



A fan fiction novel by [Inverarity](#)
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Book Three of the *Alexandra Quick* series

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Chapter 1 — The WODAMND Act



San Francisco

Residents of the City by the Bay loved watching tourists shiver in their shorts and t-shirts. Visitors often forgot that this was not Southern California; in San Francisco, the ocean was just blocks away, and it was cold. Sea breezes and fog could make for chilly mornings even in the summer.

Usually the fog burned off quickly at this time of year, but today it lingered almost until noon, lying over San Francisco's neighborhoods and making everything damp and gray. It didn't slow the city down a bit, though, and in Chinatown, the streets were as crowded as always. The mist gave an even more picturesque quality to the chinoiserie trappings of the touristy areas, and shrouded the markets and crowded tenements that were more familiar to the locals.

To one lone individual exiting the Chinatown branch of the San Francisco Public Library, it offered the illusion of invisibility. The small figure pulled up the hood of her red cloak and walked down Powell Street, with the fog parting before her as if by magic.

Anna Chu wasn't invisible, but at least with the streets still foggy, this late in the morning, no one was staring at her, and she didn't feel quite so out of place.

In fact, she rarely attracted much notice even on bright, sunny mornings. San Francisco, and Chinatown in particular, was host to a great many people dressed in varied and unusual outfits, and one person in old-fashioned robes and a red hooded cloak was barely noteworthy. But Anna always *felt* as if she were being stared at – particularly by other girls.

She turned a corner, and passed by a group of giggling teenagers wearing high-heeled boots, short skirts, sparkly blouses, and hair and makeup that matched the colors of their cell phones. They might be

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cold, too, in those skirts, but Muggle girls apparently valued fashion far more than comfort. Perhaps that was why they looked at Anna as if she were a refugee from some far-off medieval kingdom, as she navigated her way past the open-air markets and packed restaurants along Stockton Street.

This had always been the case. In Anna's infrequent contacts with Muggle girls, she was never able to fit in. She didn't know who the most popular entertainers were, she didn't understand their slang, she didn't care about shopping, she didn't know what made some clothes 'hot topics' and others not, and most damning of all, she did not have a cell phone. In her limited understanding of Muggle teen culture, this apparently marked her as an uncivilized peasant of the lowest order.

The four girls, simultaneously chattering away on their phones and to each other, pointed and lowered their voices to carrying whispers as the strange hooded girl walked past. They were judging her appearance, Anna knew – her robes, her shoes, her hair... everything about her. The sudden peals of laughter behind her back indicated that they were guessing what boat she'd just stumbled off of. They were speaking Cantonese, but Anna could still pick up some of the words.

You wouldn't laugh if I pulled out my wand and covered you with jellyfish, she thought.

That was a rash, irresponsible thought, though, and she quickly banished it. No, the Muggle girls wouldn't laugh – they'd be terrified. And that was the problem. As tempting as it might be to show off her special talent, to demonstrate to those silly girls what she could do that they couldn't, Anna knew that magic would never make them her friends. It would only scare them.

Plus, it would get her in big trouble. The Trace Office in California was exceptionally vigilant, and her use of underage magic would be detected and provoke an immediate response.

No, that was the sort of thing Alexandra might do – not Anna.

Anna smiled wistfully. She missed Alexandra. She'd never admit it, but she *liked* Alexandra's hot-headedness and stubbornness. Not that she liked seeing her friend get in trouble afterwards, but she admired Alexandra's bravery, and wished she could be as fearless and heedless of consequences. Anna lived in fear of punishment, and could never muster the courage to stand up for herself the way Alexandra did.

So Alexandra stood up for Anna instead. She'd done it since they began attending Charmbridge Academy, two years ago. Anna had gone to the wizarding school in Central Territory, halfway across the country, knowing no one and having precious little experience making new friends, and found herself rooming with a girl who had grown up among Muggles and knew nothing about the wizarding world. But Alexandra Quick soon proved that she was adaptable, wickedly talented, and an endless source of trouble. To be fair, not all of the trouble that came to her was her own doing, but she seemed fated to be at the center of every calamity, and frequently wound up dragging her friends into it as well.

Anna Chu, the timid, studious, rules-abiding girl who came to Charmbridge hoping only to make good grades, had gotten into more trouble and danger in the past two years than she could ever have imagined. It was all because of Alexandra – and to Anna, it had all been worth it. Alexandra was her best friend, and Anna thought going to Charmbridge was the best thing that had ever happened to her.

Her father, however, did not. He had almost decided not to send Anna back to Charmbridge for a second year, after what had happened at the end of sixth grade. Anna had begged and pleaded – one of the rare times she actually argued with her father – and her mother, for once, had supported her. Eventually, Mr. Chu had relented.

Alexandra's notoriety had only increased the following year, though. She was the daughter of a Dark wizard named Abraham Thorn, and a disastrous and fatal series of events had ended, in June, with the Thorn Circle launching a deadly attack against the Confederation's Wizardrail network. Since then, the entire Confederation had been in an uproar, fearing the rise of the Dark Convention.

None of this was Alexandra's fault, as Anna repeatedly told her father. Alexandra herself had suffered as much as anyone. Her brother – whom she had only met last year – had died. Alexandra had nothing to do with the Thorn Circle's plans, and she was being persecuted just because of who her father was.

But Mr. Chu didn't want his daughter rooming with the daughter of the most wanted warlock in America. Once again, he was threatening to pull her out of school; over Anna's tearful objections, he had sent a letter to Dean Grimm, demanding that Anna be assigned another roommate, or else she would not be returning to Charmbridge Academy.

They hadn't received an owl back yet. Anna was hoping Dean Grimm would be too busy to respond. With Aurors and Special Inquisitors trying to boss her around, an irate parent wasn't going to intimidate the Dean.

"I don't want another roommate!" she had written to Alexandra. *"I don't want to be stuck with Angelique and her jarvey, or snotty Lydia Ragland!"*

She didn't want anyone but Alexandra to be her roommate.

Alexandra had taken the news of Anna's father's attitude towards her calmly and without indignation. In fact, her reply had been too calm, too reassuring. It was completely unlike Alexandra not to make at least one smart crack, but she had merely told Anna not to worry, that they'd still be in classes together and hang out together, and they would still be friends, no matter what.

All of Alexandra's letters and emails had been like that – calm, reassuring, bland. And to Anna's repeated queries about how Alexandra's summer was going, how she was feeling – Anna didn't quite dare ask directly: *"Are you okay, since your brother died and everything?"* – Alexandra merely replied that she was fine, her summer was boring, and that she was looking forward to returning to Charmbridge Academy in September.

She is not okay, Anna thought. She and David Washington and Constance and Forbearance Pritchard all agreed. All summer, the four of them had been communicating with each other by owl or email, as well as with Alexandra, and they all knew their friend was hiding how she really felt – but they didn't know what to do about it.

Anna sighed as she turned into one of Chinatown's many narrow alleys, and walked between two older buildings with basement windows cracked open at ground level on either side of her. Steam and cooking smells joined the fog in the alley, obscuring her enough that Anna didn't need to look around, as she usually did, before she raised her wand and traced a Chinese ideogram against the stone wall where the alley seemed to dead-end.

The wall made a sliding, grinding sound as the stones came loose, detaching from one another but still floating magically in place without falling to the ground in a jumble. She stepped through the wall and felt it part around her as if it were a curtain of beads, and then she was on the other side, at the bottom of another incline.

She was immediately confronted by a pair of large, angry swans, honking, flapping their wings, and jabbing their beaks at her. Anna swallowed and stood her ground, waiting for them to let her pass.

She didn't like the guard swans – they were mean.

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They didn't actually attack, unless you didn't belong here – or you ran. When Anna was little, the guard swans had terrified her even when she was accompanied by her parents, and the first few times she was allowed to pass through the gate by herself, the swans had frightened her into flight even though she knew she mustn't run. The evil birds had chased her all the way up the hill to her house, pecking her, beating her with their powerful wings, and pulling strands of her hair out of her head. She had arrived at home panicked and in tears. Her mother held her and comforted her, but her father had told her sternly not to run next time.

Anna no longer ran from the guard swans, but they still scared her, and she was sure they knew it.

After their ritual attempt to intimidate her, the swans folded their wings and stepped back, regarding her with beady black eyes. She could almost hear them thinking: *Go ahead... run!*

Instead, she held her head up and walked between them, up the paved stone path. After another dozen paces, without any angry honking in her ear or hard beaks rapping the back of her head, she relaxed slightly.

The path she was on ascended a small hill that rivaled any in San Francisco for its steepness, but there were no cars here, and no street signs, and neither the paths nor the hill itself showed up on any map. Anna climbed her way past gardens full of petrified gnomes, and several traditional Chinese-style houses with golden fireproof shingles.

A large red salamander lay unmoving, half-in and half-out of the Zhengs' pond, as the water boiled and steamed around it. It glowed a little as Anna walked by, radiating more heat as a warning. She kept walking. The Cais' singing well was filling the air with a melody, after its long silence, which meant that Sanyun Cai must have returned home from his trip abroad. A swarm of giant swallowtail butterflies abruptly surrounded Anna, before drifting away towards Old Lady Wu's garden.

'Little Wuyi,' as its residents called their secluded enclave in the middle of Chinatown, was picturesque and magical. Every wizard living here took great pains to make it beautiful.

