her as she and her golems marched off. Larry in particular looked a little too smug.

That evening, cleaning Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall was again a nightmare. It seemed to Alexandra that the Clockworks were actually making it *dirtier*, and she spent all her time micromanaging what each one of the mechanical workers did, instead of leaning against a wall daydreaming as she usually did while the Clockworks cleaned.

Long past her usual finishing time, she saw Larry and the two Rashes stroll through the juncture at the end of the hallway, heading towards the seventh and eighth grade dorms. Larry paused to wave at her. "Have fun cleaning, Troublesome. We'll be thinking of you while we're enjoying the rest of the evening."

Then he looked around furtively, and seeing no one else was in sight, whipped out his wand and said, "*Creohumus!*"

Dirt sprayed from the end of his wand, and spread across the floor that Alexandra and her Clockworks had just, finally, cleaned. With a nasty laugh, Larry turned and hurried down the opposite corridor. Alexandra had her wand out, and would have cast a spell after him except that she found herself looking up at the stern warlock whose portrait hung over the opposite end of the hall. He was looking down at her disapprovingly.

"Did you see what he did?" she demanded.

"Obviously not, since you're facing *down* the corridor and I am facing in the opposite direction," the warlock intoned pompously. "But I can see what *you* were about to do. Is that proper behavior for a young witch?"

She gritted her teeth and put her wand away. Nearly an hour later, Journey came to to find her again.

"I think Larry and Benjamin and Mordecai sabotaged my Clockworks!" she said. She wasn't going to tattle about the shower of dirt, but having to work with cleaning golems that didn't clean was just unfair.

"I think that's unlikely, Starshine," said Journey slowly. "You don't think we thought about what kids might do with these fellers?" He chuckled. "I'm sure you'd enchant them to do all sorts of things if we didn't put protective charms on them. And tampering with a Clockwork isn't easy magic, anyway."

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They're awfully complicated. Heck, most wizards my age don't even understand 'em." He shook his head.

"But my Clockworks were working fine until last night!" she insisted. "They did something, I know it!"

"I'll check 'em out, but I think you'd be a lot better off if you let bygones be bygones," he said gently. "Wouldn't it be better to make friends with those boys instead of staying enemies? Wizards shouldn't be fighting other wizards, Starshine, not even at your age."

Alexandra nodded, but her face didn't do a good job of hiding her true thoughts. While Journey once again used his wand to clean up the mess, Alexandra watched silently, and plotted revenge.

Back in the room she shared with Anna, she told the other girl about her suspicions.

"Well, Mr. Journey is right," Anna said. "You have to be a Master Artificer to enchant a Clockwork properly. Larry Albo's only in the eighth grade, and the Rashes are just seventhers. I seriously doubt they're that good."

"They did *something*," Alexandra said stubbornly.

"Well," Anna said thoughtfully. She looked at Alexandra hesitantly.

"What?" Alexandra demanded.

Anna sighed. "Maybe they didn't put a hex on your golems, but on your mops and buckets and sponges," she said. "That wouldn't be so hard to do."

Alexandra's eyes widened. "That's it! That's what they did! I'm sure of it! Anna, you're a genius!"

"What are you going to do?" Anna asked nervously.

"I'm going to get even."

"Oh, I shouldn't have said anything!" Worry lines crossed Anna's face.

"Don't worry. I won't get in trouble," Alexandra said confidently.

"You always say that," Anna muttered.



Alexandra spent the first part of Sunday in the library. Mrs. Minder was surprised when Alexandra asked for books about artificing, but admitted they had a few. "I can't give you any books with actual enchantments," the librarian said. "You're not old enough. But we have some educational books about artificing." Mrs. Minder was delighted whenever a student was interested in some subject independently of his or her classwork, and it never occurred to her that Alexandra's motives might not be strictly educational.

Golems and Gears: The Enchantments that Will Revolutionize Our Future! was much less interesting than its cover promised. On the cover, a squad of Clockworks performed a complicated choreographed dance number. However, once Alexandra opened it, she found that the volume was practically a book-length advertisement for Tockmagi ® Clockwork Golems. There were a few chapters about the charms that were put on their gears and joints, and how the clockwork pieces were put together, but by the time came to serve her detention that evening, she hadn't found anything in the book to help her.

Larry, Benjamin, and Mordecai leered at Alexandra and David when they arrived.

"The sixth grade hallways are looking kind of *dirty*," Larry said.

"I wonder if they're as *muddy* as the kitchen floor," said Benjamin.

David growled, but Journey appeared with their Clockworks.

"All of your Clockworks have brand new cleaning supplies," he said mildly. "I wouldn't want anyone to have any trouble getting done on time."

Alexandra thought he gave a meaningful look to the three older boys, but they were unfazed, and she wondered why Journey didn't actually do anything if he had discovered that her mops and sponges

were jinxed.

Hardly anyone was in the hallways on Sunday evening. Alexandra was alone with her Clockworks. The only person to talk to was the old wizard's portrait hanging over the hallway entrance, and she didn't think she liked him much. So instead, she watched her Clockworks carefully as they cleaned. They seemed to be doing an adequate job.

Monday morning, she ate breakfast quickly. Anna looked worried, but Alexandra had made her promise not to tell anyone else about her appointment with the Sixth Grade Dean. "I'll see you in P.M.E.!" she said to her friends, and hurried to the administrative offices.

Dean Price's office was next to Dean Grimm's. Alexandra sat on the bench for several minutes, long enough to notice a black cat slinking down the hall from the outer office. Surprised, she leaned forward and reached her hand out to beckon to the cat, making a purring sound. The cat gave her the most disdainful look imaginable, and padded on past her, nose and tail held high.

Dean Price opened her door. She looked down her thin nose at Alexandra, then opened the door wider. "Come in, Miss Quick," she said curtly. As Alexandra entered her office, Price walked back around her desk and sat down. Unlike the head Dean's office, which had been neatly arranged and intimidating, Price's office was filled with cabinets stuffed with scrolls, her desk was overflowing with rolls of parchment, and the pictures on her walls appeared to be both family portraits and student and teacher group photos.

Price looked down at a roll of paper, and Alexandra saw "SPAWN Results" printed across the top. Then she looked up at Alexandra. "Well, why did you request to see me, Miss Quick?"

"I want to retake the SPAWN," Alexandra replied.

Price blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't think the first one was fair," Alexandra said, undaunted. "I wasn't given any study guide beforehand and I got a bad score for Alchemy when I didn't even take that test, and I got bad scores on Charms and Transfigurations even though I can charm and transform as well as any other sixth grader, just no one told me I'm not supposed to use 'doggerel verse.' So now I have *five* remedial classes!"

"The purpose of remedial classes is remediation," Price said, very slowly and deliberately. "It is not a punishment, Miss Quick."

"But I'm learning more slowly than if I were in a regular class!"

Price sighed. "Your SPAWN scores indicate that you're not prepared for regular classes –"

"How can they tell? It's a stupid test!"

"Do not interrupt me, young lady! And mind your tone! You've been at Charmbridge Academy for less than two weeks and already every teacher knows your name. That usually only happens when a student is either exceptionally gifted or exceptionally troublesome."

"Maybe I'm both," she said sullenly. She knew she should have kept her mouth shut, but the word "troublesome" provoked her.

Price's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Miss Quick," she said, "do you *enjoy* detention?"

"No, Mrs. Price," Alexandra muttered.

The Dean rolled up the SPAWN report. "We do not change schedules mid-semester except in exceptional cases, and none of your teachers have indicated to me that you're exceptional. You may retake the SPAWN when you return from Christmas vacation, before the beginning of the next semester."

Alexandra stood there a moment, and Price fixed her with a beady-eyed stare. "That will be all, Miss Quick. Don't be late to class."

"Yes, Mrs. Price," Alexandra said, barely audibly, and shuffled out of Price's office.

CHAPTER 10

Feeling defeated, she attended her classes that day with considerably less enthusiasm than she'd shown the previous week.

Practical Magical Exercise class was a welcome diversion, though. Miss Gambola and Ms. Shirliffe were both waiting for the sixth graders with a row of brooms. Everyone murmured excitedly.

"That's right, broom lessons begin today," said Ms. Shirliffe. "Let me remind you all that a broom is not a toy, and despite the safety and braking charms put on these training brooms, flying is an inherently risky activity. You will all do exactly as you're told, and no horseplay will be tolerated. Anyone violating these rules will be grounded for the rest of the semester at the very least."

Alexandra was as eager as anyone to begin flying. However, Shirliffe and Gambola spent most of the hour teaching them how brooms flew and how to control them, while the brooms themselves remaining tantalizing out of reach, sitting untouched on the rack.

Finally, with ten minutes left before the end of the period, the teachers allowed each student to take a broom off the rack, and get on them just long enough to rise a few feet into the air. Alexandra held on, letting her feet dangle loosely, and silently urged hers upwards and upwards, until Shirliffe saw her and snapped, "That's high enough, Quick!"

Although they were disappointed not to be able to zoom about as they could see some of the older kids doing, everyone was in high spirits when they left P.M.E., and David grumbled, "If we didn't have detention, we could practice after dinner."

Alexandra had other plans. She was still reading "Golems and Gears" in the little time she had between dinner and detention, and in the last part of the book she finally found a little bit of information about how Clockworks were given their orders. It was very vague, however. They weren't truly intelligent, and so could only obey commands that fell within the narrow range of orders they were enchanted to understand.

During her detention that night, she tried ordering her Clockworks to dance, and found they would do so, clumsily. The order "play dead" only made them stop moving entirely, while her attempts to stage kung fu battles between golems failed miserably; she had to give instructions for every step they took, and getting one to perform a kick only resulted in it falling over.

So it went for the rest of the week. Alexandra paid lackluster attention in class, except for P.M.E., in which they were finally allowed to take to the open air outside. Older kids were playing broom games, and David began imitating the maneuvers he saw the Quidditch players practicing. Alexandra felt quite comfortable on her broom, and chafed at the restrictions Ms. Shirliffe put on them, wanting to go higher and faster.

In detention each night, she continued experimenting with her Clockworks. She concluded that she didn't know enough about how their enchanted brains worked to accomplish the sabotage she had in mind... unless she cheated.

And so it was that Thursday evening, she arrived early to detention, early enough to find the waiting Clockworks before the custodian or any of the boys had arrived.

She remembered what Ms. Shirliffe had said about using a crutch, but she wasn't going to let the opportunity pass to get back at Larry Albo and the Rash twins. So she took out her wand, and held it in front of the row of Clockworks that would be going with the older boys to the stables.

*"There's dirty things for you to clean,
Here's the dirty things I mean:
Benjamin, Mordecai, and Larry,
Need a good scrubbing, make it scary!
Only when you're in the stables,*

*When they give orders, turn the tables,
Use every sponge and broom and mop,
Until they're begging for you to stop."*

She put away her wand quickly as she heard the boys arriving.

"I guess Troublesome thinks if she gets started early, she might actually finish by bedtime," Larry snorted.

"I think I'll be done before you tonight," she said.

"Yeah, right." He rolled his eyes. The twins and David were next to arrive, and then Ben Journey came into the storage room. "All ready and eager to get working?" he asked, eyes twinkling. "Only one more night, isn't that right, kids?"

"Yes, sir," they all replied.

Alexandra was whistling as she marched off with her Clockworks.

She really had no idea whether her charm would work. She knew her rhymes didn't always have the desired effect, and she had rarely used one so long and complicated. Still, she hoped at least Albo and the Rashes would suffer some inconvenience.

She got her answer when they all returned to the custodian's office that night. Larry, Benjamin, and Mordecai looked battered, bruised, and disheveled, not to mention soaking wet. They were glaring at their Clockworks, but those were nothing compared to the glares they gave Alexandra when she appeared. She smiled sweetly at them, while David just looked confused by their appearance.

When Journey came out of his office, he looked shocked.

"What in Merlin's name happened to you boys?" he exclaimed.

Alexandra and Larry made eye contact. She held his angry glare, looking back at him coolly and triumphantly.

"We had a fight," said Larry. "Over who was going to clean what."

"Fighting?" Journey raised an eyebrow, and shook his head. "You could get more detention for that, you know. I'm sorry to hear you fellers can't get along."

"We're fine now," said Larry. Benjamin and Mordecai nodded. Their gazes were fixed on Alexandra too.

"Well, that's good. Promise me you're going to remember we're all wizards here. And witches." He nodded to Alexandra. "We've got to get along. It's important to be unified. You understand what I'm saying?"

"Oh, we're unified," Larry growled.

"Good. No more of this squabbling. Last thing the wizarding world needs is more division." He smiled and waved good-night as they all departed from the maintenance corridor.

"Sentimental airy-fairy Radicalist!" Larry said contemptuously, under his breath.

Alexandra couldn't hide her pleased expression. David was looking at her suspiciously.

"You two Mudbloods are so dead!" Larry hissed.

Alexandra caught David before he could lunge at the older boy.

"You'd better watch that dirty mouth, or it might get washed out with soap," said Alexandra, and now Benjamin and Mordecai had to grab Larry as he lunged in her direction. She pulled David along with her down Delta Delta Kappa Tau hallway, leaving Larry and the Rashes glowering after them.

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David found Alexandra's sabotage hilarious. He went off to bed after she swore him to secrecy, but she immediately told Anna when she returned to her room. Anna was impressed and appalled.

"You can't enchant Clockworks to do that!" she exclaimed.

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"I guess I can," Alexandra retorted.

"If you keep using doggerel verse, you'll never learn proper charms," Anna scolded. "And if you keep doing things like that, you'll get in trouble again. Larry and his friends could have told on you!"

"Yeah, but then they'd be tattletales and they'd be admitting that I beat them," Alexandra replied, not a little smugly.

"So instead they're going to try to get even and you'll keep doing worse and worse things to each other. And what if the Clockworks had done something really bad? What if you got caught? Did you even think about what could have happened?"

Anna was concerned, but she sounded an awful lot like Brian, which made it hard for Alexandra to listen to her. The fact that she had a point was just more infuriating.

"What if you get caught? What if something happened? What if you get in trouble?" Alexandra mimicked Anna, waving her arms in the air in mock hysteria. "Do you ever do anything besides worry about what might happen? What if you do nothing but study all day and never take any chances and just worry about what your parents and your teachers will think and don't do anything when jerks pick on you?"

Anna looked hurt. Alexandra put her arms down, but it was too late.

"Well, then at least I won't be spending my sixth grade year taking remedial magic classes and doing detention," Anna said stiffly, and turned her back on Alexandra, climbing into bed without another word.

Alexandra got into bed herself, feeling angry and sad, but unwilling to apologize or admit that she was wrong.

She never *meant* to hurt her friends, but she was proud, and stubborn.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Anna still wasn't speaking to her the next morning, and Darla and Angelique, taking turns to use their shared bathroom, sensed the tension between them and asked what was wrong with very concerned voices. Anna and Alexandra both shrugged, and went to breakfast that way, indifferent and nonresponsive.

"What'd you do?" David whispered to Alexandra, in Remedial Charms.

"What do you mean, what did I do?" Alexandra whispered back.

"Why is Anna all upset?"

"She's too sensitive!" Alexandra scoffed. "All she could say after I told her about getting back at Larry and Benjamin and Mordecai was that I shouldn't do things like that and what if I get in trouble—" Her voice was rising as she imitated Anna's tone again, and Mr. Newton called on Alexandra to demonstrate the Seven Basic Wand Positions. David sighed and shook his head.

In P.M.E. class, they were allowed to do some free-flying for the first time, with Shirtliffe and Gambola watching them as they turned and spun and dived on their brooms.

Nearby, the juniors and seniors were playing Quodpot. Suddenly Anna cried out as Larry Albo swerved very close to her, causing her to flinch and nearly tumble off her broom.

Then the Rash twins shot past Alexandra, trying to cut so close to her that she would also jerk away and possibly lose her balance, but Alexandra merely sat on her broom without reacting or altering her course. She tracked them with her eyes as they wheeled around for another pass.

Larry seemed to be arrowing towards David now. Alexandra looked over her shoulder at Ms. Shirtliffe and Miss Gambola, but Shirtliffe was lecturing Anna on how to steady herself and Gambola was watching another group of fliers. Neither of them seemed to have noticed what Larry and the Rashes were doing. The boys were flying in a borderline-reckless manner, but just carefully enough

that it wasn't obvious that they were deliberately maneuvering too closely. Once again, someone could have called their behavior to the attention of a teacher, but they would have protested innocence, and while the teacher would probably have told them to fly further away, the complainer would look like a whiner and a tattletale. And so no one said anything.

But as the Rashes came closer, Alexandra swerved into the airspace occupied by the Quodpot players.

"Get out of the way!" one twelfth grade boy yelled at her. Alexandra seized the ball out of the air, and went veering back in the direction of the Rashes.

"Alexandra Quick!" bellowed Ms. Shirliffe. Alexandra ignored her. The Rashes had turned away from David now, and were watching her. Their expressions changed from loathing to alarm as she zoomed at them and hurled the Quod at Benjamin's head. He rolled and would have fallen off his own broom if his brother hadn't caught him, and the two of them dipped and angled away from the Quod just before it exploded.

Alexandra barely had time to see Larry coming at her before she dived out of his way. He spun about and came at her again. She took off across the field, with Larry in pursuit. Alexandra descended until her feet were almost dragging against the grass, laughing over her shoulder. She leaned forward and increased her speed. Larry did likewise.

Almost at the edge of the forest surrounding Charmbridge Academy, Alexandra pulled back hard on her broom handle. She felt the sudden deceleration pulling her backwards as her broom creaked and bent, while she made a hard hundred-and-eighty degree turn while simultaneously forcing herself forward on her perch to make the broom keep accelerating. Larry tried to imitate her, and almost went tumbling, but managed to stay on his broom.

"Chicken!" she yelled at him, and made a rude gesture before launching herself forward.

Yelling in fury, Larry dogged her tail as she closed on the Quidditch and Quodpot fields again. She was laughing gleefully, completely carried away by the thrill of eluding and bedeviling the other boy.

"I'm going to plow the lawn with you!" he yelled, yards behind her. Alexandra grinned, and saw the Quidditch players pausing to watch them. She also saw the Bludgers, the metal balls that chased the players, circling lazily looking for new targets. The Quidditch players started yelling at them now, but Alexandra ignored them, rose higher, and made directly for the Bludgers.

With Larry almost on her, he didn't see the Bludgers until one nearly took his head off. He yelped and rolled, while dipping in an upside-down position on his broom. Alexandra had to admit that he wasn't a bad flier. But now the Bludgers were chasing the two of them. Alexandra arced away from the field and Larry matched her trajectory.

"You crazy little brat!" he yelled at her.

"Chicken!" she yelled back.

The two of them were circling high above the ground now. The faces of the other kids and the teachers were just indistinct blurs. The Bludgers were still chasing them; there were no Quidditch Beaters to knock them away, as the Quidditch players were all watching the two younger students engaged in their aerial duel.

Larry had almost reached Alexandra again, but he was more concerned about the Bludgers that were hot on his tail than trying to grab her or her broom. Alexandra too had to stay alert and keep zig-zagging back and forth, as while they could keep ahead of the flying balls over the long haul, the Bludgers were capable of brief bursts of acceleration when they got too close to one of the fliers, during which time they could make a sudden attack capable of overtaking either one of them and knocking them off their brooms.

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"You're going to get us both killed! Or expelled," Larry gasped, as he finally pulled even with her.

"You started it," she retorted. A Bludger swooped at the two of them, and they both rolled aside. Alexandra began arcing downward and accelerating.

Larry followed her, as if he fell behind, the Bludgers would both focus on the nearer target.

Alexandra was descending at a steep angle, directly towards the ground outside the open doors of the P.M.E. gymnasium. Her speed increased, owing both to her constant forward lean and gravity. Larry had no choice but to match it, but his face became a little pale as he saw the speed at which the ground was approaching.

"We have to head towards the teachers, or the Beaters on the Quidditch team!" he yelled at her.

"Go ahead, chicken!" she yelled back at him.

Larry groaned, and held onto his broom.

Alexandra kept zooming towards the ground. Wind whipped through her hair and roared in her ears. She saw the terrified faces of her classmates, but they were just blurs, rapidly growing in size. The ground was getting closer and closer. She heard Shirliffe yelling at her, and Gambola too, sounding more like a scream, but couldn't make out what they were saying.

Larry's face was white. He wasn't sure how quickly his broom could stop or how sharply he could turn it at full speed. He looked over at Alexandra and saw nothing but fierce determination on her face. She was gripping her broom and leaning forward as if locked into that position, and despite the fact that they were seconds away from slamming into the ground hard enough to make craters in the packed dirt, there wasn't even a flicker of hesitation in her eyes.

Larry had no choice but to follow Alexandra into the ground or turn aside. With a curse, he chose the latter, and pulled back on his broom, braked, and caught a Bludger hard in the back.

In the corner of her eye, Alexandra saw Larry chicken out. The ground was a heartbeat away when she leveled off. A sudden swerve and deceleration at the angle she was descending would only have buried her in the dirt up to her waist, so instead she cut her descent to a sharp downward plane that carried her *into* the gymnasium, through the open doors, and by the time she had slowed down enough to get off her broom, she'd had to raise her feet and tuck her knees under her, sitting sideways on her broom with the ground almost scraping her knuckles. She came to a halt just before bumping into the far wall, and hopped off her broom.

There were cheers and applause from almost a hundred students, who'd seen Alexandra's daring flight, if not what had led up to it. But the cheering died abruptly when Ms. Shirliffe's amplified voice rang over the din.

"MISS QUICK! MISTER ALBO! GET OVER HERE!"

With students from all grades watching, Larry and Alexandra silently dragged their brooms to the angry flying instructor. Larry was limping a little and rubbing his lower back.

"Chicken," someone muttered as Larry trudged past, and laughter and snickering rippled through the crowd, much more than when someone whispered, "Troublesome" at Alexandra.

Ms. Shirliffe glared down at the two students, and seemed ready to launch into a long, angry tirade, but then she just shook her head and bit off whatever she was going to say with an audible clacking of her teeth. Instead, she pointed at the building behind them.

"Dean's. Office. Now."

Chapter 11 — Jinxed

Apparently there had been no time to convey what had happened to the Dean, as Miss Marmsley was aghast when Alexandra and Larry entered the administrative office. After they both offered a short, mumbled explanation, she simply pointed to the bench on which Alexandra and her friends had sat the last time they were waiting to see the Dean.

“And I don't want to hear a peep out of either of you!” she added, from her frame, as they trudged to the bench and sat down.

They sat silently for several long minutes, before Larry muttered, “Troublesome is right,” under his breath.

“You're blaming me?” she muttered back. “You started it.”

“You're insane.”

“You're stupid. And by the way, chicken!”

“Ssh!” Miss Marmsley hissed from the picture on the wall behind them. “I would think being in as much trouble as the two of you are you'd both know when to be quiet!”

The two of them sat silently for a minute, before Larry whispered, “What does that even mean?”

“What?” Alexandra asked.

“Chicken. Why do you keep calling me a chicken?”

Miss Marmsley appeared in the portrait in front of them this time. “I said be quiet!” she snapped.

They both sat up and stared straight ahead. Alexandra smirked as soon as the secretary disappeared again. She wiped the smirk off her face when the Dean's office door opened.

Ms. Grimm was sitting behind her desk. “Miss Quick, Mr. Albo. Enter.” Her voice sounded like ice cubes clinking together in a glass.

The two of them rose and walked slowly into the Dean's office. The door slammed shut behind them.

Dean Grimm wasn't looking at papers on her desk this time. She was leaning back in her chair with her fingers steepled together, her gray eyes cold and expressionless.

“Would you care to explain why the two of you have been sent to my office again?” she asked.

Simultaneously, Alexandra and Larry pointed at each other.

“It was his fault!”

“It was her fault!”

Grimm's eyes narrowed to slits. “I see.”

They both had just enough time to glare at each other, before the Dean pulled out her wand and gestured at them.

Alexandra felt the most peculiar sensation, as if her insides were sliding together, and her skin was suddenly scratchy and fuzzy. She felt her nose twitching, and then the Dean's desk rose over her head, towering above her like a skyscraper. She squeaked in surprise.

A giant hand descended from overhead, and Alexandra felt herself lifted from behind. Her feet scrambled wildly in the air as the Dean's office, enormously magnified, spun and whirled around her. She was deposited onto a vast, polished wooden plain, and looked around in alarm. The first thing she saw was a huge white rat, her own size, staring back at her.

“Apparently, I need to speak to Ms. Shirliffe and Miss Gambola to get the complete story.” The Dean's voice boomed so loudly it hurt Alexandra's ears. She could see the other rat's ears twitching as well. “So the two of you can remain right here.”

Alexandra felt dizzy. Then there was an ominous thump that caused the surface they were standing

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on to vibrate. She and the other rat looked up, to see a monstrous black cat staring down at them. It licked its lips.

"Galen will keep an eye on you. I suggest you remain on your best behavior."

They could feel her footsteps sending tremors that vibrated all the way up to the desktop on which they were standing as she walked away. The reopening and closing of the door send shock waves through the air that made the other rat jump into the air.

Alexandra looked at her fellow rat. While Larry appeared to be so terrified he could hardly move, Alexandra begin picking up her four feet and examining them, and then looked at her long hairless tail. It was an odd sensation to feel it scraping against Ms. Grimm's desk. She began walking around, and looked up at Galen.

The cat was staring down at her with a baleful, hungry expression.

Nice kitty, she thought, but all that came out was a squeak. The cat's ears flicked in her direction.

Alexandra was filled with annoyance and fascination. She wondered if the wizarding world didn't have laws against turning children into rats, but she thought turning into a rat at will might be kind of fun. And exploring her present situation, undignified as it was, allowed her to put off thinking about what would happen when the Dean returned.

Of course she knew Galen was supposed to scare them, but Alexandra mustered the same fearless stubbornness she brought to every dangerous situation, and refused to be intimidated. She simply didn't believe the Dean would feed students to her cat. And seeing how terrified Larry obviously was, Alexandra walked, somewhat clumsily, directly up to the cat until she was only inches from its nearest paw. She could hear Galen making a rumbling sound, and it extended its claws. They were each as long as one of Alexandra's rodent forelegs.

Alexandra looked up at the cat, and flicked her tail. Although her little rat-sized heart was beating wildly, she said, "You wouldn't dare eat me!" Of course the words didn't come out, only a defiant squeak, but the cat threw its head back and stared at her, astonished.

Alexandra slowly and deliberately turned her back on Galen, and flicked her tail insouciantly as she padded back to where Larry was still huddled, trembling and wide-eyed.

"Chicken!" she squeaked.

Larry looked at her and squeaked back, but she couldn't tell whether it was fear or anger.

Voices in the hallway indicated the Dean was returning. The door opened, and the muffled thunder of footsteps on carpet shook the desk beneath them again. Ms. Grimm grabbed Alexandra and Larry both by their tails and lifted them off her desk and dumped them unceremoniously on the floor.

The world shifted and shrank, and Alexandra was light-headed, as she found herself sitting next to Larry on the floor in front of the Dean's desk, back in human form. The two of them struggled to their feet. Alexandra touched her nose. It still felt twitchy. Larry looked a little sick.

"After what I've just heard, I was tempted to leave you as rats," Ms. Grimm said.

They faced the Dean silently. Ms. Grimm reached one hand out absently and stroked Galen's fur. The cat purred, while still staring at Alexandra.

"I am astonished," Grimm said. "Simply astonished. You two apparently require *special* disciplinary measures."

Alexandra and Larry both opened their mouths, but the Dean said, "Silence!" and produced her wand again. Their mouths snapped shut, and she laid her wand on her desk, then leaned back again in her chair.

"Your detentions are now extended until... oh, Thanksgiving."

Alexandra's eyes went wide. That was almost three months!

“You will of course apologize to Ms. Shirtliffe and Miss Gambola. You are both forbidden to ride a broom or participate in any sports for the rest of this semester.”

Larry looked even more sick. Alexandra's heart sank.

“The Rashes, and Mr. Washington, are also barred from brooms or sports as well.”

Alexandra gasped at this. “No! That's not fair!”

The Dean regarded her coldly. “Excuse me?” she asked, in an ominous near-whisper.

“David didn't do anything, Ms. Grimm! You can't punish him for what I did! Go ahead and expel me, but don't punish David!” Alexandra had wanted to play Quodpot, but it an impulsive desire. She knew that David really did have his heart set on playing Quidditch.

“My understanding is that the Rashes and Mr. Washington were peripheral players in this little fiasco, even if they were not the primary antagonists.” And Ms. Grimm smiled coldly. “But I am so pleased that I have finally discovered something that actually makes an impression on you, Alexandra. Apparently, despite your willingness to endanger your friends and drag them into trouble with you, it bothers you when they suffer as a result of your actions. Then know that from now on, I *will* hold your friends accountable for your misbehavior. When you do something wrong, it is not only you who will be punished for it. Spend some time thinking about what responsibility really means.”

Alexandra was staring at the Dean, open-mouthed. Grimm rose from her desk, holding her wand.

“And one final thing,” she said, and walked around to stand behind the two students. Alexandra and Larry both swallowed.

“I am placing a proximal transfiguration jinx on both of you,” she said quietly. She murmured something while waving her wand.

“As soon as you leave this office, if you come within ten feet of one another, you will both become rats. If either of you attempts to cast a spell on the other, the caster will become a rat. And any action, discussion, or plan to do mischief to the other will, I assure you, become evident. Stay completely away from each other and end this childish feud, now.”

“Yes, Ms. Grimm,” both of them murmured.

“Now get out of my office!”

They both started forward, reached the door, and almost went out the door together, before they stopped and looked at each other. Galen was watching them both with interest. Wordlessly, they both made as if to precede the other out into the corridor, but neither dared when the other could step out immediately behind the first and cause them both to become rats. Finally, Larry stepped back, and with an exaggerated, sarcastic bow and flourish, gestured for Alexandra to go first. Sneering, she did, but picked up her pace to hurry away from the Dean's office as quickly as she could. She didn't look back to see how much of a lead Larry gave her, but she made it back to her room without turning into a rat.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

She felt terrible. She didn't know when David would find out about how he was sharing her punishment, and she didn't know what she would say to him when he did.

She was sitting on her bed, with her back against the wall and her knees up against her chest. Charlie was sitting on her right knee, eating bits of bread that she was offering. Earlier the raven had tried playing with the bracelet still around Alexandra's wrist, but she pulled her wrist away and Charlie apparently sensed that she was in no mood to have ownership of the bracelet contested again.

The door to their room opened, and Anna walked in, carrying her bookbag. She looked at Alexandra, and walked over to her own bed and set down her bag.

“Did you get expelled?” she asked quietly.

“No,” Alexandra said. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

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Charlie screeched in her face, making her flinch, and then flapped over to the window and sat on the sill, back to Alexandra. She frowned and brushed crumbs off her knee.

Anna had her back to Alexandra also. She was opening her bookbag, taking books out, slowly. Without looking up, she said, in a soft, casual tone, "I think Charlie is saying you're being a jerk."

It was the quiet seriousness with which she said it that kept Alexandra from offering another sharp rebuke. That, and Charlie's soft cluck of agreement.

Anna shrugged off her red cloak, and laid it over her chair, then turned to face Alexandra.

"I worry about what might might happen when you do foolish things because you grew up with Muggles," she said. Alexandra opened her mouth, but Anna kept talking. "It's not just that you don't know the rules at Charmbridge, Alex. You don't understand the wizarding world. Dean Grimm told us we're responsible for you. And if you're going to refuse to think about what might happen..." Anna took a breath. "Then I guess your friends will have to."

Alexandra stared at her, and suddenly felt a lump in her throat making it very hard to swallow.

"I think being my friend will just get you in more trouble," she mumbled.

Anna sat down on the bed next to her, and Alexandra told her about what had happened in the Dean's office, including the fact that David was going to be banned from Quidditch.

"I told you she turns students into animals!" Anna whispered.

"It was only temporary!" Alexandra sighed.

Anna sighed too. "David's going to be really upset."

"I know." Alexandra looked away. "He's going to hate me."

"I don't think so. But he is going to be mad at you."

"How come you're not mad at me?"

Anna smiled shyly and looked down.

"You really are headstrong and stubborn and everything in that Ozarker nursery rhyme," she said softly. "Even a trial and a pain. But you're brave too. I saw you go after Benjamin and Mordecai after they were trying to make me lose control of my broom."

"I didn't want to let them get away with picking on you," Alexandra muttered.

"Yeah. I wish I were as brave as you, Alex." Alexandra blushed, and Anna took her arm. "But I wouldn't want to get into trouble the way you do. Come on, we have to go to dinner."

As soon as they arrived at the cafeteria, Alexandra knew that David had been given the news. He glared at her reproachfully when she sat down.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said.

"Why did I get punished for what you did?" he demanded.

"Ms. Grimm thinks if she punishes my friends it will make me behave." Alexandra was having trouble meeting anyone's eyes.

"So every time you do something wrong, one of – one of your friends is going to be punished along with you?" Darla exclaimed.

"That's... not very fair," Angelique said, scooting a little further away from Alexandra on her bench.

"Why'd you have to go and play chicken with Larry?" David demanded. "And what did you think was going to happen when you took off like that across the sky? We were almost done with detention and you go and -"

"I know!" Alexandra snapped at him. "Well, at least you won't be doing detention for the next three months! And if you don't want to be my friend any more, well, fine, I don't blame you!"

"Don't be silly, Alex," Anna said, with a worried look at David.

"It's not my fault the Dean decided to punish my friends. Maybe she doesn't want me to have any

friends,” Alexandra muttered, stabbing her peppermeat with a fork.

“Maybe she wants you to behave.” This was Constance, speaking in a low voice.

“It is a thought,” agreed Forbearance mildly.

Alexandra looked up at them. They couldn't meet her gaze, and looked down after a moment.

She sighed and pushed her plate away, with her dinner half-eaten. “I have to go serve my detention,” she said, and got up from the table.

“Hard-headed,” David muttered, as Alexandra left.

“Troublesome,” sighed Constance and Forbearance.

For everyone but Alexandra and Larry, it was the last night of their original two-week detention.

David didn't speak to Alexandra, and the Rashes didn't seem to be talking much with Larry either.

Larry and Alexandra had to take care to remain at least ten feet from each other, so they merely stood on opposite sides of the room and glared in the general direction of, but not directly at, one another.

Mr. Journey marched the Clockworks out and shook his head. “So, I understand two of you will be here every evening for some time to come,” he said. He clucked his tongue. “Well, I don't mind the company, Starshine, but I sure wish you could keep out of trouble.”

Alexandra was the first to lead her Clockworks out. Well behind her, Larry muttered, “I sure wish you could keep out of... of...” He stopped, and put his hand to his mouth, and realized with horror that his incisors were growing slightly.

“Watch what you wish for, rat-face,” Alexandra said.

The rest of that evening passed uneventfully. Alexandra's Clockworks cleaned the hallways she was assigned, and while Alexandra continued testing the limits of their obedience, she did not try to charm them again.

With the weekend came freedom for David. But not for Alexandra and Larry, who were now consigned to spending every weekend until Thanksgiving in detention. On Saturdays and Sundays, Alexandra's mornings and afternoons were free, but she no longer felt as motivated to study, not when she wouldn't be able to take the SPAWN and get out of remedial classes until the next semester. As far as Alexandra was concerned, that was a point too far in the future to be worth worrying about. Instead, she checked out more books from the library about clockwork golems and artificing, figuring she might as well have something to do in the evenings that she would be spending with the automatons. Anna was not sure whether to encourage Alexandra's interest or be worried, but since she knew Alexandra was probably going to wind up doing something she shouldn't, worry predominated.

In fact, however, over the next few weeks Alexandra was remarkably well-behaved. If her performance in class was lackluster, at least she was paying attention and not causing trouble. She still considered herself to be smarter and better than her fellow remedial students, but since she wasn't able to do every classroom exercise with ease, she did begin to grudgingly acknowledge that she didn't know as much as she should.

David was still very resentful at having been denied the opportunity to try out for Quidditch. Darla and Angelique repeatedly told him that sixth graders almost never made the team anyway, but this did nothing to diminish his resentment. He would watch the Quidditch players practicing after school, and read every book in the library about brooms and broom sports. Since Alexandra also spent much of her free time in the library, between that and their remedial Charms and Transfigurations classes they saw each other often, but did not talk much. After several attempts by Alexandra to make amends, David had grudgingly accepted her apology, but was still obviously not quite ready to forgive her completely.

Meanwhile, Alexandra had to deal with a new annoyance. Word of the jinx that Ms. Grimm had put on her and Larry spread throughout the school. Many of their classmates found it amusing to try to

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force them together and watch as they both transformed into rats. At first it happened almost daily; in the cafeteria, in the hallways, or in P.M.E. class. Alexandra and Larry would both be minding their own business, and someone would give one of them a shove, or they would be pressed forward in line, or they would be tricked by students who would stand in such a way as to block each from the other's sight until it was too late.

Each time, the two of them would wind up on the floor as rats, squeaking indignantly, and then they would have to wait until a teacher could arrive to untransform them. If Anna was nearby, she was always quick to pick Alexandra up and gently set her on her shoulder.

Quickly, both victims of the jinx became much more alert, constantly aware when the other one was nearby and wary of any students moving suspiciously in a group. And Alexandra's friends did look out for her. Anna and the Pritchards took to walking with her in the hallways, and even Darla and Angelique helped watch her back in the cafeteria (though Alexandra caught them laughing with the rest on several occasions when she and Larry were turned to rats in front of a crowd). Larry's friends did the same thing for him, so after the first couple of weeks, it was harder to trap them together, and the novelty of seeing them turn into rats wore off.

In P.M.E. class, Alexandra and David were both banned from broom games, so they spent most of their time playing plunkballs or practicing charms. Ms. Shirtliffe staged transfiguration contests as well, and Alexandra found that she did very well, at least against other sixth graders. To her, this was proof that she did not belong in Remedial Transfiguration class, but when she pointed this out to Ms. Shirtliffe, the teacher just shrugged and told her that wasn't her decision.

Shirtliffe was also in charge of the Charmbridge Academy Dueling Club. Since Quodpot was now off-limits for her, Alexandra was immediately interested in learning to duel, only to be disappointed again when she learned that only eighth graders and up were allowed to join.

Larry Albo, of course, was one of the first to join, and he smirked at Alexandra as he and the other duelers practiced during P.M.E. class. Alexandra could not hide her envy.

"Have you noticed," asked Anna one day, "that Larry is starting to look more like a rat?"

And he was. His nose was becoming more pointy, his front teeth were more prominent, and his eyes were smaller and beadier. Even his hair seemed to be going from its previous curly black to a more bristly, grayish color. And he just looked more furious every time he saw Alexandra.

"I'll bet he's imagining it's me he's hexing in the dueling club," Alexandra said, and realizing what effect this was having on the older boy, she began smiling sweetly at him at every opportunity.

If Alexandra was learning to control her impulses, it was not always easy.

One evening, Torvald Krogstad struck up a conversation with Alexandra. It began innocently enough. It was dinnertime, and the cafeteria Clockworks were serving Norwegian Meatloaf.

"Oh look, it's Troublesome!" said Torvald, but his grin wasn't really malicious. By now, this was Alexandra's nickname throughout the school. So she merely gave him a sarcastic smile in return.

Torvald was a seventh grader with a bad case of acne. Thanks to playing "hexem" too often with his friends, even the school healer's potions couldn't fix his complexion. Alexandra knew him to be a mischievous prankster who liked breaking the rules when he could get away with it, so of course she liked him.

She did not, however, trust him. His chatter about Norwegian Meatloaf and P.M.E. class struck her as suspiciously innocuous. It made her think he was trying to distract her, and with instincts honed over the last few weeks, she looked around for Larry.

Sure enough, Stuart Cortlandt was with Larry only a few yards away. Larry was bragging about his prowess in the Dueling Club, while Stuart nodded appreciatively, giving Larry his undivided attention.

Some other boys were trying to stay between them, as they approached Alexandra and Torvald in line.

“Larry!” Alexandra yelled, startling the other boy. He stopped, saw her, and with a panicked look began backing away. Torvald and Stuart both laughed, and Torvald grabbed Alexandra and began pushing her forward. “I heard there were rats in the cafeteria!” he crowed. The boys with Stuart had suddenly become a ring around Larry, trying to prevent him from escaping.

Alexandra's first impulse was to resist – violently. She snatched her tray out of the air and was about to smash it into Torvald's face and make a break for it.

“Don't!” Anna cried out. Alexandra stopped, with her tray raised. Torvald was already flinching away. For a moment, Alexandra and Anna made eye contact. Alexandra's expression was furious and indignant. She was tired of detention and tired of being turned into a rat for the general amusement of her classmates, and this was one public humiliation too many. But all her rage drained out of her when she saw Anna's pleading, sympathetic expression. Her shoulders slumped, and then Larry stumbled forward and both of them transformed into rats.

There was laughter, but it was sporadic and nervous. Somehow it just didn't seem as funny this time, and even Torvald and Stuart looked let down, despite the success of their prank.

Alexandra just glowered at Larry, who glowered back at her until Anna knelt next to them. To Alexandra, Anna's face was immense, looming over them like the moon, and her hands, normally so tiny, were gigantic. But her voice, despite being amplified by her relative size, was soft.

“Come on,” she said. “You two shouldn't stay on the floor. Someone could step on you.”

Alexandra hopped into Anna's hand, then realized that Anna had held her other hand out to Larry.

“Let him stay there, maybe someone will step on him!” she squeaked, but she knew Anna wouldn't understand her. Larry hesitated a moment, his nose twitching suspiciously, and then crawled onto her outstretched palm.

Anna stood up and set Larry on one shoulder and Alexandra on the other. “I'd better go find a teacher,” she sighed.

Afterwards, Alexandra asked Anna, “Why didn't you just leave him there on the floor?”

Anna looked at her reproachfully. “You know, he probably doesn't like being jinxed any better than you do.” She was carefully polishing her wand, while Alexandra cleaned out the cage she had acquired for Charlie from the school aviary.

“It's his fault!” Alexandra said.

“All his fault?” she asked casually, looking down at her wand.

Alexandra scowled at her, then thought about how patient and compassionate Anna had been, and she felt guilty.

“Maybe not all,” she mumbled, quickly and almost inaudibly. Then added, “But he's still a jerk!”

Anna smiled. “Yeah,” she said. “He is.” She paused. “You just let them do it. You didn't fight or do anything rash.”

“I wanted to.”

“You would have gotten in trouble.” Smashing Torvald in the face with a tray would certainly have resulted in another trip to the Dean's office.

“I would have gotten in trouble, if you hadn't stopped me.”

They looked at each other, and smiled.

“But I'm still going to get back at Torvald and Stuart.”

“That's what I was afraid of,” Anna sighed.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Alexandra didn't have much opportunity for revenge, though she did find out more about the game

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the boys played, 'hexem,' which seemed to be popular mostly among Old Colonials, and mostly among boys. It involved throwing painful and embarrassing hexes at one another until someone cried “uncle” (or was incapacitated). It was forbidden at school, but apparently the healer did not ask too many questions when students came to the infirmary needing fangs, scales, boils, tails, tusks, rabbit ears, batwings, antennae, slime, fungus, extra tongues, extra eyes, and various other disfigurements removed. As long as they could walk, the usual claim that they “made a mistake” while practicing their transfigurations was accepted. Boys will be boys.

Whatever ideas this gave her, an event a week before Halloween would put it out of her mind, at least for a while.

No other students had been assigned to detention, or at least, not to serve it cleaning the building and grounds under Mr. Journey's supervision, so Larry and Alexandra had gone from dorms and stables to classrooms, kitchens, auditoriums, storage lockers, gymnasiums and bathrooms. Charmbridge Academy was immense, and Alexandra was often unsure just what floor they were on, as it seemed that the internal architecture of the building never quite matched how she thought it should look from the outside.

Journey usually made sure Larry and Alexandra took their Clockwork cleaning crews to separate areas, so that there would be no danger of them running into each other and being turned into rats by the Dean's jinx. On this particular evening, however, he told them that the attic spaces needed to be cleaned out, so that they could receive their annual anti-doxo fumigation.

Alexandra had read about doxies and knew they were fairy-like creatures with venomous bites. She asked, rather hopefully, if they might find any.

“You'd better not!” Journey replied. “And if you do, Starshine, don't go near them! Let me and the Clockworks deal with them.”

Charmbridge's attic was as huge as the rest of its various floors. Journey gave her and Larry both maps, and showed them where they should work so as to avoid coming near each other.

“And let me know if you spot any ghosts or poltergeists,” he added.

“Ghosts and poltergeists?” Alexandra repeated.

“Yeah, school policy,” Journey sighed. “Most of the wizarding world still hasn't embraced the rights of the non-living, and the Dean is no exception. She doesn't think allowing them to share space with the living is a healthy environment for students. Now and then some poor ghost settles in the attic or the basement for a while, but the Dean insists we get rid of them.”

“Scared?” Larry sneered, as Alexandra walked up the stairs, a full flight above him, with her Clockworks.

“A ghost would be better company than you!” she retorted. “Just stay on your side of the map!”

“Don't worry, Troublesome,” he called back up. “Maybe I'll get lucky and you'll become a ghost. I bet you'd wind up haunting one of the toilets.”

“Yeah, right. Only a moron would think a ghost could haunt a toilet!” she scoffed.

She and her Clockworks began dragging out old crates, empty pallets, slipcovered furniture, and shrouded paintings, dusting and cleaning and stacking the contents of each attic room neatly in the center. Alexandra found no signs of doxy infestations, nor did she encounter any spirits lurking about. She did encounter an immense amount of dust, however, and was soon coated in it and coughing from the clouds that her Clockworks were stirring up.

If Charmbridge's classroom and dormitory floors were sometimes confusing, the attic was a labyrinthine obstacle course of closets attached to closets, stairs that should have gone down to the main floors or up to the roof but instead led to other storage areas or merely to cramped crawlspaces,

and doors that did not always match the ones on Journey's map. After navigating half a dozen rooms, Alexandra felt as if she were on an endless quest through a dusty, shadowy maze of broken furniture and forgotten lamps and books and paintings. The dust was so thick that it was like a throat-scratching fog.

This was when she encountered a locked door, backtracked, and found the door that she was sure she had come through was not there. She couldn't see more than a few feet ahead of herself, so she felt along the wall until she came to the door again, and opened it. The room beyond was not the one she had been in previously. She squinted at her map, trying to rub dust out of her eyes, and sighed, then regretted it, choking on the dust she inhaled.

"This has got to be bad for me," she commented about the dust, but it wasn't a command so the Clockworks ignored it.

"Follow me," she said to them, and the golems followed her into the next room. She had them begin dragging its contents into the center as before, while she opened the far door, trying to find her place on the map. The far door opened onto a corridor that was lined with boiler pipes. Alexandra walked down the corridor, tried the door at the end, and found that it opened onto a stairway that went down. She looked at her map, turned it upside down, sideways, and sideways again, and concluded that she was lost.

"How can we get lost in an attic?" she demanded, but the Clockworks paid no attention.

There were windows in some of the attic rooms, so Alexandra opened one in the room they were cleaning at present, and looked out at the night sky. The stars were much clearer here at Charmbridge, clearer than in Chicago or even in Larkin Mills.

Alexandra took a few breaths of clean air, and then tried to match her location on the map against what she could see of the academy building out the window. This didn't help, so she went into the previous room and opened a window there as well.

She was still lost, and was now becoming frustrated. Alexandra had no fear of doxies, ghosts, or anything else she might find in the attics. What she did dread, however, was being lost and unable to find her way out of the attic until Mr. Journey had to come find her, which Larry would undoubtedly find out about and spread to the rest of the school.

Although she thought she could probably think of a rhyme that would help, she had been trying to avoid "doggerel verse," especially after getting a lecture from Mr. Newton about her "poorly vocalized" incantations for basic charms. So she left her Clockworks behind and went through the next door she saw that she didn't recognize.

As she entered the room beyond, she saw that it was small, barely more than a five-by-five closet, and the door opposite hers was opening.

Larry stood there, covered with dust and grime and looking annoyed. They stared at each other just long enough to blink.

"Oh –"

"– no!"

And the two of them became rats, up to their rat ears in dust.

Larry made an angry squeaking sound. Alexandra rolled her eyes.

They couldn't command their Clockworks, or open doors, or use magic. Alexandra ran past Larry to look through the door he'd come in through, and saw that beyond it was a small, narrow hallway with a closed door at the other end. There was nowhere to go in that direction. She decided that the only thing to do was wait in the room where her Clockworks were working, figuring that eventually Mr. Journey would find them. So she made her way back there. She ignored Larry. He could sit alone in the room

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where they'd run into each other for all she cared.

The Clockworks were almost done piling up the furniture and pallets. When Alexandra reentered the room, careful to stay near one wall that had already been cleared so that none of the golems might step on her, she saw that they were grinding to a halt. Without further work or orders, they stood motionless, waiting for their next command.

"Great!" Alexandra squeaked. She hoped Journey would come soon. At least Larry would have to share in her embarrassment.

She paced back and forth across the floor, and didn't notice Larry had entered until the other rat was almost on her. She spun to face him, and snapped, "What?" But it was just another incomprehensible squeak.

Larry, as a rat, was considerably bigger than her, just as he was in human form. The other rat glared down at her, but she was not about to back away. Instead, she bared her teeth, and Larry's tail twitched.

He squeaked at her, and what followed was a frantic exchange of furious squeaking that probably would have peeled the paint in the room if any of it had been understandable.

This ended only when a shadow fell across them both. Since the Clockworks had become motionless, Alexandra and Larry were both startled by the movement of something else in the room. Hoping it was Mr. Journey (though how could he have entered without their hearing him?), Alexandra looked around, and found herself staring into two baleful, yellow cat eyes.

Galen was only a few feet away, and crouched very low to the floor, ready to pounce. There was no mistaking the cat's intent.

"Run!" she squeaked, and she scampered away. Galen leapt, landed directly in front of her, and turned to face her with an ominous yowl.

Alexandra darted off in another direction, and the cat swiped at her with one paw, but missed. Then instead of chasing her, the cat's attention was transfixed by Larry, who had not moved. The bigger rat was paralyzed by the sight of the enormous feline towering above him.

Galen crouched again, and began padding slowly and deliberately towards the trembling rat that wasn't running, stretching one leg out, then another, pushing across the floor as if this were a deep dark jungle and the cat were stalking an alert prey ready to bolt.

Alexandra ran across the floor, scrambling as fast as her four legs would carry her. She reached Larry before Galen could, only because the cat was taking its time.

"Run!" she squeaked again, and then, seeing that Larry was still staring at the cat in horror, she grimaced, opened her mouth, and bit down on Larry's tail.

The other rat jumped almost a foot into the air with a rodent-like scream. Galen pounced, and Larry and Alexandra took off in different directions.

They scrambled under the covered furniture, and between the legs of the Clockworks, who remained motionless and oblivious to the pursuit happening underfoot. Galen chased them around the room, and once Alexandra bit Larry's tail again to keep him from running out the way he'd originally entered, because she knew that way there was no cover or escape; it would be a trap.

Galen was playing with them. The cat was faster and stronger, and the rats were becoming tired. There was nowhere to hide in this room where Galen couldn't get at them, so all they could do was avoid the cat as long as possible.

Galen would try to corner first one rat, then the other, and Alexandra and Larry both felt the cat's paws coming closer and closer.

Alexandra zigged when she should have zagged, and suddenly Galen snapped at her tail, and she felt herself being lifted off the ground.

Larry scrambled around in circles, panicking, while Alexandra dangled in the air, kicking and twitching, trying to jerk free. Galen reached a paw out and caught Larry, pinning his tail to the floor.

Both of them felt ice in their veins, while the cat sat there for a moment, purring triumphantly. Then a screech made the cat jump as well.

There was a flurry of wings and an ugly, ear-splitting sound and Alexandra dropped to the floor while Galen yowled and hissed.

It was Charlie. Charlie's black wings were beating the air, Charlie was diving at Galen with talons outstretched, and making a hiss to match the cat's. Galen crouched defensively, took swipes at the bird, but was forced to back away again and again by the raven's assault.

A door opened, and they saw Mr. Journey towering high, high above them. "What in Merlin's name is going on here?" he exclaimed.

Galen was a black streak across the floor. The cat leapt onto the windowsill and then, with a twitch of its tail, it was gone.

Charlie landed next to Alexandra and Larry, and cawed.

Journey looked down at them. "Now, how come none of you are where you ought to be?" he asked, shaking his head.



"Well, I sure don't know how you could have gotten lost, Starshine," Journey said, back in his office. She was sitting in a chair with her back against one wall, Larry across the room from her, seated against the opposite wall. Journey had carried them both back to his office, and then untransformed them one at a time. Now they had enough space between them not to be transformed again, but neither could reach the door without passing too close to the other one.

Alexandra's expression was more sullen than angry. She was more shaken than she wanted to admit. Larry, for his part, looked embarrassed and angry in equal measure, but he was avoiding looking at Alexandra.

"Are you sure the map is right?" she asked.

Journey chuckled. "Sure I'm sure. Rooms don't move. Well, not at Charmbridge, anyway." He looked at Larry. "How did you get so far from your Clockworks?" he asked.

"I got lost," Larry mumbled.

Alexandra felt a little better, but managed to keep a smirk off her face.

"Well, both of you are going to have to be more careful," he said. "And you really ought to keep that bird locked up, Starshine."

Alexandra stared at the custodian. "Are you kidding?" she blurted out. "Charlie saved my life! He saved *our* lives!" she added, glancing at Larry. He flushed.

Charlie had flown back out the window, once Journey picked up Larry and Alexandra in rat form back in the attic, and Alexandra assumed he'd gone back to her room.

"I don't think the Dean's cat would have eaten you," Journey said.

"You try saying that when you're a rat!"

"Now, I understand you're upset, Starshine," Journey said. "But mind your manners."

"Anyway, I *was* following the map, but a door got locked behind me," she said. "And then when I tried to find my way back, I ran into Larry who was more lost than me."

"I was not!" he snapped.

"You sure looked lost!"

"And you didn't?"

"All right, kids," Journey said wearily. "You're both fine now. We'll just all have to be more careful

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in the future, right? And you two should really try to get along. You're both magically-enabled. The gift of magic makes us all brothers and sisters.”

For once, Larry and Alexandra were of one mind, as they both stared at Journey as if he were insane. Though this was undoubtedly not the kind of unity he had in mind, he seemed satisfied with having given his lecture, and dismissed them both for the evening. They stood up, then looked at each awkwardly. If they both stepped forward at the same time, they'd turn into rats again.

“Go ahead,” Larry growled, this time without the sardonic bow. Alexandra edged past her chair, kept close to the wall as she made her way to the door, and exited.

Back in her room, Anna was surprised when Alexandra entered and went directly to Charlie's cage and kissed the bird on top of its head.

“Thanks, Charlie!” she said. “You've saved my life twice now! Do you want a treat? Cockroach Clusters? Wizard chocolate? Cornbread?”

The raven made a pleased trilling sound, and then pecked at the locket that she now had hanging around her neck.

She sighed. “All right.” She lifted the gold chain over her head and then dangled the locket into the raven's cage, allowing Charlie to snatch it up, but then she latched the cage. Charlie squawked in protest.

“You can play with it,” she said, “but I'm not going to let you fly off and hide it again!”

Charlie made a rude, indignant noise, as Alexandra turned to Anna, who was watching her quizzically.

Alexandra told Anna about what had happened. Anna's hands went to her mouth in horror when Alexandra got to the part about being caught by the tail between Galen's teeth.

“You could have been killed! Eaten!” she gasped.

“That's what I told Mr. Journey, but he thinks Galen was just 'playing',” Alexandra snorted. Her eyes narrowed. “But that's twice I've almost been killed. And I think I know who's trying to kill me.”

Anna's eyes were wide. “You think someone is trying to kill you?”

“Think about it! Do you really think it's a coincidence?”

“Well...” Anna looked skeptical.

“Who put the jinx on me and Larry in the first place? And gave us detention? Whose cat almost got us? Who do you think could make the Invisible Bridge disappear?”

Anna bit her lip.

Alexandra glared at her. “I'm not crazy, Anna!”

“No, of course you're not!” Anna said quickly. “But... why would the Dean want to kill you, Alex? I mean, it really doesn't make any sense.”

“I'm sure she has a reason,” Alexandra said confidently. “And I'm going to find out, before she tries again.”

Chapter 12 —A Confederation of Wizards

Alexandra decided not to share her suspicions with everyone else, but she did feel that David had a right to know, since he'd almost been killed too. But he was no easier to convince than Anna.

"If the Dean wanted to kill you," he asked skeptically, "don't you think she could just make you disappear any time?"

"She wants it to look like an accident," Alexandra said. She was not about to let go of her new theory.

David rolled his eyes. "You create your own accidents," he said. "I'm sure she could arrange to make one of them fatal."

"I didn't make the Invisible Bridge disappear, and that *would* have been fatal if not for Charlie!" Charlie made a coughing sound in agreement.