For Anna, growing up in this place, it had been a beautiful prison. To her, the magic and wonder of this refuge from the Muggle world outside represented only the loneliness and isolation she had shared with her mother throughout her childhood.

She saw Mutan Lin and her little brother playing on their patio, and gave them only the briefest of nods; Mutan returned an equally minimal acknowledgment. The other girl was her age, but Anna knew that the Lins, like all the other families in Little Wuyi, considered her a 'Mudblood.' Even being accepted to the prestigious Charmbridge Academy, while giving Anna's father reason to boast about

her, had only sparked resentment in her peers.

She couldn't wait to return to Charmbridge, and her friends. She felt guilty that her mother was left alone now for most of the year. That was why she was hurrying home this morning, even though she would have preferred to stay at the library all day.

The public library's computers had opened up a new world for Anna, and she loved the ability to communicate with her Muggle-born friends. She had also become quite fond of the patient librarian who taught her how to use email and the Web – even if the woman remained convinced, despite Anna's perfect English, that she must have just recently arrived from China.

Anna's mother sometimes accompanied her to the library, and Anna always encouraged her to come along, now that she could let them both through the gate, but today, Lisa Yuan had chosen to remain home. Mrs. Yuan was reclusive by nature, and never complained about living here, but she was a Muggle, and so could not leave Little Wuyi, or get back inside, without the help of her daughter or husband or one of the other residents. And while the Chinese wizarding community never complained openly about the Muggle living in their midst, or showed Mrs. Yuan disrespect, Anna knew that was only because of her father's reputation, not because they liked his wife... or his half-blood daughter.

The Yuan-Chu household was at the very top of the hill where Anna's great-great-great-grandfather had built his home a hundred and fifty years ago. He had hidden it from Muggle sight, and the Chinese wizarding community in San Francisco had grown around it. Anna's father was the last of the pureblood Chus, and he had courted the wrath of his dead ancestors, the horror of his living kin back in Fujian, and the astonishment and dismay of his neighbors, when instead of choosing a bride from one of the prominent Alta California Chinese families, or bringing a pureblood wife over from China, he had married a Muggle instead.

Geming Chu was still a formidable, respected community leader, and now he was running for the Wizards' Congress. This meant he spent even more time than usual away from home, leaving his wife home by herself. At times, Anna wondered whether she should have allowed her father to withdraw her from Charmbridge and keep her in San Francisco; at least then her mother wouldn't be alone. She was sure that her father's desire to keep his daughter away from Alexandra Quick was motivated in large part by his political ambitions. Alexandra's father had also been a Congressman once; the associations wouldn't reflect well on Mr. Chu.

Anna loved her father and feared him, in equal measure. So when she opened the door and heard his voice raised in anger, she froze. Her father rarely shouted at her mother, and it was terrible when he did. Had he found out about Anna's trips to the library? She was not, strictly speaking, forbidden to go to Muggle Chinatown, but Mr. Chu certainly didn't want his daughter becoming too enamored of Muggle technology, and he definitely would not have approved of her communications with Alexandra. Anna's heart pounded in her chest, and she gulped in fear as she heard her father swear violently.

Then she heard other voices, and realized that it wasn't her mother he was swearing at. There were other men in the house!

She heard her mother cry out in alarm. Anna gasped, then drew her wand and rushed forward, turning aside before the brick screen that separated the entranceway from the rest of the house. Around the corner was the marble-tiled kitchen; her mother was not there, and the fire spirits were flickering lazily inside the stone kiln where they lounged when not called to service. She passed her own room on the left, and the small family shrine at the center of the house, and continued past the library and the master bedroom.

She found her parents in the wood-floored south-facing bay of their house, where her father usually studied or wrote letters. His desk had been kicked aside, with parchment and pens and the pillows he

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sat on scattered across the floor.

Mr. Chu was on his feet; he and another Asian man were pointing wands at one another. A second stranger, a Caucasian man with thin hair combed over the top of a fat, round head, had grabbed Anna's mother by the upper arm, and was holding his wand at the ready. Mrs. Yuan looked frightened, and was trying to shake the large man's hand off, but his grip was too tight.

Anna started to point her wand at the man holding her mother, and then her father barked, "Hua, *no!*"

Anna realized then that both intruders were wearing the black robes and red vests of Aurors.

The Auror confronting Mr. Chu remained motionless, his wand steadily pointing at the other man; only his eyes drifted in Anna's direction. The second Auror turned his head, and his wand began to move.

"Hua, put your wand away *immediately!*" her father commanded, in his severest tone.

Anna's father only ever addressed her by her Chinese given name in tender moments; he had never used it in such an angry manner as this. She swallowed and almost dropped her wand as she fumbled while tucking it back into her robe. She looked at her father, and her frightened mother, and the two Aurors, and felt fear and helplessness bubbling inside her. She didn't know what was going on or what to do.

"Good girl," said the Auror facing her father. He was much smaller than Mr. Chu, who was nearly six feet in height, but he was clearly the one in charge. He spoke in Mandarin, as Anna's father had. "I don't really want to arrest your daughter also, Mr. Chu. Now lower *your* wand – you don't want your family to get hurt, do you?"

"*Arrest?*" Anna gasped.

"Take your hands off my wife," Mr. Chu said to the Auror restraining Anna's mother. "Mei, Hua, just stay out of this. It will be all right." Slowly, he lowered his wand, with his eyes flickering angrily between the two Aurors.

Anna noticed that the second Auror, though he wasn't Chinese, smirked and obviously understood what they were saying.

"Father, what's going on?" she pleaded. She felt tears welling up in her eyes.

"It will be all right, Hua," her father repeated, more gently this time.

The Auror in front of him said, "*Accio wand,*" and Mr. Chu's wand flew out of his robe and into the Auror's hand. Then the Auror said, "*Incarcerous!*" Silver ropes shot out of his wand and wrapped around the other wizard.

The taller Auror thrust Mrs. Yuan towards her daughter. Anna put her arms around her mother, while standing protectively between her and the two men.

"You can't just barge in here and arrest my husband!" Mrs. Yuan said, in English. "You – you need a warrant!"

The two Aurors laughed.

"Tell your Muggle wife that we're not Muggle policemen," said the smaller Auror, still speaking in Mandarin. He gripped the end of the rope now wrapped around Mr. Chu with a smug smile.

"His Muggle wife has ears!" Mrs. Yuan retorted, in Mandarin.

"Mei," admonished her husband. "Don't interfere. This will be remedied, and I will be back soon."

"But... but what are you arresting him for? You *do* need a warrant!" Anna said. She was pretty sure that was true – they had covered the basic rights of Confederation citizens in their Wizard Social Studies class last year.

The Auror with the fat head and the thinning hair smirked again, and said, in English, "Not anymore. The Wizards' Congress passed the WODAMND Act."

“The what?” Mrs. Yuan asked, looking faint.

Anna knew the answer to this – only because she'd started listening to the Confederation News Network occasionally, when it covered her father's campaign. Mr. Chu's opponents had excoriated him for his opposition to the War On Dark Arts Mandatory National Defense Act, practically accusing him of wanting to hand the Confederation over to the Dark Convention.

“What does the War On Dark Arts have to do with my father?” she asked, struggling to keep her voice from rising hysterically.

“Geming Chu, by the authority of the Governor of North California, you're under arrest for collaboration with the Dark Convention,” the Chinese Auror declared formally, in English, jerking on the rope. Mr. Chu stumbled and then glowered at the other man.

“This is an outrage! Politically-motivated harassment!” he bellowed. “You two, and whoever sent you, will regret this!”

“Threatening Aurors is a felony,” said the Auror holding the rope. “Let's go, sorcerer.”

“My father is not a sorcerer!” Anna cried. “He is not Dark! He has nothing to do with the Dark Convention! This is all a mistake!”

“Hua, take care of your mother,” her father said. “Be brave, my daughter. I will be back soon. Mei –” He looked at his wife, and then the Auror's grip on the rope around him tightened again, and with a loud pop, all three men disappeared.

Lisa Mei Yuan wailed, and would have collapsed to the ground if Anna hadn't held her up, and then they both sank to their knees together, weeping.

“What's going on, Hua?” her mother sobbed. “I don't understand! Where are they taking him? What do we do? *What do we do?*”

“I... I don't know,” Anna said, her voice choking. She was as terrified and confused as her mother, and she didn't know what to do if your father got arrested. She would have to ask someone... except her father would never want this shame exposed to their neighbors. But wouldn't they find out anyway?

Anna couldn't think of anyone who could help, and she just wanted to cry and cry and let her mother comfort her. Except that now she was the only witch in the house; her mother was a Muggle, trapped in a wizarding community. There was no way she could leave her mother here alone. She squeezed her eyes shut to fight off the wave of panic threatening to overwhelm her. What could she do? She wasn't brave and strong like Alexandra... but Alexandra wasn't here.

Chapter 2 — The Witch of Old Larkin Pond



Almost two thousand miles away, Alexandra Quick was dangling her feet over the surface of a murky brown pond, staring into water so choked with weeds and algae that she could barely see her own reflection.

Not that there was anything special to see; she knew what she looked like well enough. Skinny, green eyes, black hair cut so short that she'd been mistaken for a boy a couple of times this summer. Her clothes were nothing special, either: long t-shirt, cargo shorts, muddy sneakers. She looked like a fairly typical teenage girl, albeit one who was indifferent about her appearance.

The only thing anyone stumbling upon this scene might have found remarkable was that she was hovering over Old Larkin Pond on a broom.

The town council had been talking about cleaning up the dirty old pond, and possibly turning the area into a park or a nature trail. It was almost a mile outside of Larkin Mills proper, located on the other side of the Interstate, and further separated from the town by a wooded hill and a large,

The Witch of Old Larkin Pond

uncultivated field. Despite being dirty and smelly and littered with trash, it was a popular spot for the town's teenagers to hang out and engage in exactly the sort of behavior their parents feared.

Alexandra had heard her stepfather complaining about this place often enough. Archie Green was a police officer, so in his opinion, the town needed to spend more money on law enforcement, not beautification projects. He had strictly forbidden Alexandra to go anywhere near Old Larkin Pond, so of course, she had made it her refuge of choice this summer.

Alexandra didn't come here solely to defy her stepfather, though. She could have stayed at home, or gone to the library, or she could have done what many of Larkin Mills' other teenagers did, and hang out at the mall. None of those places appealed to her. Nowhere particularly appealed to her, but Old Larkin Pond drew her back, day after day, as the summer dragged on. It was secluded, no one bothered her, and in some ways, she felt that it was here that her life as a witch had truly begun. So each day after returning home from summer school, she would head for this greenish-brown puddle that was called a pond.

She had mostly managed to avoid trouble this summer. She argued less frequently with her stepfather. She was unusually quiet. She thought her parents would be pleased; instead, her uncharacteristic behavior caused them to become suspicious, even concerned.

Charlie knew something was bothering her, too. Her raven familiar had been bringing her shiny gifts all summer in an effort to cheer her up, which meant Alexandra had to lock the bird in its cage when she wasn't at home.

It was her mother's idea for her to attend summer school. It had been couched as a suggestion, but Alexandra knew that Claudia and Archie weren't going to let her sulk at home by herself all summer. Suspecting that the alternative would be forced enrollment in some kind of summer camp, or worse, a repeat of last summer's Vacation Bible School fiasco, Alexandra had sullenly agreed.

She signed up for remedial English, American history, and pre-algebra at Larkin Mills Middle School. Though she initially resented being stuck with the 'stupid' kids who'd flunked during the school year, she realized with surprise and not a little dismay that she had, in fact, fallen behind in learning what Muggle kids her age usually learned.

She didn't make friends with any of her classmates. They remembered her as being 'weird' even before she started going to a mysterious private school in sixth grade, and Alexandra didn't try to hide the fact that she considered herself smarter than all of them. On the other hand, no one (except Billy Boggleston and his friends) tried to bother her. Even the teachers mostly left her alone, and that was the way she liked it.

After school, she hurried home to dump her schoolbooks on her bed, drag her backpack out of the closet, and disappear out the door. She was rarely stopped by her mother or her stepfather, and if she met any kids on the streets, she didn't talk to them. In Old Larkin, the rundown neighborhood between Sweetmaple Avenue, where she lived, and the Interstate, she occasionally heard whistles and catcalls, but she paid them no attention. She had her wand with her, and she had no fear of walking alone through a grungy neighborhood, or under a dank freeway underpass.

Her destination was the same place she had haunted in the summer before she had entered the wizarding world.

When she got there, she sat on her broom hovering over the pond – sometimes reading a book, but often just brooding. Occasionally, she dipped her toe into the murky water, as if daring something beneath the surface to grab it, but nothing ever did. The kappa and the redcaps that had once haunted this place had been removed by the Department of Magical Wildlife, and now the most dangerous things lurking in the tall grass were teenagers. And Alexandra had mostly chased them away.

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The first time she had hiked here after getting out of summer school, she had found her favorite hideout being occupied by a gang of older kids, smoking and drinking and tossing bottles into the pond.

She had been tempted to use her wand on them. She would have, if not for the Trace Office. The Juvenile Magical Offenses Division forbade underage witches and wizards to perform magic in Muggle communities, and Alexandra had learned the hard way that she couldn't cast even one little spell without them noticing.

But they didn't know about her magic backpack which Quimley, the free elf, had returned to her. It had once been her brother's, and it still contained some of the items she and Maximilian had taken to the Lands Below, such as potions, Flaming Dungbombs, and a Skyhook. Then there were the treacherous 'gifts' from the Generous Ones – carved wooden sticks, a mummified snake, a bone flute, a set of talking stone heads... most of these artifacts were completely inscrutable to her.

Alexandra had no idea what the little stone heads were saying. They would remain silent for long periods of time, and then begin chattering endlessly, talking over each other, not apparently engaged in actual conversation. Sometimes they would all begin chanting together. Occasionally, one would suddenly shout: "*Hayaiyiyiyi!*" None of it was comprehensible to her, and they didn't seem to notice her at all, nor object when she shoved them back into the backpack when she feared their strange babble and eerie chants might be heard by her parents.

The day after she found the pond taken over by teens, she ran there early in the morning, before school, and threw one of the stone heads deep into the rushes at the swampy end, and tossed two more into the water. She could hear their voices bubbling up from below, making a strange, faint sound, like someone drowning slowly a long ways off, while their companion in the reeds muttered and squawked.

This was partially effective; teens didn't hang around the pond as much anymore, but Alexandra was still sometimes forced to abandon her retreat when curious kids would come by to listen to the ghostly voices. Gradually, however, they came less often, and Alexandra began to think she had scared off all interlopers.

It was late July before her retreat was once again invaded. She was sitting on her broom as usual when she heard loud voices and the sound of stones being thrown into the tall grass. So she landed, and shoved her broom back into the backpack – one of its convenient magical properties was that its interior space was much larger than its exterior size. She was standing by the water's edge when Billy Boggleston and his friends Tom Gavin and Gordie Pike came marching around the thicket. They stumbled to a halt when they saw her.

"It's the freak!" Tom said.

Gordie sneered. "I thought it smelled bad here."

Billy and Tom snorted, but all of them eyed her uneasily. Alexandra had been a thorn in their side for years – and they in hers. She hadn't had much trouble from the bullies this summer, aside from one day when they had thrown trash at her from the window of a passing bus. She thought they'd learned their lesson about messing with her.

"Get lost," she said. "I was here first."

"Is this your home now?" Billy demanded. "Nice place for you – scummy and stinky and crawling with snakes!"

"Get out of here!" she repeated angrily, but she realized immediately that the boys had mistaken her rising tone for fear.

Tom and Gordie snickered. Emboldened, Billy put his fists on his hips, striking a belligerent pose. "Or what? You'll do one of your freaky tricks?" He made a clumsy gesture at the pond, still keeping his

The Witch of Old Larkin Pond

hands balled into fists. “Everyone knows you’re just a loser, Alexandra. You go to some ‘special’ school, and then you still have to take remedial classes with the rest of us. You get out of here, or I’ll kick your skinny ass!”

Alexandra took two steps towards him, until they were standing toe to toe.

They’d all grown quite a bit since last summer, but Billy most of all; he towered over most other thirteen-year-olds, and even Alexandra, who was tall for her age, had to tilt her head to look him in the eye. Yet he was the one who blinked first.

“Try it,” Alexandra said, in a low voice. “You’ll be sorry.”

Billy swallowed. Behind him, Gordie and Tom shifted nervously.

She thought he’d back down. Instead, he reached out and gave her a hard shove right in the chest. Alexandra staggered, stumbled backwards, and lost her footing. Her arms waved comically in the air, just before she toppled backwards into the pond. She landed on her butt with a splash, and sat there for a moment, sputtering, with muddy brown water dripping down her face.

The boys laughed. The apprehension on Billy’s face vanished, replaced by a look of triumph. “Not so special now, are you, freak?” He grinned. “I’ll bet you made up that story about the ghost of the drowned kid yourself, to scare everyone away.”

Alexandra shook with fury. She took a deep breath, and climbed to her feet.

“Aw, is the witch gonna cwy?” Billy mocked her.

As she staggered towards the slippery bank of the pond, Billy extended one leg towards her in a crude approximation of a karate kick. It was enough to knock her off-balance again, and she fell back into the water. The three boys hooted with laughter.

When she rose from the water a second time, she was holding her wand. It was pointed at Billy.

It was just a stick of wood, but something about the way she held it, and the murderous look in her eyes, made all three boys stop laughing. For a moment, Alexandra was almost blind with rage.

The boys’ faces turned white, and they all exclaimed at once: “Holy crap!”

Alexandra blinked. She hadn’t actually done anything, and she hadn’t expected them to scare that easily. She started to lower her wand, and noticed that her arm was dripping red.

She looked down. The water was bubbling at her feet and turning crimson. All around her, Old Larkin Pond was boiling like a cauldron of blood.

Just then, a tiny, high-pitched voice screamed “*Haya iyiyiyiyi!*” from the rushes, joined by a spooky chorus of moans that seemed to come from the bottom of the pond.

Gordie screamed, Tom blubbered, and Billy was already running. Tom and Gordie stared at Alexandra for another moment, and then followed Billy. They didn’t look back.

Alexandra stared down at herself in horror, and then at the pond. It simmered for a while, then slowly stopped boiling. Dead fish and frogs and other tiny creatures popped to the surface.