They were out on the lawn for Practical Magical Exercise. Charlie, who was still free to come and go from Alexandra's room at will, had taken to visiting her during P.M.E. class, and was now sitting on her shoulder. This annoyed David, as he could only allow his falcon out after school. He gave the raven a sour look, and turned back to the Quidditch field. Alexandra, Anna, and David were watching the Quidditch players fly Bludger-blocking drills. Most of the other kids were staying away from Alexandra now. Her raven familiar made them uneasy, as did her growing reputation for being a nexus of trouble. Some kids were saying she was jinxed by more than the Dean's punitive curse.

Darla and Angelique wandered over. "I'm surprised Ms. Shirliffe hasn't made you send your familiar back to your room," Darla said.

"You really are going to get a Dark reputation if you keep skulking about the Quidditch field with a crow," Angelique agreed.

Darla and Angelique still sat at the table with Alexandra in the cafeteria, but otherwise tended to avoid her nowadays, except when they had an opportunity to offer helpful advice on social self-improvement. Alexandra and Charlie both gave Angelique haughty stares.

"Charlie is a raven, not a crow," Alexandra said, and Charlie leaned forward, beak opened wide, and screeched disparagingly.

"And you're the last person who should be criticizing other people's familiars," said David.

Angelique flushed. "At least jarveys aren't favored by Dark wizards," she said.

"Jarveys aren't favored by anyone with a brain," Alexandra muttered, and Angelique flushed again.

"Whenever you see a murder of crows, they're spies for the Dark Convention," said Darla.

"A what of crows?" David demanded.

"That's what you call a group of crows – a murder," said Alexandra, who had read quite a lot about corvids since acquiring Charlie as a familiar. "And I don't know what the Dark Convention is, but that sounds like a stupid superstition."

Darla and Angelique both looked affronted. "You don't even know what the Dark Convention is, so how can you say it's stupid?" Darla scoffed.

"Because we already know wizards believe lots of stupid things, like about Muggle-borns and house-elves," David said.

"Oh, God," Darla said, rolling her eyes. "You really are turning into such a goblin, David!"

"I suppose goblins are bad too?" Alexandra asked.

"She means I'm hanging out with the wrong crowd." David held up his fingers to make air-quotes.

"They call kids who join ASPEW and believe in respecting the rights of non-humans and Muggles

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alike 'goblins'."

"What do they call stuck-up girls who butt into other people's conversations?" Alexandra asked.

Darla and Angelique gasped, and then Darla retorted, "Gone!" with her nose in the air, and they both flounced off.

"Way to be tactful," said David, but he didn't actually look upset.

"I wonder what they say about an unkindness of ravens?" Alexandra said.

David gave her another look. "A what?"

"Crows gather in murders, ravens gather in unkindnesses," Alexandra said. "Muggles generally don't have a good opinion about them either." Then she added, "And as for your familiars, it's a cast of falcons, and a parliament of owls, just in case you're interested."

Anna grinned. "I knew that." She looked at Charlie, and said, "Ravens are bad omens in China, too. But, they also say, 'The raven has an evil voice, but a good heart.'"

"Yeah, that fits," David muttered. Alexandra looked surprised, then she and Anna exchanged looks and hid their smiles.



Now that David was talking to Alexandra again, he began talking a lot about the various causes taken up by students at Charmbridge – abolition of elf slavery, recognition of the rights of ghosts, a lifting of wand restrictions, and outlawing Obliviation. He was becoming quite passionate about these issues, especially ASPEW.

"You've still never actually *talked* to an elf," Alexandra pointed out.

"That's because they keep the elves out of sight here at school. Why don't you come to the ASPEW meetings? Anna said she would."

Anna nodded, looking a little embarrassed. They were eating lunch. Darla and Angelique were sitting a little further down the table, trying to ignore them.

"I would," Alexandra said sincerely. "But I still have to do detention every evening."

Alexandra and Anna did both start wearing ASPEW buttons, Anna because David asked her to, Alexandra because David asked her to and because it made most of the other students and a lot of the teachers scowl disapprovingly.

Anna was not a goblin, however. She was one of the students who spent most of her time in the library or study hall. She was terrified of getting less-than-perfect grades, and so she joined the other students who were called "wyrms" for their endless book-learning. Alexandra didn't pay too much attention to the cliques at Charmbridge; as at Larkin Mills Elementary School, she was aware they existed, but was an outsider to all of them. She knew that the athletes who played team sports were called "brooms" and were quite popular, especially with girls like Darla and Angelique. And there were other extracurricular organizations that students divided themselves into, such as the Wizard Rangers and Witch Rangers, and the Junior Regimental Officer Corps, and the Magic Band. Alexandra could not participate in any of these, since she and Larry Albo were still spending every evening cleaning floors and hallways with their Clockworks.

She did learn that much of wizarding society divided itself roughly into "Old Colonials" and "New Colonials." Old Colonials included Ozarkers, Highlanders, Palatines, Salem Traditionalists, Plymouth Traditionalists, and numerous other divisions she couldn't be bothered to remember. Darla and Angelique were New Colonials (they called themselves simply "Colonials"). Then there were Muggle-borns like David and Alexandra, and students like Anna who were from traditional Chinese or Native American wizarding families. There were other students who didn't fit into traditional wizarding society: Radicalists and members of the New World Druidic Order and other designated "Cultures"

whose non-standard wizarding practices were recognized (reluctantly) by the Department of Magical Education.

But it was in her Wizarding World History class that Alexandra next heard about the Dark Convention.

Ms. Grinder had finally started, grudgingly, teaching from their book, and the current unit was “Wizards in the New World.” In fact, it was almost entirely about America, but it wasn't an America Alexandra recognized, as names like Alta California, Deseret, New Amsterdam, and Arcadia were unfamiliar to her. She didn't see how any of this was immediately relevant to learning magic, so Alexandra wasn't paying much attention, particularly when Ms. Grinder went off on her frequent tangents.

It was the beginning of November. Alexandra had been thinking about Larkin Mills lately. She would never have admitted to homesickness, but she had lingered a bit over the last letter from her mother, even though it contained nothing but banal details about her new boss at the hospital and how Archie was repainting the kitchen. Their Wizarding World Studies classroom had a window facing the outside, where Alexandra could see the autumn leaves piling up under the trees that surrounded the academy's lawns.

“I hope you're thinking about something very important, Alexandra,” Ms. Grinder said, cutting into her daydreaming. Alexandra blinked and sat up, while the other students snickered.

“I don't blame you for not being particularly interested in the first Governor-General of the Confederation,” the teacher went on, “but since this is standardized material we are required to cover in our standardized classes, it just may be on your standardized test.” She sounded more disgruntled about what she was teaching than about Alexandra's lack of interest in it.

“Can anyone tell me what they notice about this list, from Governor-General Calvin to the present day?” she asked.

“They're all men?” Alexandra suggested. She hadn't even looked at the list, but by now she could predict Grinder's tangents.

“Exactly!” Grinder said. “Congress hasn't appointed a single woman Governor-General! Almost every other country in the world has had witches as Ministers of Magic. Britain had one over two hundred years ago! Yet we've had only a handful of women as Territorial Governors and in the Wizards' Congress.”

Alexandra nodded, mostly to make it seem as if she were paying attention, though she did think that it was awfully unfair, what Ms. Grinder was saying.

“Why, maybe Alexandra Quick will grow up to be our first female Governor-General! Wouldn't that be something?”

Alexandra turned a little red and refocused her attention, as the other kids snickered again.

“Not unless the Dark Convention takes over,” someone sneered, behind her.

She frowned. “What's the Dark Convention?” she demanded aloud.

“Not part of our standard course material,” said Ms. Grinder briskly, and continued talking about Governor-Generals and the first Wizards' Congress.

When the class ended, Alexandra approached the teacher and repeated her question. “Ms. Grinder, what's the Dark Convention?”

The elderly teacher tilted her glasses and looked down at Alexandra.

“Depending on who you ask, they're an evil cabal of warlocks intent on destroying civilization as we know it, or they're just another group of men who feel disenfranchised by not being in charge, so they want to take power away from the men who are in charge.”

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“So there are no witches in the Dark Convention?”

Grinder sighed. “I’m sure there are, Alexandra. But I wouldn’t take your classmates’ teasing seriously.”

“I’m not. I’m just curious who they are. Is it true that crows spy for them?”

“No. That’s superstitious nonsense. You know, there are books in the library, and newspaper archives, that will answer these questions. Make use of them, young lady, and pay more attention during class to what will be on your SPAWN.”



It wasn’t so easy to learn about the Dark Convention, though, as Mrs. Minder didn’t think it was an appropriate topic for sixth graders.

“Why would someone your age want to know about such nasty people?” she asked.

“Research,” Alexandra said.

The librarian looked askance at her. “What exactly are you researching?”

“Dark wizards. I’m worried about them so I want to know how to recognize them,” Alexandra said.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about Dark wizards,” Minder scoffed. “Some people see Dark wizards behind every tree, but if they were half as numerous and powerful as conspiracy-theorists say they are, they would have brought down the Confederation long ago. The Dark Convention is a bunch of bitter old cranks boiling death-draughts in their cellars, if you ask me.”

Alexandra discovered that while nearly everyone in the wizarding world seemed to know the Dark Convention existed, few were willing to talk about them openly.

“It’s sort of a taboo,” Anna explained, clearly nervous herself. “No one likes to speak their names or discuss them.”

“Then how is anyone supposed to recognize them?” Alexandra demanded.

“Well, you can’t recognize them because they usually don’t identify themselves. That’s how they stay hidden.”

“And they want to take over just because they’re Dark?”

Anna shrugged. “I don’t know. My father said they tried to take over, just before I was born. A lot of wizards were killed and a lot of others went to prison, and now no one likes to talk about it.”

When Alexandra went to serve her detention that evening, Mr. Journey told her and Larry that they were going to be working outside that week.

“I love this time of year,” Journey said. “All those leaves, turning orange and brown and gold.” He said this as he showed them the rakes and wheelbarrows their Clockworks would be handling.

“All those leaves making huge piles that need to be raked up, you mean,” said Larry. “One charm could sweep it all away. For that matter, you could just cast a Leaf Repelling Charm on the grounds.”

Journey sighed and shook his head. “Just because you *can* do something with magic doesn’t mean you should, Youngblood,” he said. Larry frowned, no more fond of Journey’s nickname for him than Alexandra was of “Starshine.” Journey went on. “Nature needs to be respected.”

“Then why don’t we just let the leaves stay there?” Larry asked.

Journey laughed and handed him a rake. “Get going, Youngblood!”

Alexandra waited as Larry slouched off across the north lawn and moved well away from her. They had hardly said a word to each other since the cat incident in the attics, which was an improvement.

“Mr. Journey,” she asked, “what do you know about the Dark Convention?”

Journey looked startled, and stared at her. “Why would you ask about the Dark Convention, Starshine?”

“Because I heard about them but no one will talk about them. I figured since you’re pretty old you

must know at least as much as Ms. Grinder or Mrs. Minder does, and you might tell me.” There were times when Alexandra was a shameless liar, and other times when she was as guileless as she was tactless, and this time was the latter. Journey's eyebrows went up, and he looked both bothered and amused.

“It depends on who you ask, Starshine,” he said, his eyes gazing off at the woods on the borders of Charmbridge's grounds, with the late afternoon sunlight casting a golden glow around the brown and yellow crowns of the trees. “The first thing you should know is that 'Dark' is a word most of the wizarding community uses to mean 'magic we don't approve of.’”

“So Dark wizards aren't evil?”

Journey looked at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling a little in thought.

“Some of them are,” he said slowly. “But some just get called Dark because they oppose the Governor-General.”

“Why do they oppose the Governor-General?”

Journey was silent again for an unusually long time, then said, “Years before you were born, Starshine, there was a Dark wizard who nearly took over Britain. Now, he was a *real* Dark wizard, as bad as they come. And a lot of folks here were afraid he might have followers in America, or that someone might try to imitate him. So the Governor-General said we needed to protect ourselves, and the Wizards' Congress went along. And so anyone even suspected of having Dark sympathies got questioned and sometimes imprisoned.”

“Well, maybe there really were Dark wizards here and maybe there weren't, but a lot of people felt the Governor-General and the Wizards' Congress were just making things worse. So all of a sudden he really *did* have enemies.”

“But they lost?” Alexandra asked.

“Those who weren't killed or imprisoned went into hiding,” Journey said. “Then, about the time you would have been a baby, that Dark Lord in Britain returned, and took over. Over here, there was panic and paranoia again, and no one trusted anyone else. It was a bad time, Starshine.” He shook his head.

“What happened?”

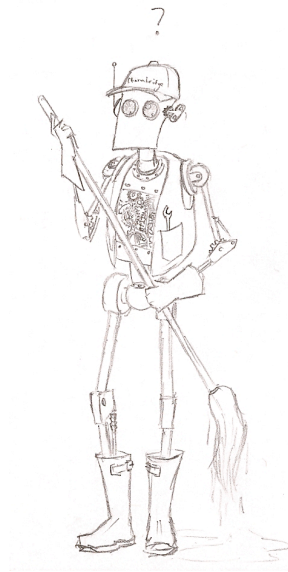
“In Britain, they got rid of their Dark Lord. Here, the Dark Convention was driven into hiding again.”

Alexandra mulled this over. It was a little confusing, and not at all like anything she'd heard either from her fellow students or in Ms. Grinder's class.

“So who were the good guys and who were the bad guys?” she asked at last.

“That's a good question, Starshine,” Journey replied. “Now, I think you have some leaves to rake.”

Chapter 13 — Clockwork Mutiny



Raking leaves was tedious, and endless. Soon there were piles as high as Alexandra's head and they seemed to have made little progress. The Clockworks, of course, had infinite patience, but after two months, Alexandra was weary of constantly spending her evenings watching the golems perform menial labor.

Out on the athletic fields, some kids were still playing games, and she could see David over near the aviary, unhooding Malcolm and letting the falcon soar into the blood-red sky. As the raptor passed over the woods bordering the academy's lawns, Alexandra saw a great black cloud ripple and swarm amongst the trees, accompanied by a cacophony of shrieking and cawing. Crows by the hundreds had settled into the branches, but Malcolm's passage overhead had unsettled them.

Alexandra wondered if Charlie might be among them – ravens did socialize with crows sometimes, she knew. And then she wondered if Charlie had anything to fear from Malcolm, but decided not. Malcolm might be swift and powerful, but Charlie was cleverer by far.

As it got darker and students retired indoors, Alexandra had her Clockworks begin filling bags and wheelbarrows with leaves, and marched them to a large brick-lined pit where Journey had started a bonfire. Here she found Larry leading his Clockworks, similarly laden, and they stopped, glaring at each other in front of the steps that led down into the pit. The pit was about twenty feet across, and sunk into the ground with only the one set of stairs providing an easy path to the fire in the center. They both wanted to be close enough to the fire to supervise the leaf-burning, and also to be warmed by it, as the evenings were becoming increasingly chilly. They couldn't both occupy the pit without standing at opposite sides, though, and it was also apparent that either could effectively block the other from entering or leaving, unless one of them were willing to turn them both to rats again.

"I was here first!" Larry said sharply.

"Were not!"

"You wait while I burn my leaves, then you can go down and burn yours."

"You wait!" Alexandra countered stubbornly.

Larry glared at her, and then began walking belligerently forward towards the steps, as if to force

Alexandra to back away.

Of course she didn't. With an equally determined glare, she walked forward as well.

It was the same unyielding expression she'd worn when they played chicken on their brooms, and Larry recognized it. Alexandra would turn them both to rats again before she'd turn aside. With a curse, he backpedaled, and Alexandra triumphantly walked down into the pit, her Clockworks following behind her.

"I hope you fall in the fire!" he yelled at her.

Alexandra smelled like smoke and burnt leaves when she finally returned to her room, but she was feeling quite pleased with herself.

The next evening was much like the last. Journey told them they'd probably be raking leaves daily until the end of November (which was when their detention would finally end), but at least now Alexandra could see the piles getting smaller.

At sunset, she saw the crows flapping around in a great multitude out in the woods, as she urged her Clockworks towards the fire pit. She was prepared to confront Larry again, but this time she'd beaten him handily, as his Clockworks were nowhere to be seen. Smugly, she marched down the steps into the fire pit. The fire Journey had started was burning as intensely as on the previous night, almost white at its center. It was sustained by magic as far as she could tell, as there was no fuel for it other than the leaves her Clockworks dumped into it. The custodian wasn't around, so Alexandra held her hands out to feel the warmth while the golems carted one wheelbarrow after another down the steps and upended their contents into the blaze. She watched as the leaves ignited and added to the heat and glow of the fire. Some of them rose into the air, smoldering and leaving a trail of red embers that fell back into the flames, and some of the ashes blew into Alexandra's face and settled in her hair. Anna had complained about the smell last night, so Alexandra knew she'd have to take a bath tonight, but right now it didn't bother her. She was entranced by the fire and the simple pleasure of watching things burn.

Soon, though, her Clockworks ground to a halt, having finished burning that evening's haul. With a sigh, Alexandra backed away from the fire and moved towards the stairs, and found the Clockworks blocking her.

"Move," she said. Clockworks being nothing more than animated metal, she felt no need to be polite to them. "Up the stairs."

So surprised was she by their failure to obey that she didn't move in time to avoid being grabbed by a pair on either side of her. Their metal fingers closed around her upper arms with slow but inexorable grips.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed. And then, "Let go of me!"

It was only when the two Clockworks lifted her off the ground, letting her feet dangle in the air, that her astonishment turned to alarm. "Hey!" She began struggling and kicking, but she couldn't struggle free of their grasp, and kicking the metal golems did no good.

"Let go of me now!" she ordered. "Put. Me. Down!"

Two more Clockworks bent over with a grind and a whir, and grabbed her ankles. Now she was being held by her arms and legs, completely unable to wriggle free, and, she realized, they were walking towards the fire!

"What are you doing?" she yelled. Her wand was tucked into a jacket pocket, and reaching it was quite impossible. She closed her eyes, struggling to think of a rhyme to extricate herself. She could feel the heat of the bonfire against her face as the Clockworks moved to the edge of the fire pit itself.

"Clockworks, you've gone wrong," she gasped.

"Umm, stop moving... put me down –"

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It occurred to her belatedly that she might have done better to just cry for help, much as it would gall her. She was stammering and failing to produce anything that rhymed. She felt herself swaying back and forth, and the heat along one side of her body was broiling. She opened her eyes, in as close to a true panic as she'd ever experienced. Fearlessness was one thing, but she felt a sudden certainty that the golems really meant to throw her into the fire. As she twisted and writhed in their grasp, she saw Larry's face silhouetted against the evening sky overhead. He was at the edge of the brick-lined pit, looking down at her.

The shadows cast over his face by the roaring flames made his expression impossible to read, but for one moment, they made eye contact. Alexandra didn't know if Larry was somehow responsible for this, but she knew she would never beg him for help. So she just stared at him, and then the Clockworks swung Alexandra back, preparing to heave her forward into the fire.

Larry clenched his teeth, and leapt down into the pit.

He didn't land as a boy, but as a rat. Alexandra was suddenly free of the Clockworks' grasp, falling to the ground at their feet. She wasted no time in scurrying away from them, seeking the darkest corner of the pit that she could find. Larry was right behind her. She feared the Clockworks might chase her and try to crush her, but they didn't seem bright enough to realize what had happened. They merely stood around the fire, motionless now that she had escaped.

Singed, shaken, and miserable, she and Larry tried to squeeze themselves into a crack beneath one of the stone steps, and they stayed there until Journey came looking for them, nearly half an hour later.

This time, Journey actually seemed shocked and concerned by what Alexandra and Larry told him had transpired, after he turned them back to normal.

"Clockworks don't do that," he said.

"Clockworks do whatever you tell them to do," Alexandra said. "Obviously someone told them to kill me!" She cast a suspicious look at Larry, who was once again standing across the room, well out of range.

"Don't you dare accuse me, Troublesome!" he said hotly. "Or are you forgetting that *I'm* the one who saved you?"

She hadn't forgotten that, much as she would have liked to.

"Now, let's not get overly dramatic," Journey said. "Obviously something's gone wrong here."

"You think?" Alexandra retorted, without thinking.

The custodian frowned. "Now, Starshine, don't be forgetting your manners just because you had a bit of a close call."

"A bit?" she exclaimed. "I almost got barbecued!"

"Well, I reckon the Dean is going to need to hear about this," Journey sighed. Larry blanched and Alexandra grimaced. "The important thing is, you're both all right now. So get along back to your rooms. I'll have a talk with Lilith tomorrow."

Once again, Alexandra had to edge her way out the door, while Larry waited for her to get clear and well ahead of him. But she was waiting for him at the top of the stairs leading from the basement to the residential hallway. His eyes were cast downward so he almost didn't see her until she said, "Larry!" and he jerked to a halt and looked up at her, still ten steps and about fifteen feet below her.

"Why did you do that?" she demanded.

"I didn't do it!" he sneered. "You're the one who sabotages Clockworks, in case you think I've forgotten. Maybe your own jinxes backfired!"

"I meant —" She scowled. It was an effort to admit it to herself, much less say it aloud. "Why did you save me?"

He stared at her silently, then said at last, "I hate owing you." He sounded disgusted. "You and your stupid bird. Now we're even."

Alexandra stared back at him, then nodded slowly, and turned away, disappearing from view. Larry's mouth curled up in annoyance, and very cautiously he made his way up the rest of the stairs. Alexandra was nowhere in sight, so he headed back to his own room.

"You smell like burnt hair," Anna said, wrinkling her nose, when Alexandra returned to her room.

"I'll take a bath," Alexandra muttered.

Anna noticed Alexandra moving gingerly as she emerged from their bathroom and got ready for bed. "How did you get those bruises on your wrists?" she asked. Her eyes widened. "Did Larry do something to you?"

"No," Alexandra groaned. She hadn't even realized her wrists and ankles were sore where the Clockworks had grabbed her and swung her, until Anna pointed out the bruises. In fact, the left side of her face and neck was also tender, from having been so close to the bonfire. She couldn't stand Anna's worried look, so she told the other girl about the Clockworks' attack.

Once again, Anna's hands covered her mouth as she listened in horror.

"Oh, Alex, someone is trying to kill you!"

"You think?"

Alexandra couldn't help sounding frustrated and sarcastic. Anna looked guilty, but said, "I still don't understand why Dean Grimm would want to kill you, and you'd think, well..."

"That she could do a better job of it?"

"Well, yes."

"I don't know," Alexandra sighed, plopping down on her bed and staring at the ceiling. "Maybe I'll just ask her." She ignored Anna's aghast expression, and pulled the covers back to crawl under them.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning, Mr. Newton's class was interrupted by the sudden arrival of a Hall Pass. The cream-colored piece of paper flapped its way into the room and fluttered in front of the Remedial Charms teacher's nose until he snatched it out of the air and opened it.

He said, "Huh," and then his eyes fell on Alexandra. "You're wanted in the Dean's office, Miss Quick."

Everyone was staring at her. Alexandra gathered her books. "I didn't do anything!" she whispered to David. He looked skeptical. She hadn't told him about the latest incident.

With her bookbag slung over her shoulder, she followed the fluttering Hall Pass through the corridors and back to the administrative wing.

"You can go right in," said Miss Marmsley perfunctorily from her usual portrait. "The Dean is expecting you."

Alexandra hesitated at the door to the Dean's office, and then opened it. She saw Larry inside and yelped as she hastily backed away.

"Come in, Miss Quick," called the Dean from within. "The transfiguration jinx will not affect you while you're in my office."

Cautiously, Alexandra pushed the door open again and entered, feeling a little foolish. She and Larry both looked nervous as she came within the proximity that usually turned them both into rats, but nothing happened. She saw that Ms. Grimm was seated behind her desk, and Mr. Journey was sitting in a chair to the side, where he could see both the Dean and Alexandra and Larry.

"I didn't do anything. It wasn't my fault!" she said immediately. Larry rolled his eyes.

"Offering defenses before one has been accused is a sign of a guilty conscience, Miss Quick, and I

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did not invite you to speak yet,” the Dean said coolly. She looked at Journey.

“I take it you have thoroughly examined the Clockworks for jinxes and curses?”

“As best I could,” the custodian/groundskeeper said. “I know some basic jinx detection and removal charms, that's how I removed that little jinx she put on them before –” He looked meaningfully at Alexandra, who maintained an innocent expression, with effort. “But I'm not a licensed dejinxer.”

“I'm aware of that, Mr. Journey. However, the nature of this accident does not suggest a high degree of skill or sophistication.”

“It wasn't an accident!” said Alexandra, and simultaneously, Larry said, “It wasn't me!”

“I did not invite either of you to speak yet!” Ms. Grimm snapped, and they both fell silent.

She laid a finger on her chin and her eyes narrowed as she regarded them from beneath long dark lashes.

“It is most likely,” she said at last, “that your earlier tampering with the Clockworks – yes, I know about that, Miss Quick – resulted in their unpredictable behavior. However, to be on the safe side, we're going to have to have them all thoroughly inspected, and until then, I'm afraid I cannot allow them to operate near students.”

“That'll be a problem in the cafeteria,” said Mr. Journey. “Unless...”

“Yes, I know. Kitchen elves,” sighed Ms. Grimm. “I am not looking forward to the owls.” She turned her attention back to Larry and Alexandra. “But you, Mister Albo, can lend a hand in the kitchens.”

“You... you're going to make me work in the kitchens?” Larry repeated, sounding appalled. “With *elves*?”

“Yes. Do you have a problem with that?” She smiled at him, and something about her expression was very reminiscent of Galen when she did. Larry gulped. “No, Ma'am,” he said weakly.

“You'll work the morning shift... beginning at four o'clock,” she said. Larry looked as if he were trying to swallow curdled milk. “Now, don't look at me like that, Mister Albo. It means none of your classmates will see you, and you'll have your evenings free at last. Although I suspect you're going to have to get to bed much earlier. A shame, that will probably preclude the Dueling Club, won't it, since now the only time you'll have to do your homework is immediately after class.” She sighed, and turned her attention to Alexandra. “As for you, Miss Quick, obviously you and Mister Albo need to be kept even further apart, so you'll continue to do detention in the evening, in the library.”

“The library?” Alexandra wondered if she'd heard correctly.

“Yes. Students are in there all day and Mrs. Minder tells me they leave books scattered everywhere, not to mention an appalling assortment of gums and candies left stuck beneath chairs and tables. You'll have plenty to do.”

Alexandra opened her mouth, and Ms. Grimm said, “That will be all. Both of you may return to class. Mister Albo, you leave first.”

Larry murmured, “Yes, Ma'am,” and backed his way to the door before exiting.

“Someone tried to kill me,” Alexandra said, staring defiantly into Ms. Grimm's eyes, after Larry had left.

“That's highly doubtful,” said Ms. Grimm.

“Whoever it is has tried three times,” Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm arched her eyebrows. “Three times?”

“At the Invisible Bridge, when Galen tried to eat me and Larry, and last night.”

If Alexandra had been hoping to surprise Ms. Grimm, she was disappointed. The Dean maintained her cool expression.

“You have an unfortunate habit of being wherever trouble happens, Miss Quick, and quite often, you

are the cause of said trouble. I assure you, no harm will come to you from anyone else. I take the safety of all my students very seriously. But I cannot protect you from yourself.”

“Or from your cat, apparently,” Alexandra replied.

Ms. Grimm's eyes narrowed to slits as her forehead creased into a downward 'V.' “Once again, you are rapidly exhausting any latitude I'm willing to give you as a result of your unfortunate experience. Please return to class, Miss Quick.” Her tone did not brook further discussion, so Alexandra silently turned around and marched to the door.

“Guess it will be harder to kill me in the library, at least,” she muttered, just loud enough for the two grown-ups to hear her, before she exited the Dean's office.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Although David and Anna were now taking her more seriously, they still weren't convinced that Ms. Grimm was trying to kill her, or indeed, that anyone was.

“The Invisible Bridge could have been an accident,” Anna said, in study hall that night.

“And you said yourself you're the one who opened the windows in the attic so that cat could get at you,” David pointed out.

“And you *did* tamper with the Clockworks, with your dogger – I mean, your made-up charm,” added Anna.

“So it's all a coincidence? You think these things keep happening to me just because I'm *troublesome*?”

Her friends looked at each other.

“Not exactly,” said David hesitantly.

“We're certainly not saying you deserve bad things happening to you!” Anna added quickly.

“Fine!” Alexandra said. “Well, I'll behave myself and I won't cause any more trouble. Then you'll see.”

“That would be something to see, all right,” David said.

Alexandra glared at him, and caught Anna trying to stifle a giggle.

“In the meantime,” she declared, “I'm going to be researching the Dark Convention.”

She left her friends staring after her, as she left the study hall to head for her first detention in the library.

Chapter 14 — The Dark Convention

The library was closed, but Mrs. Minder was there to let Alexandra in. “Good evening, Miss Quick,” she said cheerfully. “I hope you’re ready to work! This is detention, so you won’t be sitting around reading books, you know!” She wagged a finger in a friendly fashion.

“I know, Mrs. Minder.” Even if she was just going to be cleaning tables and shelving books, she liked being in the library much better than being in the hallways, or outside raking leaves.

Alexandra expected to be handed a sponge, a scraper, and a spray bottle of cleaning solution – she had had to clean quite a few desks after school at Larkin Mills Elementary. When she asked for her cleaning supplies, however, Mrs. Minder looked as if she’d asked for a bucket of worms.

“Clockworks perform manual labor like Muggles,” she said scornfully. “But since our Clockworks have been taken away – thank goodness! – you are to clean the good old-fashioned way. With magic.”

And so Alexandra received the first of several unexpected benefits from her detention in the library. Mrs. Minder had to teach her some basic cleaning and gum-removal charms. This was more than Alexandra had learned in her entire semester in Mr. Newton’s class, since he insisted on drilling the remedial students over and over again in Basic Wand Positions and Movements, and only allowed them to perform the most rudimentary (and in Alexandra’s opinion, worthless) charms.

“I’m going to stay late to supervise you tonight,” she said, “but Bran and Poe will assist you starting tomorrow. Tonight they’re repairing damaged books, which takes a bit of skill.”

Alexandra nodded peaceably. She actually rather enjoyed the work, now that she could do something with her wand. She went from table to table, exclaiming, “*Tergeo!*” and “*Scourgify!*” with such enthusiasm that Mrs. Minder reminded her that she was in a library.

“But there’s no one else here!” Alexandra protested.

“You should still use your *library voice*,” Mrs. Minder said in a hushed library voice. “And besides, at this rate you’re going to strip varnish from the tables.”

By the time Mrs. Minder released her for the evening, Alexandra had cleaned almost every chair and table in the library. She would have cleaned all of them, except several times she was distracted by things carved into the old wooden tables, such as ‘Adolfus & Ada’ with a heart around the names, and ‘*Magisterum Silencio!*’ and ‘Orson has wrackspurts!’ For decades students had apparently been using their wands to inscribe things in the tables, and it didn’t seem that library furniture was replaced very often.

There was a celebratory feeling at breakfast the next morning. The lines where the students had previously waited for Clockworks to serve them were no more. Instead, every table had an assortment of silver platters being magically replenished with pancakes, waffles, fruit, hot cereal, sausage links, eggs, muffins, cornbread, and danishes, as fast as the kids could fill their plates.

“This is how it should be every day!” Darla proclaimed happily, serving herself a perfectly crisp, golden-brown waffle. Alexandra watched as fresh waffles popped back onto the platter out of thin air.

Not everyone was happy, though.

“It doesn’t just appear by magic, you know,” David said ominously. And when everyone looked at him, he added, “Well, okay, it does, but not by itself.”

“Oh, David,” Angelique sighed. “Can’t you give it a rest?”

“Sure, why should you care about a little thing like slave labor?” David sneered at her.

“I notice you’re not going hungry in protest,” Angelique pointed out, gesturing at his plate full of sausage and eggs.

David scowled. "You know what? You're right. Maybe ASPEW should declare a hunger strike!" He pushed his plate away.

Anna, who was still wearing her ASPEW button, suddenly stopped chewing and seemed reluctant to meet David's eyes.

"Well, it's Alexandra's fault we don't have Clockworks serving us," said Darla. The story of Alexandra's brush with fiery death had gotten around the school, although the versions were not all consistent and none were completely accurate. She had heard one version that had Larry heroically diving into the flames to save her. She suspected Larry was responsible for spreading that one.

"Yeah, it's my fault," she said. "David, I'm going to meet the library elves tonight. So I'll ask them what they think of ASPEW."

"Fine," David said. "I'll see you in class." He got up from the table, leaving his breakfast behind. Anna watched him go uncertainly, and then began chewing again, slowly.

"He's going to get pretty hungry," murmured Darla, with an amused look.

In Remedial Charms, and then Remedial Transfiguration, David pestered Alexandra with a list of questions he wanted her to ask the elves, until she finally told him to shush. "I don't need you telling me what to say!" she hissed at him, before Mr. Hobbes made them both demonstrate that day's lesson in front of the class. Trying to one-up each other, they both generated piles of needles from a box of matches, leaving both of them annoyed at the draw, but Mr. Hobbes quite pleased.

Mrs. Minder let her into the library that night, as before. "Since you've almost finished cleaning all the furniture," she said, "you'll get started learning to shelve books and also to prepare new cards for the Card Catalog." As she spoke, she led Alexandra through the dim, silent stacks to a room behind her office, lit only by candles sitting on a pair of very low, ancient-looking desks. Seated at the desks, working their way through two stacks of books piled high above their heads, were a pair of elves.

Alexandra recognized them as elves because she'd seen house-elves in the Goblin Market, but whereas the elves on the street had been dressed in mere rags and scraps, the library elves were fully clothed, albeit in haphazard fashion. One was engulfed in a fluffy red sweater and wore an old, wide-brimmed black hat with a hole in it; the other had a mismatched pair of children's sneakers that swallowed his feet, a green and white moth-eaten scarf wrapped around his neck, and a rather frilly white blouse.

The elf with the blouse looked up, and its bulbous eyes went wide, then it croaked in a decidedly male voice, "Mrs. Minder! Is this the naughty girl who is going to help Bran and Poe?" The other elf also looked up, and gazed with unblinking curiosity at Alexandra.

"Miss Quick, this is Bran, and this is Poe." She smiled at the elves. "Yes, this is Alexandra."

Both elves hopped off their chairs and shuffled over to Alexandra. They shuffled because Bran was practically swimming in his sweater, and Poe could barely walk in his ridiculously oversized shoes.

"Does Miss Quick like bookses?" Bran asked hopefully.

"We hopes Miss Quick will come to the library often," Poe said, almost pleadingly.

"Bran and Poe don't get to talk to children anymore," Bran said sadly.

"Except when they're naughty and have to serve detention, and most of them aren't really happy to be here." Poe looked mournful to the point of nearly bursting into tears.

"I love books," Alexandra said. "I like the library."

Both elves' ears perked up. Mrs. Minder said, "Remember that list of tasks, dears. Miss Quick isn't to be reading while she's serving detention."

"Yes, Mrs. Minder," they said in unison.

"You mind Bran and Poe," Mrs. Minder said to Alexandra. "I know they're just elves, but I've left

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very strict instructions and you're to do as they say. I hope they tell me you were a diligent worker.”

“Yes, Mrs. Minder,” Alexandra said.

She waited until Mrs. Minder's footsteps had carried her back to the entrance to the library and she heard the librarian locking the doors, then grinned at the elves.

“So, you must know how to find books that are off-limits, right?”



Alexandra soon discovered that it would be an understatement to say Bran and Poe loved books. They treated each and every tome as if it were their child. They looked aghast when they found one on the floor, or worse, left open face-down on a table (“It ruins the spine!” wailed Bran. “Our poor bookses!”), or worst of all, ripped, defaced, or soiled. (“*Coffee stains!*” screeched Poe that night, in anguish.)

Nervously, hesitantly, apologetically, but firmly, they insisted that Alexandra actually do what Mrs. Minder had told them to tell her to do, which was to reshelve, and look for books that had been improperly shelved by students randomly pulling them from their proper locations and then sticking them back anywhere they found a space. Alexandra didn't really mind, though it was tedious, and while she was learning the shelving system, she was able to talk to the elves.

“Where did you get your clothes?” she asked. “You know, I could give you a pair of my shoes that would fit better –” But Bran and Poe's eyes widened in horror.

“Oh no!” they both squealed. “Please don't give Bran and Poe shoes, please, Alexandra Quick! Please, naughty Alexandra who loves bookses wouldn't be so cruel? Bran and Poe are only doing what our Librarian told us to do!”

Alexandra calmed them down only by promising she would not give them her shoes, then asked, “But I don't understand, it looks like all your clothes used to belong to other kids.”

“They came from the Lost and Found,” Bran said. “Once a year, Dean Grimm –” His voice dropped to a hush when he spoke the Dean's name. “– allows all the elves to choose something from the Lost and Found. Since they was Lost, you see, no one is *giving* them to us.”

“But –” Alexandra started to point out that technically, Dean Grimm was, but then decided perhaps this was not the right thing to say. “Why is it bad for someone to give you clothes? If you don't mind my asking,” she added hastily, as both their eyes grew wide and worried again.

“Giving an elf clothing...” Poe gulped. “It means you are setting that elf... *free!*” He spoke the word as if it tasted bitter on his tongue.

“That's bad?” she asked.

Once again, their eyes popped wide open. “Where would Bran and Poe go?” they wailed.

“Away from the library?” Bran said tremulously.

“Away from our bookses?” Poe whimpered.

“Who would repair their damaged spines and mend their torn pages?”

“Or make sure that bookses about *Mythical* Beasts is shelved separately from bookses about *Legendary* Beasts?”

“Even Mrs. Minder sometimes confuses them,” Bran whispered, nodding.

“Do all the elves feel this way?” Alexandra asked. “Even the ones who work in the kitchens?”

“House-elves and kitchen-elves and library-elves, we all does what we's supposed to do, Alexandra Quick,” said Bran.

“We Charmbridge elves is very fortunate. Dean Grimm –” The elf lowered his voice again. “– almost never curses any of us or turns us into bats or Flobberworms.”

“*Almost* never?” she exclaimed.

“We thinks it's better to be a Charmbridge elf than a Charmbridge student,” said Poe.

Alexandra wasn't sure how to argue with that.

Bran and Poe had been told to let Alexandra leave at eight o'clock. Bran was able to unlock the library doors for her just by wiggling his finger. Both elves made her promise repeatedly that she would be back the next night, and seemed delighted to have her company. “We used to be able to help students look for bookses!” said Bran, and then his ears drooped. “But now we hears that some wizards doesn't want elves around so the Dean,” again his voice dropped to a hush, “says we has to stay out of sight.”

“That's too bad,” Alexandra said, not sure exactly what she should think about all this, and waved good-bye to Bran and Poe. “I'll see you tomorrow night,” she promised them, one more time.

David and a whole group of students from the ASPEW club were waiting to talk to Alexandra the next morning. They took over the table where Alexandra and the other sixths usually sat, squeezing most of her friends towards the other end or else forcing them to move to another table.

“They didn't really sound like they *want* to be free,” Alexandra told them.

“They've been enchanted that way!” said one eager, round-faced, older boy, with zeal burning in his eyes.

“Well then you'll have to unenchant them if you want to free them, won't you?” Alexandra said.

“We need to persuade the rest of the wizarding world that they should be freed from their enchantments... all of them!” said the President of the ASPEW club, a blonde girl named Dewshine Jennifer, who wore shimmery blue and white robes, and an assortment of flowers stuck in her hair.

“Okay, but since they like working here —”

“They only *think* they like working here!” another boy insisted. “They can't imagine another life!”

“Well, yeah. Bran and Poe would never want to leave the library. They love it there.”

“That's brainwashing,” said David. “Can't you see what being enslaved has done to them, Alex?”

“I don't know,” she said uncertainly. “What exactly would they do if you did free them?”

“Work,” said David. “And get paid for it!”

“Maybe they wouldn't want to work,” said Dewshine. “Maybe they'd want to form their own elfish society. We could help them, let them build their own little communities.” Her eyes had a far-off, dreamy look as her voice waxed poetic. “They have their own magic, you know, and it's different from ours, and they are wiser than anyone knows. Imagine them teaching us and us teaching them, elves and wizards living together in harmony, as equals...”

“You goblins are *insane!*” yelled Larry, from another table. He'd emerged from his stint working in the kitchens, and was watching the impromptu ASPEW meeting, keeping a safe distance away from Alexandra. “Elves and wizards as equals? I work with those little boogers every morning! No way is an elf my equal!”

“I'm sure they try not to make you feel bad about it, Larry,” Alexandra called back. Larry flushed, amidst general laughter from all the kids within earshot.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

After the first couple of nights, Alexandra found that she really did not have that much to do during detention. Bran and Poe were far more efficient at reshelving books than she was, and they truly enjoyed it. They seemed both apologetic and worried at having to let Alexandra do what they regarded to be their job. The sincerity and dedication with which they handled the books under their safekeeping made Alexandra far more conscientious about her task than any lectures from Mrs. Minder or threats from Dean Grimm could have achieved. It was obvious that mishandling library books literally pained the elves.

She remained uncertain about the goals of the American Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare,

which seemed noble enough but didn't actually seem to take the elves' opinions into account. She was mindful about what David had said, that if the elves had been enchanted to serve wizards they might really be unable to imagine freedom, but whenever she broached the topic with Bran and Poe, the two elves became most distraught. She had to promise them several times that she had no intention of offering them any of her clothes.

They now usually finished shelving books soon after Alexandra began her evening's detention, and Alexandra was beginning to coax and wheedle them into letting her look at books that were supposed to be off-limits to sixth graders.

"Mrs. Minder wouldn't like it, no, she wouldn't, Alexandra Quick," Poe said, his lip trembling.

"Alexandra Quick shouldn't be reading about Dark magic," Bran whispered. "Alexandra Quick is too young!"

"I don't want to actually *learn* Dark magic," she said. "I just want to learn about the Dark Convention." The elves flinched.

She tried another approach. "Shouldn't you be encouraging students to read more books? They wouldn't have been written if they weren't supposed to be read!"

Bran and Poe looked at each other, their huge eyes blinking uncertainly. Alexandra had put two of their most compelling responsibilities at odds with each other.

"But some bookses is not appropriate for young children," Bran said in an admonishing tone that was almost identical to Mrs. Minder's.

They really had no chance against Alexandra's persistence, though. She cajoled them over the course of the next week, and in truth, practically bullied them, until finally they relented, wringing their hands as they watched Alexandra give orders to the Card Catalog and then fetch books from shelves that would normally be inaccessible to her.

Alexandra soon learned that throughout history there had always been secret (and sometimes not-so-secret) societies of Dark wizards. The Dark Convention was just the most recent name given to them in America. She also noticed that who was considered "Dark" varied according to time and place. She remembered the Dean telling them at the beginning of the semester that voodoo was classified as a Dark Art. From articles she read in archived newspapers, it seemed that every year, the Confederation Wizards' Congress rejected petitions to allow voodoo under a Cultural Practices Exemption.

There were so many books to read through, and many of them were old, thick, and much more boring than she would have anticipated from anything that was off-limits.

Alexandra's questions in Wizarding World History were beginning to annoy Ms. Grinder as well.

"You're only required to name the countries whose Ministries are members of the International Confederation of Warlocks, Miss Quick," she said.

"But I read that Dark wizards are called warlocks," Alexandra said. "So doesn't that make the International Confederation of Warlocks a Dark conspiracy?"

Grinder sighed. "Word usage changes over time. It's true that 'warlock' is no longer a favorable term. Of course if they would change the organization to something less patriarchal, like the International Confederation of Witches and Wizards, it would be much more appropriate."

Alexandra's fascination with the Dark Arts was also getting around the school.

Alexandra and Anna were paired with Constance and Forbearance in Practical Magical Exercise class one afternoon. Ms. Shirtliffe had split the Ozarker twins up, telling them they couldn't always rely on one another, so Alexandra and Constance were trying to beat Anna and Forbearance in an enlarging contest. Constance had just turned a ball into a pincushion. Anna turned it into a small pillow. Forbearance turned the pillow into larger pillow, and Alexandra turned it into a beanbag chair.

The other girls all stopped and stared at it. "What is that?" Anna asked.

"Something misshapen and Muggleish," jeered a voice behind them. "Like the sorceress who produced it."

Alexandra turned to face Benjamin and Mordecai Rash.

"Where's your raven, sorceress?" taunted Benjamin.

"Out spying," Alexandra said. "For the Dark Convention. 'Cause, you know, I'm a member. I'm actually starting a Dark Convention Club here at school. Want to join?"

Constance and Forbearance gasped. "Alex, don't make jokes about things like that," Anna said nervously. And added to the Rash twins, "She's joking."

"I wouldn't be 'stonished if she wasn't," said Mordecai.

"If I were a sorceress I'd turn you both into toads," Alexandra said, waving her wand threateningly.

Mordecai sneered. "Just on account of your father bein' a Dark wizard doesn't make you nothing more than a sorry little brat. I hope the Dark Convention gives remediatin' in curses."

Alexandra glowered and took a step towards him, before Anna grabbed her arm. "Alex!"

"You have no idea who my father was!" Alexandra snapped.

"You neither, from what I hear!" Mordecai replied with a smirk. Anna had to grab Alexandra with both arms now. "Alex, ignore him!" she pleaded.

"Constance, Forbearance, you should stay away from her," said Mordecai.

The Ozarker girls looked down. "We'll consider your advice," Constance murmured.

"And thank you for your concern," Forbearance said politely.

The Rash twins stalked off.

"Why are you so nice to them?" Alexandra demanded.

"There's never harm in nice," said Constance.

"Nor detention," Forbearance added. Alexandra flushed a little, while Anna looked away, trying not to smile.

Back in her room that night, following another evening of book-shelving and then reading in the library, Alexandra pulled out a book she'd borrowed called *'American Warlock Lore: Tales of the Dark.'* Anna looked appalled.

"How did you get that?" she asked tremulously. "We're not supposed to read books like that!"

"How does forbidding us to read things make sense?" Alexandra scoffed. "Aren't we supposed to learn things at school?"

Anna gave her a worried look. "What?" Alexandra demanded.

"Why *are* you so interested in Dark magic?" Anna asked quietly.

Alexandra put her book down. "I'm not interested in Dark magic," she said. "I'm interested in the Dark Convention."

"But why? Don't you know what kids are saying about you?"

"So what? Are you going to stop hanging around me because you think I'm a sorceress?"

Anna flinched, and looked down. "No," she said quietly.

Alexandra sighed, and chewed on her lip a moment.

"What Benjamin and Mordecai said," she mumbled. "It might be true."

Anna looked up at her in shock.

"Not about me being a sorceress!" Alexandra added quickly, with a frown.

Anna waited, her eyes wide. Alexandra had not talked about her father, or her locket, or much at all about her family, since coming to Charmbridge. She looked at Anna hesitantly, but she read only openness and sympathy in the other girl's face.

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"I *don't* know who my father was," she said. And she told Anna about her mother, and her growing up in Larkin Mills with a stepfather who was not really her father, and finally about her discovering the locket and the bracelet in her mother's closet. She held it up to show Anna, and said, "Quiet, Charlie!" as the raven squawked excitedly at the sight of it.

Alexandra could open the locket easily now. Anna looked at the moving cameo picture inside, and back at Alexandra.

"Well, he does look like he *could* be your father," she admitted. "But you can't really tell."

"So, maybe he really was a Dark wizard," Alexandra said. "Maybe that's why I never met him. Mr. Journey said around the time I was born the Dark Convention was trying to overthrow the Confederation and they lost, and a lot of wizards went to prison or died. Maybe my father was one of them. I don't know if he loved my mother or not or if he ever told her anything about being a wizard, but maybe he just disappeared one day, and my mother wouldn't have known anything about what happened, because she's a Muggle so no one would have told her."

Anna was thoughtful for a long time.

"My father told me there was a conspiracy back then," she said at last. "It was named after the warlock in charge, but I can't remember his name. But, suppose your father was one of those Dark wizards?" She looked at Alexandra. "Being Dark isn't something you inherit, Alex. Magic is, but Darkness is something you choose."

Alexandra nodded slowly. "I know," she said. "But..." She looked at her locket. "I still want to know who my father was." The man in the locket, who might or might not have been her father, winked back at her.



Bran and Poe were also increasingly worried about Alexandra's preoccupation with the Dark Convention.

"It's not right," said Bran.

"It's not wholesome, this reading about nasty Dark wizards," said Poe.

"Do you think I'm going to turn into a Dark sorceress because I read some books about them?" Alexandra demanded.

The elves shrunk back. "No, of course not, Alexandra Quick!"

"Trust me, I have an important reason for reading about this."

"Alexandra Quick isn't supposed to be reading during detention," Bran suggested slyly.

"Mrs. Minder wouldn't like finding out what Alexandra Quick has been reading," Poe agreed.

"Mrs. Minder wouldn't like finding out that you've been *letting* me for two weeks," Alexandra pointed out.

The poor elves had no counter-argument to that. Alexandra felt a little guilty about pushing them around, but her reason was important enough, in her mind.

Ms. Grinder was not particularly helpful the next day, even though this time Alexandra waited until after class to ask her about Dark wizard conspiracies.

"*Why* is this so interesting to you, Miss Quick?" she asked in frustration. "It's all about power-hungry men who want control, that's all."

"So shouldn't we try to keep them from getting control?" Alexandra asked. "By knowing about them and what they're up to?"

Grinder grinned humorlessly. "Very clever, young lady, but I sense your interest is much more a matter of *self*-interest."

"I read about the Reign of You-Know-Who in Britain," Alexandra persisted.

Their Wizarding World History textbook didn't cover anything more recent than 1960 or so, but she had found references to more recent events elsewhere. She wasn't sure why they called it "The Reign of You-Know-Who" since some of the books actually named the Dark Lord, but Grinder paused and looked down at Alexandra.

"So?" she asked.

"So that was about the time I was born."

"It happened in Britain, not here."

"But there was another conspiracy here at the same time, right?"

"The Thorn Circle? What *have* you been reading, Miss Quick?"

Alexandra's eyes lit up triumphantly, and then she quickly composed herself again.

"I'm just curious. What happened to the Death Eaters who weren't captured or killed after Voldymorty died?"

Ms. Grinder winced a little. "I suppose they went into hiding."

"So some could have hidden here?"

Ms. Grinder stared at her. "Miss Quick, I am *delighted* at your enthusiasm and thirst for knowledge, and I hope this enthusiasm carries over into your other subjects, but your score on the last quiz suggests that you would do better to apply yourself to material we are studying in class. The Death Eater regime in Britain will not be on your SPAWN."

Alexandra was undeterred, not even by her roommate's lack of encouragement.

"You think Dean Grimm was a *Death Eater*?" Anna blurted out, in a horrified whisper, when Alexandra shared her latest theory that night.

"She sort of has an English accent, don't you think?"

"Not really." Anna was looking at her the way Brian used to look at her when she voiced one of her more outrageous ideas.

Alexandra scowled and slapped shut '*An Inquiry into Death Eater Activity in America*,' which Bran and Poe had checked out to her with many misgivings.

"You still don't believe me!"

Anna's lip trembled, but she looked Alexandra in the eye.

"I don't believe Dean Grimm is trying to kill you." Her voice was almost inaudible. "It just doesn't make sense."

"It does! Somehow."

"Even if she *were* a Death Eater, why would she want to kill you?" Anna persisted.

"Maybe it has something to do with the Thorn Circle!" Alexandra said dramatically.

"What?" Anna blinked. "What's the Thorn Circle?"

"That conspiracy your dad told you about. Ms. Grinder told me the name. Except not very much about it." Alexandra frowned. "Anyway –"

"Alexandra, please," Anna pleaded. "It's like you're obsessed with this stuff. Everyone says –"

"I don't care what everyone says!"

Alexandra was angry now, and Anna paled before her outrage. Brian would have recognized the signs that Alexandra had passed the point of being reasonable, but Anna hadn't yet learned. She could only bite her lip as her roommate turned her back and climbed into bed.

Chapter 15 — Thanksgiving

There was a surprising dearth of books about the Thorn Circle in the library, and Bran and Poe were resisting being helpful as much as they could. The Card Catalog was only able to produce three books that directly mentioned the Thorn Circle, all of them checked out.

“If the Thorn Circle was a bunch of Dark wizards who tried to destroy the Confederation, how could there not be lots of books written about it?” Alexandra demanded. “There's tons of books about Moldymort and the Death Eaters.”

The library elves flinched, then Bran said, “Elves doesn't know about such things. Elves just shelve bookses like they is supposed to.”

Alexandra glared at the cards fluttering in the air in front of her, as if it were their fault. “Who checked these books out?”

“We doesn't know,” Poe said. And added, with a trace of satisfaction, “Only the Librarian can tell you that.” Alexandra could hardly ask Mrs. Minder to track down books she shouldn't even know about, much less try to check out.

Alexandra looked at Bran and Poe in irritation. They looked down at the ground, and Alexandra sighed. It was clear she was going to need their help.

“I'm trying to find out who my father is,” she said to the elves.

They looked up.

“Alexandra Quick doesn't know who her father is?” Bran asked slowly.

She shook her head. “And all these bad things everyone says I'm not supposed to read about – they happened around the time I was born. Or right before I was born. So... it's possible my father was one of the Thorn Circle.”

She leaned forward, using the same earnest persuasiveness she had once used on Brian.

“Won't you please help me find my dad?”

The elves looked at each other. Alexandra saw with a mixture of guilt and satisfaction that they looked close to tears.

“But if Alexandra Quick's father was... was a bad wizard,” Bran gulped, wringing his hands and trembling, “Alexandra Quick would do better not to find him, Bran thinks.”

“Alexandra Quick is a good girl,” Poe said. Alexandra looked at the elf with a raised eyebrow, remembering how many times they had called her “naughty.” The elf looked chagrined. “Despite reading things she is not supposed to read and doing things she oughtn't not to do and...”

“Yeah, I got it,” Alexandra muttered. “Look, I don't want to become Dark. But I have to know. I just have to.” Her voice was almost pleading. Her sincerity was not entirely feigned this time.

The elves' shoulders slumped. “We really can't find out who has these bookses,” Bran said. “Only the Librarian can.”

“But there is the Interlibrary Loan,” said Poe, after a pause.

“You mean we could get books from *another* library?” Alexandra asked excitedly.

“It needs the Librarian's authorization,” said Bran.

Alexandra waited expectantly.

The elves looked at each other again and sighed.

“We knows how to send a book request owl,” Bran said.

“We does it for Mrs. Minder all the time,” Poe said proudly.

Alexandra swept the two elves into a big hug. They both exhaled with loud squeeing noises. “I knew

you could help me!”

“We’re going to help get Alexandra Quick in trouble!” Bran gasped, hardly able to breathe.

“No way. How could a few books get me in trouble?”

The library elves told her that it could be days before they’d receive any books back. They’d have to send owls to other libraries that shared books with Charmbridge Academy, and librarians there would have to search for books matching their request (“Some elves in other libraries is not as diligent as us,” said Poe), and then they would have to be sent back by owl to Charmbridge.

“And then Bran and Poe has to hide the bookses from the Librarian,” Bran said. Both elves groaned, and began butting their heads together repeatedly.

“What are you doing?” Alexandra exclaimed.

“Bran and Poe is supposed to do whatever the Librarian tells us,” Bran said tearfully, rubbing his bruised forehead.

“Doing things that’s not allowed is naughty,” said Poe. “And hiding things from the Librarian is worse.”

“Bran and Poe is bad library elves!” And they began smacking their heads together again, loudly enough to make Alexandra jump and wince at the thud each impact made.

“Stop! Stop it!” she cried. She grabbed each elf by a shoulder and pushed them apart. “It’s me who’s making you do it, so I’m the one who should be punished!”

“Alexandra Quick is already being punished,” said Bran. “She’s in detention.”

Alexandra didn’t feel quite as smug about her victory when she left the library that night. She tried to put aside her misgivings, telling herself that Bran and Poe had really *wanted* to help her, after all. But she couldn’t help feeling there was something wrong about the elves feeling a need to punish themselves just for helping her check out a book.

She knew what David would say. She wished she could talk about it with Anna, but after last night, Anna was sulking again and avoiding Alexandra. At least that was how Alexandra saw it. In truth, she was sulking and avoiding Anna because she didn’t want to admit that she’d hurt Anna’s feelings again.

“She’s too sensitive!” was all Alexandra would say to David, when he asked why she and Anna hadn’t been speaking at breakfast.

“Seems like I heard that before,” he muttered.

Alexandra’s attitude was apparent to more than just David and Anna. Darla and Angelique now barely spoke to her, and even Constance and Forbearance seemed to be avoiding her. Murmurs and whispers followed her down the hallways, and it wasn’t just Larry or the Rashes who were jeering and calling her “sorceress” during P.M.E. class. When Charlie came to visit her in class, Ms. Shirtliffe now appeared immediately and told her that familiars weren’t allowed in class and that the raven must be locked in a cage if it wouldn’t stay away.

Alexandra could shrug off the taunts and rumors, mostly. She hadn’t been popular in Larkin Mills, and hadn’t cared. She was used to being treated like an outcast because she was different. However, here there were much older kids who were not intimidated by her, and so sometimes she wasn’t just teased, but bullied. Alexandra became a frequent target of tripping and fumble-fingered jinxes, and once, the Frizzy-Haired Hex. When she stormed into her room that evening, her hair sticking out stiffly in every direction like a huge black bottle brush, even Charlie made raucous laughing noises until Alexandra threatened to throw the raven’s cage out the window.