She had to wait until after dark before she ran home, a blood-spattered ghost smelling of algae and mud and death. She spent so long in the bathroom scrubbing herself clean that evening that her mother, who was initially angry at her for staying out after dark, became concerned, and forgot about how she’d run upstairs without answering her or Archie. Alexandra escaped punishment that night, and though she once again waited for a letter from the Trace Office, none arrived. Rather than being relieved, she found that worrying.

Annoyingly, the water-turned-to-blood made Old Larkin Pond more of a spectacle for teenagers to come see, for the next few days. Fortunately, by the time Archie drove by the pond in his police SUV on one of his periodic checks of the area, the blood had turned back to water. But Alexandra heard that night about two sixteen-year-olds he’d taken home to their parents, and the wild tales they had told him

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about the pond, followed by yet another admonition to stay away from there.

Alexandra decided keeping teenagers, police officers, and everyone else away from Old Larkin Pond required more drastic measures.

The next day, she came to the pond with another item she had retrieved from Maximilian's pack. This one hadn't come from the Lands Below; it was just a smooth stone tied to a feather.

Alexandra hesitated, then untied the feather and threw the stone into the grass by the edge of the pond.

Bet this place won't be so popular now, she thought, as she hurried back home.

The next day, the ground was covered by a writhing carpet of snakes. There were harmless brown snakes and grass snakes and garter snakes and kingsnakes, but also rattlesnakes and copperheads and water moccasins. Alexandra wasn't bothered; she simply floated out over the pond on her broom. The rattlesnakes, she thought, would serve as a warning, should anyone be foolish enough to come near.

As she expected, the entire area was abandoned completely after that, by everyone but the reptiles. She had Old Larkin Pond to herself until almost the end of summer.



Charlie had been flying about elsewhere the day that Billy Boggleston and his friends had accosted her, but when Diana Grimm came calling, the raven was perched on the end of Alexandra's broom. The raven cawed a warning, just before she heard a familiar voice behind her, speaking in a pleasant tone.

"Well, I see you're still having trouble with Muggle children." As if only noticing the intruder now, a chorus of rattlesnakes began buzzing.

Unsurprised, Alexandra slowly swiveled about, and regarded the other witch. Diana Grimm looked and sounded exactly like Dean Grimm, her twin sister. Today, the Special Inquisitor was dressed like a Muggle, with her pants tucked into tall boots that looked quite appropriate for walking through snake-infested fields and mud.

"What trouble?" Alexandra asked. "Do you see any Muggles here?"

Charlie clucked nervously.

"No," Ms. Grimm said. "I think you've scared them off... for now. The problem is, they never stay away. And here you are, flying on a broom practically within sight of an interstate highway, for Circe's sake!" In fact, at that moment, they heard the rumble of a truck passing by on the Interstate, but Alexandra shrugged.

"I'm *not* within sight of the Interstate, and I can hear anyone coming," she said.

"You didn't hear *me* coming."

"You probably Apparated. Or used a Silencing Charm. Whatever." Alexandra shrugged again.

"I think perhaps you need a little refresher on the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy," Ms. Grimm said. "You know very well that this—" she gestured at Alexandra, on her broom—"is forbidden. To say nothing of *this*." She pointed her wand where a huge tangle of snakes was still writhing about, and said, "*Accio snakestone!*" The stone came flying from the serpents' midst and into her hand. She touched the tip of her wand to the stone, and it abruptly shattered.

Brushing her hands off, she fixed Alexandra with a stern look. "I also know that you performed a powerful Transfiguration spell on this pond. It was too powerful for you to have done deliberately, so no doubt it was an 'accident,' which means it was probably triggered by an encounter with the Muggles who frequent this charming little spot." Ms. Grimm sniffed and wrinkled her nose. "And upon asking around, I learned that curiously, Old Larkin Pond now inspires dread in the local children. 'Haunted' was how one boy put it, and another said 'cursed.'" Grimm regarded Alexandra coolly. "I wonder how that happened?"

The Witch of Old Larkin Pond

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. "You go interrogate my friends now?"

She didn't actually have friends here in Larkin Mills, not anymore, but she wasn't going to tell Ms. Grimm that.

"When there's an underage witch living among Muggles, it's important to make sure nothing is happening that would concern the Bureau of Magic Obfuscation. A certain amount of rumors and gossip is to be expected, but your behavior is irresponsible."

"Right, you came to Larkin Mills to make sure there aren't too many rumors about a scary witch hanging around Old Larkin Pond."

Ms. Grimm gave her a severe look that made her resemble her sister even more. "Alexandra, you're very lucky that I told the Trace Office not to bother recording your infraction since I was coming to see you anyway. Now get off that broom and come here."

"If I get off the broom, I'll fall in the pond, since I haven't learned a spell to walk on water yet," Alexandra said, as if she were explaining something very obvious to a very stupid person. Charlie abruptly took off, flapping over to the thicket by the water's edge, on the opposite side of the pond from the other witch.

Ms. Grimm's smile became a little frostier. "I'm being very patient, Alexandra."

Alexandra's father had said something very similar to her, when they'd first met. That memory brought a scowl to Alexandra's face, and she looked away and muttered something under her breath.

"Why yes, Alexandra, I am a witch." Ms. Grimm's eyes were glittering and cold now. "That is what you just called me, isn't it?" All warmth left her voice. "Come here, child."

In response, Alexandra deliberately nudged her broom out further over the pond, away from the witch. She knew the petty act of defiance would do her no good, but she was in a defiant mood.

The other witch raised her wand. Alexandra reached for hers, but she was not nearly fast enough. The Special Inquisitor didn't say a word, but Alexandra's broom shattered into a thousand pieces. Charlie screeched in alarm as Alexandra fell straight into the water. She sputtered and squeezed her eyes shut, bobbing in the center of the pond, while bits of wood and straw rained down on her. After a moment, she paddled towards the shore, gasping. A snake brushed against her in the water.

Ms. Grimm was waiting for her at the water's edge, and grabbed her arm to pull her ashore. Alexandra staggered up onto the soggy ground, and then shook the woman's hand off angrily.

"You destroyed it!" she shouted. "That broom was a *gift from my brother!*" More rattlesnakes buzzed, only a few feet away.

"Then you should have been more responsible with it," Ms. Grimm said calmly. Alexandra's eyes blazed with fury, and then Ms. Grimm raised her wand again. "I suggest you calm yourself, and your familiar."

Charlie shrieked and dove through the air at Ms. Grimm's face. Alexandra shouted, "Charlie, no!" and held out her hands to ward off the bird. "Charlie, come here! *Come here!*" She looked apprehensively at Ms. Grimm, who was still holding her wand loosely, as if ready to cast a curse at the bird.

Charlie circled around, and then, with a caw, landed on Alexandra's outstretched hand. Alexandra immediately pulled her raven close to her body and wrapped her arms around the bird, who squawked and protested. Alexandra glowered at Ms. Grimm. "Do you feel all powerful now?"

"This was entirely your doing, Alexandra," Ms. Grimm said. "All you had to do was land as I asked you to, instead of being defiant and insulting. I know you wouldn't dare talk to my sister like that, and it's time you learned that I won't stand for it either."

Alexandra simmered, but she bit her tongue, while taking deep breaths to calm herself.

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"You have no idea how fortunate you are," Ms. Grimm went on. "Another Inquisitor might have simply put a Body-Bind Curse on you, and taken you to back to the Territorial Headquarters for interrogation... and possibly had you chained up."

"Chained up?" Alexandra scoffed. "For what, using a bad word?"

"Alexandra." Ms. Grimm's eyes flashed dangerously. "After what your father did a few months ago, you are in no position to be flouting authority. The Wizards' Congress has passed the WODAMND Act. Juveniles can be treated as adults now, if they're suspected of practicing Dark Arts."

"I am not practicing Dark Arts!"

Ms. Grimm raised an eyebrow.

"The snakestone was Max's," Alexandra hissed.

The older witch shook her head. "Your involvement with the Mors Mortis Society last year, and the fact that you're Abraham Thorn's daughter, are more than enough reason for suspicion. Get this through your head, child – you may resent me, you may hate me, but you are not your father! You can't defy the entire Confederation just because you're an angry little girl."

Alexandra bristled, but something in Ms. Grimm's tone and her steely gaze held her attention, and she kept her mouth shut.

"The rules are changing," Ms. Grimm said, "and not everyone will be as tolerant of your attitude as I have been. And it may not be just you that your smart mouth gets into trouble."

Charlie clucked, fluttering and trying to escape her grasp. Alexandra looked down at her raven, then back up at Ms. Grimm.

"What do you want?" she muttered.

"You know what I want."

"I haven't seen or spoken to my father since the last time we talked."

Grimm studied her for a moment, and then said, "You're lying."

Alexandra wondered whether the Special Inquisitor was trying to read her mind. She narrowed her eyes and thought very, very bad thoughts about her.

Ms. Grimm's eyes narrowed also, and then she pointed her wand at the center of Alexandra's forehead, and said, "*Legilimens!*"

There was a kind of pressure in Alexandra's head – a feeling of intrusion. Alexandra felt her thoughts and memories tumbling around even as she frantically tried to hide them – memories of past summers in Larkin Mills, with her friend Brian Seabury, memories of her mother and stepfather, memories of Charmbridge Academy – and then, the memories she dreaded most, those of her brother, and their deadly trip to the Lands Below. Maximilian had taught her the basics of Occlumency, but in her agitated and distraught state, it was useless trying to shield herself, and she knew that if Ms. Grimm was sifting through her thoughts right now, the Inquisitor would see memories of that trip, which Alexandra's father had supposedly Obliviated from her mind.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Get out of my head! *All right!* My father called me! I only talked to him on the phone!"

Ms. Grimm stared at her a moment longer, while Alexandra panted with anger and humiliation, and tried to calm herself enough to push some of her thoughts away from where Ms. Grimm could see them.

Slowly, Ms. Grimm lowered her wand. "Tell me."

"He called me on the phone, the first week I was home," Alexandra said, through clenched teeth. "He told me he hoped I'd understand someday, about what he's doing. I told him I didn't want anything to do with him or the Dark Convention. Then I hung up on him, and I haven't heard from him since."

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That's all."

Ms. Grimm considered this. "Are you quite certain that's all?" The tip of her wand still hovered inches from Alexandra's nose.

"I *don't* want anything to do with him!" Alexandra shouted. "And do you really think he'd tell me anything now? I don't know anything about the Thorn Circle except what I've heard on the Wizard Wireless. I've hardly talked to anyone this summer, except by phone or by owl." Her voice was bitter. "I haven't even been able to see my sister, thanks to all the restrictions you guys have put on travel."

"That is your father's doing, as you well know." Ms. Grimm hesitated, and then, to Alexandra's great relief, she slid her wand back into the sheath she kept under her jacket.

"Your father will contact you again, and you *will* report it," Ms. Grimm said coldly. "Remember what I told you about the WODAMND Act, Alexandra. There's only so much a rebellious adolescent can get away with nowadays. And if you breach wizarding secrecy again, you risk not only being imprisoned, but having a team of Obliviators dispatched to Larkin Mills."

"Why don't you just lock me up right now?" Alexandra glowered at her. "Oh, right – because then you can't use me to get my father."

Ms. Grimm stared down at the younger girl coolly.

"Remember what I said about that smart mouth, Alexandra." She nodded. "Until next time." With a pop, she vanished.

Alexandra stared at the spot from which the witch had disappeared, and then looked at the pond, where bits and pieces of broomstick and straw were now floating across the surface. Charlie squawked and pecked at her, and she released the raven. She walked over to where she had left her backpack, and squatted next to it. Pond water was dripping down her face; she wiped her forehead with the back of her hand, and only succeeded in smearing more mud across her face. She took several deep breaths, trying to compose herself.

"Alexandra," consoled Charlie, from a branch overhead.

She stood up and shouldered the pack, glad that Ms. Grimm hadn't looked inside it. There were things in there that were almost certainly illegal as well.

"Let's go home, Charlie," she mumbled. Charlie clucked, and swooped from the branch to land on her shoulder.

Soaked and smelling like the dirty old pond, Alexandra was in a foul mood. She had a bad feeling that her stepfather would be home by now, which meant unless she could sneak past him to her room, there would be no avoiding yet another confrontation. Considering that she had actually avoided crossing her stepfather for most of the summer, she wasn't looking forward to arguing with him now.

Brooding, and shivering, she ignored Charlie's squawking at first, as she trudged through the tall grass surrounding Old Larkin Pond, picking her way carefully along the hill that rose up towards the woods and the Interstate. She had to make a few detours, when warned off by the buzz of rattlers, but only when the raven took off from her shoulder, and exclaimed, "Big fat jerk!" did she pause, and look in the direction her familiar was circling.

Something was there, in the weeds and brambles growing at waist height – it was a shadow or a flash of color or something that caught her eye, and without thinking about it, Alexandra drew her wand and dashed straight into the brush. "Who's there?" she shouted, holding her wand up at eye level, pointed straight ahead, ready to curse anything in her sight. "You'd better show yourself, or –"

She almost tripped over a young girl crouching in the grass, who screamed as Alexandra stumbled into her. She wailed frantically, "Don't hurt me! I didn't mean to! I'm sorry!" as Alexandra grabbed her by the front of her shirt and hauled her to her feet.

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“Bonnie!” Alexandra hissed, in shock as much as in anger. “What are you doing here? Are you crazy?”

Bonnie Seabury stared at the older girl, her eyes wide. Alexandra might not have looked quite as frightening as she had when she chased Billy Boggleston and his friends off, drenched with blood, but she was still a dreadful sight – soaked, covered with mud and algae, and furious. Bonnie gulped, and her eyes flickered in the direction of Alexandra's wand.

“I – I – I –” Bonnie's teeth chattered.

“Were you *spying* on me?” Alexandra demanded. “How long have you been watching?” She felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Had Bonnie seen the entire confrontation with Ms. Grimm?

From the younger girl's terrified expression, Alexandra suspected she had.

It was at Old Larkin Pond, two years earlier, that Bonnie Seabury had almost been drowned by a kappa, and that had led to the end of Alexandra's friendship with Bonnie's older brother, Brian. Last winter, Alexandra had told them both to forget anything they remembered about magical creatures or witchcraft. Brian no longer wanted to be friends with a witch anyway, and Alexandra knew that the less they knew, the better for both of them.

Yet Bonnie had been unable to hide her fascination with the strange older girl who lived down the street – and that dangerous curiosity had apparently led her here, where once again she had seen things she shouldn't have. Alexandra looked quickly around, half expecting Ms. Grimm to suddenly appear again, but the two girls were alone.

“You idiot!” Alexandra hissed at her. Charlie cawed above them, still flying in circles overhead. Bonnie's eyes drifted upwards, then back to Alexandra.

“You *are* a witch!” Bonnie whispered. “I saw –”

“You didn't see anything!” Alexandra shouted. She shook the other girl, who squealed, and then Alexandra let go of her, and closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. She lowered her wand to her side.

When she opened her eyes, Bonnie was still staring at her fearfully – but with something like awe as well.

“Bonnie,” Alexandra said, in a low voice. “Did you see that other woman?”

Bonnie nodded her head slowly. “The other wi –” She squeaked as Alexandra clapped a hand over her mouth, then made a gagging sound – Alexandra's hand was caked with mud. But Alexandra just held it there, and leaned closer.

“Would you like her to put a curse on you? Make you forget everything you saw? Maybe forget you ever knew me? She might even make you forget *everything* – even your own family! You won't recognize your own parents, or your brother.” Alexandra spoke in a low, ominous voice, her eyes fixed on Bonnie's. “That's what she'd do to you, if she knew you were watching. She might do it to Brian, too. She might even make your whole family disappear.”

Alexandra didn't think the Magic Obfuscation Office would actually go that far, but Bonnie believed her. The girl's eyes were wide and terrified.

Alexandra held up her wand again. Bonnie began trembling, and making whimpering sounds in the back of her throat as she tried to mumble pleas around the hand clapped over her mouth.

“Don't. You. Ever. Follow me around or spy on me again. Do you understand me?” Alexandra pressed the tip of the wand against Bonnie's cheek, making the girl tremble even harder. “Brian's right,” she whispered. “I *am* a dangerous freak! So stay away from me!” She pushed Bonnie away. The smaller girl stumbled backwards, and stared at Alexandra. She wiped the back of her hand against her nose, and sniffled. Alexandra thought she would cry and run away, but she just kept staring at her.

“What are you waiting for?” Alexandra shouted. “Get out of here!”

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“Why are you being so mean?” Bonnie asked.

“Are you completely stupid?” Alexandra pointed her wand at the girl. “Go away, before I turn you into a frog!”

Bonnie's lower lip trembled. “You wouldn't.”

Alexandra glared at her former best friend's sister, and then lowered her wand with a sigh of exasperation. Angrily, she shoved it into her pocket, and began walking up the hill again.

Bonnie followed along, a few cautious steps behind her. Charlie landed on Alexandra's shoulder, squawked, and took off again, winging towards home. Alexandra wished she could follow through the air like a bird.

Bonnie didn't say anything, as they reached the top of the hill and walked through the copse of woods that stood on the other side of the Interstate from Old Larkin. Alexandra was too lost in brooding to give the girl much thought, but her presence bothered her, for more than one reason. What was she doing wandering around by herself? Usually Mrs. Seabury didn't let Bonnie out of the house unless accompanied by her brother.

They walked along the edge of the Interstate until they reached the underpass, and then Alexandra asked, “What were you doing out there? Old Larkin Pond is off-limits – didn't you see the signs? Or hear the rattlesnakes? And you shouldn't be walking through Old Larkin by yourself.”

Bonnie stared at her. Then retorted, “*You're telling me to stay out of trouble?*”

Alexandra blinked. Even Bonnie had recognized the irony. It almost made her smile.

But she didn't. She just shook her head and walked on, and Bonnie followed.

Old Larkin was not a particularly nice part of town, though Alexandra knew it wasn't really as dangerous as adults would have them believe. She had spent much of her childhood bicycling up and down its streets, sometimes accompanied by Brian, but often alone. Nothing had ever happened to her. She didn't know why she was more conscious of potential danger now. Not for herself – with her wand in her pocket, she feared nothing. But Bonnie *shouldn't* have been wandering by herself.