Anna hadn’t laughed. She’d only looked at Alexandra, and then gone back to her studying. It took Alexandra almost an hour in the bathroom, using her wand, to make her hair settle, and strands of it were still prone to sticking up at odd angles for days afterwards.

CHAPTER 15

Alexandra endured all of this without complaint, and even without retaliation. She went to bed each night increasingly angry, and, although she would never have admitted it, increasingly lonely.

In Larkin Mills, at least she'd had Brian, and she remembered acutely how bad she'd felt the last few days before she left, knowing that she had wrecked her only friendship. Now Anna was silent and stand-offish, and Alexandra felt very much alone again. But the only thing that stung her worse than her loneliness was her pride.

She was still friends with David, but he remained very active with ASPEW and other “goblin” causes, and Alexandra's obsession with the Dark Convention and the Thorn Circle absorbed all her attention, so she didn't see him much outside of class and mealtimes.

It was late November, just before the Thanksgiving Feast. Although some students went home for the Thanksgiving holiday, Charmbridge didn't encourage a mass exodus of students, finding it disruptive, and so parents who wanted their children home over the long weekend had to arrange for transportation themselves, which left those with Muggle families, like David and Alexandra, stuck at school.

Alexandra was missing home more than she would have admitted to anyone. Her mother rarely cooked a huge feast; in fact, Claudia, Archie, and Alexandra were more likely to eat a pre-cooked meal purchased at a deli, or else go out to a restaurant. However, Alexandra did associate the holiday with one of the rare times when her mother was warm and affectionate, and even her stepfather made an effort to be kind, if only for her mother's sake.

No books had come back from Bran and Poe's Interlibrary Loan request yet, so Alexandra was spending some time actually doing her homework. It was obvious to her that she had improved rapidly since the beginning of the year, and that she was far superior to her fellow remedial students. It frustrated her that this was not so obvious to her teachers, but she consoled herself with the knowledge that she would be in regular classes next semester. She looked forward to having Anna and Constance and Forbearance in her classes, until she remembered that Anna and Constance and Forbearance were all being stand-offish towards her. (The other girls would have said it was the opposite, but Alexandra couldn't simultaneously feel sorry for herself and blame her predicament on herself.)

Alexandra believed she excelled in Remedial Alchemy, naturally, and that only Mr. Grue's animosity kept him from recognizing this. She'd scored at the top of the class in nearly every test, and now that they were actually being permitted to brew the simplest of potions, she was finishing much more quickly than her classmates.

Grue's response, when Alexandra grew too smug, was, “Being the best of the worst is nothing to be proud of, Miss Quick.” This usually wiped the smile off her face and made her angry and resentful – so much so that she didn't notice the impact Grue's words had on the rest of the class. Indeed, she didn't notice that Grue was no kinder to them than he was to her. The other remedial students, however, certainly noticed that Alexandra considered herself better than them, and so “Mudblood” and “sorceress” were whispered behind her back more frequently in Remedial Alchemy than in any other class.

Alexandra reacted in typical fashion, by holding her head up and assuming a cocky attitude. So for their last test before Thanksgiving, she entered the classroom cocky and confident, assured that she had nothing to worry about.

Mr. Grue was now requiring them to conduct a practical demonstration as well as complete a written test, and the students had been permitted to practice for it during P.M.E. class. Under Grue's baleful eye, Alexandra used an Elemental Scale to convert a bronze potion stirrer into iron, and then into bismuth.

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“Bronze to iron to *lead*, Miss Quick,” said Grue, marking off a point. Some of the other students had only managed to melt their bronze stirrers into puddles of copper and tin.

“Bismuth is harder,” Alexandra said. “And it's used for ingested potions where -”

“Don't you tell me what bismuth is used for!” Grue snapped at her. “I am not giving extra points because you snuck a peek at next year's textbook! In my class you *do as instructed*, not what you think would be more interesting! If you do not follow instructions to the letter, sooner or later you're going to poison yourself. Or worse, someone else!” He scribbled furiously on his grade sheet. “Pass – barely. Do the next part as instructed, Miss Quick!”

The other students snickered while Alexandra's cheeks glowed. She began brewing her Blister Tincture.

The ingredients were all in the supply closet, which Mr. Grue only unlocked during class. Each of them had a drawer with their name on it, where the alchemical materials they'd purchased at the beginning of the year were stored. Access to alchemical supplies outside of class, unless one joined the Potions Club, was yet another privilege restricted to upper-class students.

Alexandra carried her box of supplies back to her desk. She set the paste base in her cauldron to boiling, and carefully extracted wasp wings and crushed pineapple seeds from her box to stir into the thickening solution. Antimony and a tiny droplet of doxy-venom came next. The concoction smelled awful, but was beginning to turn the pale shade of orange her textbook said it was supposed to at this stage.

She watched the other students idly as her Burn Tincture brewed. Lydia Ragland was nearly in tears because her mixture had turned black and fused to the bottom of her cauldron. Thomas Klaus was still trying to transform his bronze cauldron stirrer. Janet Jackson was frantically trying to stop her cauldron from emitting purple fumes.

Alexandra turned smugly back to her cauldron, and frowned as she noticed it had gone from orange to red, which was not the correct color. She threw in some more antimony, which failed to correct the hue. She looked hastily over at Mr. Grue, who was berating Janet, and drew her wand and murmured, “*Explico*.”

Her cauldron began boiling madly, and Alexandra gasped and took a step backwards as hot bits of paste almost splashed in her face.

“Miss Quick, what are you doing?” demanded Mr. Grue, and then her cauldron erupted in a fireball, spraying the room with burning goo. Alexandra, who was closest, felt searing heat and then the floor hitting the back of her head. She was dimly aware of screams and Mr. Grue roaring something, before she blacked out.



Alexandra had never been in the school's infirmary before, but she knew where she was as soon as she woke up. Her mother was a nurse, so she'd been in many hospitals. Her vision was blurry and her hands and face hurt.

“Good, you're awake,” said a kindly voice. A woman who looked old enough to be Dean Grimm's grandmother, but with bright red hair, leaned over her, holding out a glass. “Have some water, dear.”

Alexandra took the glass and sipped.

“Was anyone else hurt?” she asked, after she swallowed.

“A few minor burns and blisters, some headaches. You're the only one who needed to be kept here, and I'm only going to have you stay the night – just to be safe.” The healer smiled at her. “We'll have dinner brought to you shortly.”

“Thank you,” Alexandra said.

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“Not for you, though. You need to go eat with everyone else.” The old woman was talking to someone else now. Alexandra was confused, until she turned her head and saw Anna sitting in a chair next to her bed, with her back to the wall. She was still wearing her school clothes, and had her hands clasped in her lap.

“I’m not hungry, Mrs. Murphy,” Anna said quietly.

“Too bad,” Mrs. Murphy said firmly, though not unkindly. “I let you stay here until she woke up, but now you’re going to have to go. Miss Quick will be out of the infirmary tomorrow morning. Say good-night, now, and run along.” The red-headed nurse turned and walked with an unusually spry step along the row of mostly empty beds back to her office.

Alexandra was silent for a moment, feeling a stinging in her eyes worse than when her Blister Tincture had blown up in her face.

“I just wanted to make sure you were okay,” said Anna quietly, not meeting Alexandra’s eyes. She stood up to leave.

“Anna, I’m sorry!” Alexandra blurted it out without even thinking about it.

Anna turned back, and looked startled.

“Are you in pain?” she asked.

“No,” said Alexandra, and then realized she was crying.

Alexandra almost never cried, not since she was very little. She hated crying, and she hated most of all crying in front of anyone else. She didn’t even know why she was crying now. It was almost Thanksgiving and she hadn’t seen her mother in months, most of the school thought she was an aspiring sorceress, she’d just blown up her remedial alchemy classroom and was probably going to be expelled, and the best friend she’d made here, whom she had ignored and disregarded, had sat quietly by her bedside waiting to make sure she was okay. But other than that, Alexandra couldn’t think of any reason to be crying. Furiously, she tried to wipe her eyes, and then she couldn’t, because Anna was hugging her, and her hair was pressed against Alexandra’s cheek and getting wet with her tears.

“You’re such a jerk!” Anna said, her voice muffled against Alexandra’s shoulder.

“I know.” Alexandra hugged Anna back, a little awkwardly at first, but after a moment she relaxed slightly and no longer felt self-conscious about it.

Anna sat up. Her eyes were moist too. She held onto Alexandra’s hands.

“I’m not the only one who was worried about you, you know,” she said. “David and Constance and Forbearance all wanted to see you, and even Darla and Angeliqye looked worried. But Mrs. Murphy would only let me in.”

This touched Alexandra more than she could ever admit. She felt a surge of warmth for her friends, and more tears threatened to spill out onto her cheeks.

“Tell them to stop worrying,” she said. “I just got a little singed.”

“What happened?” Anna asked, lowering her voice.

Alexandra shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t understand how my Blister Tincture could have blown up. It was just standard ingredients. I was being careful, Anna, honest. I wasn’t messing around.” She looked down. “I really might get expelled this time. I’m sure Mr. Grue will say it was all my fault.”

Anna was silent. They both heard Mrs. Murphy coughing quietly, standing by the main door to the infirmary. She was allowing the girls a few more moments, but she was obviously serious about sending Anna away.

“I never meant to hurt anyone,” Alexandra said.

“You never do.”

Anna’s tone was casual and matter-of-fact, which made those words sting all the more. Alexandra

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looked up in shock, and Anna's expression softened.

"The first thing you asked," she said slowly, "was whether anyone else was hurt." She squeezed Alexandra's hands. "You really do have a good heart, Alex. Even Dean Grimm has to know that." She smiled hesitantly. Alexandra didn't point out that Dean Grimm wasn't going to care about what was in her heart.

"I'll see you tomorrow," Anna said, and then stood up and walked quietly through the door that Mrs. Murphy was holding open. When it closed, the healer walked to Alexandra's bedside and rubbed some more burn tincture on her face and hands, tsking a little at the tear tracks on her cheeks. Alexandra didn't want to explain or defend herself, so she said nothing. Then Mrs. Murphy retired to her office, and Alexandra felt very much alone again.



She'd been staring at the ceiling for a few minutes or maybe for an hour, she didn't know. Then a pair of sharp cracks got her attention, and she looked down to see two familiar elves standing by her bed with a tray of food.

"Bran and Poe has brought Alexandra Quick dinner," said Bran.

Poe looked more worried. "How is Alexandra Quick feeling?" he asked.

"I'm fine," Alexandra said with forced cheerfulness. "Thank you for bringing me dinner." The two elves beamed. "I thought that would be the kitchen elves' job?"

"Bran and Poe said they knows Alexandra Quick so the kitchen elves gave us her dinner to bring to her," said Bran. He made a prodigious hop up onto her bed, still holding the dinner tray, landing with a clatter of plates and dangerous wobbling of glasses that somehow managed not to spill anything. Alexandra laughed delightedly, and then helped the elves set the tray down in her lap.

"Bran and Poe has good news for Alexandra Quick also," said Bran, as she dipped a piece of crusty bread into her soup before popping it into her mouth. She looked at the elf eagerly and tried to swallow the bread all at once.

"The Interlibrary Loan owl came?" she coughed, and hastily downed a big gulp of water.

"Yes!" exclaimed the elf.

"The bookses Alexandra Quick wanted is in the library now," said Poe.

"Can you bring them to me here?" she whispered.

The elves looked at each other and shook their heads. "They has to be properly checked out. Alexandra Quick must come to the library."

Alexandra sighed, and then remembered how much the elves had stuck their necks out for her, and how ungrateful she probably seemed right now.

"Thanks, guys," she said, meaning it. "I'll come get them tomorrow." And then, as the two elves stood there, she said, "You know, you don't have to keep calling me by my full name. My friends just call me Alex."

The elves' eyes went wide and saucer-like. They looked at each other, and back at her, and were almost breathless as they spoke in unison. "Alexandra Quick wants us to call her... Alex?"

"Only if you want to," Alexandra said.

The elves were profoundly affected by this. Bran trembled, Poe quivered, and both their eyes filled up with tears.

"Alexandra Qui – Alex, is one of the nicest naughty children Bran and Poe has ever seen in detention!" Bran declared.

"Bran and Poe has to go now," said Poe in a hushed voice. "But we will wait for... for Miss Alex to come get her bookses from the library. Good-night... *Alex*."

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With a bow and a crack, the two elves both disappeared into thin air.

Alexandra thought about the library elves, and about her friends, and about the accident in alchemy class, for a long time after she finished eating. She also worried a little bit about Charlie, but knew Anna wouldn't let the raven go neglected.

Eventually, she drifted off to sleep. She dreamed that night about Charlie coming to her in the infirmary and standing watch perched at the foot of her bed. However, when Alexandra woke up, she could only remembering holding on tightly to her locket and her bracelet, believing the raven wanted to steal the bright gold artifacts again, and this made her reach for the jacket hanging by her bed to check in the pocket. She found the locket was indeed still there, and her bracelet was still on her wrist, and she relaxed.

Mrs. Murphy examined her before she left the infirmary, and gave her a little container of Blister Tincture to apply to her cheeks and hands that night. Alexandra hurried back to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, passing students on the way who were already dressed and going to breakfast. They stared at her and whispered, but it didn't bother her so much now. She ignored them, and arrived at her room, to find Anna already dressed and but waiting for her.

Anna smiled, and Charlie squawked a greeting. "How are you feeling?" Anna asked.

"Better," Alexandra said, sincerely. "But I need to clean up and change clothes now."

"I'll wait," said Anna.

Alexandra didn't have time for a long bath, but she cleaned herself as quickly as she could and then got dressed in a clean set of clothes. She and Anna hurried to breakfast, and Alexandra once again ignored the stares and the muttered comments that followed her all the way to their usual table.

"Hey, Alex, you okay?" David asked, sounding genuinely concerned. Constance and Forbearance were both looking at her with concern, and even Darla and Angelique were polite when Alexandra sat down.

"I'm glad you didn't injure yourself seriously," said Darla.

Alexandra bit back on the retort she was about to offer, and just nodded. "Thanks."

"We was awful worried about you," said Constance.

"We wanted to pay you a visit in the infirmary," said Forbearance.

"It's all right," Alexandra said. "Anna told me. But... thanks. All of you." Her gratitude was heartfelt, and it was evident in her voice. Constance and Forbearance looked at her and smiled, and David grinned.

They all wanted to know what happened, and so Alexandra told them, as simply as she could. She left out only the charm she had cast just before her cauldron blew up.

"I don't see how a Blister Tincture could blow up like that," said Anna. "There are no volatile ingredients."

"Not unless Alexandra tampered with it somehow," said Darla.

Alexandra glared at her. "Right, because I wanted to blow myself up."

"Well, of course I'm not saying that!" Darla huffed. "But you could have accidentally done something."

"It would take some major enchantments to get that kind of a reaction," Anna said quickly, fearful of Alexandra's reaction. "I don't think you could do that accidentally."

It occurred to Alexandra that Anna was right. Her accident was no accident!

"You okay?" David asked her, as she was deep in thought as they walked to their remedial charms class.

"Yeah." She nodded. "I'm just thinking."

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“Should I be scared?”

She turned to look at him, and David stopped grinning. “I’m just kidding, Alex.”

She sighed. “It really is pretty coincidental that my cauldron blew up, don’t you think? Unless you really do believe that I invite all this trouble.”

“I think you do invite trouble,” David said seriously. “But yeah, it’s pretty odd. You need to be careful, Alex. Not just because someone may be out to get you, but also because you can’t just go around saying Dean Grimm wants to kill you or there’s some conspiracy against Muggle-borns.”

“I haven’t gone around saying that,” she whispered, and added pointedly, “I’ve only said it to my friends.”

David looked uncomfortable at that, but nodded, and then they were in the classroom. Mr. Newton surprised them with a pop quiz. Everyone groaned except David and Alexandra, who both found Mr. Newton’s quizzes quite easy.

The quiz was interrupted when another Hall Pass came fluttering through the door. Mr. Newton snatched it out of the air and read it, and looked at Alexandra as if to say, “I might have known.”

“Miss Quick, you’re wanted in the Dean’s office.”

All eyes were on her once more as she gathered her things.

“Can I make up the quiz later?” she asked.

“No need,” sighed the teacher. “I’ll give you the same score you got on your last quiz.”

“Lucky!” someone whispered, as Alexandra exited the room to head for the Dean’s office.

Alexandra felt anything but lucky, sitting on the bench outside the Dean’s office once more. Miss Marmsley had given her that disapproving glower again, and told her to wait. While she sat there, she saw Galen come padding around the corner.

“You,” said Alexandra, “are a bad cat.”

The cat looked at her disdainfully and kept walking, head and tail both in the air. Then the Dean’s office door opened, and Galen darted inside, past the legs of the Dean.

“Come in, Miss Quick.” Alexandra was surprised to see Ms. Grimm opening the door herself, since usually she made it open with her wand, but she followed the Dean into her office.

Grimm sat down behind her desk, and Galen jumped into her lap. She stroked the cat’s head while regarding Alexandra. The door closed behind her.

“I’ve spoken to Mr. Grue,” she said. “He’s quite mystified. Although he’s certain you must have somehow tampered with the ingredients or the process, he assures me he knows of no way that a Blister Tincture could go so calamitously wrong, short of deliberate sabotage.”

Alexandra said nothing. She was watching Galen, who stared back at her.

“Cat got your tongue, Miss Quick?” Grimm asked in a deceptively pleasant tone.

Actually, it had my tail before, Alexandra thought, but she only looked up and shook her head. “Are you saying I made it blow up?” And as the Dean narrowed her eyes, added, “Ms. Grimm?”

The Dean sighed. “Take me step-by-step through what happened. Describe every detail.”

So Alexandra repeated everything she had done, every ingredient she had put into her cauldron, everything she noticed in her own cauldron and those of the students around her. The only thing she left out was what she left out when she recounted the incident to her friends: the charm she cast at the end.

Ms. Grimm held up a hand. “So you noticed the color was wrong, added some more antimony, and that did nothing?”

Alexandra nodded. “Yes, Ms. Grimm.”

“And then you did... nothing? You merely stood there and watched as your cauldron boiled over and erupted in flames?”

“Yes, Ms. Grimm.”

“I see.” The Dean regarded Alexandra thoughtfully for a moment. “You know, Miss Quick, I don't think you'd do nothing. You might do something else to try to fix it, you might do something foolish, you *might* even have the good sense to inform Mr. Grue that there was a problem, but I cannot imagine you standing there helplessly and doing nothing.”

Alexandra shifted uncomfortable from one foot to the other.

“I've been very lenient with you, Miss Quick. I've given you more latitude than any other student in my recollection. But I fear you are reckless to the point of endangering other students, and that I cannot allow. Worse, I cannot abide a liar.”

It was the last comment that stung the most. Although she feared she was about to be expelled, and although Alexandra was capable of lying without remorse, Ms. Grimm's severe, disappointed stare struck her to the quick, and she thought if she were going to be expelled, there was no point in hiding anything.

“I tried to cast an Undoing Charm.”

Grimm arched one eyebrow, just slightly. “An Undoing Charm?”

“Yeah. You know, *Explico*?”

“I am aware of the incantation for an Undoing Charm, Miss Quick,” Grimm said slowly and deliberately. “Where did you learn it? It's not taught in the sixth grade, particularly not in Remedial Charms.”

“I read it in a book,” Alexandra said quietly. “I was studying a lot earlier this semester, because I wanted to prove I didn't belong in remedial classes. And it looked really useful, so I learned it. And when I saw my Blister Tincture was going bad, I thought I must have made a mistake, and so if I could just undo the last few things I'd done...”

“I assume,” the Dean said, in a dry, neutral tone now, “that Mr. Grue at some point made it clear to his students that any use of charms, other than those specifically allowed, during a test constitutes cheating?”

Alexandra looked down. “Yes, Ms. Grimm.”

“Are you aware, Miss Quick, that Undoing things is a deceptively complicated procedure with a variety of second-order effects that can only be handled by someone with the experience and finesse to anticipate them? And that this is particularly true in an environment as sensitive to variability and precise timing as alchemy?”

Alexandra blinked. “Umm, yes?” In fact, she hadn't followed everything the Dean had just said, but she got the gist of it. She'd screwed up.

She looked down again, and then took a deep breath and looked up at Ms. Grimm.

“So my Undoing Charm made it blow up? I caused the explosion?”

Grimm was silent for a long moment, and then said, “No.”

Alexandra almost felt her heart stop. She held her breath, afraid she'd misheard.

“No matter where in the process you might have cast an Undoing Charm, even following your addition of more antimony – which *is* the correct remediation for a discolored Blister Tincture, by the way – there is nothing in the ingredients you were using that could have resulted in such a reaction.”

Alexandra's mouth hung open. She was uncharacteristically speechless.

“Just because you didn't cause this accident doesn't excuse your recklessness. With another potion and a different charm, you very well *could* have caused an explosion. What am I going to do with you, Miss Quick? Detention doesn't seem to have any impact on you.” Then Grimm smiled slowly. “Oh yes, punishing your friends does bother you.”

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“No!” Alexandra said. The Dean's smile only became more malevolent.

“I think your friends... let's see, Miss Chu, Mr. Washington, Miss Dearborn, Miss Devereaux, and Miss Pritchard and her sister, may enjoy spending Thanksgiving cleaning pots and pans with the kitchen elves, while the rest of the school is enjoying the Thanksgiving feast.”

Alexandra swallowed hard. “Please don't. Please.” And to her horror, tears began spilling down her face again, though she willed them to stop with all her might. She felt her knees trembling. Her voice was pleading now, and she hated hearing it, but she kept speaking. “I'll do anything you want. You can give me detention until Christmas! Make me stay here over the Christmas holidays. Turn me into a rat again and let Galen chase me around. Make me apologize to the whole school during a special assembly. Just please don't punish my friends. That's not fair. They can't make me not do something. If you want me not to have any friends, then just say so, and I'll stay away from them so you don't have to punish them.”

Grimm stared at her for a long time. She let the silence stretch on and on, and in a way, this was the worst punishment of all, because Alexandra couldn't stop crying and she didn't know why. Her shoulders shook, and she tried to suppress her tears, and she couldn't, and she hated herself.

The only movement in the room was Grimm's hand, as her long ring-clad fingers slowly rubbed the fur between Galen's ears, and the only sounds were Alexandra's labored breathing and Galen's purring. All the portraits on the wall behind the Dean were staring at the distraught little girl before them with impassive expressions.

“Well, Miss Quick, I do believe you are sincere. And truly remorseful, even,” Grimm said quietly, at last.

Alexandra swallowed and said nothing.

“The problem is,” she sighed, as she continued to stroke her cat, “I am not sure your remorse will last five minutes after you leave this room.” The portraits on the wall behind her nodded in agreement.

Her eyes seemed to bore into Alexandra, who still said nothing, merely waited.

“Against my better judgment, I am going to suspend the aforementioned punishment,” she said finally. “You may say nothing about it to your friends. You may not warn them or try to smooth things over with them ahead of time. Trust me, Miss Quick, if you do tell them, I will know.” Her voice held a chilly certainty. “Let the rest of this semester pass with you knowing that one more act of misbehavior – just one more, Miss Quick! – will result in your friends suffering the most demoralizing punishment I can think of. But not you, Miss Quick. Oh no. You will go *completely* unpunished. Do what you please. Act up, talk back to your teachers, break the rules to your selfish little heart's content. I'll see to it that your friends bear the consequences fully, but there will be no more detentions for you, no more transfiguration curses, no more privileges withheld. You can get away with exactly as much misbehavior as you are willing to let your friends pay the price for. And after the very next time you cross the line, Miss Quick, then you can tell them. Oh yes, everyone will know that Alexandra Quick bears no consequences for her actions. She lets her friends do that.”

Alexandra's eyes were wide as Ms. Grimm pronounced her suspended sentence, and she felt as if what little air were left in her lungs were being squeezed out until all that was left was an enormous pressure, constricting her entire body so that it was hard to breathe, hard to speak, hard to even think.

“Do I make myself absolutely clear on this, Miss Quick?”

“Yes, Ms. Grimm,” Alexandra choked hoarsely.

“You will, of course, receive a zero on that test, in accordance with the Charmbridge Academy Academic Dishonesty Policy,” Ms. Grimm said.

“Yes, Ms. Grimm.”

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“Now get out.”

Alexandra walked out of the Dean's office, with feet that felt like ice. Even Miss Marmsley seemed to sense that Alexandra's spirit had suffered a terrible blow, and said nothing as she walked past the secretary's portrait and returned to class.



Alexandra's friends noticed her change in attitude almost immediately. She was quiet, somber, and serious. She was not defiant or flippant, she did not talk back to her teachers, and she stopped talking about the Dark Convention and plots to kill her.

Anna tried to coax more out of her in their room at night, but Alexandra smiled and assured her that she was fine.

“I just realized, maybe I have been too careless,” she said. “If I didn't keep breaking the rules and doing things I'm not supposed to, maybe none of those accidents would have happened.”

She didn't really believe this, and Anna didn't believe that Alexandra really believed this. But they had the Thanksgiving Feast to look forward to, and Anna's anticipation cheered Alexandra up a little. Anna's family didn't celebrate Thanksgiving at home, but Anna was far more homesick than Alexandra, so the feast was something to take her mind off of her parents and her home, so far away in San Francisco.

Mr. Grue's alchemy classroom had been tidied up after Alexandra's accident, but she could still see scorch marks on the ceiling. All the other students fell silent when she entered, and there was a visible shift away from her. Wordlessly, she sat down at her table by herself, and endured Grue's constant baleful presence lurking over her shoulder, as if he feared taking an eye off her for a second.

It was much the same in her other classes. Other sixth graders believed Alexandra was Dark and dangerous, more so than ever before, but with her friends talking to her again, it didn't bother her as much, just as her outcast status in Larkin Mills had never bothered her while she had Brian's friendship.

She was still eager to see the books Bran and Poe were keeping hidden in Mrs. Minder's office, but during the final week of classes before Thanksgiving, the library was open late into the evening for the upper-class students to study for their midterms. This meant Mrs. Minder was there as well, so Alexandra had no opportunity to take them out of the library or even sneak a peek at them. If not for the burden of keeping herself out of trouble so as not to make her friends suffer, she would no doubt have tried to find a way, but Ms. Grimm's threat weighed heavily on her and she took it seriously. It was risky enough leaving the books there, and she began to feel increasingly guilty about having involved Bran and Poe in her illicit book-borrowing. She even considered asking the elves to simply send the books back, but curiosity still burned in her, so she bided her time but made no attempt to get her hands on them while under Mrs. Minder's eye.

Darla's parents were having her picked up at the Academy, so she would be going home over the Thanksgiving weekend. She made quite a production out of it, but everyone else among Alexandra's circle of friends was staying.

Thanksgiving was a day of no classes and no detention. It was the first true day off Alexandra had had in months. She scarcely knew what to do with her time, so she played Exploding Snap and wizard chess in the sixth grade lounge with David and Anna, and then the three of them went outside to run around a little in the chilly November day. They found a worn-out, slow-moving training Bludger that the Quidditch team had discarded and batted it back and forth with their bare hands.

By the time they went back inside, they were cold and their hands were red, and Alexandra had a bruise on her shoulder where the Bludger had bounced off her, and Anna was limping a little after having been knocked off her feet, but they were all laughing and leaning against each other. Even when

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they encountered Larry and the Rash twins in the hallway, they were laughing too hard to even hear the insulting comments that were tossed in their direction. Alexandra just grinned maliciously as she continued forward without hesitation, forcing Larry to back up the stairs behind him so as not to come within range of the transfiguration jinx. She almost felt like herself again.

“Nice ears,” Anna said, just loudly enough for Larry to hear. Alexandra wasn't sure, but it did seem as if his ears had become even more pointed and rat-like. She stared at Anna in surprise, and then David snickered and said, “Rat-boy!” out loud, and they all burst into laughter again.

The three older boys cast venomous looks after them, and Benjamin and Mordecai even reached for their wands, but Larry shook his head and grabbed their hands. “Not worth it,” he muttered. “She'll get hers soon enough.”

The cafeteria that night was transformed. The tables and benches were now made of heavy hand-hewn timber. The walls and ceiling likewise looked as if they were made of logs. The serving lines with their metal counters and relatively modern stoves were draped and out of sight, and hundreds of candles floated magically in the air to illuminate the grand feast. There was one additional large table at the front of the room, where most of the faculty were sitting. Alexandra saw Dean Grimm, the Vice Dean and assistant Deans, Mrs. Minder, and most of her teachers, though Mr. Journey was absent, as was Mr. Grue.

Alexandra sat down between Anna and David. The Pritchard twins were on David's other side, and Angelique sat across from Alexandra. Next to Angelique were some other New Colonial girls. They were all visibly ill at ease being so near Alexandra, and maintained a bare minimum of civility towards her and her friends. Alexandra thought Angelique looked a little lonely without Darla, but they weren't particularly close and Angelique certainly hadn't been very sympathetic while Alexandra was being shunned by most of the school, so she was only minimally courteous in return.

The tables were bare at this point, but delicious smells were wafting through the air, and Alexandra felt her stomach rumbling. Anna giggled, and Alexandra elbowed her, which only made the other girl giggle some more. Angelique and the girls on either side of her frowned.

A hush fell over the cafeteria as the Dean rose to address them. Like the other faculty, she was dressed formally. Alexandra had never seen Ms. Grimm in traditional witches' clothing before. She wore a white gown with silver trim, beneath a robe that was such a dark shade of blue it was almost black. She still wore her silver jewelry, but her long black hair, which usually hung straight and loose around her head, was tied back in an elegant bun with a red and black comb holding it in place.

She smiled as she looked around at all the students. Alexandra still thought Grimm's smile was something she forced her mouth to do – it never quite reached her eyes.

“Thanksgiving is a time when we all reflect on what it is we have to be thankful for,” she said. “We are blessed, here at Charmbridge Academy, in many ways. I truly believe you are the most gifted young witches and wizards of this generation, and I expect all of you to do great things in the future.”

Alexandra was afraid the Dean might continue streaming platitudes all evening, but she stopped there, tightened the muscles in her face that stretched her smile out just a little more, and concluded her speech with a wish for a hearty feast and a relaxing holiday weekend. She sat down, and for a moment Alexandra thought the Dean's gaze fell on her, but then it passed on.

“Short and sweet, now let's eat!” David whispered. Even Angelique laughed a little at that, and as if in response, an enormous roast turkey popped out of thin air and landed with a small thud on a broad silver platter in front of him. There was a huge silver fork and carving knife already embedded in the bird, and as they gasped, more platters materialized on the table.

There was duck and goose and an enormous pink ham, as well as rabbit and deer, and there were

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bowls of silky white mashed potatoes, savory golden-brown stuffing, boats of gravy and pans full of cornbread and biscuits accompanied by fresh-churned butter. There were platters arrayed with crispy celery and carrot sticks sliced and arranged in decorative displays, there were olives and pickles and radishes, and cooked green beans, peas, pearl onions, squash, yams, fried green tomatoes, swiss chard, and okra. There was a platter piled high with fresh corn-on-the-cob, and another with fresh loaves of bread and great wheels of cheese. Pitchers foaming with butterbeer and fizzypop circulated up and down the table, and there was also pumpkin juice and mushroom tea and ice water to quench their thirst. The turkeys, ducks, hams, and other meats carved themselves, or rather, the knives that appeared with them did the carving, as if guided by invisible hands. Everyone stuffed themselves, trying to sample everything that was good, and even though Alexandra passed on the things that weren't (she especially did not like swiss chard or green beans), she was full even before the desserts began appearing.

Pies in all the varieties she had seen at Goody Pruett's appeared, and someone pushed a slice of humility pie at her. She suspected it had been passed down the table by the Pritchards, so she accepted it and sampled it with good humor. It was crusty with a chewy, slightly bitter filling that went down with difficulty, but did not feel nearly so heavy in her stomach.

All of this was the work of elves, she knew. David realized this too, and she could see that he was not completely untroubled during the feast, but obviously he had abandoned his idea of a hunger strike. Alexandra couldn't blame him; it would take enormous dedication to the cause to pass up a feast like this! And she also suspected that telling the kitchen elves not to cook a Thanksgiving feast would be like telling Bran and Poe not to repair or shelve their precious books. Was it wrong? Alexandra found the question perplexing and abstruse enough at her age that she had no thought of teasing David or the other ASPEWers for their lack of commitment.

Alexandra and Anna plodded back to their room afterwards, with Angelique following them. Alexandra had never felt so stuffed in her life.

"I can't believe I ate so much!" Anna groaned, covering her mouth to stifle a burp.

Alexandra agreed. She'd stuffed some leftovers in her pocket to give to Charlie, and simply dumped them into the raven's cage before washing her face and brushing her teeth. Charlie was gobbling down the treats happily as Alexandra tumbled into bed and pulled the blanket over her with a sigh.

"Alex?" Anna said, after she had also climbed into bed and snuffed the light.

"Yeah?" Alexandra mumbled.

"Did you have a lot of friends back home?"

"Not really," she replied, after a moment. "But it was okay. I didn't mind, not really."

Anna was quiet for a while, and Alexandra thought she had fallen asleep, and was almost asleep herself, when Anna spoke again. "My father wouldn't let me play with Muggle children," she said, "and most of the wizarding families we knew didn't want their children to play with me, because my mother is a Muggle."

Alexandra opened her eyes, and she started to open her mouth, not sure what to say, and then Anna said, very quietly, "You're my best friend, Alex."

Alexandra closed her mouth. She thought about Anna, and also about David and Constance and Forbearance, and even Darla and Angelique. She had more friends here than she'd ever had in Larkin Mills, she realized suddenly. And without a doubt, Anna had been the most steadfast. Her throat constricted, and her stomach fluttered while a wave of warmth suffused her body, and simultaneously, she suddenly thought of Brian and her stomach fluttered even more.

It would have been impossible for her to put into words what she was thinking at that moment, but

Thanksgiving

Anna, as if to say that she didn't need or expect a response, murmured contentedly, "Good night, Alex."

"Night, Anna," Alexandra murmured back.

From the next room, they heard a shrill, piping voice exclaim, "Goodness gravy, what a fat selfish pig!" Followed by Angelique saying, in a tired voice, "Shut up, Honey." Then there were loud nibbling sounds as the jarvey chewed on something Angelique had brought back from the feast, which apparently satisfied it enough to silence any further outbursts. Alexandra and Anna both laughed silently, and then drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 16 — *The Hidden Thorn*

The next morning was a Friday, and being part of the holiday weekend, there were again no classes. Alexandra and Anna were not the only ones to sleep late after having gorged themselves at the feast the night before.

Neither of them were very hungry, but they dressed anyway and walked together to the cafeteria, thinking to have a light breakfast – perhaps some orange juice and toast. There was no sign of David, and they had heard Angelique still snoring in her room. Honey was offering some choice comments about the noise, but Angelique wasn't waking up. Alexandra hoped the jarvey had been kept awake all night, and even went so far as to ask Anna whether her Great Horned Owl might eat Honey for them when it was full-grown. Anna shushed her, but looked amused.

Constance and Forbearance were standing in the hallway reading the sixth grade bulletin board, apparently on their way to breakfast also. Alexandra and Anna said good morning to them, and they turned to greet the other pair of girls, but there was concern on their faces, particularly when they looked at Alexandra.

“What's wrong?” Alexandra asked, and then her eyes fell on the bulletin board. There were the usual daily messages about club activities, items in the Lost and Found, keeping familiars in their rooms, an announcement that the Clockworks would be returning to service in the cafeteria and library, and another one informing students that Mrs. Murphy would be serving Stomachache-Curing Crackers in the infirmary starting at 9 a.m. But below that was a list of appointments, where teachers and faculty would post the names of students they wanted to see for one reason or another. There was only one entry that day:

Alexandra Quick: Dean's Office, 10 a.m.

Alexandra had a sinking feeling, made worse by all the food she'd eaten last night.

“You look like you could use one of those Stomachache-Curing Crackers,” said Anna worriedly.

“I didn't do anything,” Alexandra muttered. “I didn't.”

“Why assume the worst?” said Constance.

“If you didn't do nothing, you hain't in trouble,” said Forbearance.

“Let's see, how many times has Ms. Grimm called me into her office when I *wasn't* in trouble?” Alexandra asked.

The other three girls looked at each, and held their tongues, but as they continued on to the cafeteria, Anna said hopefully, “She *did* take you out for ice cream once!”

Anna's forced optimism was so absurd Alexandra couldn't help but laugh. Her cheerfulness didn't last through breakfast, though, despite her friends' efforts.

“Where's David?” Alexandra asked, as they stood in the serving line, which was once more manned by clockwork golems. “He should be happy they've put the Clockworks back to work.”

“I wonder what the kitchen elves are doing now?” Anna said.

Alexandra was eying the animated golems suspiciously, but they showed no signs of recognizing her, nor did they behave any differently when she passed in front of them.

“Dunno,” Alexandra said, “but I trust elves more than I trust Clockworks.”

After they finished eating, it was almost nine-thirty. “I'm going to go now,” Alexandra said. “I might as well be early for my execution.”

“Dean Grimm turns students into animals,” said Anna very seriously. “She doesn't kill them.”

“I was kidding... sort of,” Alexandra said, but then noticed Anna's eyes twinkling. “Jerk,” she added, and gave the smaller girl an affectionate shove.

“I'm sure you'll be all right,” Anna said, but now she really did look worried.

Alexandra wasn't so sure, either that she would be all right or that Ms. Grimm didn't kill students. Or at least, wasn't trying to kill her in particular. The Dean seemed to be brushing all her near-fatal mishaps under the rug. However, she had to admit that Anna and David were right about one thing: if Ms. Grimm really wanted to kill her, it seemed unlikely she'd rely on her cat or Clockworks to do it.

To her surprise, Miss Marmsley told her to go ahead into the Dean's office when she arrived, so Alexandra opened the door, and only paused for an instant when she saw Larry inside. Then she entered, and walked over to stand next to him, both of them avoiding looking at one another.

“Well, how nice that you're both here early,” said Ms. Grimm from behind her desk. She was back to wearing a crisp suit that would have let her pass as a lawyer or businesswoman in the Muggle world.

“What did I do now?” asked Alexandra.

Grimm closed her eyes, as if summoning patience. Larry rolled his eyes and seemed to be suppressing a smirk.

“Miss Quick, what have I told you about that guilty conscience of yours? Not to mention speaking out of turn?”

Alexandra flushed, and clenched her teeth together.

“It makes me wonder whether I am ending your punishment too soon,” she went on, producing her wand. Alexandra blinked.

It was the day after Thanksgiving! It had been so long ago that the seemingly endless period of after-school detention and chores had been pronounced upon her and Larry, she had forgotten that it was supposed to end at Thanksgiving.

Grimm rose from her desk and walked around it, to stand behind Larry and Alexandra. Both of them stood still, licking their lips nervously.

“*Finite*,” Grimm said, waving her wand over them, and then she went back to her desk and sat down again.

“I've removed the proximal transfiguration jinx,” she said. “I still strongly advise you to stay away from one another.”

“Yes, Ms. Grimm,” they both said without hesitation.

“Enjoy the rest of your weekend. Stay out of trouble.” She fixed her gaze on Alexandra. “Especially you, Miss Quick.”

“Yes, Ms. Grimm,” she said sullenly, while Larry tried not to smirk again.

“Ms. Grimm?” he said hesitantly. She raised an eyebrow.

“Umm, what about...?” He pointed at his face, which over the past couple of months had become quite unattractive and rat-like.

Grimm smiled unpleasantly. “Ah yes, what large teeth you have, Mr. Albo.”

And ears, and nose, thought Alexandra, but now she was the one trying not to smirk.

“The effects will wear off gradually, now that I've lifted the curse. While they persist, let your mirror offer a daily meditation on the importance of self-control... and letting go of grudges.”

Larry did not look happy at all, but muttered, “Yes, Ms. Grimm.”

“That will be all.”

With that curt dismissal, Larry and Alexandra both started towards the door, paused out of habit, and then moved forward again. Alexandra preceded him out of the office, and both of them hesitated again,

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as they stepped into the corridor outside, an arm's length from one another. Nothing happened. For the first time in months, they didn't turn into rats. A visible look of relief passed between them, and then with a scowl, they both turned away and walked out of the administrative wing.

"You'll be back in her office before Christmas," Larry predicted, as she went her way and he went his.

"Go gnaw something," she replied.



Alexandra and her friends celebrated that afternoon. "I told you not to worry!" Anna said.

"You told me Dean Grimm was going to turn me into an animal."

"I did not!"

They were outside again, trying to conjure snow. This had been Alexandra's idea, despite the fact that even simple Snowmaking Charms were well beyond what they learned in the sixth grade.

Constance and Forbearance had actually managed to produce a few flakes. David sighed as a stream of wet slush spilled out the end of his wand.

"So no more turning into a rat," he said.

"Nope. But Larry's still going to look like one for a while," Alexandra said gleefully. She was waving her wand and conjuring for all she was worth, but nothing was happening. The temptation to lapse into rhyming was strong, but seeing that Anna and the Pritchards were doing better than her in Charms was a powerful disincentive.

"And no more detention," said Anna. "You won't have to spend every evening in the library anymore."

"That means you can come to an ASPEW Club meeting," said David.

Alexandra stopped suddenly, and looked like she'd been punched. Her wand-hand dropped to her side.

David frowned at her, disappointed. "Well, fine, forget it then!"

"No, that's not it," Alexandra said.

They all looked at her curiously, but she couldn't explain about the books Bran and Poe had waiting for her in the library. How was she going to get into Mrs. Minder's office now?

"I was kind of starting to enjoy the library," she said awkwardly.

"Well, go start another fight with Larry Albo," David snorted. "I'm sure Ms. Grimm will put you back there for the rest of sixth grade."

Alexandra shook her head. "No," she said. "I don't think so."

She told Anna about the books requested through the Interlibrary Loan that night. Rather than scolding her, Anna just sighed. "So what are you going to do?"

"I'll have to talk to Bran and Poe somehow," Alexandra said. "I think I have an idea."

Anna grimaced.

"Not one that will break the rules," Alexandra clarified.

Anna looked doubtful. "Will you stop trying to get hold of books you're not supposed to have, after this?"

Alexandra nodded. "I really am trying to stay out of trouble now, Anna."

Her friend smiled. "I've heard that before."

"I'm serious!" And Alexandra looked serious, so Anna nodded.

The next day, Alexandra visited Mrs. Minder in the library.

"Miss Quick, it won't be the same without you haunting the stacks every evening," Mrs. Minder said cheerfully. "Bran and Poe said you were a very diligent worker."

"That's what I came to talk to you about, Mrs. Minder," said Alexandra. "I didn't really get to say good-bye to them. I know they're not supposed to come out during regular library hours, but would it be okay for me to talk to them?"

Minder watched disapprovingly as a Clockwork marched past with an armload of books. "Of course, dear. It's nice of you to appreciate all the work the library elves do. I only wish the Dean and the Department of Magical Education did."

She led Alexandra into the back room, where Bran and Poe were carefully removing ink and pencil marks from recently-returned books. They jumped up excitedly when Alexandra entered.

"Miss Alex!" Bran exclaimed.

"Bran and Poe thought Miss Alex isn't coming to the library no more!" said Poe mournfully.

"Of course I'm coming to the library," Alexandra said. "But I won't be doing detention with you anymore. I wish I could still visit you, though."

And that was true, she was going to miss talking to the elves, which made her feel a little guilty that the real reason for her visit was to try to get the books they had hidden for her. Mrs. Minder was standing over them, smiling blissfully, so Alexandra couldn't ask about the books.

"You'll probably have other kids in here," she said. "I can't be the only naughty student in school."

"Yes, Bran and Poe sees many children when they is doing detention, but usually they is not wanting to come back to visit us," said Bran.

To Alexandra's relief, someone rang the bell at the front desk just then, so Mrs. Minder said, "Oh, I'd better see who that is. The Clockworks are useless at helping students, useless I tell you!" And she turned and left Alexandra alone in the room with Bran and Poe.

"It is good to see you again," Alexandra said. "And I'll visit you every time I'm here, if Mrs. Minder lets me." The elves' ears perked up at this, and they both looked so grateful that Alexandra felt even more guilty at her next request. "Umm, I was hoping, though..."

"Miss Alex wants her *special* bookses," whispered Bran, with a knowing look at Poe.

Alexandra nodded. "Please?"

"They has to be checked out properly," Bran said.

"Which means they needs the Librarian's stamp, and Miss Alex has to sign for them," said Poe.

"But Mrs. Minder won't let me do that."

They nodded. "Miss Alex needs to come back tonight after Mrs. Minder leaves." They looked at each other, and suddenly each picked up a large, heavy volume and began thumping each other over the heads with them.

"Stop that!" Alexandra gasped, looking over her shoulder and trying to grab the books before Mrs. Minder or someone else heard the racket. "Why are you doing that?"

"Bran and Poe is plotting naughty things again!" Bran said.

"Stamping a book the Librarian didn't tell us to stamp!" said Poe.

"Letting students into the library after it is closed!" said Bran.

Alexandra had to lunge for them again to keep them from resuming their mutual book-beating.

"Okay, send them back," Alexandra said.

The elves stared at her.

"I can't do it," she said heavily. "If you two are going to beat yourselves over the head because of them, I can't check out these books. I don't want you punished because of me. I don't want anyone punished because of me."

They blinked, and their eyes filled with tears again.

"Miss Alex is worried about elves!" Bran gasped.

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“Miss Alex would give up finding out about her father for Bran and Poe's sake?” Poe gulped.

She nodded slowly. “I'll find some other way.” She hated to give up, even temporarily, when the books were almost within her grasp, but she could just imagine what David would say. And Ms. Grimm's words rang in her ears: “*Alexandra Quick bears no consequences for her actions. She lets her friends do that.*”

The elves looked at each other.

“If Miss Alex just read the bookses *in* the library,” said Poe slowly.

“Then Bran and Poe wouldn't need to check them out to her!” said Bran enthusiastically.

Alexandra's mouth dropped open. “You could do that?” she whispered. “Just bring me the books and let me read them here?”

The elves nodded vigorously.

“And you won't get in trouble for that? I mean,” she paused, “you won't be doing anything you need to be... *punished* for?”

They thought a moment, and shook their heads. “Bran and Poe shouldn't have sent the Interlibrary Request owl,” Bran said. “But the bookses is here now.”

“If Miss Alex reads them but doesn't takes them out of the library, we can send them back when she's done reading them,” said Poe.

“But Miss Alex must please be very careful not to damage them,” pleaded Bran.

“Of course I will!” Alex said. “You know I'm careful with books.”

This was how Alexandra spent the rest of the weekend. From after breakfast until dinnertime, she left the library only to go to lunch. David was curious about what had her so preoccupied. “Are you still reading about the Dark Convention?” he demanded. “Or trying to figure out why Ms. Grimm is trying to kill you?”

“Not exactly,” she said, exchanging a look with Anna. “But I'll tell you about it later.”

“If it's another one of your *theories*, maybe it's better if you don't,” he snorted.

Of the three books that had come from the New Amsterdam Public Wizards' Library and the Blacksburg Magery Institute, two were written in a very dense, journalistic style that made Alexandra's eyes blurry. *Dark or Demented? The Case Against Abraham Thorn* was a biography of the eponymous ringleader of the Thorn Circle, detailing his early career as a martial wizard in the Regimental Officer Corps, then his rise as one of the most influential members of the Wizards' Congress and a likely future Governor-General, and finally as an opposition figure rumored to have allied himself and his followers with the Dark Convention.

The Thorn Circle: Warlocks in Hiding concentrated mostly on the latter events in Thorn's career, particularly the followers who sided with him against the Confederation. As far as Alexandra could tell, there was never an actual war or even a secession, as there had been in Britain. Thorn began publicly denouncing the Confederation, and Governor-General Hucksteen in particular, and lent aid to accused members of the Dark Convention, but what convinced most American wizards of his Dark affiliation was when he traveled to Britain, allegedly to meet with Lord Voldemort. Warrants were issued for Abraham Thorn and all of his followers, and all of their property was seized, but they eluded arrest. A few months later, they attempted to assassinate the Governor-General, and failed, and went into hiding for good after that.

The events described were dramatic enough to make a fine movie, but Alexandra could barely stay awake through reading them. It was all names and dates and quoted speeches and details about the inner workings of the Wizards' Congress, and historical background and tangential arguments.

The third book was practically hyperbolic in its prose: *The Darkness That Threatens Us All!* by

Jerwig Findlewell. Findlewell seemed to believe that everything from the Automagicka and ASPEW to the Muggle Marriage Act to the New World Druidic Order to a witch from Alaska having been considered for the Governor-General's office in 1980 was all part of a vast Dark conspiracy aimed at tearing apart the traditional values of wizarding society. Much of it made no sense to Alexandra, since she was still quite unfamiliar with the politics and history of the wizarding world, and Findlewell was writing for adult wizards who cared about such things. However, he gave a concise history of the Thorn Circle that was more informative (to the degree that it was true, and Alexandra was perceptive enough to realize that Findlewell seemed to be the sort of man who might present things that reflected his personal opinions more closely than they reflected the truth) than entire chapters she trudged through in the other two books.

If half the stories about what Thorn had done to his enemies were true, he was certainly a ruthless wizard. Jerwig Findlewell considered the case for Thorn being a Dark wizard open and shut. The other two books were less one-sided, but the evidence that he and his inner circle collaborated with the Dark Convention became very strong after their failed assassination attempt.

In the aftermath of that event, which happened a year before Alexandra was born, only the most peripheral followers of Abraham Thorn were ever caught. The Thorn Circle itself disappeared, and despite many years of hunting by the Confederation's Special Inquisitions Office, none of them had yet been captured. They may as well have vanished into thin air. Rumors of their current activities fueled conspiracy theories that kept men like Jerwig Findlewell up at night. Findlewell was certain that the Dark Convention, led by Abraham Thorn, was preparing for an all-out war against the wizarding world.

This was, after several hundred pages, much less interesting to Alexandra than it might have seemed at first. Tales of Dark wizards and a conspiracy to kill the Governor-General were dramatic, but delivered as either lengthy academic histories or long-winded polemics, the details became indistinct and unimportant to her. Ms. Grinder's description, "power-hungry men who want control," seemed apt.

It occurred to her immediately that her father might have been one of the Thorn Circle, and it was this possibility that kept her reading, even when she found herself nodding off over the books on Sunday evening.

Ironically, her determination to read them straight through was what kept her from discovering the most interesting thing of all right away. There were photographs in the appendix of Thorn's biography. Most were of people and places whose names were referenced in the dense history, but who meant little to her. Governor-General Hucksteen, the target of the Thorn Circle's assassination attempt, was old and fat with a massive white beard and a severe expression. Alexandra thought he looked like an unkindly Santa Claus. There were pictures of the wizards' prisons where suspected Dark collaborators were sent, and there were pictures from Britain of the major players in that country's civil war.

But Alexandra was almost half-asleep when she turned the page and found the picture she should have looked for to begin with. It was surprising, really, that it hadn't been easier to find, perhaps even prominently displayed on one of the book covers. Abraham Thorn was, after all, a famous and powerful public figure in the wizarding world. But Alexandra knew now that wizards didn't like to talk about or even name anyone suspected of being in the Dark Convention, and that was probably why it took so long for her to stumble across a picture of him.

It was curiously anticlimactic, because once she did, she realized it wasn't a surprise at all. As if she'd known it all along, she nodded when she found herself staring at the familiar face. Without a doubt, Abraham Everard Thorn was the man in her locket.

Chapter 17 —Homesickness

"Holy crap!" Anna exclaimed, when Alexandra told her what she'd discovered, and then covered her mouth, mortified. Alexandra almost laughed. The other girl was usually so soft-spoken, such profane Muggle-like words coming from her made even her owl flinch.

"Yeah," Alexandra said. "That's sort of what I thought."

She had her locket sitting on her lap now, but she was almost afraid to open it.

"I wish my father had told me more about the Thorn Circle," said Anna. "All I remember is that he said all the Territories were hunting for anyone they thought was Dark. Even having a raven familiar could get you arrested. He never mentioned names, though, or if he did, I didn't remember them."

Alexandra nodded, while she spun her bracelet around her wrist. Charlie had exited the cage and was sitting on Alexandra's shoulder.

"So you really think he's your father?" Anna asked in a whisper.

"I don't know. Why else would my mother have this locket? But why would the most powerful wizard in America... well, my mom's just a Muggle."

"My mother is a Muggle too," Anna pointed out, with a small frown.

"But at least she knows about the wizarding world. I'm pretty sure my mother doesn't."

"Are you sure? You said she's always refused to talk about your father..."

Alexandra sighed. "I still have nothing but questions. And *he's* not going to answer them." She grabbed her wand suddenly, and held her locket in her other hand and pointed. The locket opened, and Abraham Thorn looked at her and smiled.

"I know who you are now!" Alexandra said.

Charlie shrieked, and Anna suddenly looked nervous. "Alex, maybe you shouldn't -"

"Abraham Everard Thorn!" Alexandra said. "Are you my father?"

Charlie cawed and took off from Alexandra's shoulder, with a dark flutter of wings. Abraham Thorn had always seemed smug and distant when she'd opened the locket in the past, but now he was staring directly at her, and she felt a shiver as she got the feeling that he'd really heard her this time. And then, abruptly, he turned and walked out of the cameo.

Anna gulped. "What... where did he go?"

"I don't know! Have you ever seen pictures do that before?"

Anna shook her head. "Wizard photographs can move, but they're still just recordings."

"What about paintings, like Miss Marmsley?"

"They're like spirits. I don't know exactly how it works, but we have a shrine to our ancestors at home, and they talk to us sometimes. My mother hates it." Anna was still staring at the now-empty cameo, looking a little pale. "But if You-Know-Who is still alive..."

"Don't call him that!" Alexandra snapped. "He's not some Dark Lord like that guy in Britain. And if Abraham Thorn is my father, or even if he isn't, I'm not going to be afraid to use his name."

Anna shivered a little, and nodded. "Do you think Ms. Grimm knows?" she asked quietly.

That was a thought that hadn't occurred to Alexandra, and she frowned thoughtfully, as she closed the locket.

"That's a good question. Maybe I should ask her."

Anna gave her a panicked look.

"Oh, don't worry, Anna. I'm not going to just go into her office. I have to think about this." She sighed. "Don't tell anyone else, all right? Not even David."

Anna nodded. "You might be safer if no one else knows. I don't know what the Wizard Justice Department would do if they find out you're... *his* daughter."

That thought worried Alexandra a little too. She hadn't read anything about the Special Inquisitions Office arresting and interrogating eleven year-olds, but Abraham Thorn was still a wanted man, and if they couldn't find out anything from her, they certainly might try to get answers from her mother.

"When I go home for Christmas," she said softly, "my mother is *going* to give me some answers!"



They had less than a month until Christmas vacation started, but it was one of the longest months in Alexandra's life. Even the weeks she had spent cleaning hallways and raking leaves and putting away books had been less tedious. It was the end of the semester, so everyone had to study for final exams, and Alexandra was acutely aware that these were a preliminary for the SPAWN she would be taking when she returned after New Year's.

The rumors about her continued unabated, and knowing that there might really be truth to them, Alexandra began to play the part, giving people sinister looks and spending a lot of time outside with her raven perched on her shoulder. The possibility that she really was the daughter of the most infamous wizard in the country had been a shock at first, but now, deep down, she felt something akin to pride. She wasn't sure what to believe about Abraham Thorn. At best he was ruthless and ambitious, and at worst, evil, and neither made him the sort of father she had imagined. But just having a concrete image in her head of who her father might be was more than she'd had before, and she clung to it.

Sometimes her imagination ran wild: she was Dark Queen Alexandra, daughter of the Dark Lord Abraham Thorn, dread sorceress who commanded the Dark Convention and made the wizarding world (and especially Larry Albo and Dean Grimm) tremble at her name.

Whatever glee she felt while indulging in these fantasies was tempered by her conviction that she really was in danger. If Ms. Grimm wasn't behind the repeated attempts on her life, she was at least trying to cover them up. And Alexandra was more worried than she wanted to admit that threats to her life might follow her home. She didn't want her mother endangered – or Archie, even, though she would barely admit that even to herself.

Alexandra was trying to keep her promise to Anna. Other than her "Dark" posturing, she was behaving herself. She had held onto the biography of Abraham Thorn for a while, especially now that it contained the only picture she had available of him. His image had not returned to her locket; when she opened it now, the cameo was empty.

She asked Anna whether the wizarding world had anything like photocopiers, which took some explaining at first. Anna was somewhat familiar with the Muggle world but she didn't really live in it.

"Oh, like a Copying Charm," she said. "But those are difficult, and even if you could learn it, the things it copies are only temporary."

Eventually, Anna simply told Bran and Poe to send all three books back to the libraries they came from. The elves were relieved, as they'd been afraid Mrs. Minder might receive an owl from the Interlibrary Loan service if someone else requested one of the books.