Bonnie spoke again. “Brian's sorry, you know.”

Alexandra frowned, then slowed to a halt and turned around. “Sorry about what?”

“You know.” Bonnie looked down. “About calling you a freak.”

Alexandra stared at the girl for several moments. “Good,” she said. She turned around again and resumed walking.

Bonnie bit her lip and followed. They had almost reached Sweetmaple Avenue, and Bonnie seemed about to say something else, when they heard someone shout, “Bonnie!”

Both girls looked up, and saw Brian running down the street towards them.

“Bonnie!” he yelled again, and as he came closer, he slowed to a jog, then a walk, and finally he came to a halt in front of them. He gazed with dismay at Alexandra, dripping wet and covered with mud, and at Bonnie, who had not been dunked in the pond, but still had enough dirt and grass clinging to her to make it obvious where she'd been.

“Oh no!” he groaned, with a panicked look. “Bonnie – did you –?”

“Nothing happened,” Alexandra told him. “She didn't fall in the pond. I did. She wasn't there.”

Brian stared at her, and looked her up and down, and then stared at his sister again.

“I found her while I was walking back home,” Alexandra said.

“You didn't take her to the pond again?” Brian demanded.

Alexandra's eyes flared. “*No*, I didn't!”

“She didn't!” Bonnie agreed quickly.

“What the heck were you doing out there anyway?” Brian shouted. Alexandra wasn't sure if he was

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directing that at her, or Bonnie, or both of them, but then he grabbed his sister by the shoulder, and said, “You are in *so* much trouble, Bonnie! Have you gone nuts? Mom's freaking out! What do you think you're doing, wandering around by yourself? Get home, now!”

Bonnie wrinkled her nose, and gave Brian a disdainful look as she tried to shake his hand off. “You're not the boss of me!”

“You should listen to your brother,” Alexandra said.

Both Seaburys stood still for a moment, and stared at her in shock. Then Brian shoved his sister in the direction of their house, and Bonnie, with an indignant glower, stomped off down the street. Brian looked like he was about to follow, but hesitated.

Alexandra just stood there and watched him, not saying anything.

“Bonnie's been getting in a lot of trouble lately,” Brian muttered.

Alexandra raised an eyebrow, but didn't reply.

“What *were* you doing out there?” he asked.

“Sitting on a broom,” she said. “It's where we witches hold our covens.”

Brian grimaced. “Right.” He shook his head. “I thought maybe you got in another fight with Billy Boggleston. He's been saying he beat you up and that's why you hide at Old Larkin Pond after school.”

Alexandra snorted. “What's it to you?”

“Bonnie shouldn't be following you around – Mom thinks you're a bad influence.”

“I didn't ask her to follow me around!” Alexandra stared at him incredulously. “You're blaming *me* because Bonnie is acting up?”

Brian shook his head. “No, but she thinks you're... different, and she's too fascinated by you –”

“Oh, so it's my fault because I'm a bad role model for your sister?”

“I didn't mean that –” Brian looked flustered.

“Well, I told Bonnie to stay away from me, so don't blame me for her problems!” Flushed with anger, Alexandra pushed past him, and Brian flinched, at her tone and at the muddy hand with which she shoved him out of the way.

She heard Brian following her, as she stalked down the street, but she didn't look back, and neither of them said anything to one another as Alexandra turned left and walked up the path to her house at 207 Sweetmaple Avenue. She slammed the door behind her, and ignored her stepfather's angry shout as she stomped upstairs.

Chapter 3 — Innocence



Every year, a week before school started, Charmbridge Academy sent a bus to bring those students whose parents couldn't take them shopping for school supplies to the Goblin Market in Chicago. The morning that the Charmbridge bus came to pick up Alexandra, her mother was up early and had prepared breakfast for both of them by the time Alexandra came downstairs.

The previous summer, Alexandra had been eager to see her friends and go to the Goblin Market, after almost three months of being stuck in the Muggle world. This year, she faced the upcoming shopping trip with mixed feelings. She did want to see her friends again, but the prospect of reentering the wizarding world didn't fill her with excitement this time.

In fact, part of her dreaded returning to Charmbridge.

She had not spoken of this to anyone – not to Anna or David, in their email and telephone conversations, nor to Constance and Forbearance, in the letters they exchanged by owl, nor even to her sister, Julia. And certainly not to her mother.

Claudia Green regarded her daughter as they sat together at the table eating eggs and waffles, until Alexandra felt her mother's eyes on her and looked up.

"What?" she asked.

"You've been pretty quiet this summer," Claudia said.

Alexandra shrugged. "Is that a problem?"

"No." Claudia studied her face. "*Is* there a problem?"

Alexandra stuck her fork in her mouth, and chewed on her waffle slowly, keeping her expression impassive.

"Did something happen at Charmbridge?" Claudia asked.

Alexandra shook her head. "No."

"If there's a problem – if something is wrong..."

"What, suddenly you're interested in the wizarding world now?" Alexandra's tone was harsh, and she

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looked away as her mother winced slightly. They'd had this discussion the previous winter. Her mother knew about the wizarding world, yes – she knew that Alexandra's father was a wizard, and she knew that her daughter was a witch. But that was a world she could never be a part of, and she'd made it clear that she didn't want to hear about it.

Alexandra had honored her mother's wishes. She hadn't talked about it. She hadn't talked about anything that had happened.

"I'm fine, Mom." She softened her tone a little. "It's just boring here. At least at Charmbridge –" She started to say, "I can do magic," and instead, she finished, "I have friends."

Claudia nodded uncertainly. "You could make friends here."

Alexandra rolled her eyes.

"You and Brian really should make up..."

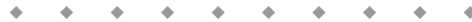
"I'd still only see him over winter and summer breaks, so what's the point?" *He doesn't want to hear about the wizarding world either.*

Outside, a short bus pulled to a stop in front of their house.

"It looks like your ride is here." Claudia handed her some money. "Here's some spending money. Don't come back with any more pets, all right?"

Alexandra almost smiled. "I won't." Her parents had never been happy about Charlie, and they'd been even less happy about her snake, Nigel.

"Behave yourself. I'll see you this evening." Claudia gave Alexandra a quick kiss on the cheek as her daughter headed for the door. Alexandra paused, and then nodded before going outside to get on the waiting bus.



Besides children like Alexandra who lived with Muggles, there were many students who arrived at the boarding school early from other parts of the country; they also came along for the shopping trip. Thus, Alexandra expected to find most of her friends already on the bus.

Mrs. Speaks, the elderly, frizzy-haired bus driver, greeted her pleasantly, but Alexandra was still a little tense as she stepped aboard. She was already notorious in school, even before the events at the end of the previous school year. Now everyone knew that she had been involved in something terrible, deep in the basements below Charmbridge Academy. Thirteen students had been expelled for practicing Dark Arts, and Alexandra's half-brother, Maximilian King, had died.

No one knew the whole story, though, not even her friends. So when Alexandra walked down the aisle of the Charmbridge bus, past the rows of large booths holding many more tables and students than could have fit inside a non-magical bus, conversations faltered, voices dropped to a murmur, and games of Exploding Snap and Muggle Madness were paused. Alexandra ignored the stares as she walked past the older students who filled the front of the bus. Larry Albo, a dark-haired Old Colonial boy who had been her nemesis since her very first day in the wizarding world, was sitting with his friends Ethan Robinson and Wade White. Larry wore his characteristic smirk, but he didn't say anything as she passed by. Wade whispered something to Larry. Alexandra didn't hear what he said, but when she turned her head to glare at him, Larry snorted and punched his friend in the shoulder.

Torvald Krogstad, a ninth grader whose face was pock-marked by puberty and adolescent curses, greeted her with "Troublesome!" She gave him a sour look, but he just grinned. Next to him, his more handsome friend Stuart Cortlandt seemed to be avoiding her gaze.

"Take a seat please, Miss Quick," Mrs. Speaks called from the front of the bus, as they began moving again. Alexandra proceeded towards the back, hoping to find her friends.

She was greatly relieved to see Constance and Forbearance – the Pritchards' parents had been

threatening to pull them out of school. To her surprise, however, there was another girl sitting between them, looking like a younger version of the twins. Like them, she wore a calico dress and bonnet, though her blonde curls weren't staying tucked beneath it quite as neatly. Her deep blue eyes were now staring curiously at Alexandra.

The three Ozarker girls were not alone in their booth. Sitting across the table from them were Benjamin and Mordecai Rash.

The Rash twins were Ozarkers, too, but they were not nearly as friendly as the Pritchards. They had welcomed Alexandra into the wizarding world by calling her a Mudblood, and none of their words to her since then had been any kinder. The two boys, in their long-sleeved shirts, suspenders, and rough wool pants, were both giving her dirty looks.

"Hello, Alexandra," Constance said, and the Rashes frowned disapprovingly.

"Hi," Alexandra said. "It's great seeing you... both."

"We're real proud to see you 'gain," said Forbearance, provoking more scowls from the Rashes.

"You'uns ought not be talkin' to this sorceress," said Benjamin.

"She's our friend, Benjamin Rash. Don't you be rude!" Constance scolded.

"Well, she hain't sittin' here." Benjamin glared at Alexandra. "Just keep on and sit with your own kind."

Alexandra bristled. "Who made you anyone's boss?" The Pritchards had never hung around with the Rashes before, and didn't seem to like them much; finding them sitting together now was disconcerting.

From the front of the bus, Mrs. Speaks yelled, "Miss Quick! Sit down!"

Constance and Forbearance looked pained – Alexandra knew they hated conflict. She didn't, and she wasn't afraid of it, and she was ready to sit right down with them and stare the Rashes in the face.

She glanced at the younger girl, who was still watching the confrontation with wide-eyed fascination, and thought about starting the eighth grade with another fight.

"See you at the Goblin Market," she muttered, and moved to the next booth down. She found a pretty, dark-skinned girl there, sitting alone, fidgeting with the elaborate, lacy collar of her bright red and gold robe. She was adjusting and readjusting the way her long braided hair fell against it.

Angelique Devereaux would normally be sitting with her friend Darla Dearborn. Darla was one of the students expelled for practicing Dark Arts – Alexandra didn't expect to see her again, and good riddance, she thought.

"Hi," Alexandra said, and then looked around. Someone else was missing as well. "Where's Anna?"

Anna had always arrived at Charmbridge before Alexandra did, and was always on the bus to the Goblin Market before her. But there was no sign of her. With an uneasy feeling, Alexandra sat down with Angelique before Mrs. Speaks could yell at her again.

"I haven't seen her," Angelique said. And after an uncomfortable pause, she asked, "How was your summer, Alexandra?"

Alexandra didn't dislike Darla's former roommate, but they were not exactly close friends, and after finding the Pritchards sitting with the Rash twins, and her best friend missing, she was unhappy, confused, and not really eager to spend most of the trip to Chicago sitting next to a girl who was mostly interested in clothes and wizard bands and comparing her looks with those of other girls.

"Boring," she said indifferently. "Yours?"

"It was pleasant enough. I took summer classes at Baleswood again."

Alexandra wasn't really interested in Angelique's summer – any more than she expected Angelique was interested in hers – so she just nodded and grunted. The two girls said little to each other as the Charmbridge bus left Larkin Mills and sped onto the Automagicka. Alexandra could hear the Pritchards

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talking – actually, it sounded like the younger girl was doing most of the talking, asking questions about the trolls who guarded the entrances to the Automagicka, and the Muggle town they had just left, and the Goblin Market. Then the Rashes scolded her for talking too much, and that provoked a flurry of heated whispers between Benjamin and Mordecai and Constance and Forbearance. Alexandra was itching to say something nasty to the Rashes, but held her tongue.

When they reached Detroit, Alexandra perked up a little – David Washington, her only Muggle-born friend, lived here.

David boarded the bus wearing a plain wizard robe casually thrown over his jeans and jersey, and strutted down the aisle, waving to a couple of the Quidditch players. He paused, as Alexandra had, at the table where the Ozarkers were sitting. Constance and Forbearance both greeted him, and the Rashes muttered and grumbled again. David, casting suspicious, sidelong glances in their direction, kept walking. His expression brightened a little when he reached Alexandra's table.

Angelique smiled at him. “Hello, David.” Her New Orleans drawl became soft and syrupy.

David's face lit up even more. “Hi Angelique.” For a moment his voice sounded a little wheezy, and Alexandra thought his expression was positively goofy.

Then Mrs. Speaks called from the front of the bus: “Mr. Washington, please sit down!” Mrs. Speaks was sounding unusually short-tempered.

“Have a seat, dork,” Alexandra said. After hesitating a moment, David sat next to her, across the table from Angelique.

Angelique fanned herself casually. “And how was *your* summer, David?” she asked.

“It was, uh, great.” David's cheeks darkened a little, as his eyes fixed on Angelique's long, fluttering lashes, drifted downwards, and then back up to her face. Angelique's robes were perfectly decorous and modest, but they were just loose enough around the neck to show some skin below her collar, and she was sitting in a way that thrust her chest out a little. Alexandra bet she practiced that.

David cleared his throat, before turning to face Alexandra.

“How've you been, Alex?” he asked, sounding more serious.

“Fine,” she said.

He frowned, opened his mouth, and Alexandra repeated, “*Fine*,” giving him an ominous look.

His eyebrows went up a little. He glanced at Angelique again, then nodded. Leaning forward, he whispered, “What's the deal with the Ozarkers?” He jerked his head back in the direction of the booth behind them.

“Dunno.” Alexandra shrugged, with a frown.

“Is that other girl their sister?”

“I don't know.”

David looked around. “Hey, where's Anna?”

“I don't know.”

Alexandra's mood was becoming sullen again. David tried to draw her into the conversation, as the bus proceeded from Detroit to Chicago, but she found her mind drifting, and she stared out the window at the other magical vehicles zooming along the Automagicka, while David talked to Angelique. He seemed to be trying to explain football to the pureblood witch; Alexandra couldn't tell whether Angelique was actually interested, but her giggles and her fawning tone made it clear she liked having his attention.

It took much less time to travel from Detroit to Chicago on the Automagicka than it did on the Interstate. In a parking lot in downtown Chicago, the Charmbridge students disembarked, and filed into Grobnowski's Old World Deli. Although Grobnowski's shared the parking lot with several Muggle

storefronts, Alexandra had never seen any Muggles in the deli. As on previous trips, Mrs. Speaks and the students marched through the front doors, past the dour old proprietor and his wife, and cases full of Muggle and wizard meats and cheeses, and out the back entrance, into the Goblin Market.

For Alexandra, the Goblin Market never stopped being a strange, wonderful bazaar full of magical people and enchantments. The gaily dressed witches and wizards in bright robes and skirts and gowns and tall pointed hats, and the stores that sold everything from wands to owls to 99-flavored ice cream, still seemed like something out of one of the fantasy books she had read as a child.

This was her world now. That thought brought a mixture of delight and sorrow. She couldn't help feeling her spirits lifted a little, after the long summer spent alone in Larkin Mills, but she had also learned that this world wasn't always as bright and magical as it seemed on the surface.

"Sixth, seventh, and eighth graders, you are to remain with your chaperones at all times," Mrs. Speaks said to the Charmbridge students who were all gathered on the street in front of the Colonial Bank of the New World. "Ninth graders and above, you're free to shop on your own, but do not forget that you are to conduct yourself according to Charmbridge's Code of Conduct at all times, and meet back here at four p.m."

"Alexandra!" called Constance. The Pritchards hurried over to her, with Forbearance towing the younger girl who had sat with them on the bus by the hand.

"We're right sorry 'bout that, Alex, dear," Forbearance said. "We'uns wanted you to sit with us."

"We missed you terrible," Constance said, taking Alexandra's hands in her own and squeezing them tightly.

"I missed you, too," Alexandra said. "And I'm really glad your parents let you come back to Charmbridge."

"I'd'a had kittens an' conniptions if they'd said I can't educate at a real witchin' school!" the third girl said, with an accent that was even thicker than that of the other two girls.

Constance smiled. "Alexandra, this is our sister, Innocence. She's startin' at Charmbridge this year."

"I'm proud to meet you," Innocence said. "You don't look nothin' like how I 'spected!"

"Hush, Innocence!" Constance scolded, while Alexandra's eyebrows went up. "Now you best mind what you're told and comport yourself proper." She pointed at the other sixth graders, who were gathering into their own group.

"Why can't I stay with you'uns? I already gots a wand!" Innocence pulled out a long wand of white oak to show Alexandra. "Great-granny made mine just for me – I'm the first in our family to get a *new* wand!"

Forbearance grabbed her hand. "Put that away! You know you ought not be wavin' it about! And you'll go with the other sixth graders like you oughter! You 'member what Ma and Pa told you!"

Innocence looked sulky. "Yes, sis." Her eyes went wide again as David and Angelique joined them, and then Constance gave her a little shove, and Innocence trudged over to join the sixth graders with their chaperone, looking back over her shoulder several times.

"A younger sister at Charmbridge, huh?" David said. "That's cool."

"Is 'cool' good or bad?" Constance whispered in Alexandra's ear.

"It's good," Alexandra whispered back, as someone called: "Eighth graders! Over here!"

Alexandra was looking forward to next year, when she would no longer have to follow a senior chaperone around. She groaned a little when she saw who was in charge of the eighth graders: Marguerite Millicent Murray, a thick, beefy girl who was the leader of Charmbridge Academy's Witch Rangers coven. Her green and black robe was tied with a sash from which dangled a constellation of small metallic charms representing her accomplishments as a Witch Ranger – some of them flapped,

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jingled, chirped, or emitted tiny little sparkles as she moved.

Despite her leadership role, Marguerite looked nervous.

All the flinching and avoidance and averted eyes Alexandra was getting from other kids was starting to annoy her; she felt a spiteful temptation to stare at Marguerite's charm collection and ask if there was one for Dark Arts.

"Does anyone need to go to the bank?" Marguerite asked.

Everyone, including Alexandra, shook their heads.

In the letters she had exchanged with Julia over the summer, Alexandra had learned about the CBNW's Owl Banking Service. (Julia had of course offered to simply send Alexandra some money, which Alexandra had of course refused.) Even after paying the Owl Banking fee to exchange her allowance for wizard money, the Colonial Bank of the New World had charged her less than Gringotts had the previous year, and now Alexandra had a pocket full of eagles. The spending money her mother had given her she would keep for another day.