It was becoming bitterly cold outside, though without any signs of snow as of yet. Charlie spent less time outdoors, preferring the warmth of Alexandra's room, but she and her friends continued to walk the grounds after school, wishing for snow. Led by Alexandra, it had become a sort of quest for them, the sort of absurd and unrealistic project children take on when looking for things to do. Alexandra had even read a little about weather magic, enough to know that conjuring snow was difficult even for experienced meteorologimancers. This didn't stop them from trying.

The cold also meant more crows roosting in the woods surrounding the academy. Alexandra knew

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from her reading that this was natural behavior for crows in the winter. But it seemed to keep many kids inside in the evening, when the crows swarmed across the sky to settle in the branches of the trees.

One evening, there was a sudden cacophony of shrieking and cawing, and a cloud of birds erupted out of the nearest trees and flapped around before landing in other trees nearby. Constance and Forbearance both started, and looked at the woods apprehensively.

"It's probably just an owl," said Alexandra, and when Anna stared at her, she pointed out, "Well, owls do eat crows."

"Not *my* owl!"

"We oughter go inside," said Constance and Forbearance together.

"They're just birds," said Alexandra. "They aren't really spying for the Dark Convention, you know."

"Of course we know that!" Forbearance snapped.

"We hain't simple!" Constance huffed. Both girls whirled and hitched up their long dresses as they stalked back towards the academy.

Alexandra, Anna, and David exchanged baffled looks. None of them had ever seen the Pritchard twins lose their temper before. Then Alexandra set off at a run to catch up to them.

"Hey!" she gasped, puffing clouds of mist in the freezing air. "I don't think you're simple!"

The Ozarkers stopped, and looked at each other.

"Was that an apology?" Constance demanded.

Alexandra shuffled her feet. "Okay," she said. "I'm sorry."

"Ozarkers hain't stupid," Constance said.

"We hain't superstitious –"

"– foolish –"

"– unlettered –"

"– ignorant –"

"Hey!" Alexandra interrupted. "I never said any of that stuff! What are you guys talking about? Half the school thinks I'm Dark just because of my raven!"

"And half the school thinks we're silly as geese!" said Constance.

"With heads like straw!"

"We know nothing of the world!"

"And will believe all what we're told!"

Anna and David caught up to Alexandra, while she stood there blinking at the Pritchards.

"People have been saying that about you?" she asked.

"I s'pose you hain't noticed," said Constance.

"Since you got your own name to fret about," added Forbearance, a little sharply.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said again, letting out another steamy breath of air, and this time she meant it.

"We're near 'bout the only Ozarkers in school," said Constance. "Exceptin' Benjamin and Mordecai."

"And we're from the furthest holler."

"C'mon, Alex wasn't making fun of you," said David, and she felt a flash of gratitude towards him.

Anna nodded. "Everyone does believe that stuff about ravens and crows, and you... well, you did look scared."

The twins looked at each other.

"Perhaps the crows did a'ween us," said Constance.

"A little," admitted Forbearance.

They looked down. "It's not been easy here," Constance mumbled.

"Sometimes we wish we'd stayed in our holler," agreed Forbearance.

"We miss our kin."

"We're all homesick," said David. This admission surprised Alexandra a little, as David didn't look homesick and generally seemed quite happy to be at Charmbridge, when he wasn't protesting elf slavery. Anna nodded vigorously, and they looked at Alexandra expectantly, but she couldn't force herself to do more than shrug. "I guess."

Everyone rolled their eyes at her. "What?" she demanded, as she followed them inside.

They all sat in front of the fire that had been lit in the sixth graders' lounge that night. Constance and Forbearance didn't usually socialize with them in the evenings. Alexandra realized, a little guiltily, that she really hadn't gotten to know the Pritchards well, despite Ms. Grimm having included them among her friends who would be punished for her misbehavior.

"It's not my fault everyone's making up stuff about me!" Alexandra insisted. A popping sound was coming from the fire, as kids were thrusting magic skillets into the flames and shaking them to generate endless piles of popcorn.

"Well, you do kind of... *encourage* it," Anna said hesitantly. Alexandra looked at her.

"Come on, you know it's true, Alex," said David.

Even the Pritchards agreed.

"Sometimes," said Constance, "you and your raven..."

"You both *preen*," finished Forbearance.

Alexandra stared. "I do not!"

"Do so," said Anna.

"You totally do," said David.

Alexandra sat back, folding her arms and sulking a bit.

"Have some popcorn," said David, shoving a skillet at her. It floated in the air in front of her. She took a handful and munched on it, while the rest of them talked about their plans for Christmas vacation.

"The Automagicka don't come within a hundred miles of our holler," said Constance.

"The Charmbridge bus will drop us off at the edge of the Ozarks."

"Our eldest brother will pick us up, we reckon."

"Then we'll have to fly by night."

"You have an older brother?" Again Alexandra realized, after asking this, that it was a silly question and revealed how little she'd learned about them.

"We have three older brothers," said Constance.

"And two older sisters," said Forbearance.

"And two younger sisters."

"And a baby brother."

Anna's eyes widened. "Ten kids?" Like Alexandra, she was an only child, and could not imagine having such a large family.

"It's not irreg'lar among Ozarkers," said Constance.

"So you two both planning on having that many kids someday?" David asked.

"David!" Anna gasped, as the Ozarker girls blushed.

"Whatever will be," murmured Forbearance.

"Will be," murmured Constance.

Alexandra frowned. "None of your brothers or sisters go to Charmbridge?"

The girls shook their heads. "We're the first."

"Most Ozarkers are schooled at home."

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“So why did your parents send you?” Alexandra asked.

“Our parents conceived that formal schooling could improve us.”

“Times do change, after all.”

“So we took the entrance exams.”

“Ma and Pa were so proud when the owl from Charmbridge came!”

Anna nodded. “My parents made me apply to all four of the major schools, but I was really happy that I was accepted at Charmbridge.”

“I never even got tested,” Alexandra said. “Ms. Grimm said my name just appeared on some scroll in the Registrar's office.”

“Me too,” yawned David.

And that was when Alexandra suddenly had a thought, such an unexpected, startling, and exciting thought that she jumped up and sent popcorn flying around the room.

“Hey!” David grumbled, brushing kernels out of his hair and sitting up.

“The Registrar's Scroll!” Alexandra said. Then she crouched back down and lowered her voice, as other kids were staring at her.

“What about it?” Anna asked.

“How does it work? I mean, how does it know who you are?”

The others all looked at one another, and shrugged.

“I don't know,” said Anna. “It's magic.”

“The information probably comes from the Wizard Census Office,” said David.

Alexandra was thinking hard. She remembered Darla mentioning something about a census.

“Does that mean it would list the name you were born with?”

Now they were looking at her very strangely – except for Anna, whose eyes were wide.

“Well, duh,” said David. “What other name would it list?”

She couldn't explain to the others, but when they went back to their room that night, Anna immediately asked her: “You think it might have you recorded under your father's name?”

“Aren't children usually given their father's last name?” Alexandra asked. “Especially in the wizarding world, they seem kind of...”

“Old-fashioned?” suggested Anna.

“Yeah.”

“But how can you find out? I don't think you can just go ask if you can see the Registrar's Scroll.”

Alexandra was struck then by another realization. “If it *does* list me by my father's name,” she said, “then Ms. Grimm has seen it.”

She and Anna stared at each other.

“But,” Anna said slowly, “that still doesn't tell us why Ms. Grimm would want to kill you. And we don't *know* anything. You might not be Abraham Thorn's daughter. And even if you are, the Registrar's Scroll might not say so.”

“No,” agreed Alexandra. “But somehow, I'm going to find out.”

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There was not much opportunity for Alexandra to visit the Registrar's office before the Christmas break. That week they had final exams. Anna was studying constantly, and while Alexandra was not quite as dedicated, she was busy enough that by the time the term ended, she had not had any better ideas than simply marching into the Dean's office and demanding answers. She didn't think that would go very well, so she decided she'd at least try it with her mother first. Claudia Green could get angry, but she couldn't turn her daughter into a rat.

Alexandra did well on her tests, and felt confident she'd prove that she no longer needed remedial classes after Christmas. Anna scored almost perfectly on her tests, but almost wasn't good enough. Alexandra spent an evening trying to reassure her roommate that her father wasn't going to make her stay in San Francisco and go to a traditional Chinese day-school because her grade point average was only 97.3%.

"At least you can tell your parents what your grades mean," she said. This didn't have the desired effect; Anna just clutched her disappointing test results and moaned. Her owl hooted sympathetically along with her.

Perfectionist fears aside, Anna was looking forward to going home for the holidays. So was Alexandra, although not for the same reasons. She was determined to corner her mother and have an unavoidable conversation about her father.

The morning of their departure from school, Anna gave Alexandra a neatly wrapped package. "Don't open it until Christmas," she said, then added, "I would have sent it to you from home, but Jingwei isn't big enough to fly that far yet." Her great horned owl was getting big, almost too big for its cage, but it was still an adolescent.

Alexandra took the gift, with a slow blush spreading across her face, while Anna began arranging a pile of other packages on her desk. "Come on, let's find the others and exchange presents." Then she noticed Alexandra's red face.

"You didn't get anything for them, did you?" she said with a sigh.

"Well, it's not as if I've had any chance to go shopping," Alexandra said defensively.

Anna looked a trifle disappointed, but tried to reassure her. "It's all right. Not everyone orders things by owl post, or has something sent from home."

Of course Anna had thought ahead and done just that, making Alexandra feel all the worse.

"I'll send you something, really!" she promised.

Anna smiled. "Ravens aren't very good at delivering things," she said. "They're too proud." Charlie cawed in agreement, and then made a hooting noise that was an almost perfect imitation of Anna's owl, except that the tone was slightly mocking.

"I can send it by regular mail if you give me your address."

Anna looked doubtful. "Muggle post? Well, okay. But don't worry about it, really."

As it turned out, only Darla and Angelique also had presents ready to distribute. David too wanted their postal addresses so he could mail something, but Darla and Angelique weren't sure of theirs, and the Pritchards were sure the Muggle post office wouldn't know where they lived.

"It's the thought that counts," said Forbearance, untroubled.

"This wizarding stuff still gets me, sometimes," David admitted to Alexandra, as they all joined the large group of children streaming out of the academy. Alexandra nodded her head in agreement.

Students had been leaving the academy in stages all morning and would continue to do so throughout the day; even with its magically enlarged interior capacity, the short bus could not carry the entire student body all at once. So the departing kids were grouped by final destinations, and Anna, David, and Alexandra had to say good-bye to Constance and Forbearance before they left the school grounds, as the Ozarker girls would not be carried to their far drop-off point until that evening.

Unlike when they arrived, they didn't have to carry all of their belongings back to the bus stop across the valley. Mr. Journey and some other faculty were transporting the larger trunks, boxes, and bags on a very large flying carpet. "It'll all be waiting for you on the other side!" Journey assured them.

"Wish we could ride the carpet," said David.

Alexandra could tell he was more nervous than he wanted to admit about walking back across the

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Invisible Bridge. She was carrying Charlie's cage with her, and leaving the door unlatched, just to be safe.

The woods were dense and undisturbed, and the crackle and rustle of leaves underfoot was almost deafening as students tromped along the trail that had been little-traveled since the start of the school year. It was cold and everyone was wrapped in heavy coats, fur-lined robes, scarves, and mittens. Their condensed breath spread out like a small fog bank. But as the line of students snaked its way out of the woods and to the edge of the great valley that separated Charmbridge Academy from the Muggle world, Alexandra noticed most everyone pulling away from her. Only David and Anna remained near her. Even Darla and Angelique separated themselves, engaging in rather forced conversation, as if to pretend that they hadn't noticed how they were now grouped with the other students who were reluctant to cross the bridge with the 'jinxed' girl who'd nearly fallen to her death last time.

"You can go on ahead too," Alexandra said to the other two. "Really. I don't mind and I won't blame you."

"Don't be silly." Anna actually looked offended. "Dean Grimm wouldn't let another accident happen." And she actually took Alexandra's hand and said, "Come on."

David swallowed, and seemed to be praying for a brief second before he stepped onto the Invisible Bridge.

Alexandra's heart was beating a little faster as she looked down at the valley far beneath her feet. Last time it had been a lush green. Now it was all brown and yellow, and the river was icy and more than half-frozen. It would be a very, very cold, hard landing, she thought, and then tried to put that thought out of her mind. Of course they weren't going to fall. She could feel Anna squeezing her hand tightly, and wasn't sure if the other girl was trying to reassure her, or feeling scared herself.

"Don't worry," she joked. "Charlie will save us if anything happens."

Charlie made a sound that was almost like a laugh, and David echoed it with a barking laugh of his own. Anna just smiled tightly.

"Darn," said Larry loudly, from a throng of older students, as Alexandra set foot on the far side. This was greeted by laughter from his friends, but Alexandra just rolled her eyes. David and Anna both let out their breaths in long relieved exhalations that clouded the air.

Aboard the short bus, Darla and Angelique sat with them as if nothing had happened, and Alexandra pretended not to have noticed. Angelique had Honey in her cage, but the jarvey was dozing peacefully. Mrs. Speaks had told her that any profane outbursts would result in her familiar being stuffed into the luggage compartment beneath the bus, so Angelique had poured a sleeping draught into Honey's water. Anna's owl Jingwei kept looking into the jarvey's cage in a way that made Angelique profoundly uneasy.

Darla, Angelique, and Anna were going only as far as Chicago. Darla lived in the Chicago area, and Anna and Angelique would be taking the Wizardrail home, to San Francisco and Louisiana, respectively. Darla did most of the talking, as usual, bragging about how her family was going to go to the North Pole for Christmas, and the gifts she expected to receive. David was trying to keep Malcolm settled, and Alexandra and Anna passed notes back and forth, exchanging addresses and ideas for finding out more about her father.

When they arrived in Chicago, in front of the Wizardrail station, Darla and Angelique disembarked together, along with most of the other kids on the bus. Alexandra said good-bye to them politely, but was rather relieved she wouldn't have to hear Darla's chatter for the rest of the trip. But she was more solemn as she turned to Anna.

"I'll miss you," Anna said.

"I'll miss you too. I will send you something, honest."

"You don't have to."

"I will! I mean it."

Anna laughed, and gave her a hug. "Merry Christmas, Alex."

"Merry Christmas, Anna."

Anna turned to David, and after hesitating a moment, gave him a hug too. He looked uncomfortable and embarrassed, and hugged her back awkwardly. "Why do girls have to get all huggy? It's not like we won't see each other again in a few weeks!"

"Merry Christmas, David." Anna grinned at him, and then joined the others exiting the bus. Alexandra watched the small girl hauling her huge owl cage up the steps to an old-fashioned wooden train platform with hand-painted signs indicating departures to Alta California, Arcadia, New Amsterdam, and New Orleans. Anna turned to wave good-bye, and then the bus began moving, and the Wizardrail station disappeared behind them.

Alexandra and David played magic checkers and Go Fish until they reached Detroit, and it was David's turn to disembark.

"I ain't hugging you," he said.

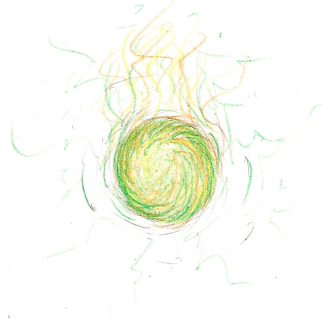
She smirked. "In a few years, you'll wish girls would hug you."

He rolled his eyes. "Merry Christmas, Alex. Stay out of trouble."

"You too."

And then David got off, and Alexandra was alone for the rest of the ride to Larkin Mills.

Chapter 18 — The Christmas Blizzard



“Here we are, dear,” said Mrs. Speaks. The bus had pulled up directly in front of her house. By now there were only a few other students on the bus, and none whom Alexandra knew well, so she carried Charlie's cage down the aisle without speaking to anyone else.

“Thanks, Mrs. Speaks. Merry Christmas!” she said, as she got off the bus and retrieved her luggage, which was only a small bag.

Although Charmbridge Academy was farther north, it was colder here, and it had snowed recently. Not heavily, but all the front lawns on Sweetmaple Avenue were blanketed in white. While some of the sidewalks were neatly shoveled, the path to the front door of the Green residence, predictably, was merely tromped flat from Archie and her mother walking to and from their cars.

Alexandra took in a deep breath, as she looked around at the familiar houses, while the Charmbridge bus drove off. She was *home*, and felt emotions she would never have felt if she hadn't been gone so long.

Then her front door opened, and her mother came out. “Alex?”

Claudia Green took hasty skidding steps on the slushy path from their porch to the sidewalk where Alexandra stood, and seized her daughter in a hug that almost lifted her off the ground. It was unprecedented in Alexandra's memory. Her mother occasionally hugged her, but never so tightly or for so long. And Alexandra didn't mind. That night, as Claudia actually prepared a home-cooked meal, and even Archie made no snide or critical comments, Alexandra's resolve to corner her mother with questions about her father weakened. There would be time enough later, she thought.



Days later, Alexandra had not yet had an opportunity to do this. After her first night back home, Claudia and Archie were both working back-to-back shifts during the week prior to Christmas. For a policeman and a nurse to both get Christmas Day off was not easy, so they'd had to agree to an undesirable schedule for the entire month surrounding the holiday.

Alexandra didn't mind too much. At Charmbridge, she had had little opportunity to be alone, and for the moment she was just happy to be home for a while. She now had Charlie for company, though the raven spent a lot of time away from the house, exploring the new territory. She was careful to avoid doing any magic, but she did check her locket occasionally, and was disappointed that Abraham Thorn had not reappeared. She was tempted to search her parents' bedroom and closet again, but wasn't sure how to get in without using magic.

She asked her mother for her entire accumulated allowance, and walked to the SuperMart to buy presents for her friends. She spent little time thinking about Darla and Angelique, deciding that a box of candies for each of them was sufficient. For Anna she bought a Little Red Riding Hood doll and

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storybook, as Anna had not been familiar with the tale when Alexandra mentioned it to her. She wanted to buy a button-maker for David, thinking he could use it for his ASPEW campaign, but they were too expensive, so she settled for a box full of blank buttons that he could practice transforming.

The Pritchards were the most difficult to shop for, and Alexandra knew they would be the most difficult to get their presents to as well. After wandering the SuperMart for a while, though, she was struck by inspiration. Just as the simplest charms struck Muggles with wonder, she remembered that those who grew up entirely within the wizarding community had no familiarity with even the simplest gadgets. She bought a pair of penlights and a small electronic calculator, and spent that afternoon writing very detailed instructions on how to use them on an accompanying card.

This left only the problem of how to get them delivered. For everyone but the Pritchards, she had addresses (though Darla and Angelique's lacked a zip code and Angelique wasn't even certain of a street number, so Alexandra could only hope the Post Office would be able to figure it out). After mailing her other presents, she tried to talk Charlie into delivering the box with the Pritchards' gift.

"Owls do it!" she said to the raven, who only looked at her as if in disbelief when she first proposed it.

"The Ozarks aren't that far." Actually, when she looked them up on a map, they were pretty far, but she still thought a bird should be able to fly there quickly. Charlie only squawked disdainfully.

"The box isn't that heavy!" she pleaded, picking it up and rattling it. Charlie made a scoffing sound.

Bribery, pleading, and threats didn't move the raven, but fortunately, Alexandra's problem was solved unexpectedly that night, when she heard a rapping on her window shortly after she'd gone to bed. Charlie was already inside, so Alexandra was startled by it. When she opened the window, she found a pair of barn owls huddled there on the windowsill, shivering in the cold. They were tied to either end of a package that must have been a struggle for the two of them to carry aloft, though it was soft and light when Alexandra undid the cords and picked it up.

A card in an envelope tied to the package with string said:

*"Dear Alexandra,
Though Troublesome is vexing and her words are sometimes cruel,
She has the bravest and the biggest heart of anyone at school.
We wish you and your family the very warmest Yule.
Love,
Constance & Forbearance*

(P.S. Please feed our owls afore sending them back to us, and let them bide a while in your home and warm up a bit if isn't too much trouble!)"

Alexandra smiled, and felt a warm glow that seemed to radiate from the card itself.

"Come in, you guys," she said to the owls, and they both hopped inside, hooting gratefully. She shut her window and poured out some of the bird food she normally fed Charlie. When the raven squawked in protest, she said, "Oh, stop complaining! Now you won't have to fly to the Ozarks!"

The owls rested halfway through the night, but woke Alexandra again several hours before dawn. She sleepily let them out once more, after attaching her gift to Constance and Forbearance to their legs. "Thanks for taking this to them," she said, and they both hooted back at her, though a little wearily, and flapped off into the dark sky, carrying her present between them.

The next day was Christmas Eve. Archie and her mother still had to work, though they would be

home that evening. Archie complained in the morning about hearing owls hooting in the night. Alexandra thought her mother looked at her for a moment, but then Mrs. Green shrugged and said they were probably nesting in the trees near the house. Once again, her mother was gone before Alexandra could try to tackle her on the subject of her father. She wasn't sure yet if she would try to do it on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, since after all, the conversation probably wouldn't make her mother very cheery.

So she walked to the park that day. Larkin Mills Pond was frozen over and children were skating on it. Alexandra hadn't brought her skates, so she could only watch, a little enviously, and walk around the edge of the pond, when someone called out, "Alexandra!"

Surprised, she looked up, and saw that it was Bonnie Seabury. The younger girl skated over to her.

"Are you back from school?" Bonnie asked.

"Just for Christmas," Alexandra said, glad to see her, and even gladder that Bonnie was talking to her. And then another voice said "Bonnie!"

Brian skated over to join his sister. He looked not at all happy to see Alexandra.

"Hi Brian," said Alexandra.

He just looked at her. His expression was nothing like what she was used to. This was a cold and unfriendly Brian, not her best friend of many years.

"Look, the freak is back!" This voice was also familiar. Billy Boggleston lumbered over, less graceful on his skates than either Brian or Bonnie, but he was careful enough to stay well back from Alexandra, away from the edge of the pond. He and his friends formed a half-circle and jeered at her.

"I heard you had to go to a *special* school," said Billy, putting a nasty emphasis on "special."

"Yes, it's very exclusive. You have to have a brain, so don't bother applying," Alexandra retorted. Billy's friends hooted and snickered and made rude sounds.

"Who else rides the short bus with you? Other freaks and retards?" sneered Billy.

Alexandra was becoming angry, but she knew Brian and Bonnie were watching her. Alexandra hadn't learned a lot of new charms in her remedial classes, but it would have been so easy to whip out her wand and do something minor but flashy. Billy Boggleston, she knew, would run screaming in terror. He was already trying not to look nervous as she just stared at him.

She was very conscious of her wand, tucked safely in her jacket pocket. They had emphasized wand-safety in all her classes at Charmbridge. They had also emphasized the International Confederation of Warlocks' Statute of Secrecy and the vigilance of the Trace Office, to everyone returning to a Muggle community over vacation. But more than the risk of another disciplinary owl, Alexandra feared Brian and Bonnie's reaction if she were to draw her wand and do magic, so she didn't.

"Other people who can do what I can do ride the bus with me," she said to Billy, and felt a moment's satisfaction when he turned a little pale.

"What's that, make up stories about imaginary creatures and their imaginary friends and all the imaginary things they can do?" Brian said.

Alexandra's head whipped back towards Brian, as Billy and his friends laughed.

"If that's where they send all the crazy kids," Brian continued, "then I'm glad you're not going to school with us anymore. You should be locked up, or kept far away from normal people."

Bonnie's eyes were wide, but no wider than Alexandra's. She was conscious of her mouth dropping open and a sensation like her stomach falling, falling, endlessly falling, but she barely heard the howling laughter of Billy and his friends. She could only look into Brian's eyes, which met hers for just an instant. His expression was cold and angry, the corner of his mouth was curled up into a sneer, but what she saw in his eyes was the most terrible thing of all: fear.

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Then he grabbed Bonnie and pulled her away from Alexandra. “Come on, Bonnie. We don't hang out with freaks.”

It was that last word, from Brian's mouth, that hit Alexandra like a punch to the stomach. She felt her knees tremble, but she stood motionless while the others pointed at her and laughed, and then turned away one by one to skate across the pond. Only when they were no longer watching her did she turn slowly around and begin walking home. She walked at first. Then her pace quickened. She was huffing as her arms swung back and forth in a rapid motion, and then she was trotting while she tried not to raise her hands to her eyes, knowing if she did then she *would* start crying and she'd arrive home with frozen tears stuck to her face, and then she ran, blindly, all the way from the park back to her house. She ran inside and slammed the door with a noise that made Charlie caw in surprise upstairs, and then she ran up into her room and threw off her jacket and whipped out her wand, feeling raw hurt and fury and a desire to cause harm.

Charlie was suddenly as still and quiet as if stuffed. Alexandra's lips moved silently, and then she began cursing.

She cursed Brian, and she cursed Billy Boggleston, and she wished misery and retribution upon them, and she wished they'd suffer and wish they'd never been born, and she wished they'd be sorry they'd ever laid eyes on her, and most of all that they'd be sorry they'd ever said those things to her. All her frustration and rage and vengefulness came out of her mouth, and only when she was done and felt like she'd vented it all, did she see what was coming out of her wand.

It was a great green and yellow and orange ball of energy, swelling around her like a nasty glowing soap bubble, and it crackled with malice and spite. She knew in an instant that she was unleashing something terrible.

“No!” she gulped. “I didn't mean it!”

Charlie trembled, still not making a sound. The greenish ball of malice was still pulsing at the tip of her wand.

Alexandra knew there were things you couldn't take back, and this was one of them. If she set it free, she didn't know what would happen, but she knew the consequences would be far worse than an owl from the Trace Office. So she swallowed hard and put what little energy she hadn't expended furiously cursing Brian and Billy into a single prayer that it wasn't too late to undo it, and said, “*Explico!*”

There was a burst and a flash of light and Alexandra was thrown back onto her bed. Dazzled, she couldn't move for a second, and then she sat up. The ball of energy was gone, but there was a terrible sense of foreboding in the air. She jumped up and ran over to Charlie's cage.

“Charlie!” she exclaimed. “Are you all right?”

The raven had also been stunned. It fluttered its wings and cooed feebly.

Not knowing what she'd done or whether she'd undone it, she sat back on her bed and wrapped her arms around herself, and shivered. Outside, she saw snow beginning to fall.

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The snow continued to fall that night. It came down heavily and suddenly, catching the entire town by surprise, and even as salt trucks and snowplows began plying the streets, the snowstorm intensified.

Alexandra's mother barely made it home that evening, and said she'd had to abandon her car two blocks from the house and hike the rest of the way through snow drifts that were already up to her thighs. Archie called and said he would not be able to come home – all emergency personnel were on twenty-four hour duty. The roads in and out of town were already undrivable, and visibility was nonexistent. Alexandra only had to look outside and see that the snow was coming down in solid sheets of white. She couldn't see her hand in front of her face.

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It only got worse after midnight. Alexandra barely slept, and knew her mother was staying up, worrying about her stepfather. During the night, she thought she heard noise outside, like someone moving through the snow, but when she got up to look, she couldn't see anything because the snow was still falling.

The next morning, the snow was up to the top of their front door. It would take hours of shoveling just to get to the sidewalk, and her mother told her that much of Larkin Mills was now without power. And still the snow kept falling.

At noon, power went out on their block. Alexandra's mother lit the fireplace and they stayed near it to keep warm. She brought Charlie's cage down and let the raven perch near the fire as well.

"I've never seen a blizzard like this in my entire life," her mother said.

The only consolation, Alexandra thought, was that no owl from the Trace Office would be able to make it through this storm.

Her mother wrapped them both in a pair of heavy quilts, and held her to keep her warm, and they sat huddled together as the house became colder and the shadows grew longer. Alexandra wondered if she would end up having to use magic to keep them from freezing. She was alone with her mother and had her undivided attention for the first time since she'd returned from Charmbridge, but she knew Archie was out there in the blizzard and her mother was thinking about that, and she could not bring herself to start asking questions about her father.

Mrs. Green rose now and then to prepare some sandwiches or other snacks, and Alexandra again thought she heard noise outside. She could see her mother did too; she tilted her head and looked out the window, but it was still a blanket of white. Then she returned to the fireplace and suggested they open their presents, since Archie was not likely to get home that night.

Archie had given her a snow saucer, and her mother had bought her a new pair of ice skates, since Alexandra had mentioned in letters home that she didn't have any of those things at school. There were also new clothes and books, and then Alexandra opened her presents from her friends. Darla and Angelique had given her boxes of candy. David (whose present had arrived by mail the day before Christmas Eve) had sent a book about football, which Alexandra thought was funny since they'd never talked about football, and another one about the civil rights movement.

Anna's gift was a beautiful golden charm bracelet to go with the bracelet Alexandra usually wore. She hoped her mother didn't notice the similarity. It had a symbol dangling from it, which Anna explained in the accompanying card was the Chinese character for "raven."

Constance and Forbearance had sent her a knitted hand muffler. It was particularly appreciated under the circumstances, and when Alexandra thrust her hands inside it, she realized immediately that it had had a Warming Charm cast on it.

"I'm glad you've made so many friends," her mother said, as Alexandra leaned against her under the quilts. Alexandra nodded. She might have taken that moment to ask the questions she had wanted to ask, about her father, but there was a sudden crashing sound from upstairs.

They both jumped, but Alexandra sprang to her feet before her mother did. Charlie, who was sitting on top of the cage, cawed and flapped through the air and up the stairway. Alexandra was about to follow when her mother grabbed her arm. "No, Alexandra, you stay here."

"It's probably a bird 'cause I left the window open," Alexandra said, and then she heard things falling off her desk.

"I'll check," her mother said firmly, and grabbed a poker from the fireplace, but Alexandra followed her up the stairs, with her hand on her wand, tucked in the waistband of her pants.

Alexandra was quite sure she hadn't left her window open, and so she was surprised when she felt an

arctic gust of air upon reaching the top of the staircase. Looking around her mother, she saw that the window in her bedroom was indeed open, and her desk had been overturned.

"Mom, come back downstairs now!" she exclaimed. She grabbed her mother's hand, and then they both heard a roaring, crackling sound from the living room. Mrs. Green gasped and hurried past Alexandra back down the stairs. Alexandra paused, still at the top of the stairs, looking into her bedroom, and then her mother screamed: "ALEXANDRA! WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF THE HOUSE NOW!"

She sprinted down the stairs to find their living room in flames, with her mother backed to the dining room trying to beat them down with one of the quilts. Fire had spread from the fireplace and engulfed the sofa they had been sitting on, the chair, the carpet, and the bookcases, and was already climbing the walls.

Her mother looked at the windows in a panic, realizing that with the snow piled up against the walls of the house on all four sides, they couldn't get out on the ground floor. "Back up the stairs!" she said.

Alexandra knew from fire safety lessons at school that you wanted to go downstairs, not upstairs, if your house was on fire, but downstairs they had no way out. So back up they went. Alexandra also knew that she should have had a ladder or a rope to escape from her bedroom window in the event of a fire, but somehow she and her parents had never quite gotten around to implementing a complete fire safety plan for their home. She could already see flames licking at the bottom of the stairs, and marveled at how quickly the fire was moving.

"Shouldn't we call 911?" she asked her mother, but already she knew the answer.

"They've barely started plowing the town center," her mother answered grimly. "They can't possibly reach us in time."

The blizzard was still howling outside, as thick and blinding as before. Even though it wasn't quite sunset yet, it might as well have been midnight, for all that they could see. Fire was already roaring up the stairs as if it were pursuing them with deliberate intent.

Her mother moved to the small spare bedroom they'd used for years as a storage space, shoving old boxes and furniture aside. "We'll have to climb out onto the porch," she said, "and then jump down. The snow is so deep, it should break our fall." She was struggling to get to the far window. Alexandra could smell smoke and feel heat rising from the floor beneath them.

"Mom, we should go out my bedroom window, we don't have time!" she said.

Her mother ignored her, and pulled open the shutters and pried at the window of the spare bedroom, which had not been opened in years. Alexandra looked from her mother to the top of the stairs, gauging the speed at which the fire was advancing. And in her head, she was composing rhymes. She cursed Ms. Grimm for letting her be placed in remedial charms classes, and she cursed Mr. Newton for having taught nothing but basic wand drills and simple charms, rather than something that might be useful like a fire-extinguishing charm or a rope-summoning charm or even a window-opening charm.

"Alex, come here," her mother said, as she forced the window open with a creak. Unlike the window from Alexandra's bedroom, which opened directly out to a two-story drop to their backyard, the spare bedroom's window opened out over their front porch, so there was a downward-sloping surface to crawl out onto. At the moment it was groaning with the weight of the all the snow piled up on it.

"Go on, Mom, I'll follow you," said Alexandra, but her mother grabbed her and practically shoved her out the window. "Do not argue with me, Alexandra!"

She slipped a little as she tried to find footing on the porch roof, kicking snow aside. Her mother began climbing out. Alexandra could see an orange and yellow blaze behind her.

"Hurry up!" she exclaimed.

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Claudia Green clambered out onto the porch with her daughter, and as she stood, the roof collapsed with a groan, pitching them both forward to land in snowdrifts rising above Alexandra's head.

"ALEX!" her mother shouted.

"I'm all right!" Alexandra sputtered, as she tried to stand, more than half-buried.

Her mother was a few yards away. She could hear her also struggling in the snow.

It was cold, and the snow was blinding. Alexandra stuck her bare hands into the snow and tried scooping her way towards her mother, but her fingers started to get numb before she'd excavated more than a small amount, and she wished she hadn't left Constance and Forbearance's magical hand-muffler behind.

"Alexandra, come to where I am!" her mother was saying.

She tried to do that. And without drawing her wand or speaking any rhymes, she found herself climbing out of the hole she was in and walking on top of the snow, though there must have been five or six feet of it beneath her. But when she moved towards her mother's voice, she suddenly heard her calling from a little further to the left.

"Mom!" she shouted, and moved that way, yet her mother's voice was even further away.

In the blinding whiteness of the blizzard, she could see a red and orange glow in one direction, radiating heat, and then, something just as bright but more green and yellow in the opposite direction, so she followed the latter.

She continued to call for her mother, yet her mother's voice was growing faint. She knew she couldn't have wandered far. They were on Sweetmaple Avenue, after all! The green and yellow light continued to lead her on, and without thinking about it, she followed. She walked through the snow as if it were only ankle deep, but the cold still permeated her. She was shivering, but hardly noticed. Nor did she realize it was getting darker. The glow that remained just out of reach was her guide. Alexandra was oblivious to all else.

On she trudged, as the sky darkened until even the falling snow couldn't be seen. The world was blank and empty and endless, and there was only a pulsing, bobbing green and yellow glow to light her way. Hypnotized, unaware of how her steps were slowing as the cold began seeping into her body, she continued to follow the light.

A loud, piercing caw was what finally brought her to her senses.

"Charlie!" she exclaimed.

Somewhere nearby, over her head, her raven was flying in this mad blizzard. And when she called Charlie's name again, a spot of black materialized out of the sky and fluttered to her shoulder.

She looked around, and realized she had no idea where she was or how long she had been walking.

"Mom?" she shouted, but there was no answer, and then she yelled, "Hello?"

The green and yellow light she had been following was now nowhere to be seen, and the cold hit her fiercely then, like a convulsion seizing her body.

"Wh-wh-where are w-w-we, Ch-Ch-Charlie?" she whispered, teeth chattering. The raven croaked and nestled against Alexandra's cheek. She shivered, and realized how very, very cold she was. She'd been wearing only a sweater, pants, and slippers when she and her mother escaped their burning house. Anna's charm bracelet was still on her wrist, and her wand was still tucked against her side, but other than that she had nothing.

"We h-have to g-get h-h-home," she said to her raven. "C-c-can y-you lead m-me th-there?"

Charlie cooed at her, and then took off. A moment later a shrill caw sounded overhead, and Alexandra tried to follow, but she was lost and did not know in which direction to turn.

Charlie kept cawing, and Alexandra shouted, "Charlie! Where are you?"

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Then she heard a noise nearby. Something moving through the snow, pushing it aside.

Her heart beat faster. She drew her wand, wishing desperately she had learned some defensive magic this semester. All she could think of was trying to push whoever or whatever it was away, or repeating her fireball trick, though she'd never tried to do that with a wand.

A bright light reappeared in the darkness, and then it was in her eyes, blinding her.

"Who are y-you?" she shouted, pointing her wand. She thought her chattering teeth must be as loud as her voice. Then a familiar voice said, "Alex?" She almost dropped her wand.

It was Archie, standing knee-deep in the snow. He had a flashlight held up to his cheek, the way police officers did, and he was shining it into Alexandra's face.

Charlie cawed again and landed on her shoulder.

"Guess that damn bird of yours is good for something," he said. "All that noise gave me something to follow." And then, "What is that?"

She was still pointing her wand at him, she realized. Somehow, her arm had held it steadily, though the rest of her body was shivering. She dropped it to her side.

"My magic wand," she said.

"Magic wand," he repeated. She couldn't see his face, but the bemused, aggravated tone was familiar. "Right." He let out a long sigh.

Then her stepfather was wrapping his coat around her. He picked her up and was carrying her, which he hadn't done since she was little, but she didn't mind because she was so very cold and tired.

"How on earth did you manage to get all the way out here?" he demanded. "What did you think you were doing?"

"Trying to f-find M-Mom," she said, shivering. "Where are we?"

"Alex, we're almost a mile from home. You just about wandered onto the Interstate," Archie said. "I don't even know how that's possible."

"The Interstate?" she repeated numbly.

"Not that there are any cars moving on it right now, but still. The trouble you get into..."

The admonishment she was used to. The note of concern underneath she was not. Normally the thought of being carried like a baby by her stepfather would have her squirming with embarrassment and indignation, but now she didn't care. Whatever she might think of Archie, she knew she was safe.

"Is M-Mom all right?" she asked.

"She's fine, but worried sick about you. Managed to call from the neighbors'. Our house burned down, Alex."

And Alexandra closed her eyes, and fell asleep.



Alexandra had somehow walked directly away from her burning house that night, down Sweetmaple Avenue and through Old Larkin and towards the Interstate. She wondered to herself if she would have eventually reached Old Larkin Pond, had she kept going. Archie and her mother could not get over the impossibility of her blind hike through the blizzard. Archie had only been able to find her because he'd been fighting his way through the snow to get home all afternoon, and when his wife had called the police station, Archie had been alerted over the radio, and went in search of her. It was Charlie's cawing that led him to her.

What the green and yellow light that Alexandra had been following might have been, she did not know, but she felt a shiver every time she remembered the way it had led her through the blizzard as if she were in a trance. She did not mention it to her parents, of course.

They assumed that the fire had been caused by a stray spark from the fireplace, or something left too

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close to it that caught fire, though the fire inspector commented afterwards that it was amazing how quickly it had spread. Within minutes, the entire house had been engulfed. Virtually all of their possessions were destroyed.

"It's just as well you're going back to school in a week and a half," her mother sighed. "It's going to be uncomfortable for us for a while."

For the time being, they were in a motel room. It was very uncomfortable, especially sharing a bedroom and a bathroom with her mother and stepfather. Pets weren't allowed, but Charlie always stayed near, and when her mother and stepfather were at work, Alexandra let the raven inside the room. After the first day, they decided that the motel room wasn't a suitable place to leave Alexandra alone. So she spent the rest of her Christmas vacation in a succession of friends' and neighbors' houses. Alexandra was surprised at how many friends and coworkers her parents had who offered support in the wake of their tragic house fire. Policemen's wives and fellow nurses babysat Alexandra over the next few days, and she spent one afternoon at Mrs. Wilborough's house. Mrs. Wilborough didn't want Alexandra to touch anything in her house and so all she could do was read books, but the old woman was nosy too and kept trying to find out about the "special school" that Alexandra was going to.

But the most uncomfortable times of all were the two days that Mrs. Seabury offered to let Alexandra come over. If her mother knew that Alexandra and Brian were no longer on speaking terms, she didn't say anything, as she couldn't turn down free childcare. Mrs. Seabury seemed to be aware of this, and was polite but very cool with Alexandra. She must have felt an obligation to help out her neighbors, whom she had known for a good number of years, especially when so many other neighbors were doing the same thing, but Alexandra didn't mistake her charity for friendliness. Brian's mother wasn't happy to have her around, and she didn't think it was a coincidence that she stayed over on days that Brian and Bonnie were visiting their grandparents. Mrs. Seabury made her nice meals, and even gave her extra snacks to take back to her hotel room with her, and let Alexandra watch TV as much as she wanted, and so they were very polite to one another and barely exchanged more than a few words.

Alexandra tried to puzzle out all the details of the night of the fire, going over them again and again in her mind. Someone had opened her bedroom window and started to ransack her room. Somehow a fire had started moments later. Somehow she had become separated and lost, mere yards from her mother. So many strange details and none of them made sense. She feared her own aborted curse might have had something to do with it, but she feared equally that the danger that had been dogging her throughout the semester at Charmbridge Academy had followed her back to Larkin Mills.

Her mother was back to her usual distant, snappy behavior, and Archie's attitude hadn't been improved by their having to live as refugees from the fire either. By the time she came home for the summer, they said, their fire insurance would have paid out and they'd have a new house, but Alexandra was now counting the days until the Charmbridge bus would arrive to take her away.

With her mother so upset and angry, Alexandra knew she wasn't going to get any answers about her father. It wasn't that her resolve had faded; she simply knew her mother, and knew that under the present circumstances, there was no approach that wouldn't result in angry shouting and then silence.

And worse, the locket and her bracelet had perished in the fire. Unless the mysterious intruder had stolen them. Alexandra had left them upstairs in her room, and suspected that's what whoever had knocked her desk over had been searching for. But she had left them under her pillow, not in her desk, so the would-be thief wouldn't have had much time to search for them.

Yet despite the disaster, and her subsequent discomfort in the cramped motel room and irritation at being passed from neighbor to coworker during the day, there were parts of this Christmas that lingered in her memory and which she did not want to forget. Opening the presents from her friends. Her

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mother's genuine delight when she returned from school. The two of them cuddling together on the couch in front of the fireplace. And strangely, Archie wrapping her in his coat and carrying her out of the blizzard.

It had been, in most respects, a truly awful Christmas, and Alexandra was looking forward to going back to school. Yet when the time came for the Charmbridge bus to pick her up again, she could not help looking around at the snow-covered streets of Larkin Mills, and feeling a little homesick again, before she'd even left.

Chapter 19 — *The Registrar's Scroll*

"Be good, Alex," her mother said.

"I will." Alexandra couldn't help rolling her eyes.

They were standing in front of the blackened ruins of their house. They'd finally been allowed to go through the wreckage to pick out anything salvageable, but there was nothing to retrieve. So Alexandra was returning to school with little more than a few changes of clothing, and Charlie. Fortunately she had left her school clothes and books in her room at the academy, but she regretted the loss of her Christmas presents. Only Anna's charm bracelet had survived, because that she had been wearing when she escaped the fire.

Archie was waiting with them this time. He was wearing his police uniform, because he was on duty, but he'd swung by Sweetmaple Avenue to see Alexandra off.

"That means stay out of trouble," he said, as if he didn't think "Be good" was clear enough.

Alexandra sounded exasperated, but there was a trace of a smile on her lips. "I *will*, Archie."

The Charmbridge bus rolled around the corner. Charlie squawked excitedly, and her mother ran a hand through her hair, smoothing it down though it didn't need it.

"We'll let you know how the house-hunting is going," she said. "You could write more often, you know."

"I'll try."

Her mother snorted at that. The short bus pulled to a stop, and opened its doors. Mrs. Speaks looked past Alexandra at the burnt wreckage behind her. "Miss Quick, whatever happened?" she exclaimed.

"We had a terrible accident over Christmas," her mother said to the bus driver. "But no one was hurt, fortunately."

Alexandra got on the bus, said "Happy New Year," to Mrs. Speaks, and walked past staring classmates.

"Troublesome burned her own house down!" she heard someone whispering, and she sighed and found her way to a lone booth. The bus was apparently making its previous trip in reverse order, which meant none of her friends were on board yet. She practiced wand movements and thought about the upcoming SPAWN until they reached Detroit, and David got on.

"Alex!" he exclaimed, and sat down next to her. "Did you have a good Christmas?"

"I had sort of a strange Christmas," Alexandra said. She wasn't going to go into detail on the bus, while others could hear. "How about you?"

"Pretty good, but my parents gave me a bunch of electronic stuff. Playstation, computer, MP3 player, even a new cell phone."

"Cool!" Alexandra was impressed, and a little envious.

"Yeah, except none of that stuff will work at Charmbridge. They didn't pay attention when I told them that Muggle devices don't work around magic."

"Oh." Alexandra thought about the flashlights and calculator she'd sent Constance and Forbearance, and hoped they weren't wondering why she'd given them useless Muggle junk.

When they arrived in Chicago, Darla, Angelique, and Anna all boarded. Anna beamed when she saw Alexandra wearing the charm bracelet that had been her Christmas present. They didn't have much chance to talk, though, because Darla and Angelique both spent the rest of the ride detailing everything they'd done over vacation and every one of their presents. This suited Alexandra, since she wanted to tell David and Anna about the Christmas blizzard without the other girls listening in.

As they ascended the highway leading up to the bluff where the Invisible Bridge was located, Alexandra saw that it had snowed here as well, and when they got off the bus, the valley was blanketed in frost, and the woods on the far side were caked with snow.

"Snow!" exclaimed Anna excitedly, and she bent over as soon as they disembarked to scoop some up in her hands.

"You act like you've never seen snow before," David said.

"I haven't. Except in pictures. We don't get white Christmases in California." She was happily making a snowball.

"Be happy. Detroit got buried. Heck, most of the Midwest got buried this Christmas. Believe me, you can get tired of snow real fast. At least here it won't turn all gray and nasty after it gets plowed and driven over for a few weeks."

Alexandra stared at David, and then recovered. She hadn't realized the blizzard had been so extensive.

"Here we go again," he muttered, as Mrs. Speaks began leading students across the Invisible Bridge. Once more, Mr. Journey was there. "Happy New Year, Starshine. Did you have a nice Christmas?"

"Nice enough," Alexandra said. She wondered if snow shoveling was among the tasks the custodian's Clockworks would now be performing, and resolved not join them in detention this semester.



"Goodness!" said Forbearance.

"Gracious!" said Constance.

They were all sitting in front of a crackling fire in the sixth graders' lounge. Alexandra was telling her friends about the events over Christmas. She had not yet told anyone but Anna about her possible connection to Abraham Thorn, but aside from that, she didn't leave out any details, not even her aborted curse.

"You almost died!" Anna said breathlessly.

"Again," said David.

"Do you *still* think no one is trying to kill me?" she asked.

Constance and Forbearance looked at each other, and Forbearance cleared her throat.

"That curse," she said.

"It was..." Constance's voice trailed off.

"I know," said Alexandra. "It was bad."

They were all silent for a bit.

"But willing you dead?" said Constance.

"Surely not," said Forbearance.

"Who would wish such a thing?" The Ozarkers hadn't been privy to the discussions Alexandra had had with David and Anna before Christmas, so this was all new and shocking to them. She hadn't gotten around to her theory about Ms. Grimm's involvement, and wasn't sure they would want to hear it.

"Gee, I don't know," said Alexandra. "Certain boys who use the m-word?"

The twins flushed, and looked down.

"Benjamin and Mordecai are... not always charitable," said Constance, diplomatically.

"And we know you and Larry are not on the best of terms," said Forbearance, even more diplomatically.

"But accusing them of murder in their hearts is too much."

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“And it's silly anyway, to think they pursued you into the Muggle world?”

“I don't.” Alexandra was not as certain as the Pritchards were that Larry and the Rashes might not wish to see her murdered, but she didn't really think they were the ones who'd been trying to murder her. She gave a warning look to Anna. “But it is awfully suspicious, don't you think?”

The twins exchanged another one of their meaningful looks.

“You conjured up an awful lot of ill,” said Constance.

“It must had to go somewhere,” said Forbearance quietly.

“And whether or not you loosed it on others, that's the sort of curse what *always* afflicts the one what did the cursing.”

“Evil always returns to the one who dealt it.” The Ozarkers looked very serious, and a little pale.

“Evil?” Alexandra exclaimed.

“We're not saying you're evil, Alexandra!” Constance said emphatically.

“Never!” Forbearance agreed.

“But...”

And they both bit their lips and looked at her worriedly. Everyone was silent, looking at her.

“I'm not Dark!” she said.

“We know!” all her friends echoed.

She looked down. “All right, maybe what I did was bad. You think I brought it all on myself?”

Anna slipped her hands around Alexandra's arm and leaned her head against her roommate's shoulder.

“I think,” she said, “that you should be careful, Alex. And I'm really glad you weren't hurt. And you should try really, really hard not to get in any trouble this semester.”

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There was an assembly the first day back from vacation, and the Dean addressed the entire student body, welcoming them back for a new semester, warning them that snow charms were not to be used indoors, and announcing the Winter Ball for grades eight and up. She also told them that Clockworks would be taking over more duties formerly performed by house elves, and introduced a new member of the staff, a young man with a scraggly goatee and an earring who looked like it hadn't been long since he was a student himself. “This is Mr. Thiel, who will be joining our groundskeeping and custodial staff. Our hard-working Mr. Journey has had the monumental responsibility of maintaining Charmbridge's grounds and facilities – with some help from elves, Clockworks, and of course, the occasional student with a little too much idle time...” there was muted laughter at this, and Alexandra felt quite a few pairs of eyes turning in her direction, but Ms. Grimm went on. “So I'm very pleased that our new budget allows for a full-time assistant who will be relieving Mr. Journey of some of his more tedious duties.”

Alexandra noticed that Mr. Journey was smiling and applauding politely, but somehow he didn't seem all that enthusiastic about having a new assistant. Darla and Angelique were whispering and giggling, and Alexandra gathered that they thought the young assistant custodian and groundskeeper was cute.

“Finally,” said Ms. Grimm, “I'm very pleased to announce that for commencement this year, the Governor-General himself will be our invited guest!” A ripple went through the auditorium. “As you know, it's been quite a few years since the Governor-General has honored Charmbridge with a visit, so I expect to see every student putting forth maximum effort to display Charmbridge pride and excellence.” She beamed at the assembled students, and Alexandra thought her smile looked like a threat.

"The Governor-General!" Anna exclaimed, walking to lunch with Alexandra after the assembly.

"So what?" Alexandra shrugged. Commencement was for graduating students. The event was irrelevant to her, though she guessed there'd be a lot of fuss when the time came.

"Well, he's really important! He's the most important man in the Confederation!"

Alexandra thought maybe she'd know more about the Governor-General if she was in a regular Wizard Social Studies class with Anna, instead of Remedial Wizarding World History.

"He's also the one the Thorn Circle tried to assassinate!" Anna added, in a whisper.

That got Alexandra's attention. She stopped and stared at Anna. "The same one? But that was years ago! Before we were born!"

Anna nodded. "Governor-General Hucksteen has been in office for thirteen years."

Alexandra was thinking about that when they passed Larry Albo in the hall, and he called out "Nice going, Troublesome! One day back and already in the Dean's office! That must be a new record!"

She jerked to a halt. "What?" She hurried with Anna to the nearest bulletin board, and sure enough, Alexandra's name was posted there. She had been summoned to the Dean's office immediately after lunch.

"Well, if I have to answer for what I did this Christmas," she said, "at least I'm going to ask a few questions of my own."

Anna looked worried. "Is that a good idea, Alex?" But she might as well not have asked.

Even Miss Marmsley seemed to be getting used to Alexandra's presence. "On the bench, Miss Quick," she sighed, and Alexandra waited there for several minutes before the door opened.

"Enter."

Alexandra entered, and stood in front of the Dean's desk. Ms. Grimm was wearing a fur-lined jacket over an ankle-length dress, and had a scarf wrapped around her neck, which made her outfit appear warm, but did nothing to improve her frosty expression. So Alexandra was surprised when the Dean gestured at one of the chairs. "Please have a seat, Alexandra."

Alexandra was suspicious. Ms. Grimm hadn't called her by her first name since their first meeting. She slowly slid into the chair, and watched the woman across the desk. Grimm folded her hands together and leaned forward a little, studying Alexandra in return.

"I gather you had an eventful Christmas vacation," she said.

"I guess." Alexandra said slowly.

"Manners, Miss Quick."

"I guess so, Ms. Grimm," Alexandra repeated, trying not to look annoyed.

Ms. Grimm nodded. "Have you any idea why you're here?"

Alexandra decided there was no point in evasion, so she said "I used magic while I was at home. But someone burned our house down and tried to kill me!"

Grimm arched an eyebrow. "Before or after you used magic?"

Alexandra shifted in her seat.

"Just tell me everything, Alexandra," the Dean said. "And by that, I do mean *everything*."

So she did. She started with her return home, her very conscientious practice of wand-safety and her responsible abstention from magic use for the first few days, but she grew less confident as she reached the events at Larkin Mills Pond. She recounted her anger as she ran home as dispassionately as she could, but even now a flush came to her cheeks, remembering how upset she had been.

She took a deep breath, and confessed about how she had started to curse Brian and Billy. She didn't hold anything back, but she pointed out that she was angry and hadn't been consciously, deliberately, trying to cast a real curse.

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“Except you did all this with your wand out,” Ms. Grimm commented dryly.

Alexandra swallowed, and then described the malevolent bubble of energy that formed, and her attempt to Undo it, and then the snowstorm and the fire that followed, and finally, her confusing trek through the blizzard until her stepfather found her by the Interstate.

Grimm sighed, and actually looked tired. She rubbed the bridge of her nose, closing her eyes. Without opening her eyes, she held up one finger even as Alexandra opened her mouth to say something else. Finally, she looked at her.

“I have rarely heard of such irresponsible, self-indulgent, reckless disregard for the safety of oneself or others,” she said. “I ought to take your wand away from you. In fact, I am strongly considering having your wand confiscated whenever you return home. It’s an extreme measure, but not entirely unprecedented.”

Alexandra said nothing.

“Do you realize what could have happened if you had unleashed that curse? It might have been not merely memories the Obfuscation Office would have had to conceal, but bodies. So your little friends called you names. Did you really want to *kill* them, Alexandra?”

“No,” she said quietly. “That’s why I tried to Undo it.”

“Ignoring my previous warning on that topic.”

“I didn’t know what else to do!”

“Not spitting curses while brandishing your wand in the first place would have been an excellent choice.”

“Fine!” Alexandra glared at the Dean. “So what’s my punishment? Or my friends’ punishment? But before you tell me, I just want to ask two questions. First, am I Abraham Thorn’s daughter, and second, are you trying to kill me?”

It hadn’t been a deliberate strategy to go on the offensive, but she experienced a rare moment of satisfaction when the Dean’s eyes widened. She didn’t think Ms. Grimm was often caught off-guard. But even faced with these outrageous questions, it only took the woman a moment to regain her composure.

“Why on Earth would you believe either of those things?” she asked.

Alexandra took a breath, and plunged ahead. She didn’t really believe the Dean was trying to kill her, not anymore, but she had nothing to lose by making the accusation. She told Ms. Grimm about her locket, and about her suspicions, and about the many near-fatal accidents she had experienced since she first came to Charmbridge.

Grimm listened quietly and attentively until she was finished. “So all this time,” she said at last, “you’ve believed you’re the daughter of Abraham Thorn and that someone is trying to kill you. And this explains your utter disregard for the rules, your recklessness, your frankly atrocious behavior?”

“Well, not the entire time. It took me a while to figure out some of it.”

“I see.” The Dean stood up. “I will be right back, Alexandra.”

She left her sitting there alone in her office for several minutes. Alexandra watched the portraits of the witches and wizards from decades past, all of them looking right back at her, but she couldn’t think of anything to say to them, and they in turn seemed to have nothing to say to her, so she passed the time in silence.

Ms. Grimm returned, carrying a pair of large wooden spools that rolled and unrolled a long scroll between them. She laid them down on her desk, and beckoned Alexandra over. Alexandra got up from her chair and looked curiously at the scroll.

“Show me Alexandra Quick, Class of 2014,” Ms. Grimm said.

The Registrar's Scroll

The scroll began moving, the spools spinning by themselves, and Alexandra saw names flash by, decades of Charmbridge students, until finally the parchment was nearly at its end, and between 'Carol Olivia Queen' and 'Sonja Rackham' was her name: 'Alexandra Octavia Quick.'

"That is the name the Registrar's Scroll recorded. Alexandra Quick, not Alexandra Thorn," Ms. Grimm said. Alexandra stared at the dark freshly scripted letters, and felt an inexplicable pang of disappointment.

"But the locket," she said.

Ms. Grimm rolled up the scroll, and sat back down at her desk. She regarded Alexandra very seriously for several minutes.

"Alexandra," she said finally, and her voice was almost gentle. "I truly do not know how your mother came by that locket. But I suspect your earlier theory may well be true. It is entirely possible that your father was one of the Thorn Circle. Perhaps the locket with Abraham Thorn's cameo was something they used to communicate amongst themselves. Perhaps it was a keepsake. Without being able to examine it, I can only guess. Did some of them go into hiding among Muggles, and even take Muggle wives? It's possible."

She steepled her fingers. "Your desire to find out about your father is natural. Your intense curiosity is understandable. But it is quite dangerous for you to be telling other people that your father might have been one of the Thorn Circle, let alone getting it into your head that your father was Abraham Thorn himself. Do you see how this preoccupation of yours has blinded you to the consequences of your own actions? Oh yes, it is possible that someone *might* wish to harm you if your paternity became public knowledge."

"The Invisible Bridge almost killed me and David," Alexandra said.

"I realize it was frightening and believe me, I was as shocked as anyone, but we have confirmed it was an *accident*."

"The Clockworks -"

"*You* tampered with them, Alexandra, using juvenile magic you've already been told is crude and haphazard in its effects. Clockworks are complex artifacts, and unskilled modifications of the charms that motivate them have been known to result in inexplicable behavior. *You* told them to do harm to other children. Is it so surprising that your own jinx backfired on you?"

"Your cat!"

Ms. Grimm sighed. "Yes, Alexandra, Galen went through an open window – a window that *you* opened – as cats are wont to do, and upon discovering a pair of rodents, pursued them, as cats are also wont to do. Of course when I placed that jinx on you and Mr. Albo, I didn't expect you two would ever find yourselves alone together in the attic."

"The explosion in alchemy class – even you said I didn't cause that!"

"It does not follow that someone else caused it. We have no explanation for that after weeks of investigation, and can only conclude that the wrong component or the wrong spell caused a freak accident."

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. This was an awful lot of freak accidents!

"The fire -"

"Yes, the fire." Ms. Grimm's eyes narrowed. "What do you suppose happened when you tried to Undo your nasty, vengeful curse?"

Alexandra was quiet a moment. "I don't know," she mumbled.

"You poured out all your hurt and outrage and desire to cause harm, and made it take magical form. You may have succeeded in Undoing the specific form you gave it, a form that might have left poor Mr.

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Seabury and Mr. Boggleston in a very non-Undoable state –” Alexandra shuddered. “– but that sort of malignant energy doesn't just dissipate with an Undoing Charm.”

“I caused the fire?” she asked quietly.

“Tell me honestly, didn't you already suspect as much?”

Alexandra looked down, and nodded.

“Have you ever heard of ignis fatuus?”

Alexandra looked up, and shook her head.

“Fool's fire. Also known as foxfire, or will-o'-the-wisp. It's a peculiar type of magic, very old magic, fueled by malice.” The Dean's voice was low now, and Alexandra leaned forward, hanging on each word, and shivering a little. “It appears to those who are lost, in places where the path can't be seen and there is danger ahead. A light that beckons you, urges you onwards, inviting you to follow. And many have done so... right to their doom.”

Alexandra remembered how she had followed that green and yellow light, not knowing why. If Archie hadn't found her... She shivered again.

“There's a reason we learn how to do magic properly, Alexandra,” Ms. Grimm was saying. “Now do you see what happens when you conjure magic you don't understand?”

She nodded. “And the blizzard?” she asked quietly.

Grimm raised an eyebrow. “The blizzard?”

“It started right after I... right after I did the curse, and then tried to Undo it.”

Grimm stared at her a moment, and then broke into laughter.

“Oh my. Did you actually believe that you caused the blizzard, Alexandra?”

Alexandra frowned a little.

Grimm kept laughing. “My dear, you might be capable of impressive feats of spontaneous magic for your age, but really!” Alexandra felt herself becoming small and silly. “If an eleven year-old could conjure a blizzard that stretches across five states just because other children were mean to her, why, I shudder to imagine what would happen when you experience real distress! I daresay that the trials and tribulations of adolescent witches would threaten civilization itself!”

Alexandra's face was burning. “Okay!” she said. “I get it. I didn't cause the blizzard. I'm glad.”

The Dean composed herself, her expression becoming more serious. “Manners, Alexandra,” she chided. Then shook her head.

Her tone was firm, but lacking its usual icy-hard edge when she spoke again.

“I can see now, how your troubled past and your difficulty in adjusting to the wizarding world has contributed to your recklessness. You have questions to which you may never get satisfactory answers. You've survived a number of remarkable mishaps, some your doing but not entirely. You're a bright, inquisitive child and you're unaccustomed to boundaries.” She folded her hands on her desk.

“I don't discipline you to be cruel, Alexandra. I administer discipline so that you will learn to behave yourself properly in this world. There are much worse things that can happen to you than detention. You've already had but a small taste.”

Alexandra was by now thrown so completely off-balance that she hardly knew what to say or how to react to the Dean's words. Ms. Grimm seemed almost kind in comparison to their previous meetings, yet Alexandra still sensed the condescension and something else. She wasn't sure all of her questions had been answered, yet it seemed so silly and childish to persist. Wasn't it true that she *had* brought most of her trouble down on herself?

“You do want to remain in the wizarding world, don't you, Alexandra? After seeing what you can become, do you want to go back to a Muggle school, a Muggle life?”

Alexandra nodded, then shook her head, confused.

"I promise you this, Alexandra." The Dean's voice was soothing, reassuring. "You will be safe here. I do not allow students to come to harm at Charmbridge. I want you to stop looking for enemies who are out to get you. If you feel threatened, you can come to me and I will address your concerns. I also want you to stop this obsession with the Thorn Circle and the Dark Convention. It's unhealthy and unproductive. Concentrate on your schoolwork, and master your gifts. Behave yourself, and don't bring trial and trouble to yourself and your friends. It's a new year and an excellent time to make a fresh start. Wouldn't you like that?"

Alexandra nodded.

"Excellent." And Ms. Grimm actually looked pleased. "We are agreed, then. I don't want to see you in my office again, Alexandra. Will you promise me that you won't make it necessary any more?"

She wasn't quite sure how she could promise that, yet it sounded so reasonable, and she didn't want to disappoint the Dean, so she just nodded.

"I believe you have a SPAWN test tomorrow. Good luck. Make the most of this semester, Alexandra."

Alexandra left the Dean's office feeling as if she'd been spun around and around and then sent staggering off in a new direction. Everything she had been certain of was now thrown into doubt. And she could never quite pinpoint what had happened, but she could not deny that she felt as if a burden had been taken from her. Maybe it was better to concentrate on learning proper magic and adapting to the wizarding world. She had all the time in the world to find out about her father.

Chapter 20 —Larry's Wager

"You're not in trouble?" Anna asked incredulously.

"I guess not." Alexandra was still a little dazed, after her meeting with Ms. Grimm.

"Maybe she forgot to give you your punishment."

Alexandra gave her roommate an annoyed look. Anna looked abashed, and shrugged apologetically. "So what are you going to do?"

"I guess I'm going to do what she said. Take my SPAWN. Study. Try to stay out of trouble."

Anna opened her mouth, and Alexandra cut her off. "Don't say it."

While most students took 'practice SPAWNs' at this time, to gauge their progress, Alexandra and David's scores would actually determine whether they would stay in remedial classes. David had studied hard over Christmas vacation, and was looking more nervous than she'd ever seen him. He was a good student, and generally much more diligent than Alexandra, but unlike Anna, he didn't obsess over his grades.

"You'll do fine," Alexandra said, feeling nervous herself. She was so sick of Newton's wand-drills, and Grinder's carping about sexism in the wizarding world (even if she agreed), and most of all, Mr. Grue watching her as if she were going to blow up the classroom again at any moment.

"Do you know Darla and Angelique are doing complex animate transfigurations already?" David asked. "And the regular Charms class is halfway through the basic Sixth Grade-Level Charms curriculum. They can start fires and clean spills and freeze water and cast tripping jinxes. We're still levitating feathers and making little sparks at the ends of our wands!" he said in disgust.

"We'll catch up." Alexandra had also seen how much Anna was learning in her classes, and was as jealous as David. She hated feeling inferior to her classmates at least as much as he did.

Mrs. Middle was administering the SPAWN again, and smiled pleasantly at all the sixth graders. "This is only a progress check. A practice SPAWN, if you will. It won't go into your permanent record," she assured them. Alexandra didn't care about her permanent record. She sat down in the room set aside for their test, and when given the parchment, she opened it up with her quill gripped tightly in her hand.

"*Sixth Grade Level Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge,*" it said, and on the next line: "*Section One: Magical Theory.*"

This time, she thought, I'm ready. And she went to work.

The questions were different than last time, but generally similar in content. She felt confident after finishing the Magical Theory section – Mr. Adams had been boring, but thorough – and dived into Alchemy and Herbology. Here she wasn't quite as certain about some of the answers, but she wasn't taking wild guesses like last time, so she answered all the questions as quickly as she could, and moved on to Section Three: Arithmancy and Geomancy. She was fully prepared to explain the magical properties of the numbers six, seven, and thirteen, but the questions were quite different this time, and she became flustered. She had to match magic squares with their correct astrological signs, and describe the magical significance of each compass point, things she didn't recall being taught in any of her classes. And she had studied up on Roman and Arabic numerals, but was unprepared for questions about Sanskrit and Hebrew numerology.

She wished that Section Four: Wizard History had questions about the Dark Convention, because she was sure she could answer those, but here it was almost a repeat of her earlier SPAWN – to her detriment, because Ms. Grinder had gone off on tangents so frequently. Alexandra scribbled what little

she could recall about the Declaration of Territorial Autonomy and the First Wizards' Congress, and when goblins first emigrated to the New World, and how that resulted in the Great Goblin Compromise, but it was just bits and pieces she had overheard, mostly while Anna was studying with her classmates.

When Mrs. Middle collected her parchment, two hours later, Alexandra didn't feel as helpless and hopeless as she had after her first SPAWN, but neither did she feel completely confident.

"How was it?" Anna asked her and David, during lunch.

"Not bad," David said, and Alexandra nodded, with a little shrug, but she suspected that Anna sensed her doubts.

"You're going to do fine," she said confidently, patting Alexandra on the arm.

"And if not," said Darla, across the table, "there's another SPAWN at the end of the year. You'll get out of remedial classes eventually." Alexandra shot her a look so dark that Darla nearly choked on her pumpkin juice.

Their practical SPAWN was after lunch, and it was with the same testers, who also happened to be Alexandra's remedial teachers.

Mr. Grue was the worst, as her instructions for the Practical Alchemy portion were written down, and he simply thrust them at her with a grunt. He stared at everything she touched and scribbled notes each time she measured something or stirred her cauldron, and never actually said a word. When she was finished, she thought she'd brewed a good Wakefulness Tonic, identified and measured all the Essential Salts correctly, and peeled and dethorned prickly pear skins and prepared crushed mistletoe properly. But she couldn't read from Grue's reaction whether he agreed.

Hobbes was as friendly as ever, and gave her almost the same transformations to perform as before. This time, she managed each one without difficulty, only hesitating when it came time to transform the mouse. Then she thought about Larry, and imagined the mouse as a big fat rat, and it became large and brown and grew a long pink tail.

"Rather basic," Hobbes said. "Rodent-to-rodent isn't much of a challenge, but it's acceptable." He waved his wand and the rat turned back to a mouse. Alexandra thought the mouse looked a little disappointed.

Newton watched her unsmilingly as she performed her Practical Charms portion. "Try to manage without doggerel verse this time, Miss Quick," he said in a sour tone.

"Yes sir," she replied, in a tone that was just barely polite. When some of her charms didn't go as well as she'd hoped, she became angry and wanted to ask the teacher why he hadn't taught those charms if she were going to be tested on them, but she bit her tongue and tried again.

Finally it was time for Basic Magical Defense with Ms. Shirtliffe. Alexandra had tried learning some new spells just for this test, but since she had learned them entirely from library books, she had no idea how well they would work.

"Well, since you've had an entire semester to prepare, I hope you have something to show me, Quick," Ms. Shirtliffe said. She already had her wand in hand.

"I do," said Alexandra, and then she pointed her wand. "*Expelliarmus!*"

Shirtliffe's hand jerked, and then she flicked her wrist and it was Alexandra's wand that flew out of her fingers. The teacher caught it in her other hand and tossed it back.

"You can't make up in volume what you lack in technique, Quick," she said. And then she flicked her wand again, and again Alexandra lost hers.

"Let me do that a third time and I may give you a Hocus Pocus mark," she said.

Alexandra retrieved her wand. Shirtliffe gestured again, but this time Alexandra half-turned and

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shielded her wand-hand with her body. Then she suddenly turned back and thrust her wand in the teacher's direction like a fencer lunging with a foil. "*Expulso vermes!*"

Nothing happened. Shirliffe shook her head.

"It takes more than a Latin dictionary to create a new spell." But she was smiling a little as she picked up her pen.

"That will be all, Quick," she added, as Alexandra raised her wand again.

"That's not fair! You didn't hardly test me!"

Shirliffe grinned. "Just because you aren't aware of all the ways in which you're being tested doesn't mean you haven't been. You're a clever girl, Quick, but you have much to learn before you even begin to know how much you don't know."

"I don't know what you're talking about, that's for sure," Alexandra muttered, as she left the room.

When she asked David afterwards what his Basic Magical Defense test had been like, he said, "Ms. Shirliffe just cast some basic jinxes at me and had me try to defend myself. I guess I did okay. I mean, I know I couldn't have stopped her if she'd really been trying."

Alexandra had to continue attending her remedial classes for the next two days, and waited anxiously for her SPAWN results. They came one morning at breakfast, delivered in a flying envelope much like the Hall Passes that went zipping magically about the corridors. David received his too, and tore open the envelope eagerly.

"Average, Average, Excellent, Average, Excellent," he read, sounding pleased. "Aw, man, I should have gotten an 'Excellent' in Wizard History."

"How did you do, Alexandra?" asked Darla. Alexandra was eager to see her results, but not so eager to show them to everyone. But everyone was looking at her expectantly. She held her breath and opened the envelope.

There were two pieces of paper. One revealed her SPAWN results, and she stared at them for several seconds before letting out a sigh of relief. She had scored 'Average' on every one, except Basic Magical Defense. Ms. Shirliffe had rated her 'Excellent' there.

The other piece of paper was her new schedule. She looked at it and whooped. "No more remedial classes!"

"Oh, Alex, that's wonderful! Now you'll be in the same classes as the rest of us!" Anna was delighted.

"I got out of remedial Charms and Transfiguration too," said David. "Now maybe we can start learning *real* magic!"

"Well, I don't know why you're so satisfied with 'Average,'" said Darla. "My parents give me a lion for every 'Excellent' and two lions for every 'Superior.'"

"You mean, they would give you two lions for every Superior, if you earned any," said Angelique. Darla blushed while everyone else laughed.

"My parents threatened to pull me out of Charmbridge if I earn anything below Excellent," said Anna." Then she looked guiltily at Alexandra. "I mean, not that there's anything wrong with Average! That is, I'm not saying you're average. You just haven't had as much education as the rest of us – oh!" She covered her mouth with her hands, embarrassed. Alexandra just laughed.

"It's all right, Anna," she said. "I'm just happy to be out of remedial classes now."

Getting out of remedial classes didn't mean escaping her least-favorite teacher. Mr. Grue still taught the regular sixth grade Alchemy class.

"We make potions in this class, Miss Quick, not just simple pastes and tinctures and household remedies," the teacher warned. "We handle toxic, flammable, and highly magical ingredients!" He

glowered at her balefully, from beneath his bushy eyebrows. A number of students seemed to be trying to move further away from her, but David and Anna sat on either side of her, and she was grateful.

Hobbes and Newton taught regular sixth grade Charms and Transfiguration as well. Alexandra and David were both delighted at the spells being taught in the non-remedial courses, but this also made them painfully aware of how far behind they were. Anna patiently corrected Alexandra when she had difficulty with her transfigurations, and drilled her in the incantations for spells she hadn't been learning the entire previous semester. She was a little annoyed when she noticed that David was having less trouble than her.

Escaping from Ms. Grinder's Remedial Wizarding World History, she was now taking the regular sixth grade Wizard Social Studies class, which was less about history than about the cultures and traditions of the wizarding world, and the American wizarding world in particular. This was useful, as Alexandra began learning a lot of what most witches her age were assumed to know already. The teacher was Mrs. Middle, who was as sweetly patronizing as ever. She spent much of the first few weeks asking Alexandra, loudly, in front of the entire class, whether there was anything she hadn't understood or needed help catching up on. Alexandra decided she rather preferred Ms. Grinder's off-topic lectures about the obstinacy and ignorance of the Wizards' Congress.

She received another surprise in her first non-remedial Magical Theory class.

"You never told me Ms. Shirliffe also teaches this class," she whispered to David.

"You never asked," he whispered back.

Shirliffe was brisk and barely took notice of her newest student. The homework accumulated quickly, however, and Alexandra knew right away that this was going to be her most challenging class academically.

After the first week, she settled comfortably into her new schedule, and enjoyed the fact that she was now moving from class to class with all her friends in a single cohort. She knew that in seventh grade they'd begin to be separated again, by differing levels of ability and the introduction of electives, but in the sixth grade nearly everyone had the same classes.

January passed into February. Alexandra seemed to be succeeding in making the fresh start Ms. Grimm had enthusiastically encouraged. She didn't get into trouble, she did her schoolwork, and while there were still mutterings and occasional taunts directed at her, she retaliated mildly or not at all. She and Larry calling each other "Troublesome" and "Rat-face" in the hallway almost became a comfortable routine for both of them.

Anna seemed happy that Alexandra was no longer talking about the Thorn Circle. She asked her once whether she had given up on finding out who her father was. Alexandra shrugged and said that she had more important things to do right now, and this also seemed to please her friend. Alexandra was doing everything she was supposed to be doing, and staying out of trouble. No danger presented itself, and nobody seemed to be trying to kill her. All was well.

But she hadn't forgotten, and she hadn't given up.



It was nearly March. The weather was still intensely cold, and snow still blanketed the area, although there had not been any fresh snowfall in over a week.

David was spending more time outdoors, because he was discovering that a falcon was a demanding familiar indeed. Owls could be left in the aviary for days at a time, and ravens were practically self-sufficient, but Mr. Fledgefield, Charmbridge's Animal Care and Magizoology teacher, had made it clear to David that a falcon required a lot more bonding time and daily exercise. So David was sending Malcolm soaring into the sky overhead while Alexandra, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance all played

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in the snow, shaping snowballs by hand and then launching them at each other with their wands.

The crows that nested around Charmbridge were still thick in the trees, and Alexandra noticed the Ozarker girls start again as a great flock of them shot up into the air, like a black feathery funnel cloud, before resettling elsewhere.

"It's probably David's falcon," she said. "Falcons eat crows too."

"No, Malcolm's over there," said Anna, pointing far away in the opposite direction. "See?"

Then a large white projectile, the perfect combination of packed snow and slush with just a bit of ice, caught Anna directly in the side of the head, hard enough to knock her off her feet. She sprawled out in the snow, looking dizzy. A chorus of laughter told them who was responsible even before they turned to look.

"It's the hodag," said Larry, waving his hands and making a mocking, frightful face as he came shuffling through the snow towards them. He laughed again, while Anna tried to sit up. Her face was red, with embarrassment and from the stinging impact, and Alexandra was already kneeling next to her. It was only the fact that she was trying to help her friend that kept her from immediately launching into Larry.

"Benjamin and Mordecai Rash!" exclaimed Constance, outraged. The two Ozarker boys were behind Larry, along with Ethan Robinson and Wade White, his two friends who had been with him in Grundy's.

"You oughter be ashamed!" said Forbearance.

They just smirked. "*You* oughter be ashamed!" retorted Benjamin.

Mordecai sneered. "Still consortin' with the M –"

"Alexandra, don't!" said Anna, as Alexandra rose to her feet and pointed her wand. The Rash twins had their wands out in a flash as well. Then Larry was pointing his wand, and then snowballs pelted all of them.

"Hey!" Alexandra shouted, ducking and covering her head.

"What the –?" Larry exclaimed, crouching and putting his hands up.

"Stop it!" said Constance.

"This very instant!" said Forbearance.

The Pritchards had their wands out, and had just exhausted the girls' stockpile of snowballs. They looked angry and a little embarrassed, but their barrage had been quite effective.

Everyone stood up cautiously. Even the Rashs were staring at the Pritchard twins apprehensively.

"Go away, Larry!" Alexandra said. "Just go away!"

"Why can't you just leave us alone?" Anna asked, trembling a little.

"I just wanted to warn you," Larry said, in a tone of feigned innocence. "You're getting awfully close to the trees." He pointed to the woods. "There's a hodag in the woods, you know." He lowered his voice. "Every year, some little kid wanders in," he whispered, "and..." He made a sudden lunge and a gnashing sound with his teeth. Anna jumped.

"That's an old witches' tale," said Constance.

"Like hide-behinds and drop-spiders," said Forbearance.

"Everyone knows t'hain't no such creature," said Constance.

"They used to say there's no such thing as re'ems or arctic basilisks," Larry said. "Everyone knows there's been a hodag prowling the northern forests for years."

"Like I'd believe anything you say!" Alexandra snorted.

"Ask a teacher if you don't believe me," said Larry.

"Sure I will," she said sarcastically. "Thanks for being so concerned about us."

Larry laughed. "Okay, I dare you to go in there, then." He pointed at the woods.

Alexandra almost took a step towards the woods, but Anna grabbed her arm. "Alex! He's just baiting you!"

"Go on, prove how brave you are!" Larry scoffed.

With an effort, she calmed herself. "I'm not stupid. I'm not going to walk into the woods just because you dared me. You're just hoping I'll get in trouble."

He laughed, and drew himself up to sneer down at her. "How about a wager, then?"

"Oh, Alex, don't fall for this!" Anna said worriedly.

"A wager? Why should I?" Alexandra stood toe-to-toe with Larry, wishing she were tall enough to look him in the eye. She was skeptical, but a dare was a dare, and she'd always had a hard time turning one down.

"Stay in the woods overnight," said Larry. "Without getting caught, or eaten. And you can have a boon from me."

"A boon? Like a wish?" Alexandra squinted at him.

"It's an oath," said Anna. "If he swears a boon, he has to fulfill it."

"What if I ask you to go jump off the Invisible Bridge?" Alexandra retorted.

He smirked. "Oh, I don't think you'd do that, Troublesome. Especially since if you fail, you owe *me* a boon." He leaned closer. "And if I wanted you dead..." he whispered.

"I saved you too, or have you forgotten?" she hissed back. "If you really believe there's a hodag in the woods, then you *are* trying to get me killed."

"If you don't, then you've got nothing to worry about." Larry laughed. "But of course I'm just fooling around. I knew you're all mouth."

"You're an idiot. And you're on," Alexandra said.

"I'm what?" He looked confused.

"It means I accept, dummy!"

"You and your Muggle slang," he snapped. Then smiled triumphantly and drew his wand. "Touch wands."

"What?"

"That's how you seal an oath," said Anna. "Don't do it, Alex. Please don't do it. You know he's just trying to get you in trouble."

"This is foolishness!" said Constance.

"You're both addled silly!" exclaimed Forbearance.

"He's an idiot for thinking a night in the woods would scare me," Alexandra said, holding out her wand and looking Larry in the eye. "I'll be spending the whole time thinking up something really good to make you do."

Larry smirked and touched the tip of his wand to hers. There was a flash of sparks and she felt a tingling, which quickly faded.

"So what happens if someone welches?" she asked.

"Bad things," said Larry. "See you later, Troublesome. I already know what I'm going to make you do." He waved, and trudged back through the snow towards the academy, with his friends following.

David was running over, awkwardly through the knee-deep snow, with Malcolm on his arm. "Hey!" he said. "What's going on? Were Albo and those hillbilly crackers causing trouble?"

"Those what?" demanded Forbearance quietly. David skidded to a halt, grimacing.

"Can we not start another fight?" Anna asked, as Constance and Forbearance both glared at a chagrined David. "We already have enough to worry about!"

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"We?" asked Alexandra. "I'm the only who has to go into the woods. And there's nothing to worry about. There's no such thing as a hodag."

"You don't even know what a hodag is!" Anna exclaimed.

"What's a hodag?" asked David.

"A monster in the woods," said Anna. "And Alexandra just accepted a dare to stay out there all night!"

"You're kidding," said David. He looked at Alexandra. "Are you nuts?"

"Come on, if there were really a monster in the woods they'd have a fence or something," said Alexandra.

"Oh, jeez. Sometimes you're unbelievable, Alex!" He turned to the other girls. "You stood there and let her do this?"

"As if we had any 'letting' to do, where Alexandra is concerned!" Constance retorted.

"And what would you expect from a pair of hillbilly crackers?" added Forbearance icily. The Ozarkers turned and stalked away, leaving David gaping.

"That wasn't nice," said Anna to David. "And you know how you react to the m-word!"

He sighed. "I didn't mean them. I meant the..."

"The *other* hillbilly crackers?" Anna said, raising an eyebrow.

"Okay! I'll apologize." Then he added hastily, "To them, not to those... punks!" He turned to Alexandra. "Are you nuts?" he repeated.

"Look, I'll go read about hodags in the library," said Alexandra. "I'll bet they are just made up, to scare little kids. Do you really think if there was some terrible monster running around in the woods right there —" she pointed at the nearby tree line, "that it would be so easy for us to just wander in there?"

"Yes!" said Anna, a little shrilly. "Why don't you ever listen to me, Alex? This is what I keep trying to tell you! There are things out there that are dangerous that Muggles don't know anything about! You think the woods are like a park!"

"You don't know what kind of dangerous things I know about!" Alexandra said. "Anyway, you won't be complaining when I win the wager and Larry has to do whatever I say!"

With that, Alexandra stalked off in the same direction as Constance and Forbearance.

"Well," sighed David, "she's back to her old self, I guess."

Anna bit her lip. "Larry knows she'd never back down from a challenge like that, and he knows she'll stay the whole night. Either he really does expect the hodag to get her, or he's up to something."

Chapter 21 — The Hodag



Mrs. Minder scoffed when Alexandra asked about hodags. “I’m sure there are books about them,” the librarian said. “But you’ll find them properly referred to in magizoological texts as ‘mythical.’ Stay away from old *Mystic Inquirer* reprints and books written by conspiratorial warlocks. There is no such beast, Miss Quick. Upperclassmen have been trying to frighten younger children with stories about the hodag ever since *I* was a student.”

The books Alexandra found did mostly treat the hodag as a myth, though a few authors were convinced that the enormous forest-dwelling beast existed. From its description, it certainly sounded improbable to her: the body of a crocodile, the head of a frog, an elephant’s tusks, the claws of a wolverine, and a long spiky tail. It was supposed to be virtually unkillable.

Anna found her still in the library, and dropped into the seat across the table from her. Alexandra looked up at her, feeling bad about their argument earlier but still annoyed.

“I don’t need another lecture, Anna,” she said.

“Good,” replied the other girl curtly, “because I don’t need an apology. I’m coming with you.”

“What?” Alexandra almost shouted out loud, then looked around and lowered her voice, before Mrs. Minder came around to lecture her on using her “library voice.”

“I’m coming with you,” Anna repeated in a whisper. “It’s too dangerous for you to go out into the woods at night by yourself and you know it, or you would know if you ever listened to anything —”

“I said I don’t need a lecture!” Alexandra snapped.

“Fine. But I’m coming.”

“No, you’re not.”

“Yes I am, or I’m telling.”

Alexandra’s mouth dropped open. “What?”

Anna paused to sniffle and wipe her nose, and Alexandra thought she was about to cry, but then she looked up again. She met Alexandra’s gaze and didn’t look away.

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"I mean it. If you go without me, I'll tell the Hall Supervisor," she said, referring to the old warlock whose portrait hung above the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall.

"You wouldn't!"

Anna looked determined. "Don't think I'm bluffing! You're not the only one who can be stubborn, Alex."

Alexandra gritted her teeth, trying to think of a counter-argument, while Mrs. Minder walked past with an armful of books.

"Fine!" she hissed. "Just after sundown, meet me by the aviary." She got up and walked out of the library without another word.

A shockingly cold blast of air blew past her as she exited the library. Curious, she went left instead of right, and followed the cold breeze to the entrance of another residential hall. The Greek letters were ΠΚΚΠ, and 'Pi Kappa Kappa Pi' was printed beneath them. A portrait of a very old, very thin woman wrapped in red velvet robes and holding an equally thin black cat (it looked as if it were starved) glared down at her. "You don't look like a junior!" she said sternly. "I don't recognize you."

"Nope," Alexandra agreed, and kept walking. She saw Mr. Thiel and Mr. Journey standing in the hallway just beyond the entrance. Beyond them, the entire hallway was iced over. Icicles taller than Alexandra dangled from the ceiling.

"Students are going to do things like this," Journey was saying in exasperation to the younger man, as he held out his wand. "You need to practice your counterspells instead of calling me every time some prankster decides to do an indoor weather transformation." He sounded gruffer than Alexandra was used to, but he paused and turned around when he heard Alexandra's footsteps. Thiel also turned, and regarded her dully, with his hands in his pockets and his shoulders slumped forward.

Alexandra hadn't seen Mr. Journey much this semester. Mr. Thiel was sometimes out on the grounds, or in the hallways, and Alexandra was never quite sure what he was doing, but he always looked at her in a way that she found slightly creepy. She had heard other students say that Journey was constantly having to show Thiel how to do simple things or cleaning up after his messes, and found his "assistant" rather more hindrance than help, so she supposed that accounted for his unusually sour disposition lately.

"Well hello there, Starshine," Journey said. "You're not supposed to be in this hallway."

"I felt cold air blowing all the way back to the library." She was staring at the icicles.

Journey chuckled. "Just older students playing pranks. Nothing to worry about. Now run along back to your own dorm."

"Okay." But when Journey turned around and began weaving a series of spells to undo the indoor ice cavern, she stayed and watched. In a matter of minutes, he had de-iced the hallway and vaporized the icicles, until all that was left was a large puddle.

"Now do you think you can handle cleaning *that* up?" he said, with annoyance, gesturing at the puddle. Thiel nodded. Journey turned and saw Alexandra still standing there.

"Starshine, I told you to run along," he said, and for the first time there was a trace of annoyance when he spoke to her as well.

"I was just curious," she said. "That was pretty good magic." Journey opened his mouth, and she said suddenly, "Mr. Journey, is there really any such thing as a hodag in the woods?"

He frowned. Thiel, who'd been dispelling the puddle with an Absorbing Charm, glanced over his shoulder at her.

"Why are you asking about hodags?" he asked. "You aren't thinking of going out in the woods, are you?"

“No, of course not. I was just curious if the hodag is real or something made up to frighten kids.”

“I’ve never seen a hodag,” said Journey. “But the woods can be dangerous. That’s why the Ranger covens always go in groups, with adults along.” He frowned at her. “Starshine, if you’re up to more mischief...”

“I’m not, I promise! Bye, Mr. Journey.” She turned and walked out of the juniors’ hallway, back towards her own.

“Show me your Hall Pass!” snapped the witch in red velvet, behind her, but Alexandra ignored her and kept walking.

Anna wasn’t in their room, so Alexandra put on her heaviest coat, mittens, boots, scarf, and a wool hat. She wished that the hand-warmer Constance and Forbearance had given her hadn’t burned in the fire at home; she suspected it was going to be very cold in the woods.

It also occurred to her that she should have joined the Witch Rangers at the beginning of the semester. They learned camping spells, among other things, but the uniforms and magic badges and ‘The Good Witch’s Pledge’ had not appealed to her. But she was sure a few light and fire-starting charms should be sufficient for one night in the woods. It wasn’t as if she were going hiking. She had a bag of snacks she’d filled in the cafeteria, so there was only one other thing she wanted to take with her.

Anna had started leaving her owl in the aviary, saying she was old enough to begin socializing with other owls, but Charlie still stayed in their room. Alexandra opened the window, and then said, “I’m going out tonight, Charlie. Will you come find me?” The raven squawked in surprise, and then made a great show of fluttering and shivering.

“I know it’s cold!” Alexandra said. “But I need my familiar. Don’t be lazy!” She opened the window partway, and then left her room. Several students asked where she was going on her way out, dressed for the cold, and she said she had detention again. No one questioned this.

Charmbridge had a curfew – younger students were to be inside by sundown. She slipped outside just as the sun was disappearing, and tried to avoid passing by any windows as she made her way around the huge perimeter of the academy towards the aviary. She knew older students were allowed to be out past dark, but not many would be in this weather. Still, she was watchful, but encountered no one before reaching the three-story tower in which both students’ avian familiars and the many owls that carried letters and packages to and from Charmbridge lived.

With a squawk, Charlie descended and landed on Alexandra’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Charlie!” she said, petting the bird. Charlie ruffled its feathers and looked less than happy.

She heard the crunching sound of footsteps in the snow, coming from a ground-floor exit out of the aviary, and then a sneeze, and then a soft hooting. Anna appeared, wearing her red hooded cloak, with Jingwei on her shoulder.

“Are you catching a cold?” Alexandra demanded. “You should go back inside.”

“Of course not,” Anna said. “Witches don’t catch colds.” She sneezed.

“Well, come on then,” Alexandra said reluctantly. She turned and began walking towards the woods. Anna followed.

“You should never have accepted that dare,” said Anna.

“No lectures,” said Alexandra. “And anyway, it’s too late now. But it’s not too late for you to –”

“No way.”

“You really do look like Little Red Riding Hood.”

“Little Red Riding Hood probably didn’t have a weather-proof charm on her cloak,” Anna said smugly.

They were silent until they got to the edge of the woods. It looked a lot deeper and darker at night.

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The lights of Charmbridge Academy were warm and beckoning behind them.

"Last chance. I'll be all right, Anna," Alexandra said. "What would you do if the hodag did come to get me, anyway? Besides get eaten first?"

"Not funny." Anna looked at her. "I don't want to do this, Alex."

She sounded scared, and Alexandra's immediate impulse was to say, "Then don't." But she felt her annoyance melt, and she just sighed. "Then why are you?" she asked. "It can't be that dangerous, just to stay in the woods practically within sight of the academy, or the Rangers wouldn't go camping at all! If you think it is, then you should have stayed in our room."

"Would you let me go do something you thought was dangerous and stupid by myself?"

Alexandra opened her mouth, and shut it. She shook her head. "Then why didn't you just go ahead and tell on me?" she asked, more quietly.

"Would you tell on me?" Anna replied.

Alexandra sighed. "No, of course not."

"You know Larry just wants to see you get in trouble. He set you up and you fell for it, because you just can't turn down a dare." Anna sneezed again.

"Well, we have Charlie and Jingwei to help be lookouts," said Alexandra. The two birds hooted. She put an arm around Anna's shoulders. "Come on." They walked into the woods, and within less than two dozen paces, the lights of Charmbridge were swallowed in the darkness behind them.

They stopped in a small flat patch of pristine snow, between three trees. Anna reached into her cloak and withdrew a small leather bag. She opened it, and began pulling out a bedroll that was much too large to fit inside such a small bag. In the half-moonlight, Alexandra's face was barely visible, but Anna caught her surprised expression.

"Don't tell me," she sighed. "You didn't bring a camping kit?"

"I figured we could just sit by a fire," Alexandra said. "Where did you get a camping kit?"

"I was in the Junior Witch Rangers for a while. But I didn't like the other girls." Anna shook her head. "You didn't plan this out at all! How can you just do that, Alex? Just decide to do something and do it without even thinking ahead? Do you think being brave and not caring what others think makes you immune to bad stuff happening? Achoo!" Anna sneezed violently again.

"No." Alexandra watched her friend unroll a sleeping bag, and then pull three perfectly-cut sticks out of the leather bag. "I know bad stuff happens. But there's always something you can do about it." But with her face hidden in the shadows, she frowned. Was this true? She had rarely escaped trouble because she was well-prepared for it. In fact, luck probably had more to do with her surviving her many hazardous mishaps than anything else. It wasn't a question she cared to examine too closely at the moment.

Anna formed a little tripod with the sticks, and waved her wand over it. "Ignite!" she said, and bright orange flames instantly blossomed. She held her hands over the fire, and sniffled.

"You do have a cold!" Alexandra said accusingly.

"I've never had a cold in my life!" Anna sneezed.

"I have, so being a witch obviously doesn't make you immune."

Anna pulled her cloak around herself, and shivered a little.

Alexandra sat down next to her, while Jingwei flapped up to a branch overhead, and Charlie joined the owl. She took out some of the food she'd brought with her, and offered Anna a roll.

The fire burned without diminishing at all, and the logs that fueled it didn't appear to be consumed. As the night wore on, they heard owls, other night birds, and four-footed creatures moving through the woods, sometimes sounding a long way off, and sometimes very near. Alexandra was unbothered,

though she was alert. In her mind the worst they might encounter would be a bear, and she knew bears usually avoided humans, and even some of the simple charms they'd learned would be sufficient to scare one away.

Anna, however, was growing increasingly nervous, or maybe she was trembling from the cold, despite her cloak and the fire. Alexandra was also worried by her roommate's increasing sniffing and sneezing.

"Mrs. Minder and Mr. Journey both said hodags aren't real," she said, trying to sound reassuring, after Anna jumped again at some animal moving about in the woods.

"They were probably afraid you'd go looking for it otherwise," the other girl sniffled.

Alexandra frowned. "Don't be like that, Anna."

Then a loud crashing sound made both girls look up. It sounded as if a tree had fallen over, some distance away.

"Probably an old dead tree, weighed down by snow," Alexandra said. Anna nodded, but her eyes were wide enough for the whites to gleam in the shadows cast over her face by the firelight. Alexandra scooted closer to her. "Why don't you go to sleep? I'll stay awake, and Jingwei and Charlie are both watching over us too."

Anna was shivering. She crawled into her bedroll, just as snowflakes began to drift down. "Great, now it's snowing," she muttered.

"Is your bedroll warm enough?" Alexandra asked. Anna nodded. "It's got a warming charm. Here, you should wear my cloak." She pulled off her red all-weather cloak and handed it to Alexandra, who took it reluctantly.

As Alexandra stood over the fire, the snow became heavier, and she could feel a drop in temperature as well. Charlie squawked overhead, and then another noise made Anna sit up and Alexandra turn around. It sounded like something much larger than a deer, making its way through the trees nearby.

"Just a bear, maybe," Alexandra said.

"Just a bear?" Anna repeated, in a high-pitched voice.

An even louder noise echoed from further away. It was a bizarre sound, like a cross between a screech, a howl, and a croak. Alexandra had never heard any animal make a sound like that, and it was immediately followed by the sound of another tree crashing to the ground. Whatever animal had been prowling about nearby went running off deeper into the woods and away from the other sound, dashing through the snow in a panic.

Alexandra and Anna were both staring at each other wide-eyed.

"What was that?" Anna squeaked.

"I don't know," Alexandra admitted. Her hand was on her wand. She kept listening.

Anna's owl was fluttering from one branch on the tree overhead to another, obviously disturbed. Charlie too was making a racket, until Alexandra shushed the raven.

"Alex..." Anna said. Her teeth were chattering, and she sneezed.

The snow was becoming heavier, and it was definitely getting colder. Alexandra's heart was beating a little faster, after that bizarre cry from the deep woods, but it was something else that made her swallow hard and say, almost in a whisper, "Let's go inside."

Anna stared at her, her expression a mixture of desperate hope, relief, and trepidation. "Really? But... but... you'll lose the wager. You'll owe Larry a boon." She looked down. "It's because of me, isn't it?" she murmured.

Alexandra knelt next to Anna. "You're sick," she said. "And it's getting colder."

Anna sneezed, then looked up at her stubbornly. "I can make it until morning," she said. "I know I'm

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not brave like you, Alex, but –”

Another long inhuman howl, like the groaning of something large and in pain (or hungry) set Jingwei and Charlie both to protesting overhead, and made Anna gulp. It sounded closer this time.

“Come on!” Alexandra said. She helped Anna stand and extract herself from her bedroll. Anna quickly stuffed it into the improbably small leather bag it came in, and extinguished the fire.

Charlie squawked very loudly, and Alexandra started to hiss, “Charlie, be quiet!” when she saw that a very large owl was attacking her raven. Charlie ducked aside, and Jingwei was coming to the rescue, but then another owl swooped out of the darkness, directly at Anna's owl.

“Jingwei!” Anna screamed, and then someone said, “*Petrificus Totalus!*” Anna suddenly froze in place.

Alexandra spun around with her wand out, and sprayed a shower of red and gold sparks into the darkness. She saw Larry, Ethan, and Wade crouching by a tree. Larry snapped, “You got the wrong one!” as he pointed his wand at her. Alexandra ducked the spell that went whizzing over her head, and then caught Larry with a Tripping Jinx as he rose to lunge at her. He went face-first into the snow and Ethan and Wade both stumbled over him.

She tried to cast a hex on Larry as he stood up, but Ethan blasted her off her feet with a hex of his own. Alexandra almost hit her head on a log, and rolled to the side without looking. Another hex sprayed snow where she'd just been lying.

“You creeps!” she yelled.

Larry stood over her, pointing his wand. “*Expelliarmus!*” he yelled, and her wand flew out of her hand.

“What are you doing?” she snapped.

“Petrifying you,” he said. “So when they go looking for you tomorrow morning, you'll be caught, and you'll lose the wager.”

“You're just going to put Body-Bind Curses on us and leave us here?” she exclaimed. “We'll freeze to death, you jerk!”

He snickered, then yelped as she lashed out with her foot and kicked his ankle. She rolled to her feet and threw her shoulder into the taller boy as hard as she could, and he went tumbling backwards, but then Ethan and Wade grabbed her arms and pinned her, cursing as she struggled and tried to kick them. Larry stood up again, and pointed his wand at her.

“You didn't even have to do this!” she snarled. “We were about to go inside anyway!”

He was so surprised, he almost dropped his wand. “You were? What for?”

An impact shook the trees around them so hard that snow fell on all their heads. Very close by, there was a groaning, splintering sound as another tree crashed to the ground, followed by that awful croaking that Alexandra and Anna had heard earlier.

“Oh, crap!” exclaimed Ethan.

“It's the hodag!” gasped Wade, as he let go of Alexandra.

“There's... there's no such thing as a hodag!” Larry stammered, but as his two friends fled, he cursed and turned to run after them. “Better get out of here, Quick!” he called over his shoulder.

Alexandra scrambled about in the snow, trying to find her wand. Charlie and Jingwei were both flapping around her head and screeching. Along with the snow flurries, this was only making it harder for her to see anything. “Both of you shush!” she exclaimed, but neither bird heeded her. She heard whatever beast was knocking trees over grunt loudly, sounding almost like an enormous belch.

Her fingers finally closed around her wand, and she ran over to where Anna was still standing motionless, petrified by Larry's curse.

"Finite incantatem!" she gasped. It took her two more tries to dispel the Body-Bind Curse. Anna almost fell into her arms, sobbing. "We've got to get out of here!"

"Come on." Alexandra took her friend by the hand, and they both ran.

It was difficult, in the darkness, especially with Anna sneezing and shivering all the way. They nearly stumbled several times, but their familiars led the way through the trees. When they saw the lights of Charmbridge, they made directly for the school, across the great lawn between it and the woods.

"We're almost there, Anna," Alexandra said, half-supporting her friend. It was easier for her, still wearing Anna's weather-proof cloak. They opened one of the outer doors, and stepped through into the warmth of the interior, only to find themselves facing Larry, Ethan, and Wade. Charlie and Jingwei had followed their owners inside, and now screeched and puffed themselves up threateningly, as the three boys' owls did likewise.

"So you really did ... what's that Muggle term? Chicken?" Larry was grinning with delight. The sight made Alexandra's face burn with fury.

"You were going to cheat!" she yelled. "And you were trying to kill us!"

"Oh, stop whining, Troublesome." He was almost chortling. "You lost the wager and you know it."

Anna sneezed. Then a deep voice said, "What's this about a wager?"

They all turned. Mr. Journey had followed Alexandra and Anna from outside, through the still-open door.

"I thought I saw some kids running across the grounds, from the woods," he said. "What in Merlin's name are you young'uns up to?"

They all looked at each other.

Journey folded his arms across his chest. "No one wants to talk, eh? That's a shame. I'm guessing it had something to do with a dare, involving a certain young lady with more courage than sense?"

Alexandra shuffled her feet, not meeting Journey's eyes. Larry pulled his cloak around himself and said nothing.

"You know I should report all of you to the Dean. None of you had any business being outside at this hour, much less running around in the woods."

Anna shivered, and Larry and his friends looked at each nervously. Alexandra just kept her eyes on the floor.

Journey shook his head. "All right, wands out."

They all looked at each other again, confused.

"Starshine, Youngblood, both of you. Show me your wands."

Slowly, Larry and Alexandra both took out their wands. Journey looked at them and nodded. "Huh. Care to tell me what you two swore to?" Alexandra and Larry glared at each other silently.

"No, huh?" Journey drew his wand. "Well, that's enough nonsense for one night." He tapped his wand against Larry's, and sparks ran up and down it, jolting the boy's hand and making him jump. Then he tapped Alexandra's wand likewise, and she flinched as a shock ran through her arm.

"You shouldn't be swearing magical oaths," Journey said. "You might not be old enough to cast a binding magical contract, but even schoolyard oaths can be dangerous." He waved his wand admonishingly at them. "Now get back to your dorms. If I see any of you out after curfew again, I will report you!"

"Yes, sir," mumbled Larry.

"Yes, Mr. Journey," Alexandra muttered.

"Thank you," Anna murmured, and coughed.

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Larry spared Alexandra a look of fury, and stalked off with Ethan and Wade. Alexandra shrugged out of Anna's red cloak, and wrapped it around her shivering friend.

"We have to go see Mrs. Murphy," she said.

"No," Anna said. She coughed and clung to Alexandra's arm. "If we show up wet and cold like this, Mrs. Murphy will know we've been outside, and she *will* tell Dean Grimm."

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They argued briefly, but Alexandra agreed to go back to their rooms first, where they changed into dry clothes.

Mrs. Murphy was appalled at Anna's condition when they arrived at the infirmary. "Why, if I didn't know better, I'd say you have Muggle Flu!" she exclaimed, putting a hand on the girl's forehead.

"I think it's just a cold," said Alexandra.

Murphy scowled at her. "Oh, you understand healing, do you, Miss Quick?" She gave Anna a potion. "Drink this, and I'll check on you in an hour."

Anna drank the potion, while Alexandra slumped in the chair next to her. They were both quiet for a while, as steam began coming out of Anna's ears.

"You were going to give up," Anna said at last. "You were going to let Larry win. He would have except for Mr. Journey. I'm sorry, Alex."

Alexandra shook her head. "No, you were right. You're always right, Anna." She sighed. "It was dangerous out there. It's not right to put my friends in danger."

She looked down at her lap, while Anna stared at her for a while, then said quietly, "I wish you wouldn't put yourself in danger either, Alex."

"I don't always *put* myself in danger, you know."

"I know. Not always."

Alexandra smiled slightly, then turned her head to look at Anna seriously. "You were wrong, though."

Now Anna frowned. "About what?"

"About not being brave. You are brave, Anna. Even when you're scared."

After a moment of stunned silence, Anna smiled slowly.

"Do you think that was really a hodag out there?" she whispered.

"I don't know." Alexandra looked out the window of the infirmary. Snow was still falling. "But – oh never mind. If I say I'm not going to get in trouble any more, you wouldn't believe me, would you?"

Anna laughed quietly, as steam continued to billow out of her ears. "Not really."

Chapter 22 —Field Trip

That was the last snowfall of the season. After the girls' night in the woods, it became gradually warmer. By the beginning of March, all the snow had melted.

Journey didn't report them to the Dean, although he still gave Alexandra knowing looks in the hallways and shook his head, on the rare occasions that she saw him. Almost always, he was either being tailed by Thiel, or trying to find his unhelpful assistant.

Larry was infuriated by having victory snatched from him, and he and his friends taunted her even more frequently. For the most part, she ignored it. Alexandra was starting to enjoy her classes, and she particularly enjoyed Practical Magical Exercise, now that she was allowed to ride a broom again. David had missed tryouts for Quidditch, but he frequently played informal games with other students. Alexandra thought he was only a so-so flyer; in fact, she thought she was much better. She didn't say this to him, though.

Constance and Forbearance remained rather cool towards David, though they claimed to have accepted his apology. Alexandra had not realized, with all the taunting and name-calling she had been subjected to, that the Ozarker girls were in fact mocked quite a bit themselves, for their speech, for their old-fashioned mannerisms, for their homemade clothes, and for not fitting in with any of Charmbridge's cliques. She thought this was terribly unfair. While she didn't exactly like being known all over school as "Troublesome" or a girl supposedly obsessed with the Dark Arts, she sort of understood it. The Pritchards, however, were never anything but nice, and didn't deserve such treatment.

On March 22nd, an owl came to the window of Anna and Alexandra's room. This was how the mail was delivered in the wizarding world, and Alexandra wasn't surprised, when she opened the window, to find that the letter the owl bore was addressed to her, from her parents. Of course her parents couldn't send owls, but Alexandra's understanding was that somewhere, the Muggle post office exchanged letters and packages with the Owl Post, and so mail managed to pass between the Muggle world and the wizarding one.

Anna looked curiously at the card Alexandra opened. Alexandra smiled and rolled her eyes, as she withdrew a pair of bills folded inside.

"Money," she said. "That's what they always give me for my birthday."

"It's your birthday?" Anna squealed.

"Yeah." Alexandra was twelve today, but she hadn't really thought about it until the owl came. At home, her mother usually bought a cake on the way home from work, and if they weren't too tired, she and Archie would sing "Happy Birthday" and then give her some money and tell her she could buy whatever she wanted at the SuperMart.

Anna hugged her. "Happy birthday, Alex! You didn't tell me!"

Now Alexandra was thoroughly embarrassed. "When's your birthday?"

"December." And when Alexandra looked even more embarrassed, she said, "Don't worry about it. It was during Christmas break, and we don't celebrate Christmas at home, so my Christmas presents were like birthday presents to me. Anyway, we have to tell everyone else –"

"No!" The last thing Alexandra wanted was all her friends singing "Happy Birthday!" to her in the cafeteria. "It's no big deal, Anna, really." She looked at the paper money. "I don't know where my parents think I'm going to spend Muggle money around here, though."

"Well, they don't really understand that you're somewhere where Muggle money isn't used, do they?"

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Anna pointed out reasonably. "But you can always spend it or exchange it on our field trip next month."

"Field trip?"

Anna shook her head. "You've been forgetting to read the bulletin board again, haven't you? The entire sixth grade is going to Chicago for Muggle Awareness Month."

"Muggle Awareness Month?" Alexandra made a funny face.

"You've probably noticed, a lot of wizards aren't exactly sympathetic to Muggles... or Muggle-borns." Alexandra snorted at that, and Anna went on. "The Department of Magical Education said all schools have to start teaching Muggle Awareness. I guess they're trying to get rid of the old pureblood prejudices."

"Good luck with that." Just the other day, Ebenezer Smith had asked in their Wizard Social Studies class whether it was really proper to talk about Muggles and wizards as if they were both "people." Mrs. Middle had given a benign, textbook answer, while Alexandra and David had both been clenching their wands tightly under their desks. Even Darla had looked appalled, perhaps on account of her Muggle grandmother. But most of the class found the question quaint but not offensive.

Walking to Charms class that morning, they were surprised to see Ms. Grimm strolling through the hallway. It wasn't unheard of for the Dean to walk the hallways while school was in session, but so formidable and intimidating was her presence that she generally stayed in her office. Alexandra thought she stayed in her office and out of sight to make it *more* intimidating when she appeared. It was certainly the case now. Students flowed around her, greeted her in hushed, fearful tones from youngest to oldest, and no one met her eyes. Except Alexandra.

"Miss Quick."

Alexandra slowed to a stop. All of her friends jerked to a halt behind her. Alexandra elbowed Anna, who looked like she might faint.

"Good morning, Ms. Grimm," Alexandra said. Her friends all echoed this, in hushed tones.

"I understand it is your birthday today, Miss Quick."

Alexandra blinked in surprise. "How did you know?"

"I know *all* my students. I like to know everything about them." Ms. Grimm took a few steps down the hallway, walking past and around her, and she felt her friends unconsciously pressing closer to her, as if they were being circled by a hungry predator. "I'm always keeping an eye on my charges. Especially those who have at times been... troublesome."

Alexandra's eyes narrowed.

"Well," the Dean said pleasantly. "I hope you have a very happy birthday, Miss Quick. I know you've had a difficult first year at Charmbridge, but it's over halfway through and I'm pleased to see you've managed to avoid my office lately. I'd say you're almost out of the woods, so to speak. Miss Chu, do you have a cold?" Anna was shivering, and Alexandra elbowed her again.

"No, Ms. Grimm," Anna stammered.

"Good. Well, happy birthday again, Miss Quick." The Dean gave her that cat-like smile.

"Thank you, Ms. Grimm," Alexandra muttered.

"Oh," Ms. Grimm added, taking a step away from them and then stopping. "Miss Quick, I do hope you'll be cooperative and helpful during next month's field trip? Since you've had a Muggle upbringing, you'll be more familiar with the Muggle world than most of your classmates."

"Yes, Ms. Grimm," said Alexandra.

"Excellent." The Dean smiled and continued down the hallway.

"Why'd she single you out?" David demanded. "I grew up in a non-wizard household too! I know

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just as much about the Muggle world as you!”

“If you're jealous 'cause she pays more attention to me, I'd be happy to trade places with you,” Alexandra retorted.

“Happy Birthday, Alexandra,” said Constance.

“Happy Birthday!” echoed Forbearance.

“Thanks,” Alexandra said, embarrassed.

She was more embarrassed when they all announced her birthday in Charms class, and sent up showers of multi-colored sparks from their wands. This happened whenever someone's birthday was revealed, but most kids avoided it, and it annoyed Mr. Newton a great deal. In Transfiguration, Anna transformed a rat into a cupcake, and Constance turned a quill into a candle and stuck it on top. Forbearance lit it with a small wave of her wand.

“Very well done, Miss Chu, Miss Pritchard!” Mr. Hobbes praised them.

“Yeah, good job,” said Alexandra. Then whispered, “But I'm not eating that! It's still a rat!”

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The sixth grade field trip was the third week in April. They were scheduled to take a walk through Chicago's streets, then visit the Territorial Headquarters Building in downtown Chicago as part of their wizarding civics lessons, and finally ride the subway to a Muggle baseball game, before being bussed back to Charmbridge.

For Alexandra, this was all rather exciting. On one of her trips to Chicago, she and her mother had ridden the subway, but she barely remembered it, and she had never been to a baseball game. She was also interested in seeing what a wizard government office looked like.

For her classmates, however, at least those who had never set foot in the Muggle world, the upcoming trip was both highly anticipated and highly dreaded. To hear Darla and Angelique speak of it, walking among Muggles, even for a few short blocks, would be like walking among headhunters. The subway train was an incomprehensible Muggle contraption of metal and wheels and gears and electricity that would surely send them all to their deaths, and baseball was some quaint Muggle pastime that would no doubt look very crude and unsophisticated to wizards' and witches' eyes.

“Are they for real?” David asked Alexandra one afternoon. It was his familiarity with Muggles that had Constance and Forbearance finally speaking to him again. He had just reassured them that they would not have to watch any human sacrifices after the game. Some eleventh grader had told them that Muggles made the losing team march under a pair of golden arches to be broiled alive.

“Be nice to them, David. They never even left the Ozarks before they came here, and they've never been among Muggles.”

Even Anna was nervous. Although she lived in San Francisco, she said it was a much more wizard-friendly city. “We can wear regular clothing there, and the Muggles hardly even notice.”

Part of their preparation for the field trip was studying Muggle fashions, so they could all dress appropriately for Chicago. This was made a part of their Transfiguration class project; each student was responsible for altering at least one outfit into something suitable for their outing. Alexandra was rather enjoying being consulted by her classmates as an authority on Mugglewear. For the first time, being “Muggle-born” was not seen as a disadvantage, and she and David (and to a lesser extent, Anna) were suddenly the most popular kids in their class.

Constance and Forbearance were rather distraught that their bonnets would not pass as everyday Muggle apparel.

“Well, you can wear them,” said Alexandra. “But girls don't really wear those anymore, so Muggles will look at you funny.”

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“Our parents would be shamed at us if we bared our heads like foreigners!” said Constance.

“We can't indecent ourselves for our education!” said Forbearance.

Alexandra crossed her arms. “I guess I'm an indecent foreigner, then?” she snapped.

As usual, the twins blushed and looked away when subjected to Alexandra's temper.

“That hain't fair, Alex,” said Forbearance quietly.

“We got oun ways, and we don't chide you none over yourn,” said Constance.

Alexandra's expression softened, remembering her admonition to David. “Okay,” she said. “Muggle girls don't wear bonnets, but that doesn't mean you can't wear anything on your head.” She helped them find pictures of fashionable hats, and after that the Ozarkers began practicing transfigurations on their bonnets enthusiastically.

The next day, Darla and Angelique came to her.

“Oh Alexandra, what do you think?” asked Darla.

“Do we look like Muggles?” asked Angelique.

The Pritchards looked over her shoulder, and their mouths dropped open as they turned bright red. Alexandra turned around, and her own mouth dropped open as well.

Darla and Angelique had acquired a pair of leggy Muggle dolls with exaggerated proportions, and transformed their clothes according to what the dolls were wearing. Darla was now squeezed into a spaghetti-strap tank top that left most of her belly exposed, and a skirt so short and tight she could barely bend over (and wouldn't want to). She had bangles and bracelets and charms dangling from her wrists, to match a pair of truly extravagant earrings, and a pink feather boa wrapped around her plump, bare shoulders.

Angelique, who was rather proud of being the most developed girl in the sixth grade, was wearing a tight sequined blouse with a few too many buttons undone. She had turned her pants into tight red shorts. Both girls had transformed their shoes into ridiculously elevated high heels. Their legs were entirely bare.

Alexandra was speechless for several seconds. She exchanged a glance with David, who was also gaping at them.

“Great!” Alexandra finally managed to blurt out. She made a thumbs-up gesture. “That's perfect! You totally look like Muggles!”

Darla and Angelique beamed, and turned around to prance off and practice more transformations – or they would have pranced, if they weren't wobbling so unsteadily on their unfamiliar high heels.

Alexandra and David both covered their mouths, trying not to burst into laughter. David almost doubled over, and Alexandra made strangled choking sounds as she clutched her own stomach. They had tears in their eyes, and only stopped laughing when they looked up to see Anna standing with her hands on her hips, glaring at both of them.

“Oh, don't worry Anna,” Alexandra said. “You don't really think any teachers will actually let them go to Chicago like that, do you?”

Constance and Forbearance both looked appalled, and sighed, shaking their heads.

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Darla and Angelique stopped asked Alexandra for advice after that. In fact, they still weren't speaking to her by the time they all got on the bus for their trip to Chicago. They sat at a different table inside the magically expanded interior of the short bus. Alexandra didn't really mind.

She and David were wearing the clothes they came to Charmbridge in. Constance and Forbearance were wearing long dresses, sweaters, and sun hats. Anna was wearing a plaid skirt and white shirt that made her look like a Catholic schoolgirl. All the students, and the staff, were dressed in outfits that

would look perfectly normal in the Muggle world – but not all at once. When they got off the bus in Chicago, on a secluded side street not far from the Goblin Market, Alexandra thought they didn't exactly look like a typical group of schoolchildren on a field trip.

“Wands, everyone,” Ms. Shirtliffe said, as they disembarked, and with only a few grumbles, each student dropped his or her wand into a chest that sat on the ground as they stepped off the bus. Some of the sixth graders had protested bitterly when this rule was announced, and a few parents had even sent angry owls to the Dean, but the administration had decided that only adults would be allowed to carry wands on this excursion. For many of the young witches and wizards, it was their very first time among Muggles, and dozens of sixth graders carrying wands through downtown Chicago was deemed to present too great a risk of an untoward incident.

Shirtliffe was watching every student to make sure no one tried to sneak off the bus without surrendering his or her wand. Two students tried, but the teacher caught them immediately. Alexandra dropped hers reluctantly into the chest with the rest.

“Now, everyone stay together,” Mrs. Speaks said. She was wearing a city bus driver's uniform. Gwendolyn Adams, helping Speaks chaperone the students, was wearing a taffeta dress. Darla and Angelique were wearing cheerleaders' uniforms, in different colors. Ebenezer Smith was dressed entirely in black and looked like a goth. Ms. Shirtliffe, Mrs. Minder, and Miss Gambola were all accompanying them, along with Dean Price, wearing a purple dress and a large purple hat. As the line of sixth graders stretched down the street, wearing jeans, three-piece suits, formal dresses, sports uniforms, T-shirts, sweatshirts, leather jackets, fur coats, and everything else that could be found in Muggle magazines, people looked at them curiously. Mrs. Speaks and Mrs. Price both walked ahead, nodding politely at the Muggles on the street, while the other teachers walked on either side of the double-column of students.

Alexandra and Anna were at the center of one knot of students, and David was in another, as their classmates peppered them with questions about taxis, mailboxes, streetlamps, manhole covers, cell phones, fast food restaurants, skateboards, sunglasses, and everything else they saw on the street.

The walk was only four blocks through downtown Chicago, but Alexandra realized it was like running a gauntlet through an alien landscape to many of her non-Muggle-born classmates. Constance and Forbearance were alternately fascinated, by motorcycles and streetcars and the storefront of an electronics shop, and terrified, by a policeman who frowned in puzzlement at them from behind dark sunglasses, and a young man who wolf-whistled and made lewd kissing noises at the girls as he walked by, and the skyscrapers towering overhead. The young witches and wizards craned their necks to look up at the high-rise buildings that lined Chicago's business district, and the elevated tracks of the “L.”

Alexandra wanted very much to stop at a burger joint for a cheeseburger, fries, and a soda, but this was to be a walking excursion only, with no deviations permitted. However, when a vending machine just inside a drugstore caught her eye, she whispered to her friends, “Cover for me, I'll be right back!”

“What?” gasped Anna.

“Alexandra Quick!” scolded Constance, as Alexandra slipped between them, gave a quick look over her shoulder at Gwendolyn, who was bringing up the rear and being distracted by an overly-friendly Muggle boy her own age, and over her other shoulder at Miss Gambola, who seemed to be trying to work out the timing sequence at a crosswalk, and darted into the drug store.

She went to the counter, used one of the bills her mother had sent her for her birthday to buy some candy and make change, and then went to the vending machine and bought as many cans of soda as she could fit into her pockets. By the time she stepped outside again, the line of Charmbridge students had moved on, but they didn't seem to have noticed she was gone. She hurried to catch up, slipped deftly

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past Gwendolyn, who was staring through the window of a hair salon, and darted back into her friends' midst with the triumphant expression of a raider returning from a foray behind enemy lines.

"See, easy!" she said smugly.

Constance and Forbearance looked aghast and admiring. Anna had grabbed her own hair with both hands, and was pulling at it anxiously.

At the end of their four-block tour of The Loop, the students were all chattering so excitedly that Dean Price had to yell repeatedly to get everyone's attention. "Children! We're about to enter the Territorial Headquarters Building. I'd like to remind you again, this is where Very Important Wizards and Witches are doing government business, and if we're lucky, we might even see the Governor himself! You are all representing Charmbridge Academy so I expect to see you on your best behavior..." Her voice trailed off as she noticed Alexandra was silently mimicking her, word for word, as this was the same speech she'd given them at least a dozen times since their field trip was first announced. Anna elbowed Alexandra, who cleared her throat and adopted an expression of innocent attention.

The Sixth Grade Dean's eyes narrowed, and she continued. "Single file line, mouths shut, follow myself and Mrs. Speaks." She continued to eye Alexandra as they walked through the double doors of a tall bank building.

The lobby within was deserted, and there appeared to be a layer of dust on everything, except for the well-polished floor. They walked silently to the elevators, where Mrs. Price pressed the 'up' button, and the doors opened immediately.

The students filed into the elevator. Like many wizarding spaces, it was much larger on the inside than on the outside. The dozens of sixth graders squeezed inside as easily as they had in the Charmbridge bus. Although from the outside it was a normal office elevator, the interior looked more like an old-fashioned caged department store elevator, like the ones Alexandra had seen in black and white movies, complete with manual levers to operate it. There was no attendant, however. Alexandra looked at the plaque next to the levers, and saw a list of offices and departments from level B4 up to the 13th floor, where the Governor's Office was located. The Department of Magical Education, the Department of Magical Transportation, the Wizard Justice Department, the Bureau of Magic Obfuscation, the Muggle Relations Commission, the Artifacts and Enchantments Regulatory Board, and dozens of others blurred together, but one caught her eye in particular: 'Territorial Census Office,' in the bottommost basement.

"Trace Office," said Mrs. Price, and the levers moved by themselves, the elevator creaked and groaned, and it jerked and rattled noisily as it strained to bring them all to the seventh floor. Alexandra wondered why so many of the students were worried about the subway.

They all poured out in front of the Trace Office, and were greeted by a fashionably-dressed witch with elaborately braided hair who introduced herself as Alcina Kennedy. Alexandra faded behind the Pritchards, hoping she wouldn't be recognized.

Ms. Kennedy took them on a tour through a room full of crystal balls sitting on what looked something like seismograph machines, with quills magically hovering over scrolls that cycled endlessly. Occasionally a quill dipped to write something on the parchment below it. A clockwork golem tore off the scroll and crumpled it into a ball, then stuffed the ball into a tube which sucked the wadded up parchment somewhere else, while another Clockwork replaced the scroll.

"You can see we're in the midst of an impressive modernization effort," Ms. Kennedy was saying. "Our response time to incidents of unauthorized use of magic in Muggle communities is down to an average of forty-three minutes."

“Except during blizzards, fortunately,” Alexandra muttered.

They continued to the Juvenile Magical Offenses Division of the Wizard Justice Department. They were introduced to a bare-headed elderly wizard in black robes named Carlos Black, who introduced himself as Chief of Juvenile Inquisitions.

“He’s a little scary,” whispered David. Black had a fiery gleam in his eye, and seemed eager to find some fault to prosecute as his gaze swept the students.

“Not as scary as Dean Grimm,” muttered Anna.

Alexandra had to agree with that, but she was less concerned with the Chief of Juvenile Inquisitions than she was with Ms. Shirtliffe, who was standing behind them, between the students and the door. Shirtliffe was much more alert than the other teachers, and Alexandra didn’t think she’d be able to slip past her unnoticed.

“If anyone asks, I’m in the bathroom, okay?” she whispered to Anna.

“What?” Anna whispered. “Oh no. Not again...”

“Thanks, Anna!”

“Alex!”

Black was talking about a bill before the Wizards’ Congress that would make it legal for Territorial Governors to launch special inquisitions which could treat underage wizards and witches as adults. He seemed very enthusiastic about it. Alexandra squeezed her way to the back. Shirtliffe was watching her with narrowed eyes.

“Ms. Shirtliffe, I have to go to the bathroom!” she whispered.

Shirtliffe sighed and gestured curtly over her shoulder. “Hurry up, and *do not wander*, Quick!”

Outside the Juvenile Magical Offenses Division, Alexandra didn’t wander – she went straight to the elevator, and stepped inside. The doors rattled shut, but the elevator didn’t move.

She hesitated, cleared her throat, and then said, “Territorial Census Office.”

The lever jerked all the way forward, and the elevator descended so quickly that Alexandra felt her stomach rise a little before her feet settled flat on the floor again. The needle above was now pointing to B4, and the elevator doors opened with a ding.

The basement was lit only with torches, not even proper lanterns, and half the torches were out. Alexandra stepped out onto a bare concrete floor. There were a few other offices on this level: she passed the Department of Creature Relations, the Voluntary Wand Registration Bureau, and the Office of Lycanthropy Research, before reaching a wooden door with ‘Census and Records’ printed on it. She opened the door, and stepped inside.

The room inside was immense, much larger than she expected from the tiny door at the end of the corridor outside. There were stuffed filing cabinets, newer metal ones closer to the door, older wooden ones as she looked further back, lining the walls and stretching back into the dark corners of the cavernous room. Shelves overflowing with folders and boxes of scrolls dominated the rest of the room. They were very tall, stretching to a ceiling that was much too high overhead, considering there were supposed to be floors just above them. Alexandra heard fluttering noises, and when she craned her head, she saw *bats* hanging upside down from the ceiling.

“Are you lost, young lady?”

The voice was a raspy whisper. She started and looked around to see a very pale wizard with dark, unkempt hair wearing a very old, shabby suit beneath a black cloak, watching her unblinkingly.

“I don’t think so,” she said. “I’m looking for the Territorial Census Office.”

He continued to stare at her. He ran his tongue over his lips. “This is the Territorial Census Office.”

She found him a little unnerving, but plunged ahead and said brightly, “So do you keep records of

births here?"

The wizard nodded slowly.

"Actually, what I was wondering," she went on, as if she'd come down here to do a school project, "is if someone is born in a Muggle hospital, but she has a father who's a known wizard, would you have a record of that?"

He cocked his head and regarded her. His gaze was really quite unsettling. He never took his eyes off her, and Alexandra wondered why there was no one else working in this office.

"What is your name?" he said slowly.

"Alexandra. Alexandra Quick." She stared back at him. "I'm a Muggle-born, but I think I'm a half-blood. That is, I'm pretty sure my father was a wizard. But I don't know his name. So my mother is a Muggle, and – anyway, it's a long story. But the Registrar's Scroll at Charmbridge Academy registered me under my mother's name, which is actually her maiden name, before she got married to my stepfather. So I was hoping maybe there'd be a record of me here." She kept talking, filling up the silence, doing what had worked so often in the past.

He still hadn't blinked. He didn't reply immediately, then said, "The Registrar's Scroll?"

She nodded. "The Dean told me since it registered me as Alexandra Quick, which was my Muggle mother's name, then if my father was a wizard, the scroll must not have known who he was."

"The Registrar's Scroll records the names we send," said the man.

Now Alexandra blinked. "But, I thought it magically knows the names of students who are being registered?"

He shook his head. "It magically transcribes the names we send it."

Alexandra hissed a bad word about Ms. Grimm.

"That's not appropriate language for a young witch," admonished the pale-faced wizard slowly.

"She lied to me!"

His eyes narrowed, but he said nothing.

"Can you look up my real birth record?" she asked.

"Not if I don't know your real name," he said, still studying her in that unsettling manner.

She hesitated.

"It might be Thorn."

His face twitched. "Surely not."

"Can you check?"

He paused again, then said, "This way." He began to walk back among the shelves and cabinets. She followed. When they reached the 'T's, he looked up and scanned a row of boxes on a shelf above her eye level. She saw some shields that looked like family crests. Alexandra wondered why the Census Office didn't have a more efficient retrieval system, like the Card Catalog at the Charmbridge library.

"No Alexandra Thorn," he said. He looked down at her. "Any *Thorn* files are probably Classified."

"How could I see them?"

He didn't answer. She waited, and then turned around to look at him. He was still staring down at her, and now she was definitely uncomfortable.

"Okay," she said, taking a step away from him. "I guess I should go."

He suddenly grabbed her shoulders and leaned over her. "Why did you come here?" he rasped.

"I told you!" she exclaimed, trying to back away from him, as the pale wizard tightened his grip.

"Let go of me!" His fingers were digging into her shoulders now, painfully.

"You shouldn't have come here," he said, "alone."

When Alexandra had been trapped in the form of a rat, and Galen had been stalking her, she thought

she'd known what it was like to be looked at like a meal, but the pale man's gaze was greedier, hungrier, and went right through her in a way that chilled her to the bone.

"You're so... young," he breathed. "And warm."

"Let go!" she yelled, trying to twist out of his grasp and kicking at him, but he was far too strong. She wished desperately that she had her wand. He was lowering his head towards her neck, and for a moment she thought he was going to kiss her or whisper in her ear, and the thought of either made her skin crawl, and then she saw him open his mouth, revealing a pair of sharp fangs! She gasped.

"Let go of me, you creepy vampire!" she exclaimed. And she head-butted him right in the nose.

He pulled away from her then, shuddering, and for the first time he blinked several times. But his nose barely twitched and she didn't think she'd really hurt him very much. His eyes were wide and he almost looked frightened now as he stared at her.

"Out!" he bellowed, startling her, and with one hand still on her shoulder, he squeezed hard, turning her around and steering her out of the records section and past the front counter towards the door, taking long, hurried steps that forced Alexandra to run and almost stumble in order to keep up. "You shouldn't have come here! I am powerless over my craving! It's one thing to deal with adults, but – a child!" He opened the door and practically threw her out into the corridor, and then rushed past her.

"I need to call my sponsor," he muttered. And over his shoulder, yelled at her, "Go back where you belong, little girl!"

Alexandra was left alone in the corridor, leaning against the wall and rubbing one shoulder with her other hand. She stared after the retreating wizard, or vampire, and realized quite to her displeasure that she was actually shaking a little. She took several deep breaths, until she felt calm again.

She swallowed hard, and then looked at the door to the Census Office, and back down the corridor, where no one had yet emerged from any of the other offices. She pushed away from the wall, and reopened the door and stepped inside.

She wished there were elves or even Clockworks to help her. It appeared that the vampiric records clerk was the only one who worked here. However, she noticed a ladder leaning against one shelf. It was a very tall ladder, reaching up past the tops of the tallest shelves. She picked it up, groaning a little as it turned out to be quite heavy, and dragged it to where the man had been standing before, when he nearly assaulted her. She leaned it against the shelf, which was quite far back from the front desk and almost hidden in shadows, and climbed up it until she was at eye level with the boxes and scrolls on a shelf marked 'T.'

Sure enough, one folder was labeled 'Thoreau,' and next to it was a rack of scrolls on a stand labeled 'Thornecroft,' with a fancy wax seal over each scroll, and between them was just a white card that said, 'Thorn – SEE CLASSIFIED RECORDS DIVISION.'

She sighed heavily. "Well, I don't suppose they'd have anything on Quick," she said aloud, and suddenly the ladder began moving by itself. She stifled a startled yelp and held on as it lifted off the ground and whizzed down the aisle between the shelves, levitating in its upright position with Alexandra clinging two-thirds of the way up. It rounded the far end of the shelves so quickly that she would have been thrown off if she hadn't hooked one leg through the rungs, and then it flew down another aisle, before stopping with a jolt in front of the 'Q's.'

Cautiously, she straightened up and looked at the shelf in front of her, and there was a folder labeled 'Quick,' wedged between boxes labeled 'Queen' and 'Quinnan.' It was quite thin, unlike most of the expanding folders sitting on the shelves. Alexandra grabbed it and opened it, and found only two pieces of paper inside. One was a sheet of parchment with a drawing of a family tree (with printing along the top edge saying, 'Standard Wizard Census Family Record Form 7-7'), but there were only two entries.

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'Claudia Carolina Quick, 1974 –' was the first one, and there was a picture of her mother as a younger woman. A *wizard* picture; her mother was looking apprehensive in it, and blinked uncertainly at the camera. The gray border around her image was explained in the legend at the bottom: 'Muggle.'

Alexandra stared at this in shock, before her eyes moved down to her own entry.

Here was a baby photo, and Alexandra supposed it was of her, though she couldn't really tell, as she thought all babies looked alike. 'Alexandra Octavia Quick, 1996 –' was surrounded by a red border, indicating that she was 'half-blood.' And in the space above, where her father should have been, there was a black ink mark that blotted out whatever had been there.

She narrowed her eyes at this, and then looked at the second piece of paper. It was a hand-written note.

"Muggle Subject C. Quick interviewed 3/25/96 (see rel. file). No knowledge of pater. whereabouts (poss. Obliv?) Per case handling instructions, will follow up. BMO conducted post-interview Obliv. Signed: Diana Grimm."

Alexandra was so shocked, she almost didn't hear the voices down the corridor outside. She hastily stuffed the folder back where it had been and jumped off the ladder. As soon as her feet hit the ground she was running for the door, and she made it out just as Ms. Shirliffe came around the corner with another wizard.

"Quick," Shirliffe said, her tone unsurprised, her expression foreboding.

"This is one of your students?" the man with her asked. "He almost caused poor Thomas to relapse!"

"Poor Thomas?" Alexandra repeated, astonished.

"Quiet, Quick!" Shirliffe snapped. She turned to the other man. "I'm very sorry. I'll see to it Miss Quick doesn't wander any more." She beckoned to Alexandra with one finger.

Alexandra followed the teacher, and they were both silent until they reached the elevator.

"Are they crazy, letting a vampire work down here?" Alexandra asked. "He almost made a meal out of me!"

"Would you care to explain how a trip to the bathroom brought you eleven floors down, to the Census Office?" Shirliffe asked.

"I got lost?"

Shirliffe scowled down at her. "I am not even a little bit amused, Quick."

Alexandra tried to look abashed. "I thought maybe I could find out something about my father."

"Ah yes, your mysterious father who might have been a member of the Dark Convention?"

Alexandra looked startled, and Shirliffe smiled thinly. "Oh yes, teachers do hear the rumors that go around school. Also, the Dean told me about your little... obsession."

"Well, there's a lot she hasn't told me!" Alexandra said hotly.

"Really?" Shirliffe didn't sound sympathetic. "Well when we get back to the academy, you'll have a chance to ask her about that."

"Good!" Alexandra retorted.

Shirliffe shook her head, as they ascended back to the seventh floor.

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"Don't look at me like that, Anna," Alexandra said, as the students all trailed out of the elevator back towards the street. The tour of the Territorial Headquarters Building had ended shortly after Alexandra rejoined the group.

Anna looked away from her. "Do you always have to get into trouble?" she asked.

"You're lucky Ms. Shirtliffe isn't leaving you on the bus," David said.

"Did you know they have vampires working here?" Alexandra asked.

"What?" David exclaimed. Anna just looked at her wide-eyed.

While they walked from the office building to the subway station, Alexandra whispered to David and Anna a brief recount of what had happened in the Census Office, leaving out what she had discovered in the "Quick" folder.

"That's crazy!" David said.

"And they acted like it was *my* fault he wanted to bite me!" Alexandra finished.

"You shouldn't have been there," Anna said quietly.

Alexandra glared at her. "Oh, so I deserve to have a vampire bite my neck because I was in the wrong room?"

"Of course not!" Anna said. Her voice rose, and other kids were looking at them, so she lowered her voice to a whisper. "But Alex, this is what I keep telling you. The wizarding world isn't like the Muggle world."

"No kidding!" said David. "We don't have vampires working for the government!"

Anna gave him an annoyed look, and went on. "There are all kinds of dangers wizards just sort of know exist."

"So you would have just sort of known that creep was a vampire?" Alexandra scoffed.

Anna shook her head. "No. I would have known not to go wandering around in off-limits basements where wizards keep secrets."

"You'd never find out anything!" Alexandra said scornfully, and Anna frowned and looked away.

Back outside, Mrs. Speaks and Mrs. Price led the students to the nearest L station, while Miss Gambola and Gwendolyn brought up the rear of the column. Shirtliffe was suddenly right behind Alexandra, and whispered in her ear, "I'm *watching* you, Quick!"

On the elevated train platform, Muggles stared at them. Dozens of sixth graders dressed in mismatched outfits, chattering about subways and skyscrapers and staring back at the Muggles with equal curiosity attracted attention. As did the students who thought the trash cans should magically suck in anything tossed in their general direction, or who kept staring at billboards and posters and asking why no one moved.

The tracks rattled, and then a train rolled into the station. Constance clung to Alexandra's arm, and Forbearance held onto David's, before she blushed and let go.

"It's just like the Wizardrail," said Anna reassuringly. She had ridden the subway in San Francisco with her mother, and was even more used to Muggle trains than Alexandra.

The Charmbridge students flowed onto the train, nearly filling up one car. The few Muggles who rode with them were wearing baseball caps, apparently bound for the ballpark also.

Alexandra, who had initially been very excited about riding the subway and seeing a baseball game, now scarcely noticed the ride, and was hardly even paying attention as they got off several blocks later, and walked to the stadium.

"Alex, are you all right?" Anna asked her, while the teachers handed everyone tickets to get into Wrigley Field.

"I'm fine," Alexandra said, but the words on that piece of paper in the Quick census folder kept running through her head.

"You've been awfully quiet." Anna looked almost suspicious.

Alexandra shrugged.

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"I never 'spected there was so many people in the world!" gasped Forbearance, after they had entered the stadium, climbed the steps to where an entire section had been reserved for them, and emerged onto an upper level, to the sight of thousands of Muggles screaming and cheering and waving pennants and gigantic foam hands and balloons shaped like baseball bats.

Excitement stirred through the Charmbridge students. David was now the center of attention, as he was the most knowledgeable about baseball. Some kids were asking Alexandra questions as well, but she brushed them off. She watched the players take the field, but was not excited even by the first crack of a home run.

She waited until a break between innings, when the teachers began escorting groups of students to the restrooms. She tried to slip away, but Anna caught her hand. "Oh no, not again! Alex, you can't!"

"I just want to call my mother."

"To tell her you're about to be expelled?"

Alexandra glared at her.

"Going somewhere, Quick?" Shirliffe was behind her, and the color drained from Anna's face.

Alexandra turned slowly, and looked up at the teacher.

"I just want to use the payphone. Right over there." She pointed. "It lets Muggles talk long-distance, like –"

"I *know* what telephones are, Quick. And the answer is no, absolutely not!"

"Why not?" Alexandra demanded. "I just want to call home while we're here."

"You can send an owl from school, like every other student."

Alexandra opened her mouth to argue, and Shirliffe cut her off.

"End. Of. Discussion." She folded her arms and stared down, as if daring her to keep arguing. Sullenly, Alexandra returned to her seat.

All she could think about, as the game went on into the evening, was that note in her family folder, and the picture of her mother, right after Alexandra had been born, blinking apprehensively at one Diana Grimm, before an Obliviator erased her memories.

Chapter 23 —Forgiveness

Not everyone was enthralled by the baseball game. Some of the students were heard to loudly say afterwards, “What a silly game! Who cares about Muggles hitting a ball with a stick?” Ebenezer Smith compared baseball unfavorably to Quidditch, despite the fact that he normally scorned Quidditch as a frivolous waste of time. But most of the sixth graders got caught up in rooting for one team or the other, and ate their fill of hot dogs and popcorn and soda.

Everyone was sleepy on the ride home, and most of the students were dozing off before the Charmbridge bus even reached the Automagicka. Constance and Forbearance, now wearing Chicago Cubs baseball caps pulled down over their eyes, were snoring softly as they leaned against one another. David had his head on the table and seemed to have fallen asleep as well. Alexandra sat by the window, staring out into the darkness. Beside her, Anna struggled to keep her eyes open, but her chin kept sinking to her chest.

Anna knew Alexandra was stewing over something, and Alexandra knew Anna was sulking a little, so they didn't say much to each other even after they got off the bus. Everyone was sleepy anyway. Even the teachers were weary after the long day, and it occurred to Alexandra as they crossed the Invisible Bridge that this would be a good time for another attempt on her life, while everyone was tired and unwary.

Nothing happened, though, and they arrived back at the academy without incident. Alexandra, Anna, Darla, and Angelique all returned to their suite, and engaged in the usual skirmish for taking turns in the bathroom before bed. Alexandra brushed her teeth, after giving Charlie some popcorn she'd stashed at the ballpark, and then threw herself onto her bed and stared up at the ceiling. She didn't remember Anna turning off the light, and only realized she'd fallen asleep without even pulling the blankets over her when Anna shook her awake the next morning.

“Alex, it's time for breakfast.”

Anna opened her eyes, and looked up at her roommate. Anna looked annoyed and concerned.

“I found out something yesterday,” Alexandra said.

“I thought so,” Anna said, “since you were being such a jerk again.”

Alexandra frowned.

“So are you going to tell me about it?” Anna asked.

“Maybe after I talk to Ms. Grimm.”

Anna winced a little. “Well, come on then. We'd better find out if you've been summoned to her office yet.”

They knew before they reached the bulletin board that she had, since Darla and Angelique were there ahead of them, smirking. “I would think you would know how to behave yourself among Muggles, at least!” Darla said. “If you keep this up, Alexandra, you won't be allowed on any field trips at all!”

“If she keeps this up, she's going to be expelled!” said Angelique.

Alexandra looked at the board, which sure enough, had Alexandra Quick scheduled for the Dean's Office right after breakfast.

“I think she likes me too much to expel me,” Alexandra said. Though she didn't actually think that was true at all, she was amused by the looks on the other girls' faces, and went to breakfast feeling a little more cheerful.

She was more somber by the time she finished eating, especially since Anna wasn't looking reassured at all.

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"It'll be all right, Anna," she said to her roommate, and then with a sigh, walked the now-familiar path to the Dean's Office.

Alexandra was almost sure she saw Miss Marmsley roll her eyes this time. "You know where to sit," the secretary's portrait said. But it was only a minute before the Dean's office door opened, and Ms. Grimm said, "Come in, Miss Quick."

Alexandra entered, feeling a mixture of resignation and anger. From the look on the Dean's face, she was feeling much the same.

"And here we are again," said Ms. Grimm. "You really must believe there's no limit to my patience." She rested her elbows on her desk, and held up her wand, running the thumb and forefinger of each hand along it until she was pinching it at either end. "I suppose there's no need to discuss why you're here."

"Before you curse me or expel me or punish my friends, I have some questions for you," Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm registered astonishment. "You? Have questions? For me?" Her voice became colder with each word, and Alexandra thought she might snap her wand in half.

"Who is Diana Grimm?" Alexandra asked, figuring there was no point in not seizing the initiative.

She was rewarded with a moment of hesitation, before Grimm frowned slowly and said, "My sister. What about her?"

"Why did she interview my mother, three days after I was born?" Alexandra continued, watching the woman's expression carefully. "Or are you going to say you didn't know about that?"

Ms. Grimm pointed her wand, and Alexandra's tongue suddenly stuck to the roof of her mouth. She gagged and made a sputtering noise, and then Ms. Grimm said, "Sit on your hands." And Alexandra did – she sat down in the nearest chair, with her hands underneath her, and though she squirmed and struggled, she could free neither her tongue nor her hands, and realized she was rooted in place.

"Now you're going to listen," Ms. Grimm said, laying her wand down on her desk. And she sighed and leaned back in her chair, and didn't say anything for several minutes. Alexandra was furious, but couldn't do anything but wait.

"My sister works for the Wizard Justice Department," the Dean said at last. "Yes, she was assigned your case, because your father was believed to be one of the Thorn Circle. I wasn't even supposed to know this, but sisters talk." She smiled thinly. "Eleven years later, I was made aware that you were coming of age and it was thought that the best thing to do was bring you here to Charmbridge. I've done my best to protect you, Alexandra, but you insist on making it difficult. Initially it was my hope that you would be relatively inconspicuous, just another Muggle-born student." She chuckled humorlessly. "You, however, have been quite determinedly conspicuous."

Alexandra sputtered something, but with her tongue still glued to the roof of her mouth, it came out garbled and incoherent. What she wanted to say was: "I'd have been less conspicuous if someone hadn't been trying to kill me!" But Ms. Grimm waved a hand dismissively.

"I don't know how you found out as much as you did – there shouldn't have been any record of your mother's interrogation – that is, interview – in the Census Office. Sloppy record-keeping, but what can you expect from government workers?" She shook her head.

Alexandra narrowed her eyes again, and would have made a comment about vampire government workers, but she kept silent rather than make more gabbling noises.

"Claudia was not harmed, I assure you. My sister only wanted to find out what your mother could tell her about your father, which as it turned out, was practically nothing. Diana's superiors determined that your mother was an ignorant Muggle, probably seduced by some Dark wizard, and that she was

better off being allowed to remain ignorant. You were watched, of course, irregularly, in case your father tried to make contact with either one of you, but that, I gather, has not happened.” She studied Alexandra for a moment, as if waiting for her to react this time, so Alexandra just sat there and stared back at the Dean.

Ms. Grimm sighed again, and continued. “So here we are. I have a most troublesome young witch at my school, unconcerned by rules or boundaries, nearly impossible to discipline, and determined to poke her nose where it doesn't belong. Perhaps you do have much of your father in you after all. That, no doubt, is what concerns certain authorities.” She leaned forward, meeting Alexandra's smoldering gaze with her own.

“Has it occurred to you, Alexandra, that even if you do find out who your father is, you might not like what you find out?”

Alexandra blinked, and then made more unintelligible, angry sounds.

“No, of course that's not going to dissuade you,” Grimm said. She leaned back once more. “The fact is, if I expel you, you become subject to Confederation law on unschooled magical children, made more complicated by the fact that you now know about the wizarding world. They'll take your wand away, you'll never be allowed to practice magic again, and they might Obliviate your memories. Alternatively, they might decide that your Muggle home is unsuitable, and take you into foster care. You wouldn't like government-run foster homes, I assure you.”

This actually quieted Alexandra, and she felt a little sick. They could take her away from her mother and her stepfather? She stopped her struggling against Grimm's jinx, and sat very still. Ms. Grimm sensed that for once, she had Alexandra's full attention, and nodded.

“Alexandra, I've tried threatening you, I've tried persuading you, I've tried negotiating with you. You simply will not be amenable to reason. No matter what I do for your own good, you make it difficult for me at every turn. If I tell you I will not expel you, I fear you will feel empowered to get away with anything! Yet clearly, there is no punishment severe enough to restrain your impulsiveness. I think I could have you whipped, and it would only make you more cunning in your rule-breaking.”

Alexandra still didn't move, and refused to blink as Ms. Grimm paused to gauge her reaction.

“I could have Miss Chu whipped –” And Alexandra hated Ms. Grimm in that moment, for the triumphant smile that curled the corners of her mouth when Alexandra jerked in her seat and mumbled something that sounded like “Ung-oo!” But then the Dean shook her head. “But I doubt even that would moderate your behavior permanently.”

She picked up her wand again. “Which I suppose gives us both insoluble dilemmas. Mine is what to do with a student who is nothing but trouble. Yours is how to stay out of trouble. For your misbehavior on the class field trip: an essay, a letter of apology to Mr. Bagby, and a week of detention.” She waved her wand, and Alexandra was suddenly unglued. She pulled her hands out from underneath her, and glared at the Dean.

“Who's Mr. Bagby?” she demanded.

“The Census Office clerk, of course.” Grimm looked at her calmly.

“You mean the vampire?” Alexandra exclaimed. “I have to *apologize* to him?”

“Yes. And apologize you shall. You shouldn't have been wandering about by yourself. He's been a very productive and successful participant in the Vampire Behavioral Therapy Program –”

“He should apologize to me!” Alexandra shouted. The portraits on the wall behind Ms. Grimm recoiled in shock. Grimm's eyes narrowed dangerously.

“You will do as you're told,” she said in a low voice. “And you will not *ever* raise your voice again in my office.”

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Alexandra felt flushed and outraged. She bit her tongue before she said something else.

“Detention. With Mr. Thiel,” Grimm repeated. “He needs help degnoming the grounds.”

Alexandra was suspicious. This was relatively light punishment, and the Dean hadn't even threatened her friends again. Ms. Grimm seemed almost eager to get rid of her.

“Who's my father?” she asked.

Ms. Grimm raised her eyebrows again. “I don't know, and this conversation is over. Your insolence and arrogance are already well over the line.”

“You're lying.”

She hadn't meant to say it, but it came out. All the portraits on the wall grew very still, until they were as motionless as Muggle paintings. Ms. Grimm's expression didn't change, but her eyes became as cold and hard as ice. She rose slowly, behind her desk, and it took all of Alexandra's willpower not to back away from her.

“Hold out your hands,” Ms. Grimm said slowly, and very, very softly.

Alexandra did so. She was nervous, but she didn't show it.

The Dean raised her wand, and then brought it down across the back of Alexandra's hands with a snap. It was just a slender piece of wood, no longer or thicker than Alexandra's, but the impact felt like a blow from a baseball bat.

Ms. Grimm raised her wand again, and again brought it down on Alexandra's hands. And again, and again. Each strike made a vicious snapping sound, like the cracking of a whip. The pain of the first blow was shocking, but each one hurt worse. Ms. Grimm seemed frighteningly calm, even dispassionate, as she struck the back of Alexandra's hands over and over.

It seemed to go on forever. Even some of the men and women in the portraits were starting to look uncomfortable. The pain burned Alexandra's hands like fire and spread up her arms, but she had all her will set against Ms. Grimm now. Somehow she knew that if she cried out or dropped her hands, it would stop, so she did neither, and forced the woman to keep going. If the Dean realized that Alexandra was trying to force her to be the one to stop, she didn't show it, nor did she show any sign of tiring.

Alexandra's hands were trembling a little now, because she'd had to hold them up so long, but she continued meeting the Dean's eyes defiantly. Eventually she started tearing up – she couldn't help it. She tried not to blink, while tears of pain ran down her cheeks. One of the witches hanging on the wall seemed to be trying to get Alexandra's attention, but she refused to look away from Ms. Grimm.

Finally, one of them said, “Lilith,” and Ms. Grimm paused, and slowly lowered her wand.

Alexandra's arms were shaking and her face was red and tear-streaked, but she hadn't moved. For one moment, she thought she saw an almost admiring glimmer in the Dean's eyes, and then Ms. Grimm said in that same cold, emotionless voice, “Put your hands down.”

Alexandra dropped them slowly to her sides. She thought they should be raw and bloody, but they were only red and welted.

Ms. Grimm leaned forward, and held the point of her wand under Alexandra's chin.

“There are certain lines,” she said quietly, “that you *will* learn not to cross. Calling me a liar in my office is one of them. And what you just experienced is not even close to the limit of disciplinary actions I can take. Do you wish to test me further?”

“No, Ms. Grimm,” Alexandra whispered. She hated the Dean – oh, how she hated her!

“Then get out, and be grateful I don't put a Stinging Hex on your behind. I expect that essay and the letter of apology by tomorrow afternoon.”

Alexandra backed away, and then turned and walked silently out of the Dean's office. When she

encountered Galen just outside, she had to fight the urge to kick the cat. She walked quickly past Miss Marmsley, who watched her pass in silence, and never noticed Ms. Grimm's own hand trembling slightly as she laid her wand back on her desk.

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Alexandra's hands hurt for three days. The first night they stung so badly that writing was painful, and Anna took the quill from her as she sat at her desk, and told her to dictate so she could write. Alexandra was immensely grateful, not just for that but because Anna never said, "I told you so," and refrained from lecturing her. She did, however, talk her out of including a clove of garlic with her letter of apology to Mr. Bagby, and when Alexandra, in a fit of pique, cast an Editing Ink Charm to replace "Dear Mr. Bagby" with "Dear Creepy Bloodsucker," Anna shook her head and undid it, making the letters on the paper squirm and unravel back into their original shapes.

Detention with Mr. Thiel was awful. The young groundskeeper was, in Alexandra's opinion, lazy and inattentive. Once he showed her how to swing gnomes around until they were dizzy and toss them into the woods, he ambled around as if it were his job to take afternoon strolls, only occasionally stopping to grab one of the little pests himself. The Charmbridge Academy's lawns were huge, and the gnome infestation had reached such proportions that kids were tripping over them during P.M.E. class, so Alexandra's task seemed never-ending. Thiel never said much, and only occasionally gave Alexandra one of his inscrutable, unpleasant stares. At least Mr. Journey was friendly and entertaining, but Journey was doing other jobs that Thiel was supposedly freeing him up to do.

"Why don't we use jarveys?" Alexandra asked Thiel, one afternoon. "One of my suitemates has one."

Thiel squinted at her. "School policy. You can thank Radicalists and soft-hearted Muggle-borns for that," he spat. Alexandra didn't ask him any more questions after that.

On the last day of her detention, Mr. Journey walked out onto the grass while Alexandra was near the tree line, tossing more gnomes into the woods. She noticed that a lot of crows were gathering there, which was a little odd. With the weather warming up, the massive roosts she'd seen during the winter months had dispersed, and as far as she knew, crows didn't eat gnomes. However, she was curious what brought Journey out to talk to Thiel, so she wandered closer, kicking a stray gnome out of the way and ignoring the fact that this allowed it to dive back into a hole and dig itself in.

"The Governor-General isn't going to be checking for dust," Thiel was saying to Journey, sullenly.

"No, son, but his staff will be," said Journey, with a visible effort to control his irritation. "And they will be looking in the Registrar's Office, because they'll be checking that our records are correct and up-to-date. That's what the Governor-General and his toadies do, even if they're supposedly just paying a ceremonial visit. They *inspect* everything."

"Fine. I'll clean it up," Thiel said.

"Hi, Mr. Journey," said Alexandra. The head groundskeeper turned, surprised, and smiled at her.

"Well, hello there, Starshine. Got yourself into trouble again, did you?" He made a clucking sound with his tongue.

"Yeah. Last day, though." She paused. "Mr. Journey, who is the Registrar?"

He tilted his head. "Whichever Assistant Dean gets stuck with the job of checking names that year. Why, Starshine?"

Alexandra had just had an idea.

"Just curious," she said. Journey raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. "Better let you get back to degnoming. Allan here can't do it all himself, can you, son?" He said this with a chuckle, but Alexandra thought there was an unusually sharp tone in his voice. Thiel just looked back at Journey with a sullen

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poker-face, until the older man walked back towards the academy. Journey flicked his wand and stunned a few gnomes along the way. "Don't miss these little fellers!"

Alexandra waited until Journey was gone, then said to Thiel, "I'll clean the Registrar's Office for you, if you want."

Thiel frowned at her. "Why?"

"I don't like it outside. It's too hot." To emphasize the point, she ran a hand over her forehead, as if wiping away sweat.

"It's not that hot. What do you want in the Registrar's Office?" he asked suspiciously.

That surprised her. She'd assumed Thiel wasn't very bright.

"Nothing! I mean, I just would rather work inside."

"You'd like to poke around in student records, you mean." Thiel was scrutinizing her.

"That's ridiculous!" Alexandra stammered. "What would I care about student records?"

"Oh, I think you know," Thiel said quietly.

She stared at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"You mind your own business, Quick. I know how you have a habit of getting into places you don't belong. You're staying out here, and your detention isn't finished until you get rid of every last gnome."

Alexandra was so surprised, she didn't even manage a muttered retort as she turned away from the junior groundskeeper, and began pulling gnomes up and flinging them into the trees.

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"I have to get into the Registrar's Office," she told Anna that night.

Anna's response was to close her eyes and put her face in her hands.

"No, wait, listen!" Alexandra said. She scooted her chair over until she was next to the other girl. "I *know* Ms. Grimm was lying to me! I mean, she's lied every time she talks to me. I need to get my hands on the Registrar's Scroll."

"You already saw the Registrar's Scroll, Alex!" Anna sounded exasperated. "You told me Ms. Grimm showed you where it recorded your name!"

"Anna," Alexandra said, and leaned closer. "Teach me that counterspell you used to undo my Editing Ink Charm."

Anna's eyes widened, then she closed them again.

"Even if you're right," she said, "what's the point, Alex? Does this mean that much to you? You've never met your father, and he obviously never bothered to find you –" Then she blanched at Alexandra's expression.

"I'm sorry," she said, but Alexandra got up and left the room, slamming the door behind her.

She didn't return to her room until well after lights-out, hiding in the library until she was sure Anna would be asleep. Actually, she wasn't sure her roommate was asleep when she returned – Anna was a little too quiet as Alexandra brushed her teeth and changed for bed, but she said nothing. The next morning, Alexandra got up early, and left for breakfast while Anna was still getting dressed.

She continued giving Anna the silent treatment for most of the day, including in class, until David, Constance, and Forbearance cornered her before P.M.E.

"All right," David said. "Whatever she said to upset you, you made your point. Do you enjoy making Anna cry?"

"Anna cries too much," Alexandra said.

"Alexandra Quick, we're fit to hex you six ways from Sunday!" said Constance.

"How do you fancy a Conjunctivitis Curse?" Forbearance snapped, brandishing her wand.

"With a Stinging Hex?"

“And a Jelly-Legs Jinx?”

“Do you actually know all those spells?” Alexandra asked, and then backed away as they both pointed their wands at her, looking as incensed as she'd ever seen them. David winced and stepped between them.

“Whenever Anna cries, you know who's usually the cause? You!” he said.

Alexandra had no answer to that, so she just glowered at him.

“It's plain she hurt your feelings,” said Constance.

“But she knows she done wrong and she's plumb sorry,” said Forbearance.

“It's only right you accept her 'pology.”

“Considering how many times you been forgiven, Alexandra Quick, I think you got no call being stingy with forgiveness yourself!”

This last point was far too true for her to deny, so she hung her head and said, “Okay. You're right.”

The Pritchards lowered their wands. “Well. That's better,” they said.

Anna started when Alexandra came up next to her in P.M.E. class while she was choosing a broom. Sixth graders weren't allowed to have their own, so they had to borrow one from the academy's stock of gaming and sports equipment.

“It does mean that much to me,” Alexandra said. “But friends mean more.”

Anna looked like she might cry again, and then she smiled and gave Alexandra a hug. Unfortunately, Larry was watching at that moment.

“Aww, isn't that sweet!” sneered Larry.

“Look, Troublesome has a girlfriend!” hooted Stuart. He and Torvald began laughing, along with a bunch of other boys.

Alexandra felt her face getting hot. “Let go, Anna,” she whispered.

“Only if you promise you're not going to point your wand at them,” Anna whispered back.

Once they separated and got away from the jeering boys, Alexandra, Anna, David, and the Pritchards flew around the academy in lazy circles on their brooms, before Anna drifted closer to her.

“So is this really important enough to risk getting into trouble again?” Anna asked quietly.

“Yes,” said Alexandra.

Anna sighed. “Is it important enough to risk getting *me* into trouble?” she asked.

“I won't –” Alexandra said, but Anna shook her head.

“Don't say you won't get me into trouble, Alex. You know if I help you and you get caught, I'll be in trouble too. So, is it worth that much?”

Alexandra looked down. There were kids playing games on the grass below them. She could see that some gnomes had already started making holes again. Mr. Thiel hadn't done a good job of warding the lawn following their degnoming.

“You're right,” said Alexandra. “I keep promising I'll be careful, and I never mean for anything to happen –”

“Stop it, Alex,” said Anna sternly. “I know you're sorry. Just like I'm sorry I made you angry. But you know what you do affects your friends too, right?”

Alexandra looked back at her seriously. They had come to a halt, and were now hovering at a higher altitude than was normally allowed. The teachers simply hadn't noticed them yet. Alexandra sat comfortably on her broom, but Anna probably didn't even know how nervous she looked. Her knuckles were white as she clutched her broomstick.

“I know,” Alexandra said quietly.

“I'll help you,” Anna said. “I just want you to start acting responsible.”

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Alexandra smiled at her. “I will. And I'll be careful, I promise, Anna.”

“*We'll* be careful,” said Anna, and circled back down towards the ground. David and the Pritchards had already landed.

Alexandra took another long circuit around Charmbridge Academy, enjoying the aerial view and marveling that she could actually *fly* like this. No twelve year-old in Larkin Mills would ever be allowed to do such a thing – even if they had flying brooms in the Muggle world. Ms. Grimm was right. Having seen the wizarding world, Alexandra could never be happy going back to live life as a Muggle. Her mother would always be her mother, and Larkin Mills would always be home, but Alexandra was a witch, and magic was in her blood.

With that, her thoughts became serious, and her mouth set in a firm line. She noticed black specks dotting the horizon: crows, skimming above the trees.

If Dark wizardry was in her blood as well, then she had to know. And no one – not her mother, not the Dean, not the Wizard Justice Department, and not even her own mysterious father – was going to keep her from finding out.

With one final shout of glee, she dropped out of the sky, descending at a speed that would make other children wrap their arms and legs around their brooms and hang on for dear life. She braked to a halt inches from colliding with the ground, and could only grin at her friends, who regarded her with consternation and shock. The Pritchards had their hands clasped to their chests, and Anna just looked pale, while David shook his head. Then, in spite of themselves, they all grinned back at her. They couldn't stop, even when Ms. Shirtliffe bellowed, “QUICK!”

Chapter 24 —Responsibility

Alexandra and Anna planned their infiltration of the Registrar's Office over the next few weeks, while the weather became sunnier and warmer. Spring turned students' minds towards pranks and other mischief, and at a school full of young witches and wizards, the potential for both was considerable. Mr. Journey and Mr. Thiel had to clear multiple corridors of beach sand and ivy jungles and ice slicks. The Assistant Deans were patrolling the hallways daily, confiscating Blob Eggs and Dungbombs and Homing Spitballs, as well as separating older students whose thoughts were turning amorous. Public Displays of Affection were forbidden at Charmbridge Academy, so of course PDAs were everywhere. Teachers were using Repelling Spells and Revulsion Jinxes right and left, but you could hardly turn around without bumping into a pair of lip-locked teenagers. Alexandra would have found this annoying, except that it meant the faculty had many distractions, and many students other than her were spending time in detention.

The other distraction was the Governor-General's impending visit. For the graduating class it was much more of an ordeal, as they now had weekly practices for the commencement ceremony, but Dean Grimm had held two assemblies to announce new rules and lecture everyone about being on their best behavior for their Very Important Visitor. If Alexandra didn't know better, she'd have thought the Dean was nervous.

"We definitely need to do it before the Governor-General arrives," said Anna. "Once he's here, nobody will be able sneak anywhere."

"You don't have to do this with me," Alexandra said, for the twentieth time.

"I know. Stop saying that."

In truth, Anna's words were weighing heavily on her now. She thought about Anna being whipped, and several times came close to abandoning their mission. But she maintained her resolve, because she knew the Dean was lying to her and had hidden something she had a right to know. All the resentment she'd felt for years towards her mother had now been transferred onto the Dean of Charmbridge Academy. The fact that Ms. Grimm wanted to keep her from the truth was reason enough for Alexandra to break whatever rules she had to to get at it.

It was enough for her to let Anna join her on her quest, as well. She felt guilty about it. Anna's willingness assuaged her guilt somewhat, but mostly it just made her determined to plan this particular exploit more carefully than her previous ones. They did not share their plans with David or the Pritchards, and were particularly careful not to discuss them around Darla or Angelique.

The first obstacle was actually finding the Registrar's Office. Unlike the Dean's office, the Vice Dean's office, and several of the Assistant Deans' and school counselors' offices, it didn't appear to be located on the ground floor of the administrative wing. Alexandra knew (from eavesdropping on faculty members) that there was a teachers' lounge and some other offices on the second floor, above the area that she was so familiar with, and she had even seen some stairs down the corridor from the Ms. Grimm's office. But she couldn't think of a good excuse to go up there, and even if she managed to sneak into the administrative wing after hours, she didn't know if Miss Marmsley's portrait ever slept.

"It would be nice if we had a floor plan of the academy," Alexandra said to Anna.

"Even if there is one, I'm sure they wouldn't let students see it," Anna replied glumly.

Alexandra snapped her fingers. "Who'd know every room in the academy?"

Anna frowned. "Mr. Journey? But he'd ask questions –"

"Besides him."

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Anna looked puzzled, until Alexandra said, "The elves!"

Anna's eyes widened. "You're right! They used to clean everywhere, until Clockworks replaced them. But how can we ask an elf where the Registrar's Office is?"

"Leave it to me," Alexandra said confidently.

The next day, she visited Bran and Poe. The library elves were delighted to see her, but didn't know exactly where the Registrar's Office was.

"Bran and Poe almost never leaves the Library," said Bran.

"Only to deliver bookses," said Poe.

"Or sometimes, *fetch* them," said Bran, with a frown that made his face look like an apple dried in the sun. "From naughty students."

"Would any other elves know where the Registrar's Office is?" she asked.

"Oh yes," said Bran. "But we hardly talks to other elves. We is *library* elves!" Bran held his small wrinkled nose in the air, clearly of the opinion that a library elf was a higher class of elf.

Alexandra sighed. "Well, where would I find the elves who clean when Clockworks don't?"

"Usually in the basement." Bran shrugged.

The basement was where Mr. Journey's office was, so Alexandra had to wait until a time when she knew that Mr. Journey and Mr. Thiel were both out on the grounds. A very nervous Anna stood at the bottom of the stairs keeping watch, while Alexandra walked in the opposite direction she would take to get to the custodian's office.

The basement level was at least as extensive and mazelike as the attic, and most corridors were completely dark. Alexandra didn't quite understand why even a school as large as Charmbridge needed such a huge basement, but she committed each turn she took to memory. She cast a beam of light from her wand to light the way, and waited until she was out of sight or earshot of the main stairs, then began calling out, "Hello? Is anyone down here?"

She knew at least that either Clockworks or elves had been through the corridors recently, because there was no dust or cobwebs. But all the doors were locked (she couldn't resist trying to open a few). She also passed at least two stairwells leading up, confirming her suspicion that there was more than one way into the basement.

"Help!" she cried out. "I'm lost!"

Her greatest fear was that some teacher might be down here for some reason, or worse, another student. That would be embarrassing. She also remembered Mr. Journey telling her that ghosts occasionally took up residence in the basement, and while she wasn't exactly afraid of ghosts, she didn't particularly want to meet one while wandering around in the dark.

After crying for help several times, however, she was finally rewarded with a sharp crack. A grayish-looking elf with very wrinkled skin, droopy ears with huge tufts of hair growing out of them, and a worried expression appeared in front of her.

"Students is not s'pposed to be down here," said the elf. "Miss must be lost."

Although she could hardly tell by the elf's appearance, Alexandra was a little surprised at the elf's high-pitched feminine voice. *Well, of course there have to be girl-elves!* she thought to herself, and then smiled.

"Yeah, I am," she said. "You see, I was supposed to take something to the Registrar's Office."

The elf blinked her large, round eyes slowly, looking rather owl-like.

"The Registrar's Office?" she repeated. "But the Registrar's Office is on the second floor! Miss is *very* lost!"

Alexandra nodded. "I guess I went too far down a flight of stairs, and then I found myself here, and

it was dark, and well..."

The elf was staring at Alexandra, and then her eyelids narrowed in an expression Alexandra had not seen on an elf's face before: suspicion.

"Come with Em please, Miss," said the elf. "Em will take you to the Head Custodian."

"Mr. Journey's outside with Mr. Thiel," said Alexandra.

The elf's eyes narrowed further. "Em thinks it's very curious Miss knows exactly where Mr. Journey and Mr. Thiel is and where they is not when Miss is looking for the Registrar's Office."

Alexandra was beginning to feel she'd made a mistake. This was not going at all as she'd hoped.

"Can't – can't you just tell me where the Registrar's Office is?" she pleaded.

"If Miss has something to take to the Registrar's Office, *which is off-limits to students*," said the elf shrewdly, "give it to Em and Em will take it there." The elf held out her hand.

"I *order* you to tell me where the Registrar's Office is!" Alexandra exclaimed, a little desperately. But to her dismay, the elf actually chuckled.

"Students can't order elves," said Em. And she pointed at Alexandra, and suddenly her feet were rooted to the floor. "Naughty Miss! Em will be back." And the elf disappeared with a pop.

Alexandra spent several minutes trying to undo whatever charm the elf had used to root her to the floor, without success. She had, she realized, seriously underestimated elves.

Now she was in trouble. Em would no doubt go tell Mr. Journey, and as tolerant as the custodian was, she didn't think she could give him a story that would be convincing enough. Maybe she could get away with nothing more than another lecture, she reasoned. After all, Journey seemed reluctant to turn students in to the Dean, and was pretty tolerant of their pranks, as long as no one got hurt.

It was while she was thinking this that she heard a pop behind her. She turned around as far as she could with her feet still stuck to the floor, and said, "Hello?" But she didn't see anyone.

She was wondering if she had imagined the sound, when she felt a constricting sensation around her neck. She clutched her throat, dropping her wand, but couldn't feel anything. Without the light from her wand, she was in complete darkness, and then she felt herself losing consciousness. The last thing she was aware of was toppling backwards, and then the back of her head hit the floor while the soles of her feet remained anchored in place.

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"She's coming around. I told you she'd be fine."

Alexandra's vision was hazy. Mr. Journey's face was hovering over her, blurry. She had a terrible headache.

"Alexandra! Are you okay?" Anna sounded worried. Anna always sounded worried, Alexandra thought. And she was crying too, great wailing sobs that were excessive even for her.

"What happened?" she asked, though she was still dizzy and breathless and it came out sounding like "Whuhoppend?"

"I was worried because you hadn't come back and then Mr. Thiel caught me by the stairs and Mr. Journey said that an elf caught you sneaking around in the basement and I'm sorry I didn't know what to do, Alex, I had to tell them, but we found you lying on the floor and you must have blacked out and you hit your head so we were really worried and I think you should go to the infirmary –"

"Whoa. Slow down, Blossom," said Mr. Journey, interrupting Anna's frantic burling.

Blossom? thought Alexandra. And then she realized that the horrible sobbing sound had continued even while Anna was talking, which meant that Anna wasn't the one crying. She tried to sit up, and her head swam. She might have hit her head again if Mr. Journey hadn't caught her as she collapsed backwards. "Easy there, Starshine. You took a nasty bump on the head. But a simple De-swelling

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Charm will fix that.”

“She should go to the infirmary.” That voice was Thiel's. He sounded sullen, as usual.

“Well, maybe.” Mr. Journey sounded uncertain. Then the custodian said gently, “Em, that's enough crying. You can see she's all right. Now stop being silly, old gal, you didn't kill her.”

The sobbing diminished somewhat. Alexandra heard the elf sniff, and then wail, “Em is so SORRY! Em is a BAD elf! Em should be punished!”

“No argument here,” muttered Thiel.

“Allan!” snapped Mr. Journey. “Em did what she was supposed to. You can't blame elves for doing their jobs! The poor critters don't even have a choice! I don't want to hear you blaming poor Em again, you hear me?”

Thiel didn't reply, but by now, Alexandra felt able to try to sit up again, and she did. This time she swayed a little, but Journey's hand on her back steadied her.

“Now,” said the groundskeeper, “care to explain what *this* little adventure was all about, Starshine?”

“Umm,” Alexandra said, and glanced at Anna. “It was all my fault. Anna didn't even know I was going to go into the basement. She didn't know anything.”

Mr. Journey chuckled dryly, while Thiel glowered at the two girls. “Gotcha, you're trying to protect your friend.” His eyes hardened, just a little. “Now, why were you in the basement?”

“I wanted to find an elf,” Alexandra said. Em, sitting in a corner wiping her nose on the ragged apron she was wearing, looked up in surprise. Even Thiel looked surprised. So did Journey.

“Why were you looking for an elf?” Mr. Journey asked.

“I was hoping an elf could tell me how to find the Registrar's Office.”

Anna closed her eyes, looking defeated, while Thiel snarled triumphantly, “I knew you were up to something, Quick!”

“The Registrar's Office?” Mr. Journey had an odd expression on his face. “What in Merlin's name do you want from the Registrar's Office?”

“It was another dare.” Anna opened her eyes at this, and stared at Alexandra as she continued. “Larry Albo bet me I couldn't sneak into the Registrar's Office and out again.”

She realized a second too late that if Mr. Journey asked Larry about this, her lie would be exposed, but Journey just shook his head.

“Starshine, why do you and that Albo kid have to keep butting heads like a pair of billy goats? Did you swear another oath over it?”

“No,” Alexandra said. “Not a magical one, this time.”

“Well, at least you have *some* sense,” the older custodian grumbled. “But for goodness' sakes, haven't you found enough ways to get into trouble?”

Thiel was glowering at Alexandra and Anna, and the elf was just rocking in her chair making small moaning sounds, punctuated by sniffles.

“I know it was stupid,” said Alexandra. Thiel snorted at this, and she glared at him.

“And not only that, but you tried to bully poor Em into helping you in your scheme,” Mr. Journey admonished her. “I'd expect a self-important pureblood like Albo to treat elves like that, but I thought you had more respect for the most powerless among us. I'm very disappointed in you, Starshine.”

“That charm she stuck me to the floor with wasn't powerless,” Alexandra blurted out. Em began bawling at this, and Mr. Journey put a hand on the elf's shoulder and muttered something reassuring. Alexandra did feel guilty, and not just about making the elf feel guilty.

“Mr. Journey is right,” said Alexandra. “I'm sorry, Em.”

The elf stopped crying, and stared at her. “Miss... Miss is sorry?”

Gritting her teeth inwardly, as she never enjoyed apologizing, Alexandra nodded. "I didn't mean to come down and order you around like... like a self-important pureblood. I just wanted your help."

"Miss is sorry!" Em repeated, amazed.

"Well, she should be," said Mr. Journey, but he sounded slightly mollified.

"And you just fell over backwards," said Thiel, studying Alexandra.

She put a hand to the back of her head, where there was indeed quite a sizable lump, and winced, then nodded.

"Awfully clumsy, Quick," said the junior custodian. "It's a wonder you can walk and hold a wand at the same time."

"Allan," growled his superior. "No need to be unpleasant." He walked back to Alexandra and pulled out his wand.

"She could have a concussion," said Thiel. "She should see the healer."

"Gosh, Mr. Thiel, I'm touched," Alexandra said, not even trying to hide the sarcasm. He sneered back at her.

"Well, as you can see, she's pretty hard-headed," the older man said with a bemused twinkle. He held his wand over the bump on the back of her head, and spoke an incantation that made it tingle and caused the skin all around her head to feel tight.

"Better?" he asked. Alexandra felt the back of her head, and found the bump was gone. She nodded.

"Now," he said. "No more wandering around in the basement, no more abusing the elves, and no more accepting dares from Larry Albo. Give me your word, Starshine."

She thought a moment, and nodded again. "I promise."

"We're just letting them go?" Thiel demanded.

"You want to bother the Dean with this, while she's biting heads off over the Governor-General's visit?" Mr. Journey asked. Then added, "But if you're that eager to give them detention, son, then you can be the one to supervise them."

"Fine," Thiel said. "Why should I care?"

"Keep an eye on your friend, Blossom," Mr. Journey said to Anna. "If she gets dizzy or starts acting peculiar, then take her to Mrs. Murphy."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," Anna mumbled, eyes downcast.

"Kids," Mr. Journey chuckled, shaking his head as the two of them left the custodian's office.

"I *hate* it when he calls me 'Blossom!'" Anna whispered.

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"I didn't just fall over and hit my head! Someone tried to strangle me! And I'm fine now!"

Anna had been hovering over Alexandra like a worried mother hen for the entire evening. She had listened to Alexandra's story, but had a skeptical expression that Alexandra was only too familiar with.

"When Mr. Thiel and I found you, you were just lying unconscious on the ground," Anna said.

"After someone tried to strangle me!"

"But you weren't strangled."

Alexandra was looking in the bathroom mirror, tilting her head this way and that. There were no marks on her neck.

"You could use a haircut, dear," said the mirror. Alexandra ignored it.

"So you got there in time."

Anna chewed her lip. "And Mr. Journey came from the other direction. If there was someone there, they had to be invisible."

"Elves can teleport," said Alexandra.

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Anna blinked. “They can what?”

“Teleport. You know, disappear and reappear somewhere else?”

“Oh, you mean Apparate.” Anna blinked. “Wait a minute. You think an *elf* tried to strangle you?” Now she wasn't even trying to hide her disbelief.

“No, just saying.” Alexandra really didn't have a theory, but she was sure that once again, *someone* was out to get her. She didn't think it was Em – the elf's distress was obviously real.

Anna sighed. “Well, if we believe someone is trying to kill you again, shouldn't we forget about –” “No.”

“But you promised Mr. Journey!”

“I promised not to go into the basement, or abuse elves. Or accept dares from Larry Albo.”

Alexandra folded her arms, thinking. “I've got no choice now. I'm just going to have to do some recon on my own.”

“Some what?” Anna's brow furrowed.

“Recon. It means sneak around and find out where things are located.”

“It means get in trouble again.”

“I'll –”

“Don't even say it, Alex.”



Alexandra decided she was going to have to figure out how to sneak past Miss Marmsley. She had noticed that the wizards and witches in the paintings lining the hallways and the walls of the library tended to fall asleep after hours. She'd even caught the old warlock who supervised Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall snoozing a couple of times. She hoped Miss Marmsley slept too.

She waited until the following weekend, and set her alarm for three o'clock in the morning. Anna woke with her, while Charlie squawked at them reproachfully.

“You stay here this time,” she said to Anna. “If I get caught, I'll just say it was another dare. I'm not going to try to get into the Registrar's Office. I just want to see if I can find it and get back out.”

Anna nodded, looking resigned.

“You should go back to sleep,” Alexandra said. Anna nodded again.

Alexandra dressed, but left a pair of soft slippers on her feet, and cautiously opened the door to their room, slipped out, and shut it behind her.

Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall was quiet. She approached the entrance cautiously, but when she looked up, sure enough, the old warlock was asleep. She proceeded down the stairs to the entrance foyer, then down the main hallway, past the dark and empty cafeteria, and approached the administrative wing.

The corridor here wasn't completely dark; a few lanterns remained glowing, enough to see by. Alexandra crept very slowly up to the entrance to the main office. The portrait of the school secretary hung where she could see anyone approaching. Just before walking through the entrance, Alexandra pulled a knit ski cap out from beneath her shirt, and pulled it down over her face. Anna had suggested several charms she could use to temporarily disguise herself, but Alexandra had immediately thought of a non-magical solution, one that wouldn't be as awkward to explain if she were caught elsewhere in the hallways by a faculty member. If Miss Marmsley did see her, in the dim light, at least she wouldn't see her face.

But Miss Marmsley, still seated in her chair, back erect, shoulders square, had her chin tipped forward and her hat sliding down across her forehead, and was fast asleep.

Alexandra walked very slowly and carefully past her, and past the bench on which she had sat so many times, and the Dean's office, to the stairs. There was a door here, and there was a small click as it

opened. Alexandra stiffened, but she didn't hear a sound from Miss Marmsley. She set her foot on the first step, and went up the stairs.

At the top, she saw only another corridor. More faculty offices. There was one for the Deans of the Tenth, Eleventh and Twelfth Grades, and two other doors with no signs on them, and then, at the end of the corridor, a plain wooden door marked 'Registrar's Office.'

Alexandra stared at this door, and her promise to Anna that she would just go this far and no further suddenly seemed a weak and foolish thing. If she had gotten this far...

She reached out and tested the handle. The door was locked, of course.

For full execution of her plan, she needed more practice with Unlocking Charms, and with Anna's Editing Ink Reversal Charm. Anna had promised to come up with a way to warn her if someone was coming while she was standing lookout. This was supposed to be a recon mission, nothing more. Yet if she could just slip inside, and find the Registrar's Scroll, it could all be over tonight –

A rhyme was forming on the tip of her tongue. She had opened so many locks even without a wand, back home. Then she became aware of movement in the corner of her eye, and spun around to see Galen quietly padding down the hall towards her.

Alexandra glared at the cat. “Shoo!” she said. Galen slowed, but didn't stop, and gave her a disdainful look.

Alexandra drew her wand and pointed it at the cat. It stopped in its tracks, sat back on its haunches, and regarded Alexandra balefully.

“I ought to turn you into a rat,” said Alexandra.

The cat's response was a lowered head and arched back, and a hiss.

Galen was Ms. Grimm's familiar, thought Alexandra. The cat might not be able to tell on her, but it was probably unwise to actually make good on her threat. And being discovered by the cat made her uneasy. She didn't believe in omens, but this seemed a good time to declare her reconnaissance a success, and withdraw.

“Bad cat!” she muttered, and headed back down the stairs. Galen made a growling sound deep in its throat.

Alexandra half-expected to find Miss Marmsley awake, or some other alarm triggered by her intrusion, but apparently the Dean felt Miss Marmsley and her cat were sufficient security.

“It was easy,” she told Anna, who of course was still awake when she returned to their room.

“Maybe too easy,” Anna said worriedly. “And Galen saw you.”

“Galen's a cat!” Alexandra scoffed. “Darla has a cat, and it doesn't talk.” She fixed her roommate with an accusing stare. “If you want to back out –”

“No,” Anna said quickly. And, taking a breath, met Alexandra's gaze. “I told you, I'll help you. I know you're going to do this whether I help you or not. But someone has to be careful, and it won't be you.”

“I was careful. I didn't get caught.” And then, rather than continuing the argument, Alexandra yawned. “Let's get some sleep.”

As it turned out, their scheming had not gone unnoticed. David and the Pritchards cornered Alexandra one day, to ask what she and Anna were up to.

“Nothing,” said Alexandra.

“That's why Anna looks so nervous lately?” David demanded.

“Anna always looks nervous.”

“Usually because of you.”

Alexandra glared at him. “Have you been grilling her too?”

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"I tried. She says you're not up to anything. She's not as good a liar as you."

Alexandra's mouth curled in a scowl, and she looked away.

"Why didn't you ask for our help?" Constance asked.

Alexandra looked at her. "I don't want you involved."

"So involving Anna don't concern you none?" Forbearance asked.

Alexandra bit her lip.

"Alexandra Quick, you're our friend," said Constance. "But so's Anna."

"You best know what you're doing," said Forbearance.

"I won't let Anna get hurt," she said.

"Who do you think you are—" said Constance.

"— to say what you'll *let* happen?" Forbearance finished.

This was so similar to Brian's rebuke, months ago, that Alexandra stammered for a moment.

"You always think you know what you're doing," said David.

"And involve your friends," said Constance.

"Especially Anna," agreed Forbearance.

"It's something I have to do!" Alexandra said with sudden forcefulness, startling the other three with her vehemence. They stopped their scolding as she glared at all of them. "I told Anna she didn't have to help me. I've even asked her not to get involved. But I'm going to do it with or without her help."

Constance and Forbearance looked at each other, while David studied Alexandra.

"If it's important as all that," Constance said slowly.

"Then let us help too," her sister said.

Alexandra shook her head. "Thank you," she said quietly, "but there really isn't anything the rest of you can do."

"Well, will you at least tell us what it is?" David asked.

Alexandra shook her head again. "If you don't know, you can't get in trouble for not saying anything."

"We can still get in trouble for being your friend," David pointed out darkly.

She was silent for a moment, then asked quietly, "Are you asking me not to?"

"Would it do any good?"

She bit her lip, not sure what to say.

"If you say it's important, Alexandra," said Constance.

"Then we believe you," said Forbearance.

They lowered their voices. "But be it on your head if there's any consequence to Anna."

"We *will* hold you responsible."

Alexandra nodded. "So will I," she said quietly. "If anything happens to any of you."

Chapter 25 — The Registrar's Office

Alexandra slept restlessly for days after that. She often woke up in the middle of the night, and snuck into the hallway just to check on whether the warlock watching Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall was asleep as usual, but really it was because she was having trouble sleeping.

Now that Alexandra knew she could get to the Registrar's Office, all that remained was getting into it, obtaining the scroll, and undoing the editing charm Ms. Grimm had put on it (“*If she did,*” Anna kept reminding her).

She continued to plan their operation meticulously. She knew that the Deans and the custodians did occasionally patrol the school at night, but for the most part the faculty relied on the Hall Supervisors to prevent students from wandering after lights-out. The paintings that watched over the upperclass hallways were more vigilant, from what Alexandra had heard (which was mostly complaining from older students), but the warlock who was supposed to be making sure sixth grade girls didn't sneak in and out at night was always fast asleep before midnight. Alexandra had drawn her own map, and gone so far as to consider alternate routes down through the first floor and around that would bypass the main corridor. The main problem with this plan was that it went through the sixth grade boys' dorm, and she didn't know whether their Hall Supervisor also tended to fall asleep at night. If she was caught once, it might make a repeat attempt more difficult, and if she asked David, he might demand more answers. Even if not, she'd be placing more responsibility on him.

“You know, if you spent this much time on your schoolwork, all your grades would be Superior,” Anna pointed out. “And why do you keep using words like 'operation' and 'mission'?”

“You don't watch enough TV,” said Alexandra.

Her schoolwork was suffering a little because of her project, but she felt she was keeping up adequately in class. At least, she was learning the things she was really interested in, even if she wasn't paying so much attention to the things she wasn't. Her teachers, particularly Mr. Grue, did not fail to point this out, and Anna pleaded with her to at least study a little for their upcoming end-of-year SPAWN.

Alexandra was becoming very proficient with Unlocking Charms. In fact, it was quite possible that she was now the most skilled magical lockpick at Charmbridge. With careful practice around the school, she had learned that some wizard-made locks were more difficult to open than ordinary Muggle locks. She didn't think the Registrar's Office would have one of the charm-proof locks she had heard about, but she decided that it was best to assume it would be challenging.

One afternoon Anna returned to their room with a worried look.

“The Governor-General will be here in two weeks,” she said. “I overheard Mr. Journey talking to the Vice Dean. There are some government wizards coming to inspect the school and talk to Dean Grimm this weekend. Something about security.”

“There'll probably be another assembly,” Alexandra muttered, but she remembered that Governor-General Hucksteen had been the target of the Thorn Circle's assassination attempt. Maybe it had made him paranoid. She looked at Anna.

“We'll have to do it before the weekend, then.”

Anna swallowed, and nodded.

“You can still stay in bed. I've learned the Unediting Charm. I got in and out last time without a lookout.”

Anna shook her head. “But you'll be in there longer, and I think Mr. Journey and the other faculty are

going to start patrolling more.”

“Anna, you don't have to prove anything to me.”

“Stop it!” Anna looked angry. “Can we stop having this discussion? I already promised I'd help! If you didn't want my help you should never have accepted it in the first place! If you're so worried about me then be worried about yourself! But you can't give this up, can you? Well, stop trying to keep me out of it, it's too late for that!”

Stunned by this outburst, Alexandra stared wide-eyed at her friend. Anna glared indignantly back at her.

“Okay,” Alexandra said quietly. “Tonight, then.”

Anna swallowed again, and nodded.

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That evening after dinner, Anna knelt by her bed, reached under it and pulled out a box. She set it on her desk and opened it. Alexandra looked over her shoulder, and saw a pair of wooden cylinders the size of salt shakers. Each had a raised seam around its circumference, appearing to have been made by fastening two halves together. Each one had a rubber seal over one end and several holes drilled into the other. Anna lifted them out of the box, and handed one to Alexandra.

“Whisperphones,” she said. “They work sort of like the Wizard Wireless. You speak into the end with the holes, and you can hear what's said into the other by sticking the rubber end in your ear. They're a matched set.”

“Magical walkie-talkies!” said Alexandra. “That's what they are.”

“I guess.” Anna shrugged. “These are just for kids. You can get much smaller models, but they're really expensive.”

Alexandra walked into the bathroom and closed the door, and whispered into the holes of the cylinder she was holding: “How far away do they work?” Then she turned the rubber end around and pressed it to her ear.

“In the catalog, it said at least half a mile,” she heard Anna whisper.

Alexandra opened the bathroom door and smiled. “Good enough.”

They both went to bed early that night, to get enough sleep before they got up in the early hours of the morning. Neither one slept well. Alexandra stared at the ceiling, thinking about whether she was being selfish and whether there wasn't another way to find out who her father was. She heard Anna tossing restlessly beneath her covers as well, and tried not to feel guilty.

Just sneak in, and sneak out, she thought.

Eventually, they did both drift off to sleep. The alarm seemed to wake them up almost immediately afterwards. They both climbed out of bed, rubbing their eyes. They'd gone to bed fully dressed.

“Your job,” Alexandra whispered, “is just to let me know if anyone is coming, and then sneak back here on your own. Don't worry about me. If either one of us gets caught, it won't matter if the other one didn't.”

Anna nodded, but looked annoyed. “I know,” she whispered back. “We've been over this enough times!”

Charlie squawked. “Shush, Charlie!” Alexandra hissed. And she went to their door and cracked it open. The hallway was dimly lit, and empty as usual.

“It's too bad there's no such thing as an invisibility spell,” she murmured.

Anna just nodded again. This was not the first time Alexandra had said this either.

Alexandra crept down the hall, while Anna waited at the door. When Alexandra reached the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, she looked up. The old warlock in the painting was snoring. Alexandra

turned back and gestured for Anna to join her, and Anna quickly tiptoed down the hall.

They went down the stairs and reached the entranceway to the academy, which was lit by the usual nightlights, but it was quiet and empty as usual. They turned to go past the cafeteria. Here, however, Alexandra paused. The cafeteria was brightly lit, unlike last time.

She gestured for Anna to stay put, and crept up to the entrance of the cafeteria. She gasped and almost stumbled backwards as a line of Clockworks marched out into the hall. They were carrying mops and buckets and brooms, and immediately began swabbing the floor of the main corridor.

Alexandra turned her head, and saw Anna was paralyzed with fear. But the Clockworks just began cleaning, and took no notice of the girls. Alexandra peered around the entrance to the cafeteria, but saw no sign of Thiel or Journey or any other living thing. She turned back to Anna, and raised her Whisperphone to her lips. Anna hesitated, then fumbled to bring hers to her ear.

"Just keep going," Alexandra whispered. "They should ignore us."

She could tell by the way Anna was edging along the wall that the Clockworks terrified her. It seemed at any moment that they might take notice of the two students brazenly sneaking past them. Although Alexandra didn't show it, the Clockworks disturbed her too. She could vividly remember the night when her group of golems had suddenly turned on her and tried to throw her into a fire.

But the Clockworks continued cleaning, not registering their presence at all.

Alexandra thought to herself that they must have run out of students to serve detention if one of the custodians had turned them to loose to clean unsupervised. But since she knew well that Clockworks couldn't remain completely unsupervised, she hurried her steps to the administrative wing; one of the custodians was surely around somewhere.

This was where Anna was supposed to stand guard. Corridors on the ground floor intersected here, directly in front of the main entrance to the Charmbridge offices, and thus the location gave her a view in all directions, should a staff or faculty member on late night patrol appear. Alexandra crouched against one corner and looked up at the portrait of Miss Marmsley. Just like last time, the secretary was asleep, this time with her head lolling back against her chair and her mouth open.

She nodded to Anna, and gave her a thumbs-up sign. Anna smiled falteringly back at her, and returned the gesture, a little awkwardly.

Alexandra crept past Miss Marmsley and the Dean's office, reached the door to the stairs, and opened it. There was not a sound. She continued up the stairs, and this time spent a minute at the top looking down the corridor. There was no sign of Galen, but she supposed the cat could be anywhere, and she wasn't likely to hear it before it was within sight. So, almost holding her breath, she tiptoed down the second floor corridor to the Registrar's Office.

Here was where success depended on her being able to do something she had never attempted before: unlocking the door to the Registrar's Office. She drew her wand and pointed it at the lock.

"*Alohomora!*" she whispered, enunciating each syllable carefully, and turning her wrist *just so*. There was a trick to it, she had found, that could make the difference in a difficult lock.

The lock clicked.

Alexandra reached out and opened the door. There was not a bit of light on the other side. Her heart was pounding. She looked over her shoulder; still no movement, from cats or people.

"*Lumos!*" she murmured, and with her wand lit, stepped into the Registrar's Office.

It was a tiny, unimpressive room. There was a table in the center with a writing quill and a bottle of ink sitting on it, a bare counter with cabinets beneath it along one wall, and a tall wooden cabinet, locked, sitting against the back wall. It smelled musty and unused.

Alexandra was almost disappointed. *This* was the goal of over a month's planning? But then, why

should they go to any great lengths just to protect a list of students?

The cabinet was the most likely place to find the scroll, so Alexandra tried to open it. It was locked.

“*Alohomora!*” she intoned, pointing her wand at the cabinet. This time there was no click, and it continued to resist her attempt to open it.

She tried the Unlocking Charm three more times, her heart pounding even more. She couldn't think of any other way to get into the cabinet that wouldn't involve violence and a lot of noise. She forced herself to remain calm, and focused on the lock, and her spell, which she had practiced hundreds of times over the past month. On her fourth attempt, the cabinet door creaked open.

Alexandra raised her glowing wand over her head, and there, on the top shelf, sat a wooden case holding a pair of heavy wooden spools.

She moved the table over as quietly as she could, wincing as it made a scraping sound against the floor. She had to climb up on the table to reach the scroll, and then she had to tuck her wand into her pants in order to grasp one spool in each hand and carefully lift the Registrar's Scroll off the shelf and lay it at her feet on the table.

Eagerly, she jumped back to the floor, and raised her Whisperphone to her lips.

“Anna,” she whispered. “I've got it.”

She turned it around and held the other end to her ear. After a moment, Anna replied: “Good. Hurry up.”

Alexandra set down the Whisperphone, and took out her wand again.

“Show me Alexandra Quick, Class of 2014,” she said to the scroll.

Obediently, the parchment began unwinding from one spool and winding around the other, as names flashed past by the hundreds, until it came to a halt at the same spot as before.

Trembling, she held her wand over the black ink letters spelling out her name, there between Carol Queen and Sonja Rackham.

She spoke very carefully. It had taken her many, many repetitions before Anna had declared her pronunciation satisfactory, and many more after that before she had cast the first charm that actually worked.

“*Yumo shui niuzhan!*”

She stared intently at the parchment. For a moment, nothing happened, and she thought she might never know whether it was because she'd been wrong all along, or simply hadn't cast the spell correctly. And then the letters of her name began to twist and writhe, and when they settled, they spelled out:

Alexandra Octavia Thorn

“Anna,” she gasped into her Whisperphone.

Then the door behind her slammed shut. She felt her throat constricting. She couldn't breathe. She dropped her wand and the Whisperphone and spun around. She was alone in the room, yet she was being strangled.

“Alex?” she heard Anna's voice say from the Whisperphone. She stumbled and fell against the table, and collapsed to the floor, clutching her neck, with the Registrar's Scroll clattering to the ground next to her.

“Alex?”

◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆ ◆

“Alex?”

Anna sounded desperate and frightened. Alexandra looked up. She was lying in the corridor outside the Registrar's Office, with Anna leaning over her.

"Alex!" she exclaimed, when she saw Alexandra's eyes open.

"Shh!" Alexandra whispered.

"Meow!"

Alexandra turned her head, and saw Galen lying next to her, almost on top of her wand. Anna had apparently dragged both out along with Alexandra. The cat was splayed out on its side, but had just lifted its head. Its tail was twitching. It sounded as groggy as she felt.

"Anna, what –?"

"Garroting Gas!" Anna whispered, and spoke in a rush. "I came running up when I heard that noise and you didn't answer, I hope I didn't wake Miss Marmsley! And Galen was scratching at the door, and ran in when I opened it, and you were lying on the floor and then Galen suddenly fell over gagging, and that's when I figured it out! That's what must have knocked you out down in the basement!"

"Wh – what?" Alexandra could hardly follow this. She sat up, and was dizzy for a moment. "We have to get out of here," she said, then paused. "Wait a minute. If there was a gas in there, how did you get me – us –" she added, looking at the cat, "– out without being gassed yourself?"

"I used a Bubble-Head Charm. Older kids and the staff use it a lot, when seniors are throwing Dungbombs and Stink Pellets around."

Alexandra shook her head. "You're incredible, Anna!"

"Really?" Anna looked pleased.

"You're both incredible," sneered Mr. Thiel.

Galen leapt to its feet and hissed, as Alexandra and Anna looked up to see the junior custodian at the top of the stairs, with his wand out.

"I knew I'd catch you, Quick!" he said.

"You!" Alexandra shouted. "You tried to kill me!" She called him a name that made Anna gasp, and then without thinking, snatched up her wand and pointed it at him. "*Expelliarmus!*" His wand flew from his hand. He looked startled, and then Anna pointed her wand. "*Petrificus Totalus!*" she shouted, and Thiel went rigid, with the look of astonishment still frozen on his face. Then he tilted stiffly backwards and disappeared from sight. They heard his petrified body go tumbling down the stairs.

Anna grimaced. "I hope that didn't hurt him too badly!"

"Are you kidding? He tried to kill me!" Alexandra got to her feet, with Anna helping her up. She looked down at Galen.

"I guess you helped save my life," she said to the cat. "Thanks. Now get lost!"

The cat growled and turned its back on them, stalking away with an indignant swish of its tail.

They proceeded down the stairs, carefully stepping over Thiel, who was lying on his back as stiff as a board, head pointed down, feet pointed up. He slid out into the hallway when they opened the door, until his head came to rest on the floor with a bump.

"I hope that hurt!" Alexandra hissed, and they hurried out into the main office.

Miss Marmsley was gone. Her chair sat alone in her portrait.

"We're really in trouble now," said Anna, and jerked to a halt when she saw Mr. Journey blocking the way out of the office. The squad of Clockworks was behind him, still mopping their way up the main corridor.

"Sure looks that way, Blossom," said the custodian. "What in Merlin's name is going on here?"

"Mr. Thiel just tried to kill me," said Alexandra. "Again."

Journey raised his eyebrows. "Kill you?"

"He's back there," Anna said pointing. And added, in a high-pitched voice, "It was self-defense, I swear!"

Journey leaned forward and looked down the hall. Thiel was still lying immobile on the floor. He straightened up again, and put a hand on each girl's shoulder.

"I can't wait to hear the story behind this," he said. "But you two are definitely in trouble. Especially you, Starshine. You have no business in the Registrar's Office. Now we're going to find the Dean, and get this mess straightened out. You –" he gave Anna a little push towards the main corridor leading back towards the sixth grade dorms, "– go on back to your room, and stay there. I'm sure Ms. Grimm will want to talk to her favorite young troublemaker first."

"But –" Anna looked confused. She stood there in the intersection, as Journey began guiding Alexandra down one of the other corridors, which she thought led to classrooms for the older students.

"Go on, Blossom," said Mr. Journey.

Alexandra took a few steps, then said, "You know, it doesn't make sense that Mr. Thiel was trying to kill me. He's only been here since January."

The custodian paused. Alexandra stopped and turned towards him. She could see Anna still standing back at the intersection, looking uncertain.

"How did you know I was in the Registrar's Office?" Alexandra asked. Her right hand, blocked from Journey's view by her body, was sliding towards her wand, sticking out of her pants pocket.

"Well, where else would you be sneaking to?" he demanded. "It's what you were after when you tried to drag Em into your little scheme, isn't it?"

"Oh," she said. "That's true." She hesitated, and Journey suddenly spun her around and snatched her wand out of her pocket.

Anna squealed, and Journey turned towards her. "Blossom," he said, "I told you to go. You should have listened. *Stupefy!*" Alexandra's wand flashed red in Journey's hand, and Anna flew down the corridor and landed in a puddle of water at the feet of one of the Clockworks.

"Anna!" Alexandra cried out. Journey pulled out his own wand, while he tightened his grip with his other hand. She tried to pull away, and kicked him hard in the shin, but his fingers dug into her shoulder, and he barely felt her kick through his heavy boots. With both wands in his other hand, he pointed them at her face.

"I was hoping this would go a little easier, Starshine," he said.

"HELP!" she yelled, kicking and flailing at him. And then, remembering something her stepfather had told her once, she screamed, "FIRE!"

He squeezed her shoulder hard, and she gasped in pain and her knees buckled. She was surprised at how strong Journey's hand was.

"*Accio carpet!*" he said, pointing his wand down the corridor and dragging her with him. And then another voice said, "*Revulsio!*" Alexandra and Journey were hurled apart in a flash of purple light.

Alexandra bounced against a wall and slid to the ground. She saw Journey leaning against the opposite wall, and beyond him, Ms. Grimm, wrapped in a white robe and wearing a blue gown underneath. Her wand was leveled at Mr. Journey. Behind her, Galen was standing on Mr. Thiel's chest, tail held erect.

"Ben," said Ms. Grimm. "I'm very disappointed."

"Likewise, Lilith," said Mr. Journey.

A flying carpet flapped past Alexandra's head and flipped in mid-air, rolled itself up, and landed at Journey's feet.

"You don't really think you're going anywhere, do you?" asked Ms. Grimm. "*Stupefy!*" A red bolt of

light shot from her wand, but the custodian deflected it and forced her to duck a hex of his own which scorched the wall behind her. Journey turned and abruptly flicked his wand in Alexandra's direction, growling a curse. A fiery bolt lashed out at her, and then Grimm yelled, "*Protego!*" and the flames rebounded off a shield that suddenly appeared in front of her. Journey turned around and swung his arm in an overhead arc, flinging a curse at Grimm that knocked her down.

There was a smoking hole in her chest as she struggled back to her feet. It looked like it had burned through her robe and the gown beneath – Alexandra couldn't tell whether it had also burned into her flesh, and she didn't want to look too closely. But Grimm was quick to fire another hex, while saying, "All the Deans are on their way, Ben, and I'm sure Thiel has already called the WJD."

"I doubt that, Lilith," said Journey. He continued pelting her with hexes, but she dodged and deflected, and hurled spells back at him that forced him to duck and back away. Alexandra was impressed in spite of herself at Grimm's prowess. Red and blue and yellow bolts rebounded off the walls and floor and ceiling. One struck a Clockwork golem, which continued pushing its mop even after the hex melted the top of its head. The shield Grimm had conjured for Alexandra faded, and she could only keep her head down as more hexes flashed past her.

She was helpless; Journey still had her wand. So she crawled along the floor towards where Anna lay. She heard more voices, and saw that Dean Grimm had indeed been joined by Dean Price, and two other Assistant Deans along with Mr. Fledgefield and Ms. Shirliffe were running up the corridor.

Journey gestured with his wand, and suddenly the Clockwork crew turned and charged the new arrivals. While Price and Grimm advanced on Journey, who was now hiding behind a shield of his own, the other faculty began blasting apart the golems, who were trying to batter them with mops or metal fists.

The custodian had a melee behind him, and two witches both trying to get past his shield in front of him. As he took another step back, he reached Anna's unconscious form, and placed a boot on her neck.

"I really don't want to hurt her," he said, "but I'm going to have to ask you two ladies to drop your wands."

Mrs. Price did. Ms. Grimm didn't. She continued to hold hers at the ready.

"Lilith," said Journey. "I'll do it."

"No!" Alexandra cried out. Journey was a tall, powerful man, and if he put all his weight down, she was sure he could crush Anna's throat in an instant.

"And then there will be nothing holding me back," said Grimm, her eyes flashing dangerously. "You don't want to do this, Ben. I know that you would never want to harm a child."

"You're right," he said. "But you don't want to leave me with no choice."

He snapped his fingers, and the carpet that had earlier fallen to the floor, not far from where Alexandra now lay, unrolled and launched itself at him. "Don't!" Journey admonished, and his weight shifted slightly, as the Dean pointed her wand at the carpet.

"A hostage?" Ms. Grimm demanded. "You won't get far. This can't possibly end well, Ben. Be sensible, and surrender."

He knelt, still holding his wand up and pointed at her. One arm scooped up the small unconscious girl, and he rose and dumped her on the carpet. Simultaneously, he turned his wand so now it was pointing at her throat.

"No, wait!" Alexandra cried out. She rose shakily to her feet. "Leave Anna! I'll go with you!"

"Be quiet, Miss Quick!" snapped Grimm, not taking her eyes off of Journey.

"Well, Starshine, you're the one I wanted to begin with," said Journey. "Come on, then, and your friend can stay behind." He gestured to her, and Alexandra took a step forward, and then Mrs. Price

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rushed over and interposed herself.

"She's going nowhere," said Grimm. "Don't even think it. Now let the other girl go. The entire Wizard Justice Department will be on your trail the moment you leave the grounds. This is madness and you know it."

"They won't be able to find me, and you know it, Lilith," said Journey. "Now, I'm going to fly out of here peacefully, and none of you are going to stop me. I really, truly, would regret killing a little girl." He pulled himself up onto the carpet.

"No!" screamed Alexandra. She struggled with Mrs. Price, who held onto her with difficulty. "Take me! Take me!"

"Stop it, Quick!" Price panted.

"Sorry, Starshine," said Journey. "Truly I am. But I'm afraid what happens to your friend now is your responsibility."

"Disgusting!" Ms. Grimm snarled. "You vile, cowardly man!"

"That hurts, Lilith, it really does."

"Stop him!" Alexandra screamed.

The other faculty had dispatched the golems, but didn't dare try to stop Journey as he guided the flying carpet forward and over their heads, with Anna held at wandpoint. He zoomed down the corridor towards the front entrance, and Alexandra was still screaming and kicking and fighting with Dean Price, even after she heard the doors slam open and knew that Mr. Journey and Anna were gone.

Chapter 26 — Murder in the Woods

“How could you let him take her?” Alexandra screamed at Dean Grimm, who was now leaning against Dean Price while Mrs. Murphy fussed over her, applying burn-healing paste to her chest. A dozen other members of the staff and faculty were gathered around, including Mr. Thiel. Someone had unpetrified him, and now he was glowering alternately at Ms. Grimm and Alexandra.

“He would have killed her before any of us could have uttered a word to stop him,” replied Ms. Grimm. “Now stop screaming, Miss Quick.”

“What is he going to do with her? Why aren't you chasing him? Why are you all standing around like idiots?” she shouted.

“That will be enough, Miss Quick! I assure you, we are doing everything we possibly can.” Ms. Grimm waved the school healer aside. “That's fine, Jean.” She advanced on Alexandra, and caught her chin in her hand and forced her to look up. Dean Grimm's gray eyes were not cold, now – they were gleaming and furious.

“You,” she hissed, “are acting like a child! A hysterical, shrieking *child*! You are doing your friend absolutely no good by carrying on in this manner, so control yourself and act like a witch!”

Quivering, Alexandra closed her mouth, and met the Dean's gaze, though it was taking all her self-control to hold back both tears and more shouting.

“Good,” Grimm whispered, and released her.

“Please,” Alexandra said, her voice trembling. “This is my fault. We have to save her.”

“Yes,” Grimm said.

Thiel cleared his throat. “Excuse me, Dean Grimm, but I'm taking charge now. Effective immediately, all staff and faculty will answer to me.”

Ms. Grimm turned to face him.

“When senior Justice Department wizards arrive, I will *discuss* with them the measures to be taken,” Grimm said coldly. “In the meantime, you will stay out of the way and be quiet.”

Thiel bristled. “As the WJD agent in charge –”

“– it will be very embarrassing if your superiors find out that you were rendered ineffectual by a pair of twelve year-olds,” Grimm said, with a sharp smile. “That wouldn't bode well for the future career of an ambitious young WJD agent, would it? So if you'd like that little detail to be conveniently left out of my sister's report, you'll be silent and do as I say.”

Thiel closed his mouth, though if wizards could shoot curses from their eyes with a thought, Ms. Grimm would have dropped dead on the spot.

“I want you to take Miss Quick to her room,” she said to Thiel. “And see to it that she doesn't leave, because I assure you she'll try. I hope you can manage that.”

Both Alexandra and Mr. Thiel were glaring at the Dean now.

“Please,” Alexandra forced herself to say. “I want to help.”

“You've done quite enough already, Miss Quick. Now go with Mr. Thiel. Stay in your room. We will get Miss Chu back. Mr. Journey will probably drop her off unharmed once he's made good his escape. He has no reason to harm her.”

The Dean turned away and began speaking to the other adults. Thiel put a rough hand on Alexandra's shoulder. “Let's go,” he snapped, pushing her forward.

She slapped his hand away, and went. Her shoulder was hurting now, from where Journey had grabbed it.

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The main corridor was littered with Clockwork parts. There were piles of metal limbs and heads, and gears and sprockets and wires and rods scattered across the floor. Alexandra stopped suddenly, and stooped to pick up Anna's wand.

"Give me that!" Thiel snapped, and snatched it out of her hand. "In fact, give me *your* wand too!"

"Mr. Journey has it," she said, glaring back at him hatefully.

"Too bad," Thiel said, and gave her another push forward. She wanted to slug him, but instead she kept walking.

"So you're like an undercover agent?" she asked, as they rounded the corner at the entranceway.

"Working for the Wizard Justice Department?" She looked out the open doors through which Journey had so recently flown, but Thiel gave her another push.

"Yes," he said. "And more than once I've wished I could just let Journey do away with you."

"If you *knew* all this time that Mr. Journey was trying to kill me, why didn't you just arrest him?"

He just grunted and gave her another shove forward. Her hatred for Thiel now matched her hatred for Ms. Grimm.

The warlock at the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall was awake now. "You are out past curfew, young lady!" he said to Alexandra. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

In reply, she snarled something that would normally have been worth a week's detention all by itself. The warlock looked shocked, while Thiel just snorted. They got to her room, and she opened the door. She stopped in the doorway when it looked like Thiel was going to follow her.

"You are *not* coming into my room!" she said.

"I'm not taking my eyes off you, Quick," he replied.

"Are you going to watch me undress?" she demanded. "Or go to the bathroom? These rooms are girls only! School rules."

Thiel scowled, and looked over her shoulder into the room she shared with Anna. Charlie sat on the windowsill, and cawed a greeting. Thiel looked at the window suspiciously.

"We're on the second floor," Alexandra said with exasperation. "What am I going to do, jump out? Without a wand?"

Thiel pointed his wand into the room and muttered a few charms. He seemed to be satisfied after a moment.

"Fine," he said. "But I'm going to be right outside, and if I hear anything, I *will* come in."

She slammed the door in his face, and threw herself on her bed and buried her face in her pillow. Charlie fluttered over and landed on her shoulder.

She only allowed herself a few moments of despair and self-pity, and then sat up and began thinking.

"He wanted me," she said to Charlie. "Why did he want me?"

Charlie's offered only a head tilt in response.

"Because I *am* Abraham Thorn's daughter!" she whispered. "And Ms. Grimm knew that."

Charlie cawed, but had no further comment. From the next room, Alexandra heard Angelique groan, "Alexandra, shut that bird up!"

Alexandra ignored her. She'd certainly been woken up often enough by Honey's foul-mouthed morning greetings.

She knew she had to find Anna somehow. That was two problems: how to get out of her room, and how to track Journey. The third problem, of what she'd do when she caught up to them, was something she put aside to think about when she got that far. She got up to use the bathroom, and washed her face.

"You're looking peaked, dear," said the mirror. "Shouldn't you be in bed?"

"No," Alexandra replied. "Not while Anna's missing." And that gave her an idea. She looked into the

mirror, and closed her eyes. She'd mostly abandoned rhyming spells, but she wasn't really helpless without her wand, was she?

*"Mirror, mirror, please don't scold,
It's all my fault, so I've been told,
But Mr. Journey took Anna, she's out there,
Won't you please show me where?"*

She opened her eyes and gazed hopefully at her reflection.

The mirror sighed. "I really wish I could help, dear. But I'm not that sort of mirror."

Alexandra shouted in frustration and pounded the mirror with her fist. It made a little shriek as it cracked, and the skin over her knuckles split open. Wincing, she held her hand under cold water.

Droplets of blood splattered against the sink and then washed down the drain.

"You can really be quite a horrible little brat!" said the mirror, sounding brittle.

"Quick, what's going on in there?" demanded Thiel from outside, and he opened the door.

Alexandra glared at him. He looked at her bleeding hand and her hair in disarray. "Throwing a tantrum, are you?" he sneered. "That'll help."

"Get out!" she yelled at him. He snorted and closed the door, while Darla and Angelique both shouted from the next room, "Alexandra, it's five o'clock in the morning!"

She had never felt so helpless, or guilty. She walked over to the window and leaned against the sill, looking out onto the grounds of Charmbridge Academy, and the woods beyond, which in the pre-dawn darkness could be seen only as a jagged shadowy line of trees silhouetted against the sky.

She didn't see any adults out there, no lights, no search parties. There was no rescue squad from the Wizard Justice Department. As far as she could tell, the adults were doing nothing. Maybe they were just hoping Ms. Grimm was right, and that Mr. Journey would simply let Anna go. She hoped that was true. She still didn't understand anything that had just happened, but it was hard to believe the easy-going, anti-authoritarian groundskeeper she'd known all year had suddenly turned into a kidnapper and would-be murderer.

"He said he wanted me, not her," she murmured. "He won't hurt her, will he, Charlie?"

Charlie made a soft trilling sound, but she knew the raven didn't know any better than she did. And then Charlie suddenly squawked loudly, and Alexandra saw a dark shape flapping its way towards her window.

It was a crow.

Charlie screeched as the other bird landed on the sill. It was smaller than Charlie, but it had a threatening presence. It turned its head one way and then the other, regarding Alexandra with beady black eyes, and then it slowly raised one leg, and she saw that there was a note clutched in its talons. She reached out and snatched it from the bird. It cawed, and launched itself from the windowsill, flapping back into the sky.

"Blast it, Quick!" snarled Thiel out in the corridor.

Alexandra pushed her chair up against the door and wedged it against the doorknob. "If you come in again, I'll throw a *real* temper tantrum!" she yelled. "Why don't you just petrify me since you're such a powerful secret agent wizard? You know how that spell works, right? It'll look really good to your superiors that you had to curse a sixth grader!"

She heard Thiel utter a non-magical curse, but he didn't try to come in.

She opened the note. It was a handwritten scrawl.

Starshine,

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Come to where you and Blossom camped out that night in the woods. Make sure you're alone, if you don't want anything bad to happen to her. I know how resourceful you are. You'll figure out a way.

It didn't surprise Alexandra that Journey had known what she and Anna were up to that night. That he expected her to escape her minders for Anna's sake infuriated her. How dare he threaten Anna because he wanted her, for reasons she still couldn't fathom? And underneath that anger was anger at herself.

"But I'm afraid what happens to your friend now is your responsibility," Journey had said.

"All right then," she said to Charlie. "Let's go rescue Anna."

Charlie squawked in protest, not sounding nearly as confident as she did.

Darla, looking sleepy and annoyed in a lacy chemise, opened the door from her room to the bathroom that joined the two bedrooms, and glared at her. "Alexandra, if you don't shut Charlie up—"

Alexandra turned. Charlie was on her shoulder, and her hand was still dripping blood, and she gave Darla a look of such ferocity that the other girl instantly turned white, and took a step backwards.

"Close the door," Alexandra said, and Darla did.

She looked out the window again. It was still an hour or so before sunrise. The grounds were dark.

"Shush, Charlie," she whispered, as she climbed up onto the windowsill and crouched there.

When she was seven, she had jumped off the roof of her house. The second floor dorm windows were actually a bit higher than that; Charmbridge had high ceilings, and the ground outside was not level with the first floor. It was a daunting height. It was an impossible height to jump, without the aid of magic.

Alexandra closed her eyes, and prayed with all her might that "doggerel verse" was not as worthless as her teachers claimed.

"I can't fly, but I won't fear,

I know that I can jump from here,

Let me land on the ground down there,

As lightly as if I walked on air."

And she stepped off the ledge.

For a moment, she seemed to hover in the air, and then, as Charlie came diving after her with a shriek, she plummeted like a rock.

Unlike Charlie, she didn't make a sound, even when she hit the ground and heard something snap in her ankle. The impact knocked all the breath out of her, and a jolt ran from the base of her compressed spine all the way up to the back of her head. She nearly blacked out, and it was several seconds before she could see anything but stars.

She felt bruised and sore all over, but her leg hurt most of all. And when she stood, the pain almost made her pass out again.

"It hurts, Charlie!" she gasped.

The raven could do nothing but cluck. She looked up and saw her window, the only one on her floor with light coming out of it. She didn't think it would be long before Thiel would check on her again, and when she didn't answer... She hobbled forward, hissing with each step.

Afterwards, Alexandra barely remembered walking across the fields and into the woods on a broken ankle. It all blurred together in a haze of pain. She wished she had a broom, and even thought about trying to break into the gymnasium from the outside, or sending Charlie to fetch David or the Pritchards, or even alerting Ms. Grimm and hoping the Dean could do something. But, wisely or not, she discarded all of these ideas, as too impractical, too time-consuming, or too risky. She went into the

woods alone except for Charlie.

When she reached the spot just out of sight of the academy where she and Anna had camped, that snowy night in late February, she found a carpet lying on the ground. Without even thinking about it, she collapsed onto it, letting out a small cry of relief. Her ankle felt like it was on fire, and her leg had been trembling violently with each step. She didn't think she could have walked much further.

The carpet lifted off. Alexandra grabbed its edges, but it seemed to be obeying commands from elsewhere, and shot off through the trees, never quite rising above the treetops. Charlie's talons dug into her shoulder and the raven flapped its wings to retain its balance as they tilted and swerved. It might have been either a thrilling or a nausea-inducing ride, but Alexandra was too preoccupied with pain and worry to notice much else.

Eventually, the carpet slowed down. They were still in the woods, but Alexandra didn't know how far they had traveled. The sun hadn't risen above the horizon yet, but the sky in the east was pale and cloudy, so she could see two figures standing by a tree as the carpet descended to the ground.

One figure, she realized as the carpet gently settled down, was actually tied to the tree. Anna was bound by ropes to a tree that was several times thicker than her, and there was a gag in her mouth as well. She looked terrified.

"Why?" Alexandra asked, as she slowly rose to her feet, and then nearly fell over. "Why did you do this?"

Mr. Journey was standing next to Anna, but he closed the distance between them in three long strides.

"*Accio wand!*" he said, pointing his wand at her.

Nothing happened, and Alexandra said angrily, "You have my wand!"

He nodded. "Just making sure. You're a clever girl, Starshine. Clever and resourceful, tricky as your father. Wouldn't put it past you to have brought Blossom's wand or someone else's –"

"Her name is Anna!" Alexandra shouted. "And my name isn't Starshine! It's Alexandra! Alexandra Thorn!"

This set off a cacophony of cawing and screeching in the trees around them. They were surrounded by crows, Alexandra realized. Charlie screeched defiance at the other birds. Journey took a step back from her, and regarded her seriously, as if for the first time.

"Yes," he said. He nodded. He reached out and seized her arm, but though his grip was tight, it wasn't rough. He was supporting her as much as he was holding onto her. "We're going to take a ride on the carpet together now, Alexandra. You can sit back down, take the weight off your ankle. Looks like you broke it, is that right? I can do something about the pain."

There was something about the way he was speaking, almost a nervousness in his voice. Alexandra looked into his eyes, and an understanding settled over her, like a chill seeping into her skin.

"Wait," she said quietly. "Let me say good-bye to Anna. Please."

He hesitated, and looked at her suspiciously.

"I don't have any more tricks," she said, feeling all the pain and fatigue of this night weighing down on her.

"All right," he nodded. It was strange, how suddenly she was the one who was calm, and he was the one who was nervous. He held onto her, as she limped over to where Anna struggled futilely against her ropes. She was almost grateful, as Mr. Journey helped her keep the weight off her broken ankle.

Anna was staring at her. Her eyes were as wide and terrified as she'd ever seen them. She shook her head and made strangled sounds through her gag.

Alexandra forced herself to smile.

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"It's all right, Anna," she said. "It'll be all right." She reached up and laid the back of her hand against Anna's tear-stained cheek. "Ssh."

Anna stopped struggling, but she was still trembling violently.

"I'm going to leave Charlie here to bring help," she said. She looked over her shoulder at Mr. Journey. "Is that all right?" He nodded.

Anna was shaking her head again, but Alexandra repeated: "Ssh." And she leaned forward, to kiss her friend on the cheek. "It'll be all right, Anna," she whispered. "I promise."

Anna made muffled sobbing sounds. More tears were running down her face. Alexandra said to Charlie, "Stay here with Anna. All right, Charlie? I need you to stay with Anna. Make sure they find her."

Charlie squawked in protest.

"Charlie!" Alexandra stared at the bird. Finally, the raven fluttered off her shoulder and landed on Anna's, looking back at Alexandra reproachfully.

Mr. Journey began pulling Alexandra back towards the flying carpet.

"Don't worry, Anna," she said, one more time. "It will be all right."

She knew Anna didn't believe her. She was good at lying, but not to her friends.

She sat down on the carpet. They began rising into the air. Journey said, "Put your hands behind your back." She complied, and didn't struggle as he summoned ropes with his wand which bound her wrists tightly behind her, and then more ropes to wrap around her, binding her arms to her body.

"You must think I'm very dangerous," she said calmly.

He held his wand over her ankle. It had swollen up to several times its normal size. "Don't make this difficult, Starshine," he said. He murmured another charm.

"I'm not," she said. "Thank you," she added, as the pain receded in her ankle, though the swelling didn't go down. "But please don't call me Starshine. I have a name."

He looked at her, and nodded. He waved his wand, and more ropes appeared around her ankles. She winced but didn't say anything as they constricted around the swelling. He loosened them a little.

There was just a thin bright line edging over the horizon as they ascended above the trees. "Your father is a very dangerous man," he said. "And I should never have underestimated his daughter."

"Indeed," said a familiar, dry voice. "But everyone else has, Ben, so don't feel too badly."

Ms. Grimm was on a broom, and from mere yards away she sent a hex hissing through the air. Journey brought up his wand just in time to deflect most of it, but the flash and the impact nearly knocked him off the carpet. He yelped, and Alexandra brought her knees up to her chest and then straightened her legs with a savage kick, trying to push him the rest of the way over the edge. She screamed in pain as the force of the kick made the broken bones in her ankle grind together. He grunted, grabbed Alexandra by the neck with his free hand, and tried to jinx Grimm's broom with the other, waving his wand in a complicated gesture that forced her to grab hold of her broom with both hands.

Alexandra was twisting and struggling with all her might now. She tried to knee Journey in the side, and to bite his wrist. He was surprisingly strong, despite his age. He snarled the incantation for another hex and sent it flying at the Dean, who had regained control of her broom but now had to dodge the hex, and then he shook Alexandra by the neck so hard that she was dizzy and unable to move for several seconds. The carpet rocketed skyward, and in the corner of her eye she saw a blur that she thought was Ms. Grimm, in pursuit.

A fireball scorched past them, singing the edges of the carpet. They banked and nearly rolled. Alexandra didn't know why they didn't simply fall off, but they didn't. They did drop rapidly, skimming

so close to the trees that she could hear branches snapping as the carpet plowed through the uppermost boughs. She screamed, hoping Ms. Grimm would be able to follow them, giving her a target to aim for, and was pleased when another bolt of red light shot out of the pale sky above. Journey still had his hand around her throat and he squeezed, making an angry sound. Alexandra gagged, and went limp. She was hoping he would think she'd blacked out. He eased his grip, but didn't remove his hand, and his fingers were still dug into the flesh around her throat.

"Ben!" Ms. Grimm called. "Please. By all the stars above, this is madness! Even if you kill the girl, even if you escape, you'll only return to a life as a fugitive! A traitor, hunted by the Thorn Circle and the Confederation alike, with the blood of a child on your hands!"

"Would *you* surrender yourself to Hucksteen and his goons, Lilith?" replied Journey. And then he roared, "*Nex cornicis!*"

The woods came alive. A horde of black-winged birds erupted out of the treetops, shrieking and cawing and flapping. They streamed through the air to converge on a figure Alexandra could only see for a moment before she was engulfed by the murderous flock. Then there was only a furious storm of black feathers and slashing talons and stabbing beaks. Alexandra shuddered, but the din soon faded as Journey propelled the flying carpet onward, leaving the crows and their victim behind.

He pointed his wand at her face. Where ropes had streamed out of it before, now it produced a strip of cloth that wrapped around her head and filled her mouth. She fought the urge to gag, and had to breathe through her nose. She felt cracks appearing in the calmness that had settled over her, but steadied her breathing with an effort.

Why doesn't he just kill me? she wondered. Because she knew that was what he intended to do. But he could have done it right then. He could have used a curse, or he could have strangled her, or he could have simply dropped her from high above the trees.

"I am sorry about this, Star – Alexandra," he said, as they skimmed over the treetops. "It's your father's fault, really. He used you to safeguard us. What was he thinking, using his own daughter like that? Of course he never asked our opinion. That was always his way. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, he always said. Well, it's not so amusing when the consequences are on someone else's head, is it?"

If she hadn't been gagged, Alexandra might have told him that he wasn't making very much sense. But she was gagged and helpless, so she just listened, trying to make as much sense of it as she could. Mr. Journey glanced at her, and seemed to sense her confusion.

"I know, this is all confusing to you, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry," he sighed, and she wished he'd quit saying that. "It's very complicated, Alexandra. The people who joined the Thorn Circle, they were young and idealistic. They thought the Confederation was becoming as bad as the Dark wizards it was supposed to be fighting, and they had to do whatever it took to bring down the system. Of course they became the enemy." He sighed. "After they failed to kill the Governor-General, they had to go into hiding. And if Confederation wizards captured one of them, that would lead them to the rest. Your father came up with a solution."

He looked to the east, where the sun was rising, and began guiding the carpet back down into the trees.

"There's a powerful spell called a Fidelius Charm. It allows a secret to be hidden inside a living person, and stay protected there, from anyone and anything that might reveal it. Even the most powerful magic can't discover it. Even those who know it can't speak of it, not even under torture. The only way it can ever be revealed is if the one person it got hidden in reveals it." Journey looked at her.

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“You're the Secret-Keeper for the Thorn Circle, Alexandra.”

She stared at him, while they descended through the trees towards the ground.

“Your father did that, right after you were born. Just a little baby, and he made you the Secret-Keeper for the most important secret in the world, at least the way the Governor-General sees it. So it's his fault, you understand?”

They settled on the ground without even a bump. Journey was looking off into the distance, though there wasn't much distance to see as it was all obscured by trees now. Alexandra thought about kicking or head-butting him, but she was tired and sore all over, and she knew it wouldn't do any good. She took a deep breath, with difficulty, and wondered why Mr. Journey was telling her all this. Not that she wasn't grateful. She just didn't understand why he bothered.

Journey finally looked at her again. She was surprised at how sad he looked.

“They had good intentions, Starshine – sorry, Alexandra. They really did.” He sighed. “Anyway... the problem with making you the Secret-Keeper was that once the Governor-General found out about you, well, it was just a matter of time before he'd make you give up any information you had. Oh, don't get me wrong. I know you wouldn't on purpose. But you're just a girl. You wouldn't have a choice. He'd bide his time and wait until you learned something on your own, as you'd have to sooner or later. And then you'd tell him.”

He rose slowly to his feet. “Without you, no one can ever find the Thorn Circle, Alexandra. As long as they stay hidden, they're safe. Heck, Grimm and Thiel as much as knew about me, but because of the Fidelius Charm –” He paused. “Now, see, even I can't actually tell you who I am, not straight out.”

He reached into his pocket. “Don't think your father left you unprotected. He put another charm on you, as powerful as the first. His own invention. A Circle of Protection, he called it. Can't remember how the incantation went, exactly, but *'While the circle is unbroken,'* any murderer who raised his hand against you would be struck down himself. We watched him place the circle around your little wrist, before he sent you off with your mother.”

Alexandra's eyes went wide as she saw what he pulled from his pocket: her gold bracelet! She had thought it had melted in the fire that burned down her house, but there it was, in Journey's hand. But it was broken. He had severed the gold band, so it dangled in two disjoint halves held together by the thin latch that closed it originally. “Took quite a jinx to break the circle itself. Powerful piece of magic.”

He looked at her apologetically. “I couldn't try to kill you directly, because of the charmed bracelet, you see? It wouldn't protect you from accidents, or critters, but I never figured on you being such a danged persistent survivor! And then, even after I got the charm away from you and broke it –” he shook the bracelet. “Lilith made it hard to get at you. Her and Thiel. They're as bad as your father, you know. They were using you as bait, pretty much knowing what I was up to. Thiel just wanted to get to the rest of the Circle. His only interest in keeping you alive was making sure you could reveal anything you found out about me, or your father, or the Thorn Circle.”

It was all very interesting, and Alexandra realized that just now, she didn't really care.

Why are you talking so much? she wondered, but she couldn't say it. But as if he'd heard her, Journey sighed heavily again, and then put a hand under her arm and gently lifted her to her feet.

Sunlight was now filtering through the treetops. She could see the woods around her, and hear birds chirping. She didn't hear any crows. She hoped Anna was all right and that Charlie had already led some other grown-up to her. Ms. Grimm couldn't have come after her alone, could she?

Journey had his wand pointed at her.

“I'm sorry, Starshine,” he whispered. “Close your eyes.”

She looked back at him, and her green eyes glittered. She wouldn't close them. She met his gaze, and

his was the one that wavered.

“Close your eyes!” he repeated. He tried to make it a demand, but it sounded more like a plea.

She shook her head, not letting her eyes leave his.

Cold laughter filled the air. “You can't do it!” It was Ms. Grimm's voice.

Journey spun around, and Grimm blasted him off his feet with a wave of her wand, and then blasted his wand out of his hand. He lay on the ground, dazed.

“All those crude murder attempts,” Ms. Grimm said contemptuously, “using tricks and artifacts and beasts, but when it comes to killing a child in cold blood, you couldn't do it, could you, Ben?”

The Dean looked quite a bit worse for wear. Her clothes were ripped and shredded, her hair looked as if hundreds of birds had been trying to pull out strands to use in their nests, and she had scratches and gouges on her face, arms, legs, and everywhere else where skin was visible. There was a nasty gash above her eye, one ear looked badly torn, and she was bleeding everywhere. But she still looked regal and victorious. Alexandra admired her as much as she had ever hated her in that moment.

Journey was holding something he'd pulled out of his belt. Alexandra recognized it immediately: a revolver.

She knew guns. Her stepfather had made sure she recognized them and knew how dangerous they were at a very young age. Despite all her other mischief, the one thing she had never tried to do was get her hands on Archie's service revolver.

With her gag filling her mouth, Alexandra couldn't gasp, she could only choke. Journey fired the gun and Grimm fell, with a surprised expression.

Journey rose unsteadily to his feet. The smell of gunpowder burned Alexandra's nostrils, and he pressed the still-hot barrel against her chest, directly over her heart.

“Good gods, Ben!” Ms. Grimm was lying on the ground, clutching her side. Blood was bubbling around her fingers. “How low can you sink? Using *Muggle* instruments of murder?”

“I'm sorry, Starshine,” Journey whispered, looking into Alexandra's eyes.

“Ben,” gasped Grimm. “Don't! Please – listen to me! You mustn't!”

He pulled the trigger.

There was bang that made Alexandra's eardrums feel like they had popped. She was knocked flat on her back. She lay there, stunned and in shock.

Am I dead? she wondered. She could still see the leaves above her head, and smell gunpowder and hot metal. *And if I'm not, shouldn't being shot hurt more?*

She raised her head, so she was actually looking at her feet. Mr. Journey was standing over her with the most oddly startled look on his face.

Blood was spreading across his chest, soaking through his shirt, and the center of the stain was directly over his heart. The revolver tumbled out of his fingers, he looked down at Alexandra one last time, with a questioning look as if he expected her to explain what had just happened, and then he collapsed to the ground.

Alexandra couldn't move, and she couldn't take her eyes away from the sight. She stared at Mr. Journey, lying lifeless at her feet with his eyes open and empty, until Ms. Grimm dragged herself to Alexandra's side, and sat up next to her, and turned her around.

“Don't look,” she said. “You don't need to see this. It's all right now, Alexandra. It will be all right.”

Ms. Grimm was pale, covered with leaves and blood and feathers. Alexandra could see that one arm was hanging limply and her side was soaked with glistening red blood, but she somehow managed to look composed. Alexandra closed her eyes and leaned her head against the Dean's shoulder, and didn't mind when she felt the woman stroke her hair gently with her good hand.

Chapter 27 — Broken Circle

Alexandra was somewhat familiar with fractures, breaks, and other injuries, having spent time hanging around in emergency rooms waiting for her mother's shift to end. So she was impressed at how quickly her ankle was mending with the help of Mrs. Murphy's healing. The swelling almost disappeared overnight, though the pain did not. The healer told her she would be able to leave the infirmary in another day or so. The other cuts and bruises Alexandra had sustained required only a few simple charms or some bruise-healing paste.

On her first day in the infirmary, she was not allowed any visitors. Mrs. Murphy assured her that Anna had been brought back safely, and that Ms. Grimm was recovering just fine from her injuries, but Alexandra was sure there were things going on, out in the school, and she was being kept isolated from those things. Maybe it was for her protection, or maybe it was just more things being hidden from her.

Charlie appeared at the window, cawing, and Alexandra waved, feeling a great sense of relief and gratitude, but the healer wouldn't let the raven in.

On the second day, her first visitor was an unexpected one: Ms. Shirliffe. The P.M.E. and Magical Theory teacher was dressed in a grayish-blue military uniform, much to Alexandra's surprise.

"Did you join the Regimental Officer Corps?" she asked.

"I've always been a reserve officer," said Shirliffe. "I'll be wearing my uniform for the Governor-General's visit, and we have a dress rehearsal for the commencement ceremony this afternoon." She sat down by Alexandra's bed. "How are you feeling, Quick?"

"Bored." Mrs. Murphy had allowed some books to be brought to her, but Alexandra, who normally was happy to read all day, found herself unable to concentrate on books for very long.

Shirliffe nodded. "I'm sure boredom isn't the only thing you're feeling."

"I'm awfully confused about a lot of stuff," said Alexandra, and Shirliffe nodded again.

"I think Dean Grimm will be here soon to explain some of it."

Alexandra wasn't sure if she was glad or not. "So I guess I'm not being expelled?"

Shirliffe laughed. "No. I don't think you are."

"Why are you here, Ms. Shirliffe? Not that I mind."

The teacher smiled. "Well, there were some things I wanted to say to you when you first arrived here, and I couldn't. I want you to understand, first of all, that I support Dean Grimm completely. Although I might not always agree with her, she's a brilliant and valiant woman. I'm sure I don't need to remind you that you owe her your life. So don't mistake anything I say as a criticism of her, or think that I'm going to be sympathetic if you continue running afoul of her in the future."

Alexandra nodded. She agreed that Dean Grimm was brave, and she was sure she was probably brilliant. Her magical feats had certainly been impressive.

"You were given an unfair disadvantage from the moment you arrived here," Ms. Shirliffe said. "You were brought to Charmbridge Academy without even the minimal preparation most Muggle-born students receive, and set up to do poorly on your SPAWNs. Ms. Grimm didn't want you to immediately excel, and was hoping that being held back would make you a little less remarkable. I knew the moment I met you that you have too much talent to suppress, though. You're definitely your father's daughter."

"So you knew who my father was all along?" Alexandra asked quietly.

Ms. Shirliffe nodded. "As did Dean Price. I don't believe Ms. Grimm confided in anyone else, but obviously... Mr. Journey, with his access to the Registrar's Office, found out."

“And you went along with hiding it from me,” Alexandra said.

Ms. Shirtliffe sighed. “In retrospect, Ms. Grimm probably regrets that as well. But I understand your determination to uncover the truth about yourself. Not that it excuses everything you've done!” she added quickly. “Your behavior in Chicago, in particular, was reckless and irresponsible.”

“Does everyone know who my father is now?”

The teacher gave her a wan smile. “I'm afraid so. The Dean can only do so much to control rumors. The details of what happened out in the woods are between you and her – and Anna Chu, I suppose, since she was out there too. A lot of fantastic stories are going around the school, though. And of course, a few details that happen to be true.”

Mention of Anna made Alexandra stare out the window for a while. Ms. Shirtliffe cleared her throat, and said, “The other thing I wanted to say to you was that I think you would be a fine Junior Regimental Officer.”

Alexandra's attention snapped back to the teacher, sitting there in her neat uniform. She couldn't have been more surprised if Shirtliffe had told her she wanted Alexandra to teach Magical Theory next year. “Me? Join the Corps?” She knew very little about the wizard militia, and had only seen the Junior Regimental Officer Corps around school, flying in formation above the fields or practicing wand and broom drills, or marching through the hallways flashing their ribbons and medals.

“You have great talent, courage, and determination, and enormous charisma. You're a natural leader, Alexandra. I don't think you realize that yet, but you are. And the JROC would be good for your development.”

“Good for teaching me to follow orders, you mean,” Alexandra said, frowning.

Shirtliffe smiled tightly. “A little discipline would be good for you, yes.”

“And I'd be serving the Confederation.”

“Not as a student. Whether you choose to follow in your father's footsteps once you graduate would be up to you.” Shirtliffe was watching her closely.

“Is following in my father's footsteps really what you want?” Alexandra asked.

Ms. Shirtliffe was silent for a moment, studying her.

“You have your entire life ahead of you, Alexandra,” she said at last. “You'll make your own mistakes, I'm sure. But you don't have to make your father's mistakes. What I want is for you to reach your potential and not spend your life rebelling against or trying to live up to your name.”

Alexandra wasn't sure what to make of this. “I'll think about it,” she said.

Ms. Shirtliffe nodded. “I know you have a lot of things to think about. Well, I'd best let you rest. Don't forget, your SPAWN is in a few days. Although you can probably ask the Dean for a later test date, considering the... circumstances.”

Alexandra nodded, and closed her eyes and napped for a while after Ms. Shirtliffe left.

When she opened them again, her friends were gathered around her bed, watching her. Anna and David, Constance and Forbearance, and, to Alexandra's surprise, Darla and Angelique.

“Well, gee,” Alexandra said, sitting up with some embarrassment. “How long have you guys been standing there watching me?”

“Just a few minutes,” said David. “We were trying to decide if we should wake you up or not.”

“How is your ankle?” asked Angelique.

“Better.” Alexandra wiggled her foot a little, and winced. “Mrs. Murphy said I can get out of bed in another day.”

“So,” David said, “I hear your father really was a bad-ass Dark wizard after all.”

There was a shocked silence. David was looking at her seriously. Constance and Forbearance had

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both turned bright red, and Forbearance was giving David a scathing look, which he ignored.

Alexandra stared back at him, and then snorted. "Yeah," she said. "I guess that makes me bad –"

"Alex!" squeaked Anna, and David's face broke out into a grin. Darla and Angelique laughed nervously, and Constance and Forbearance looked relieved.

"So it's true," Darla said quietly.

"Are you going to be afraid of me now?" Alexandra asked, and though she was looking at Darla, she was really watching Anna, out of the corner of her eye.

"She's already afraid of you," Angelique smirked, and Darla protested, "I am not!"

Bringing it out into the open seemed to have released the tension, and they all talked about the assembly they had just had, where the Assistant Deans had tried to tell them all the rumors were untrue but had confirmed that Mr. Journey was dead. Alexandra heard some of the rumors Ms. Shirtliffe had been talking about – that Alexandra had flown into the woods on a broom to do battle with Journey herself, accompanied by an army of crows; that Ms. Grimm had transformed into a dragon; that Abraham Thorn himself had appeared, and a host of even more unlikely events. Alexandra knew that they all wanted to hear the real story, and she shook her head to dispel some of the more nonsensical versions, but she didn't really feel like talking about what had happened. She noticed that Anna, also, was quiet while the others chattered as if this had been some thrilling children's adventure.

Darla offered to help Alexandra "do something" with her hair, to Alexandra's amusement and irritation. Angelique offered to join her and Anna for a SPAWN study group. David said he'd sneak some decent food in from the cafeteria. And Alexandra felt happy and content, despite the persistent questions and Darla's annoying chatter.

The only ones who didn't talk much were Anna and the Pritchards. So when Mrs. Murphy came and told them that it was dinnertime and they needed to leave the infirmary, Darla and Angelique and David waved good-bye and promised to come visit the next day, but Anna, Constance, and Forbearance hung back.

"I'm not Dark," Alexandra said.

"Course not," said Constance.

"I'm not going to turn Dark just because of my father. I don't want people to be afraid of me."

"I think you like being feared some," said Forbearance.

Alexandra frowned.

"You should'a asked for our help," said Forbearance.

"You're a stubborn high-headed mule, Alexandra Quick!" declared Constance.

"Walking into the woods on a broke ankle!"

"What in heaven's grace did you have it in your mind to do?"

"It's not like I had a lot of time for planning!" Alexandra protested.

"And it hain't like you spent much time thinking!" Constance retorted.

The Ozarkers both looked at Anna, and Forbearance said, "It could'a gone very much badly for the both of you."

"We told you you was responsible if harm came to Anna," said Constance.

"And it near did," said Forbearance.

Alexandra nodded, and closed her eyes. Suddenly she was tired, and feeling defensive, though she didn't know how to defend herself. But she felt a gentle hand on each shoulder, and opened her eyes to see the twins on either side of her.

"Troublesome is vexing," said Constance.

"And her words are often cruel," said Forbearance.

And they both leaned over, and said softly, "But she has the biggest and the bravest heart of anyone in school." And they both gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Alexandra blushed, and couldn't meet anyone's eyes as the twins smiled and stood up. "You best join us for dinner, Anna," said Constance.

Anna nodded. "I will. I'll be there in a minute." Constance and Forbearance nodded, and glided out of the infirmary, leaving Alexandra and Anna alone.

"I –" Alexandra started to say, and Anna shook her head.

"I don't blame you for anything, Alex. You don't need to be sorry. I don't mean you shouldn't try to be more responsible."

"You almost got killed because of me," Alexandra murmured.

Anna was quiet, and regarded her very seriously.

"I don't think Mr. Journey ever intended to hurt me," she said at last. She hesitated, then said, even more quietly, "He was going to kill you, wasn't he? You knew that, when you went with him. When you told me it was going to be all right?" Her eyes glistened.

Alexandra nodded slowly. Anna swallowed. "Weren't you scared?"

That was a question Alexandra had been asking herself, and she still wasn't sure how she'd been so calm. She didn't think it was bravery.

"I was scared for you," she said. Her voice almost cracked. "I was afraid you were going to be hurt and it would be my fault!"

Anna reached across the bed and wrapped her arms around Alexandra's neck, and Alexandra felt Anna's tears on her cheek.

"Don't you ever do that again!" Anna whispered. "How do you think *I* would have felt if *you* died?"

"This is very touching."

Anna jumped, and stood up as she realized Ms. Grimm was standing at the foot of Alexandra's bed.

The Dean was wearing a business-like skirt, blouse, and jacket again, but one arm was in a sling. Her long black hair was tied back in a braid. Most of the cuts and bruises that had covered her face and hands were faded now; there was only one long, angry red slash across her forehead, not completely healed yet. She looked like a battle-scarred veteran, and very much back in control.

Her smile was gracious yet cold. "Miss Chu, I believe you should be going to dinner, now. You will see Miss Quick tomorrow."

"Yes, Ms. Grimm," Anna said, with her eyes lowered. She glanced at Alexandra, and whispered, "Bye," and then hurried out of the infirmary.

Ms. Grimm sat down in the chair Anna had just vacated.

"You are looking better, Miss Quick," she said.

"So are you," Alexandra replied.

They regarded one another silently for a while. The older woman was the first to speak.

"Mrs. Murphy informs me that you should be ready to leave the infirmary in a day or two. I'm sure your friends will be willing to bring you your books and homework assignments, but if you wish to postpone your SPAWN, there's no need for you to take it this Friday."

"That's okay. I'd rather take it Friday."

Ms. Grimm smiled. "Stubborn girl. I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Did you come to talk to me about my SPAWN? Or maybe you wanted to ask me not to do too well on it, so I won't attract too much attention?"

Ms. Grimm's smile became wider, but tighter. "I think it's a little late for that, don't you?" Then she sighed. "You're understandably confused and bitter, Miss Quick. But that does not excuse rudeness. If

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you mind your manners, I will answer your questions as best I can. I'm sure you have many. If you insist on being unpleasant, however, I am not going to tolerate being spoken to in your usual insolent manner."

Alexandra looked back at her steadily, then said in a calm, controlled voice, "You punished me in your office, for calling you a liar. But you lied when you told me you didn't know who my father is."

Ms. Grimm exhaled slowly. "Yes. That may not have been the best strategy, in retrospect."

Alexandra snorted. Grimm scowled. "Careful, Miss Quick," she warned.

"Did you know Mr. Journey was trying to kill me all along?"

"Of course not. Do you actually believe I would have knowingly left you in danger? I was suspicious, after the incident on the Invisible Bridge, and combined with the inexplicable presence of redcaps and kappas in Larkin Mills, I began taking a closer look at the people around you."

"How many times did I almost get killed before you actually believed someone was out to get me?"

"I put a number of protective spells up around the school, and on you personally. I did not know the exact nature or origin of the threat against you, but yes, I realized you were in danger."

"Mr. Journey said you did know. You and Mr. Thiel. Why couldn't you just arrest him instead of letting him keep trying to kill me? Mr. Journey said you were using me as bait!" Alexandra was trying to stay calm, but it was becoming difficult to keep her anger bottled up.

Ms. Grimm held up a hand, and leaned back against her chair.

"At the point where the Special Inquisitions Office became involved, I lost a great deal of... autonomy. They had a keen interest in you, Alexandra. They thought you would lead them to your father, and the Thorn Circle. They forced me to allow an undercover agent into my school, and Mr. Thiel had his own ideas about how the investigation should be conducted. I protected you as best I could."

Alexandra felt her anger draining away, almost involuntarily.

"But why?" she asked. "Why did he want to kill me? He was... nice."

Ms. Grimm nodded slowly. "He probably was nice, once. Most people assume that the Thorn Circle in hiding is still conspiring to overthrow the Confederation, but I suspect that Mr. Journey wanted only to stay out of prison. And you were a threat to his freedom."

"Because I'm a Secret-Keeper," said Alexandra. "He told me... my father cast a... a fih-day-lee-us Charm on me."

"As we suspected," said Ms. Grimm. "Did he explain what that means?"

"It keeps the secret of the Thorn Circle. None of them can rat each other out, not even if you try to use magic to force them. So if they stay in hiding, no one can find them?"

"That's correct. Wherever they might be hiding, no amount of searching or scrying will find them. Mr. Journey could have been arrested, but he couldn't reveal where any of his compatriots were." She leaned forward, to meet Alexandra's gaze. "To the Special Inquisitions Office, that makes you very, very important, Alexandra, because *you* can reveal their hiding places, their aliases. But there's a catch – if you die, then so long as you've told no one what you know, those secrets die with you."

"But I don't know anything!" Alexandra protested.

"And Mr. Journey wanted to make sure it stayed that way."

"So it was him all along? The Invisible Bridge, getting trapped in the attic, the Clockworks, the explosion in alchemy class..."

Ms. Grimm nodded. "Galen was trying to *save* you in the attic, Alexandra." She made an unpleasant face. "As it is, you only survived as many times as you did because Ben was being exceedingly cautious, and, I suspect, exceedingly squeamish. But not too squeamish to use any means necessary in

the end. And he was using Dark creatures, and Dark magic.”

Alexandra thought about that, and then asked, “So does this mean the rest of the Thorn Circle is going to try to kill me too?”

Ms. Grimm patted her hand. “I cannot say for certain, Alexandra, but generally the Thorn Circle was thought to be loyal to Abraham Thorn. I would think they'd want to protect you. You are his daughter, after all.”

Alexandra was silent again. She wasn't sure she found that reassuring.

“What happened to Mr. Journey?” she asked at last. “How come he died and not me?”

“I can only speculate,” Ms. Grimm said. “First, tell me everything he said to you while I was... preoccupied, with the murder of crows?”

So Alexandra repeated the rambling explanation Journey had given her, about the Fidelius Charm and the Circle of Protection, and her bracelet, and Ms. Grimm nodded and waited until she was finished, then chuckled dryly.

“Such a fool, Ben Journey was,” she said, shaking her head. “He should have known better. He assumed that the circle was that silly bracelet. It did have a charm on it, and might have helped you a bit, but it wasn't the Circle of Protection. The circle that protected you was the Thorn Circle itself.”

“*They* didn't protect me all the times Mr. Journey tried to kill me!”

“Didn't they?” Ms. Grimm raised an eyebrow. “Are you so certain that it was entirely your own cleverness, and luck, that kept you alive each time?”

Alexandra fell silent. Ms. Grimm continued. “Journey did surmise, correctly, that he couldn't strike you down directly. Making someone impervious to harm is extremely difficult. True invulnerability is like invisibility or immortality – highly sought after and virtually unattainable, even with magic. A lethal blow, a killing curse, it has to be borne by someone if not the recipient. Your father's charm couldn't make you *invulnerable*, but it could cause someone else to be murdered in your stead.” She smiled grimly. “Only Mr. Journey thought that by breaking your gold circlet, he had bypassed that protection. He broke the wrong circle.”

Alexandra's mouth fell open as she understood. “Oh,” she said. “The Circle...”

“Such a spell is not without precedent,” said Ms. Grimm. “But it's very difficult, very powerful, not found in any book. And I should think your father would have needed the permission of those whose lives were bound to yours. Perhaps they thought it was only fair, as your life was protecting them in return. I am only speculating. But Journey was a fool. He should have understood better the circle he was a part of.” She shook her head. “With his death, the Circle *is* broken, I think, at least as far as your protection goes. No one else is likely to die in your place, Alexandra.”

Alexandra gave Ms. Grimm a cold look. “Do you think I wanted *anyone* to die?”

“No,” Ms. Grimm said seriously. She leaned forward again.

“You are, I think, more like your father than you know. No, listen to me, child!” she added, as Alexandra was about to interrupt her. “What we know about Abraham Thorn is that he is egotistical, arrogant, willing to protect those close to him, but also willing to use them. Let me tell you what makes him such a terrible threat, what makes the Governor-General fear him. It's not that he is a powerful wizard – though he is. And it's not that his ideas and his ambitions are dangerous – though they are. It's that he is so very, very charismatic! How did he gather such a loyal following in the first place? People willing to face impossible odds and extraordinary threats on his behalf? A circle of followers willing to die for him – or for his daughter.”

She held Alexandra's gaze. “You have that same gift, Alexandra. Your friends are remarkably loyal to you. You haven't even begun to exercise your powers of persuasion, but it's clear you can talk them

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into putting themselves at great risk on your behalf. Miss Chu – well, I don't need to tell you what price she might have paid for her loyalty to you. Think on that. The difference between you and your father is in how you choose to use your gifts... and your friends.”

She sat up straight, grimacing slightly, while Alexandra sat quietly in her bed, thinking.

“What name will I be enrolled under now?” she asked.

“Well, that's a good question,” Ms. Grimm said. “I suppose it's up to you. If you want to claim the name Alexandra Thorn, you're entitled to it.”

Alexandra thought a moment, and slowly shook her head. “My father never claimed me,” she said, with sudden resolution. “Why should I claim his name?”

“So be it,” Ms. Grimm said. “We will speak again soon, Miss Quick.” She rose to her feet. “Oh, yes.” She reached into the pocket of her jacket, and withdrew a wand. “This was recovered from Mr. Journey. I imagine you want it back.” She held it out.

Alexandra closed her fingers around the hickory wand. It was reassuring to have it back in her hand. “Thank you.” And as the Dean turned to leave, she said, “Ms. Grimm?”

Grimm turned, with a raised eyebrow.

“I think there are still things you're not telling me.”

The Dean stood there a moment, and then the corners of her mouth twitched.

“My dear child,” she said, with a bemused expression. “There are things I am not telling you that would fill half the library. Good evening, Miss Quick.” And she walked out of the infirmary without another look back, her heels clicking against the floor, while Alexandra ran her fingers along her wand and watched her go.

Chapter 28 — Governor-General Hucksteen

Alexandra was released from the infirmary the next day. She had to use crutches for a couple of days, which was less annoying than having to fend off an overly-solicitous Anna. But she was touched when even Darla and Angelique offered to carry her books, until Anna whispered in her ear, “It’s because they’re afraid you’ll curse them.”

Alexandra wasn’t sure how she felt about being known publicly as Abraham Thorn’s daughter. It meant many more students gave her funny looks, or avoided her gaze entirely. There was something both thrilling and disturbing in being *feared*, even by older students. Mindful of what Constance and Forbearance had told her about “preening,” she tried not to take advantage of her even more fearsome new reputation. She was a little disappointed that Larry and his friends weren’t among those who were intimidated by her, though. It just cemented her reputation as a sorceress with the Ozarker boys, and Larry continued to mock her openly, with perhaps a little too much bluster.

More disturbing were the students who took a sudden interest in befriending her – students who tended to have bad reputations, for being antisocial and having an unhealthy interest in the Dark Arts. She received an invitation to the Mors Mortis Society’s year-end party, delivered anonymously by a screech owl. It was in red ink printed on black parchment.

None of her friends knew what the Mors Mortis Society was, but Stuart and Torvald overheard her asking about them.

“Warlock wannabes,” said Stuart. “It’s a very secretive group since Dean Grimm has forbidden their club. It’s an honor to be invited, especially a sixth grader!”

“An honor to be asked to join the Dark?” Alexandra said incredulously, while Anna and David stared, aghast.

“They’re not really Dark,” said Torvald, punching Stuart in the shoulder. “Just kids who like learning jinxes and curses they won’t teach us in school.” He grinned at Alexandra. “If you do learn any good curses from, you know, *outside* school, you’ll teach your friends, won’t you Alexandra?” He winked at her.

“Oh sure,” she replied, narrowing her eyes. “If I learn any good curses, you’ll be the first to find out, Stuart.”

The two boys laughed, and then simultaneously whipped out their wands and cast Tickle Charms on her. They ran away while David and Anna both tried to reverse the charms. Alexandra shouted, between uncontrollable giggles, “I’m...going...to...turn...them...into...doxy-droppings!”

Having lost both custodians and a good number of their Clockworks, the academy was forced to bring elves back into service. Elves and most students were delighted by this, though David and his ASPEW club were horrified.

“It’s not my fault!” Alexandra snapped at Dewshine Jennifer, who kept giving her dirty looks every time a new plate of food magically appeared on their table at the cafeteria. She looked at David plaintively.

“No, it isn’t your fault,” he sighed. “But when I tell my folks about this, they’re gonna write to the Dean and demand that she replace *all* the elves with Clockworks!”

“Do you really think the Dean will listen to... well, Muggles?” Angelique asked.

“For what they’re paying for me to go here, she better!” David retorted.

That weekend, most of the students were studying for their SPAWNs, but Alexandra noticed the grim-faced witches and wizards from the Governor-General’s security detail prowling the halls. They

were poking into every classroom, waving their wands about, and had brought in new portraits to hang at every hallway intersection, each one of a former Governor-General. The Governor-Generals' portraits were sharp-eyed and alert and had nothing better to do than watch out for student misbehavior. The ranks of students assigned detention in the following week swelled, but Alexandra didn't have to endure any more curses being thrown her way. She did notice that every single Governor-General seemed to be giving her the evil eye from his portrait as she passed them by.



Alexandra approached her SPAWN far more casually than she had the last two, even though this one was supposedly more important. As Anna constantly reminded her, the year-end SPAWN went on their permanent records. After what she had been through, Alexandra considered a test to be a trivial ordeal.

It seemed easier this time. She didn't know *all* the answers on the written portion, but she was surprised at how much she did remember. Mr. Hobbes and Mr. Newton could find no fault with her practical Charms and Transfigurations, and even Mr. Grue, muttering to himself and standing back every time she added an ingredient to her cauldron during the Practical Alchemy portion, seemed satisfied.

She felt a sense of déjà vu as she entered the classroom to face Ms. Shirtliffe for her Practical Magical Defense test.

"Got anything to show me, Quick?" asked Ms. Shirtliffe with a smile.

Alexandra raised her wand, and unleashed the nastiest curse she knew. Shirtliffe's smile faded, and she blocked the curse and retaliated with one of her own. Alexandra grimaced as it singed her neck, and tried to jinx the teacher. They exchanged no words, only curses, for a full minute. Ms. Shirtliffe nodded, and then, when Alexandra began to feel a bit smug as she almost spun the teacher around with a Spinning Jinx, Shirtliffe suddenly sent painful spasms running throughout Alexandra's body, disarmed her, and then brought her to her knees with a hex that felt like it simultaneously punched her in the gut and sucked all the air out of her lungs.

Alexandra collapsed to the floor, breathing heavily. She hadn't been hurt like that since the night she'd gone into the woods after Mr. Journey.

"You... already... disarmed me!" she gasped, as Ms. Shirtliffe knelt next to her and put a hand on her back.

"Yes, but I wanted to make sure you got the point," the teacher said, no longer smiling. "Your ability is impressive – *for your age*. You're starting to let it go to your head. This isn't a real test, Quick. A real test is when someone is actually trying to kill you and you survive."

Alexandra looked up at her, startled.

"You're not good enough to take me on," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "Not even close. Someday... maybe."

"And you wanted to make sure I know you can beat a sixth grader?" Alexandra muttered, as she got to her feet.

"No, Quick, and watch that smart mouth. I wanted to make sure you know that you still have a lot to learn. Have you thought about the JROC?"

Alexandra picked up her wand.

"You know," she said, "I think I've been tested enough this year. I passed – and no thanks to anything I learned in class."

She felt the teacher's hard stare as she left the room.

The following week, they got their scores. Alexandra opened hers without the nervousness of last time. She didn't even try to stop David from looking over her shoulder as she read it.

Sixth Grade Level Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge

Assessee: Alexandra Octavia Quick

Academic Assessment

Section One: Magical Theory	A	
Section Two: Alchemy and Herbology	A	
Section Three: Arithmancy and Geomancy	A	
Section Four: Wizard History		U

Practical Assessment

Transfigurations	E
Charms	E
Alchemy	A
Basic Magical Defense	S

“Wow!” David exclaimed. “Ms. Shirtliffe sure likes you!”

“I’m not sure about that,” Alexandra muttered.

“Hey! Your practical scores are better than mine!” he realized with a frown.

She smirked. “So?”

“So your grades stink!”

“They do not!”

“If you keep getting a 'U' in Wizard History they'll put you back in Remedial class.”

She snorted, but she was secretly pleased, overall.



For commencement, all the non-graduating classes, grades 6-11, would only have to sit in the audience in their formal robes. Under the watchful eye of the Governor-General, the graduating seniors would have to march across the stage to receive their Magical Diplomas, following a number of speeches by the Dean, the valedictorian, and the Governor-General himself. Alexandra was not looking forward to it, but she knew it was worse for the seniors.

The day before commencement, she was summoned to the Dean's office by a Hall Pass, immediately following P.M.E. class. She was walking back to her room with Anna when the Pass caught up to her.

“I didn't do anything!” she said to Anna.

“I believe you,” Anna replied.

“If I'd done something, she would have put my name on the bulletin board!”

“I believe you.”

Alexandra wasn't sure Anna believed her, but she hurried off to the administrative wing.

“Hello Miss Marmsley. How are you today?” she said with extraordinary politeness to the school secretary.

This time there was no doubt: Miss Marmsley rolled her eyes. “Fine, Miss Quick. The Dean will see you in a moment.”

Alexandra sat on the bench outside the Dean's office and waited. Galen padded by.

“Were you really trying to save me, in the attic?” she asked the cat.

The cat gave her an incredulous look, as if to ask, “Are you actually expecting me, a cat, to answer that?” and then meowed.

The Dean's office door opened, and Galen strode in. “Come in Miss Quick,” called the Dean.

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Alexandra walked in, saw that no one else was in the Dean's office besides Galen, and took her accustomed place in the center of the rug. Ms. Grimm almost seemed to be waiting for Alexandra to say something, and then smiled slightly when she didn't. She gestured with her wand, and her office door closed.

"The Governor-General will be here tomorrow," she said.

"I know," said Alexandra. "Ma'am."

"He wants to talk to you."

Alexandra knew this shouldn't have surprised her, but it did.

"I can't tell him anything about my father," she said. "I don't know anything more than you do. Actually, I'm pretty sure I know *less* than you do," she added, giving the Dean a narrow look.

The Dean gave her a narrow look back. "I'm aware of that, Miss Quick. As is he." She gestured at a chair. "Please sit down."

Alexandra sat, and waited. The Dean seemed to be thinking, and she thought for several moments before she took a deep breath and looked at Alexandra directly.

"The Governor-General," she said, "is not a man to be trifled with. He is very, very important. And very, very powerful."

"Why would I trifle with him?" Alexandra asked, a little sourly.

Ms. Grimm scratched Galen under the chin. The cat purred while watching Alexandra through slitted eyes.

"I think you might be tempted to ask him... inadvisable questions. You might be tempted to reply to his questions in a sharp, dare I say, impertinent manner."

"Who, me?" Alexandra drawled.

"Yes. Like that." Ms. Grimm didn't look amused. She leaned forward.

"Alexandra," she said quietly, and there was a note of earnestness in her voice Alexandra couldn't recall ever hearing from the Dean before. "If you never trust anything I say again, if you never believe anything I tell you, believe this: *do not* make Governor-General Hucksteen your enemy! Do not sass him. Do not be sarcastic, impertinent, impatient, indignant, or disrespectful." Her gray eyes were fixed intently on Alexandra's. "In fact, the very best thing you could do is not speak at all unless spoken to. And of course, speak only the truth then."

Alexandra looked back at her. "How could I make an enemy of the Governor-General of the Confederation?" she asked in disbelief. "What is he going to do, send me to prison if I'm not polite enough?"

"No," Grimm said slowly. "He will smile ever so politely and send you on your way."

Alexandra waited.

"Governor-General Hucksteen," said Ms. Grimm, "holds *grudges*. Even against twelve-year-old girls. Any disrespect you show him *will* be remembered. But more importantly, you are the daughter of Abraham Thorn. He wants to know not only if your father has had any contact with you, but if you show any signs of being at all like your father. Because if you do, Alexandra, then you can rest assured that the modest level of involvement the Confederation has had in your life since the day you were born will increase dramatically. If you march into his presence with a fire in your eyes and demands and accusations on your lips, he will mark you as someone to watch very, very closely, and believe me, Alexandra, you *do not want that!* Because he will make his presence felt – not just by you, but by your friends and your family."

Galen seemed to be watching her as intently as Ms. Grimm now, and Alexandra held her tongue and kept listening.

“The best thing you could do,” Ms. Grimm said, “if you care about your friends and family, is to be as unthreatening and uninteresting as possible. He will be far less likely to take a *special* interest in you if you appear... meek, perhaps even a little... dull.”

“I thought you said I should be truthful.”

Ms. Grimm narrowed her eyes.

“He had my mother Obliviated, didn't he?” Alexandra asked quietly.

“I doubt he gave the order personally, but he was aware of it,” Grimm nodded. She leaned forward again. “And that is why I am telling you to tread very, very carefully, Miss Quick. Because he can have far worse things done.”

Alexandra thought about that, staring at her feet for a while, and then she looked back at the Dean.

“Are you afraid of him?” she asked.

Ms. Grimm's fingers moved slowly between Galen's ears. The cat's eyes were almost completely closed, but its eyes were still fixed on Alexandra.

“Yes,” said the Dean. “And you should be too.”



Alexandra thought about that long after she left the Dean's office. She told Anna a lie that night – she told her that the Dean just wanted to lecture her about behaving while the Governor-General was at the academy. She felt guilty about it, but it was a lie to *protect* Anna, and it was an easily believable one.

The next day, everyone rose early to dress in their formal robes for the commencement ceremony. It was every bit as dull as Alexandra feared. Dean Grimm spoke first, congratulating all the students for completing their year at Charmbridge, and then congratulating the graduating seniors who would be going out into the wizarding world. Then she said a lot of nice things about the Governor-General, who was sitting with the Territorial Governor amidst a group of wizards in black in the front row. There were trolls walking the hallways now and guarding the entrances to the amphitheater, making everyone nervous.

Next the Vice Dean spoke, saying a lot of nice things about the graduating seniors. Those who had done notable things were recognized: one girl had been awarded an Osthane Scholarship to study alchemy in Alexandria, and one of the Quodpot players had been picked up by the Sheboygan Slammers. This generated thunderous applause, much more so than the girl who had been described as one of the most brilliant alchemists the school had ever seen. Then the Vice Dean said nice things about the Governor-General, and sat down to let the valedictorian give his speech. Alexandra didn't even remember the speech, except that the valedictorian kept thanking the Governor-General for coming.

The Governor-General looked just like the photographs Alexandra had seen. He was a big man with a huge belly and a long white beard. He wore a white shirt and dark vest underneath his long red and black cloak. He beamed jovially at the assembled students, and opened his speech by saying nice things about Dean Grimm and Charmbridge Academy. Then he made a joke about Quodpot that Alexandra didn't get, and then he spoke portentously for almost half an hour about the value of a quality American education and all the ways that Charmbridge students could help wizarding society.

Alexandra would have fallen asleep, but she was watching his eyes. They were cold and hard, even when he smiled. And the entire time he spoke, the wizards in black who had accompanied him were watching the students, with their hands on their wands.

Eventually the seniors were permitted to cross the stage and receive their Magical Diplomas. They got to shake hands with the Dean and with the Governor-General. Journalists were there, taking pictures. Alexandra knew the seniors would go outside for a flying hat ceremony, but she was just waiting for the rest of the students to be dismissed.

“Man, politicians talk a lot,” David yawned, as they filed out of the auditorium. Anna eyed the troll at the door nervously.

And that was it for the commencement ceremony.

Just before dinner, another Hall Pass came for Alexandra. She shrugged when her friends gave her quizzical looks, and headed for the Dean's office.

Wizards in black were waiting at the intersection outside the administrative wing. There was a pair of trolls on either side of the entrance to the offices. They all scrutinized Alexandra as she approached, and one of the wizards said, “One moment, young lady.” She stopped, and he held out his wand and muttered some incantations. Nothing happened, and he nodded and waved her on.

Miss Marmsley looked uneasy. She was watching the trolls and barely glanced at Alexandra. “Up to the second floor, Miss Quick,” she said. “They're waiting for you.”

The second floor? she thought. She passed the Dean's office door, and walked up the stairs to the second floor. She couldn't help glancing in the direction of the Registrar's Office, but it was closed. In the other direction, there was a wizard in a black cloak outside another door. He knocked on the door before Alexandra reached it.

“Go on in,” he said gruffly, as the door opened.

Alexandra paused outside the door. She took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and then, bowing her head slightly, she walked into the room.

It looked like it was a teacher's lounge. There was a long wooden table, some nice chairs arranged around it, and a sofa and end table.

Dean Grimm was sitting at the table, still wearing her formal robes from the commencement ceremony. Seated in one of the chairs opposite her, as if he were just another visitor, was Governor-General Hucksteen. His heavy red and black robe was hanging on a rack by the door. His belly strained at the buttons of his vest; his white beard covered his chest. He smiled in a kindly fashion as Alexandra entered, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

Sitting next to the Governor-General was a bald wizard wearing a black cloak, and a red shirt underneath that seemed to be some sort of uniform, but Alexandra couldn't make out any details about it. This man wasn't even trying to appear friendly; his expression was sinister, his gaze frankly scrutinizing. It was warm in the lounge, but the other man was still wearing black leather gloves.

Alexandra took in as much as she could with one quick glance around, and then she stood in front of them and fixed her gaze at a point on the table.

“You asked to see me, Dean Grimm,” she said quietly.

“Yes, Miss Quick. Thank you. You recognize Governor-General Hucksteen, of course.” She nodded at the Governor-General.

Alexandra nodded to him also. “Yes sir. Pleased to meet you, sir,” she said.

“I'm very pleased to meet you also, Alexandra,” said the Governor-General. His voice sounded warm and friendly. “Do you prefer Alexandra or Alex?”

She kept her fists from clenching, with an effort. “Alexandra, sir.”

He chuckled. “Very good. Alexandra, then. This is my special assistant and good friend, Mr. Raspire.”

“Alexandra,” said Raspire with a slight nod. His voice was quiet and smooth, and she could feel his eyes, never leaving her. She nodded back at him.

“I know it's been a long day for you, Alexandra,” said the Governor-General, “and probably not very interesting, listening to a lot of grown-ups talk, eh?” he chuckled.

Alexandra looked at a spot on his chin, and nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, this won't take long, and then we'll let you run along to dinner.” He smiled, and looked at Ms. Grimm. “Lilith, would you mind terribly if we had a word with Alexandra in private?”

“Not at all, Governor.” She smiled. If she were afraid of Hucksteen, she didn't show it. She barely glanced at Alexandra before leaving the room. The wizard outside closed the door behind her.

There were no portraits in this room, Alexandra realized. That was why they weren't meeting in the Dean's office.

Hucksteen and Raspire now watched Alexandra a moment, and she sensed they were waiting to see how she would react, so she shuffled a little and looked from one to the other – still not quite meeting their eyes.

“Well, Alexandra, can you guess why I wanted to talk to you?” Hucksteen said at last, still sounding friendly.

“About my father,” she replied.

He nodded approvingly. “That's right. I understand you had a rather difficult year. It would have been difficult for any young witch who'd grown up among Muggles and was just beginning her wizarding education, but of course, you're not just any witch, are you?”

She hesitated, then said, “I guess not, sir.”

“The... unfortunate events surrounding Mr. Journey's efforts to kill you... horrible, just horrible! Well, that's why I've had you under a special protective watch since we first became aware of you. You see, your father had quite a few 'friends' like Benedict Journey, very dangerous men and women. We want to do everything we can to keep you safe. That's our top priority, Alexandra.”

She nodded. She felt her fingers clenching, and unclenched them. “Thank you, sir.”

“Now, Alexandra,” he leaned forward, clasping his hands on the table. “Ms. Grimm tells me you're quite an inquisitive child. Maybe even prone to bending a few rules now and then?” He chuckled and winked at her.

“I try not to, sir,” she replied. She wondered just how much Ms. Grimm had told him, but this answer only made him chuckle a little more.

“And understandably, you've been trying to find out about your father! I truly regret that we couldn't simply tell you everything we knew about him from the beginning, but we had your well-being in mind. I wouldn't blame you for being upset, but it was for your own good. I hope you can understand that, Alexandra.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“Good, good,” he said, nodding. “Now, you've probably heard a lot of rumors, maybe even read some things, about Abraham Thorn.” He watched her carefully. “Do you know why we're so concerned about your father and his friends?”

Alexandra licked her lips. “He was... he broke the law.”

The Governor-General paused, then nodded again. “Yes. Yes, he did. And you see, he's still out there, and we're afraid he's still planning to break the law, and I know this may be difficult to understand, Alexandra, but we need to stop him. The best thing of all, of course, would be if we knew where he was and could take him into custody peacefully.”

She nodded again.

“Have you ever spoken to your father?” he asked, his voice suddenly shifting. “I know you've been raised by your mother and your stepfather, but perhaps your father might have contacted you in some fashion... perhaps a card on your birthdays? Perhaps he came to see you, just once?”

She shook her head. “No, sir. I told Ms. Grimm that. I didn't even know who my father was until a couple of weeks ago.”

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Hucksteen nodded. Raspire spoke up for the first time. "Are you absolutely certain you've never had any contact at all with your father, Alexandra?" His voice was silky, insinuating; he sounded perfectly polite and friendly, yet something in his tone seemed to cast doubt, to pry at her conscience and suggest she was lying. "Perhaps you didn't even realize it was your father at the time. A man you didn't recognize who occasionally appeared near your school, watching you? Gifts sent anonymously? A *telephone call*, anything of that nature?" He was almost whispering now, urging Alexandra to confess, to admit that perhaps she was hiding something, or maybe, now that he mentioned it, there was just *one little thing* she had neglected to mention...

She shook her head and said firmly, "No, sir. My father's never contacted me. Ever."

Raspire and Hucksteen were both silent for a moment. Then the Governor-General said, "Well, we believe you, Alexandra. But – and this is very important – it is possible he *might* contact you in the future. Any father would want to talk to his own daughter. It's only natural." He smiled. "If he should contact you – with a visit, or an owl, or even – what do you call that device, Richard?"

"A telephone," murmured Mr. Raspire.

"Yes, a telephone. If you should ever hear from your father –" Here the Governor-General slid a card across the table to Alexandra. "I want you to promise that you will use this card to contact my office immediately. Will you do that, Alexandra?"

Slowly, she reached for the card and picked it up. It was a plain piece of stiff white cardboard. Printed on it was the Seal of the Confederation, the Governor-General's seal to the right of that, and below the seals, "The Governor-General's Office of Special Inquisitions."

"That's a very special card, Alexandra," said Hucksteen. "I don't just hand them out to anyone, especially not children. But you're a very important person, because you could help bring peace to the entire wizarding world."

Alexandra took several long, deep breaths, as if studying the card, while she was actually concentrating so she could hold it easily between her fingers. She kept her face slack, her hands relaxed. It was very difficult.

"All you have to do is press your thumb to either seal," said Raspire. "You'll be contacted *immediately*."

She looked at the card while remaining silent as long as she dared, and then she asked, "What will you do with him if you catch him?"

Both men were silent for a second, and then Hucksteen said, "Well, he's committed some rather serious crimes, Alexandra. I won't lie to you, because I know you're a mature young lady and you deserve to hear the truth. He'll be tried by a wizard court, and then I expect he'll be sentenced. Our laws are strict but fair. But I can assure you, you'll be allowed to see him, while he's in prison. And he has a lot of information we're interested in, and if he were willing to show remorse for his crimes and help us stop other Dark wizards, it's very possible he might receive a much more lenient sentence. You might even be able to help make that happen, Alexandra. I imagine he'd want very much to be able to have as much time as possible with his daughter." Hucksteen smiled.

"So, Alexandra," said Raspire's deceptively soothing voice. "If your father should contact you, you will let us know, won't you? I know you want to help us... you'll want to do the right thing."

Slowly, she nodded. "Yes, sir," she said. "I will."

"That's excellent, Alexandra," said the Governor-General. "I'm very pleased to hear that. And you know, if you should ever want to speak to me, I want you to feel free to contact my office. I know what a difficult life you've had up until this point, and your father hasn't made it easier for you. I want to help you in any way I can. That's a promise, from Governor-General Hucksteen." He held out one large,

meaty hand. Alexandra hesitated, and then took it, with the hand not holding the card. His hand enveloped hers warmly.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“Is there *anything* else you'd like to tell us?” Raspire inquired lightly.

She paused, then shook her head. “No, sir.”

The two men looked at each other, and then back at her, and nodded. “Well, thank you very much for this conversation, Alexandra,” said the Governor-General. “I look forward to meeting you again some time. I wish you the very best of luck here at Charmbridge Academy.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

She didn't see Dean Grimm on her way out, only more of the black-robed security wizards and the glowering security trolls. She walked calmly all the way to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, with her head bowed and her eyes fixed on the floor in front of her.

Only when she entered her room did she throw off her robes and stand there, trembling in fury.

“*Liar! Liar! Liar! Liars! All of you!*” she screamed in her head, but she didn't make a sound. Charlie was unnaturally silent as well, watching her.

It took her a long time to calm down. She didn't go to dinner. Anna returned from the cafeteria half an hour later, to find Alexandra sitting at her desk, with a pile of ashes scattered in front of her.

“What's that?” she asked, pointing at the ashes. “How come you weren't at dinner?”

“I wasn't hungry,” Alexandra said. She swept up the ashes with a wave of her wand, sending them streaming into their waste basket. “That was just something I won't be needing.”

Chapter 29 — The Raven

Although she turned up her nose and expressed disinterest when asked about the Mors Mortis Society, Alexandra was secretly curious about them. She was sure they were exactly the sort of people Ms. Grimm wouldn't want her to associate herself with, and who would attract the special interest of Governor-General Hucksteen, should her involvement with them be brought to his attention.

It wasn't fear of the Dean or the Governor-General that made her decide not to show up at the basement juncture specified on her invitation. It was the worried looks Anna and the Pritchards still gave her. They denied that they had any doubts about her, but Alexandra feared what they would think if she did hang out with other Dark Arts enthusiasts.

It was new for Alexandra, worrying about what her friends thought, and actually deciding not to do something because of their opinions. She didn't like it. It made her annoyed and a little resentful. She was in a bad mood as everyone began leaving for the summer.

Anna, David, Constance, and Forbearance found her outside, reading a book about demons and other Dark creatures. The two Ozarker girls sat down next to her uninvited, spreading their skirts carefully.

"It's a fine day for a picnic," said Forbearance cheerfully.

"Since we won't see each other none 'til the end of summer," said Constance.

Alexandra lowered her book. "You're leaving this evening?" she asked.

The twins nodded. "The Charmbridge bus leaves just a'fore sundown."

"I can't wait to see the Ozarks again," Constance sighed.

"And our holler, and Ma and Pa," said Forbearance.

"And all our kin." Constance smiled, wiping at a tear.

Alexandra nodded.

"Well," said Constance, and she produced her wand. "Let's eat!" She conjured loaves of bread and a basket of fruit, and a fresh-baked pie, while Forbearance conjured a pitcher and then filled it with ice-cold tea, pouring from the end of her wand. Anna and David sat down as well, and Anna gently pried the book from Alexandra's fingers and tossed it aside. Alexandra scowled at her.

"You know, Alex, you can be a real jerk," said David.

"*Tsk!*" Constance said. She offered Alexandra a slice of pie.

"What –?" Alexandra was confused. She took the pie.

"You're in one of your *moods* again," said Anna.

"I reckon it's 'cause she's gonna miss us terrible," said Constance.

Forbearance nodded. "So you sit by yourself all sulky-like, not even fit company for ravens!"

"Stead of socializin' with your friends proper!"

Alexandra sighed. "I'm not sulking!"

"Yes you are." Anna pursed her lips. "Because you think we're whispering about you and worrying you're going to become a Dark sorceress."

Alexandra blushed. "I am not!"

"Good, then let's have no more of such nonsense!" said Forbearance.

Alexandra looked around at all her friends. "Aren't – aren't any of you worried at all?" she asked.

"About who I am? About my father? And, well, you know I'm not really going to..."

"Behave?" suggested Constance.

"Study?" said Anna.

"Become less hard-headed?" snorted David.

Alexandra glowered at them, but then started laughing when she couldn't hold the expression.

"Troublesome is as Troublesome does," said Forbearance.

"Knock it off!" Alexandra said, but she still couldn't stay annoyed for long. The five of them sat out on the lawn eating the picnic the Pritchards had prepared, and talked about what they would do over the summer, and the classes they would take next year, and which of their teachers had been the most horrible. It was a beautiful summer day, and as Alexandra looked off at the green woods surrounding them, she didn't see a single crow.



"We'll write," promised the Pritchards. "Our owls'll find you, don't you fret none."

Constance and Forbearance hugged Alexandra and Anna, on the steps of Charmbridge, and then they switched places. David stood there with his hands in his pockets, until Constance held her hand out. He shook her hand, and then Forbearance's.

"You'll write too, won't you, David?" asked Forbearance.

"Yeah, 'course," he replied.

They smiled, and waved, and then walked off through the woods with Mrs. Speaks and the other students leaving that evening.

The next day, Alexandra was on the early-morning bus. Anna joined her, with Darla and Angelique. David was left behind, not to be taken to Detroit until that afternoon.

"Dunno why they changed the schedule," he grumbled, standing on the steps once again to say good-bye to his friends.

"Are you going to miss us, David?" Angelique cooed, while Darla batted her lashes.

"I think he *liked* being surrounded by girls!" Darla giggled.

"Don't flatter yourselves!" he scoffed, a flush spreading under his dark skin.

He turned even darker when Angelique gave him a kiss on the cheek. "You're such a Muggle!" she giggled.

"You little hussy!" screeched her jarvey.

"Shut up, Honey," David said.

Anna hugged David next, and then he and Alexandra looked at each other for a moment, before she gave him an awkward hug. Honey continued screaming increasingly offensive names at them, until Angelique finally succeeding in casting a Silencing Charm on the jarvey's cage.

"Take care, guys," David said, and waved to them as the girls followed Mrs. Speaks into the woods.

The valley looked remarkably like it had when Alexandra first walked across the Invisible Bridge, but any trepidation she had felt on her subsequent crossings was gone now. She noticed some of the other students watching her a little uneasily and separating themselves from her on the bridge.

"Some kids are always going to be stupid," Anna said quietly, walking alongside her.

"We know you don't deserve your reputation, Alexandra!" said Darla, coming up from behind them.

"Yes, you're not to blame for your name!" said Angelique.

They were being obsequious and annoying, yet they were accompanying her on the bridge. Alexandra couldn't help smiling.

"My name," she said, "is Alexandra *Quick*."

The bus took them to Chicago, where the other girls once again got off at the Wizardrail station.

"Have a good summer, Alexandra and Anna," said Darla and Angelique, waving to them.

Anna turned to Alexandra, and looked as if she were on the verge of tears.

"Don't," Alexandra said softly, with an embarrassed smile. She put her arms around her friend, and Anna hugged her back tightly.

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"You really are my best friend, Alex," Anna whispered.

"I know," Alexandra replied. "You, too."

"Time to get back on the bus, Miss Quick," said Mrs. Speaks. Alexandra nodded and pulled away.

"We'll write," she said to Anna. "Or you could, you know, call on the phone."

"My father doesn't allow Muggle devices in our house," Anna said.

"Well then, I hope Jingwei can find my house."

"She will." Anna smiled. "Bye Alex. Have a good summer."

Alexandra watched the other girl turn and walk up the steps to the Wizardrail station, her red cloak flapping around her. Then she got back on the bus, and sat alone except for Charlie, until they arrived in Larkin Mills.



207 Sweetmaple Avenue was now a bare concrete block. Archie drove her past it once, to see what was left of their house. It would be rebuilt eventually, he said, but they probably wouldn't be living there. Her mother and stepfather were still having trouble with the insurance company, which had not completed its arson investigation yet. In the meantime, they had moved into a two-bedroom apartment closer to the center of town. Alexandra didn't like it – it was closer to stores and the hospital where her mother worked, but it didn't feel like home. And the sounds of traffic, of neighbors going up and down the stairs, of televisions all around them, felt unnatural to her. She was there for almost a week when she finally realized why it bothered her. This was the sound of the Muggle world.

"Well, Charlie," she said to her raven, in her newly-furnished room, "just because I'm a witch doesn't mean I don't belong here." She had an entire summer ahead of her, and if she couldn't find something to do, she was bound to get into trouble. Charlie seemed to agree; the raven had had no trouble settling in, and Alexandra once again usually left her bedroom window open so Charlie could come and go at will. She resolved to go out and explore downtown Larkin Mills the next day.

Late that night, she was awoken by a rapping sound.

"Charlie, what's your problem?" she mumbled, as she sat up and rubbed her eyes. "I left the window open for you." She looked at the window, and then bolted to her feet.

The raven perched on her windowsill was not Charlie.

It was enormous, with iridescent black feathers and a lordly mien. It regarded Alexandra gravely, and then stepped into her room and sat upon her desk.

"Who sent you?" she asked. "What do you want?" She was whispering, less because she felt threatened than because her parents were asleep in the next room.

"Alexandra," croaked the raven. And while she gaped in astonishment, it held out one leg. Its powerful talons looked nearly equal to those of David's falcon, but it was the roll of paper wrapped around its leg that caught her attention.

"I thought ravens didn't deliver messages," she said.

"Alexandra," it repeated, more insistently. It flexed its talons.

Very carefully, she reached out and untied the string holding the paper to its leg, and unrolled the paper. The raven set its foot back down, and continued watching her as she flicked on her desk lamp to look at what it had delivered her.

It was a letter, written in ink with broad, powerful strokes.

My Dearest Alexandra,

I know you will be astonished to receive this letter from me, but I know also

that you have been expecting it. Believe me, I wish I could deliver this message in person. I wish that I had not been absent from your life until now. There is not a day in the last twelve years that I haven't thought of you, my darling daughter.

I'm sure you have many questions. You deserve answers, and so much more. The manner in which you learned about your father is not the way I would have chosen. What happened this year at Charmbridge was beyond anything I might have anticipated. Benedict was a good friend, once, and I would never have believed him capable of such betrayal. You can be sure, Alexandra, that I have loyal friends who would never, ever harm you, and that they, and I, are watching over you now. Just as the Governor-General and his minions are, but they care nothing about you. They want only to get at me, and that is why I cannot come to you in person. I desire nothing more than to hold you in my arms, my dear child, as I did when you were a baby, but circumstances will not allow it, not yet.

You may be angry at me, Alexandra, and I don't blame you. I ask only that you reserve your judgment until I've had an opportunity to face you and answer whatever questions you may put to me. I promise, that day will come.

Alexandra, I have always been watching over you. I know that you survived your trials this year with courage and wit and skill, as befits a daughter of mine, and I am very proud.

I hope you will give some reply, even if it is angry and accusing. Just a brief note, or a word, for I so long to hear from you.

Your loving father,

Abraham Everard Thorn

Alexandra set down the letter, and looked at the raven, which was still watching her. She listened to the sounds of late-night traffic carried into her room through the open window, and stared at this intrusion of the wizarding world into her Muggle existence.

"You can tell my father," she said very calmly, "that he obviously knows where to find me."

The raven tilted its head, and squawked.

"That's all I've got to tell him," she said. And then shouted, "Go!"

"Alexandra," said the raven, and it took off through the window, its wings beating against the air. She heard it flapping off into the night, until the sound was drowned out by cars and other noise.

"Alex, I have to get up at 4 a.m., for God's sake!" her stepfather shouted through the wall. "Keep that bird quiet or else!"

Charlie came through the window and landed on Alexandra's desk. She held out her hand, and the raven hopped onto her wrist.

"Okay, Archie," she replied. She leaned over, and blew affectionately on the top of Charlie's head. "Ssh," she whispered. She extended her arm to place Charlie in the cage hanging by her bed, and then,

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very carefully, she closed her window.

Charlie watched as she very carefully tore her father's letter to pieces, then picked the pieces apart into tiny shreds, before sweeping them all into her waste basket. Then she climbed into bed, pulled the sheets up around her head, and closed her eyes. Soon she was fast asleep.

End Year One

Author's Notes

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