"Well, good," Marguerite said. "We can go straight to Hoargrim's, then."

They began walking down the street. Constance and Forbearance immediately fell in alongside Alexandra. She glanced over her shoulder and saw that the Rash twins were trailing the group of eighth graders.

"Are those two jerks stalking you?" she asked.

Constance sighed. "Our folks asked the Rashes to look after us."

"Look after you? Since when do you need babysitters?"

Forbearance looked down. "They're fretted 'bout us on account of... well, recent doin's."

"You mean, they don't want you to associate with 'unrespectable' sorts."

David, walking ahead of them with Angelique, snorted.

Forbearance took a deep breath. "They almost didn't let us come back, and only allowed it on account of how proud they was that Innocence got accepted. But we had to promise we'd mind Benjamin and Mordecai 'cause they's our elders."

"Elders? They're fifteen!" Alexandra's lip curled. "So if they tell you you're not allowed to sit with me, or talk to me, or —"

"Alexandra," Forbearance said quietly. "You know you're our friend — hain't nothin' gonna change that. But it weren't easy to get Ma an' Pa to relent, 'specially on consideration of Innocence."

"You got to let us deal with the Rashes," Constance said. "Please, Alex, promise you won't meddle."

"We hain't gonna shun you. You got to trust us," Forbearance pleaded.

"Fine." Alexandra sighed. "If not sitting next to you at lunch will keep you out of trouble."

"We're sorry," Forbearance said. "We know it hain't fair."

Alexandra shrugged. Her voice became as flat as her expression. "Life isn't fair."

The Pritchards exchanged looks, then both of them gently took hold of Alexandra's arms as they walked on either side of her, while David glanced over his shoulder, and then looked back to Angelique.

Hoargrim's Wands and Alchemical Supplies was a dark and dingy shop that looked closed even when it wasn't. It was nonetheless one of the most renowned wand shops in the Confederation, and it was where Alexandra had acquired her own hickory wand, two years earlier.

She found the smelly, dimly-lit premises as interesting as always. The shelves were full of mummified rodents, insects that were petrified, crystallized, or embalmed in amber, animated snake and fish skeletons, jars of alligator eyes and poison sunflower seeds, boxes of noose-vine roots, and potions and unguents and powders of all kinds. Skins and claws and scales and furs were draped along

the walls, along with the heads of several unfortunate beasts, not all of whom would be recognizable to a Muggle zoologist.

But Marguerite did not give them an opportunity to browse the shelves. They lined up to receive their alchemical supply kits for the coming year, bundled and handed out by one of the shop assistants. Mr. Finsterholz, the elderly proprietor and wandsmith, watched them suspiciously as he pulled back the curtain sectioning off the portion of his store where wands were kept. Eager sixth graders were lining up there now; the eighth graders, with their two whole years of worldly experience since they had been the ones waiting to receive a wand, watched with amusement.

"Innocence!" Forbearance hissed.

Across the room, Innocence was showing off her wand to the envious eleven-year-olds, with a few demonstrative gestures. From her smug tone of voice as she explained the properties of white oak, it seemed she was enjoying her brief reign of superiority over her wandless classmates.

At the sound of her sister's voice, she looked up, and then tucked her wand back into her sleeve with a guilty look. Alexandra noticed that the guilty look disappeared as soon as Constance and Forbearance looked away.

Coming out of Hoargrim's with paper-wrapped packages under their arms, the eighth graders passed the seventh grade group coming in, and Alexandra spotted a small Japanese girl among them.

"Tomo!" she whispered. Alexandra hadn't even thought about Tomo Matsuzaka until now, though she must have been on the bus with the other seventh graders. Tomo was a Majokai witch. The Majokai segregated themselves from the rest of wizarding society; Alexandra knew very little about them, except that most of them, like Tomo, lived in California.

The younger girl jumped, and her eyes darted past Alexandra's shoulder, undoubtedly expecting to see Anna. Alexandra pulled her aside; Tomo's eyes went wide, but she didn't resist. Marguerite, walking ahead, didn't notice immediately.

"Tomo, how did you get here from California?" Alexandra asked. "I heard on the Wizard Wireless that all cross-country Wizardrail lines are still shut down."

Tomo nodded. "I had to fly from LAX to Chicago."

Alexandra blinked. "You took an airplane?"

"Yes. It wasn't even my first time on an airplane." Tomo raised her chin proudly. "Lots of Majokai learn about Muggle things."

Alexandra frowned. She doubted Anna's father would have sent her to Chicago on an airplane.

"Alexandra!" Marguerite called crossly, as she realized that one of her charges had fallen behind and was lingering back by Hoargrim's storefront.

"I, um, I need to join my group," Tomo said, gesturing inside.

Alexandra nodded, and the other girl pushed the door open and disappeared into the shop. Alexandra rejoined her classmates, barely acknowledging Marguerite's admonishment to keep up and not go wandering off.

Marguerite was willing to indulge them a little as they wandered down the streets of the Goblin Market. Angelique insisted on looking in robe shops, while David and Alexandra were both captivated by the Astronomy Tower, a new shop next to the perpetually going-out-of-business Ilsing's Wizard Wares. The Astronomy Tower sold telescopes, lunascopes, sneakoscopes, necroscopes, crystal balls, charmed glass eyes, and all sorts of other glasses and lenses.

There was also a new Clockworks shop selling Clockwork golems. David, a member of the American Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare, was pleased at the increasing popularity of these house-elf replacements. Alexandra still didn't trust them, and eyed the current year's models warily.

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Boxley's Books, where they normally bought their textbooks, seemed unusually busy, and many Charmbridge students were already crowding into the store, so Marguerite decided they would return there after lunch. Instead, they proceeded to Grundy's, a huge wizarding department store that dominated the Goblin Market. Marguerite turned them loose in the store, with another admonishment to be on their best behavior. She seemed to be studiously avoiding looking in Alexandra's direction when she said this.

The Rashes, who had continued to trail the eighth graders into the store, were suddenly at the Pritchards' sides.

"We'll help you'uns find your school supplies," said Mordecai.

"You think maybe after two years they might actually know how to find their supplies themselves?" Alexandra asked.

Mordecai gave Alexandra a withering look. "We're just bein' mannerly."

"To our *kinfolk*. No one asked to hear *your* gums flappin'!" Benjamin said, with more naked hostility.

Alexandra began a rapid boil, but Constance turned to Benjamin and said, "*That* wasn't mannerly, Benjamin Rash!"

He frowned, then took her by the arm. "C'mon. You been lallygaggin' too much with these unrespectable sorts."

David was getting as angry as Alexandra, and Forbearance looked at both of them fearfully.

"Go on," Alexandra said to the Pritchards. "It's not like you're going to be able to avoid unrespectable sorts all day at school."

They smiled at that, before they were dragged away.

"That's kind of sweet, actually," Angelique said.

"*Sweet?!!*" Alexandra and David said together.

"Well, not the part about 'unrespectable sorts.'" Angelique looked taken aback at David's angry look.

"You want a boy to boss you around?" Alexandra asked, raising her eyebrows.

"I... that's not what I meant!" Angelique flushed. "Alexandra, you really are outrageous sometimes!" She turned and flounced away.

"Nice, Alex." David looked torn between indignation and laughter.

"Aren't you going to follow her?" Alexandra asked.

"Follow her?" David looked baffled.

"Or you can hang around with me. Which Angelique will notice, believe me."

"Uh..." David made a funny face again.

"Go on. Show her who's the boss."

He rolled his eyes at her, and then turned to follow Angelique to the Bath and Body Charms section.

Left alone, Alexandra wandered through the magical department store. She really didn't have much shopping to do herself, other than acquiring a new set of school robes and some potion-proof gloves. Before her visit from Ms. Grimm, she had been planning to buy a new broom cleaning kit – now, she settled for some wand polish and a bag of owl treats for Charlie. She spent some time in the brooms section, and ran her hand briefly over a midnight blue Twister, which hummed and bobbed up and down in response.

It was much too expensive, though – Alexandra could never afford to buy a broom herself.

She almost walked into the clothing department. She saw Larry Albo and the Rashes there, however, and abruptly turned around, only to bump into Constance and Forbearance, who had Innocence with them.

"There you are, Alex, dear," Forbearance said.

Innocence

"Let's git 'fore they sees us," Constance whispered, inclining her head in the direction of the boys. Alexandra followed them. "How'd you escape your 'mindings'?" she asked, once they were out of sight of the older boys, and heading downstairs to the basement cafeteria.

"We told 'em we had to shop for necessities," Forbearance said.

"Necessaries?" Alexandra asked, puzzled.

"You know, unmentionables," Constance whispered.

Alexandra laughed. "You mean underwear?"

Innocence giggled. "Them Rashes'd have a purple 'plexy if they seen girls' bloomers!"

"Innocence!" Her older sisters both gave her reproving looks, but Alexandra snickered, which made Innocence grin.

Grundy's basement cafeteria was full of buffets selling all sorts of food, some of which resembled Muggle fast food, and some of which was unique to the wizarding world. Alexandra was quite fond of peppermeat and Fizzy-Pop and Wyland West's 99-flavored ice cream. The Pritchards, as usual, had brought their own lunches.

Other Charmbridge students began trickling down into the cafeteria. David and Angelique arrived, and headed for the table where Alexandra and the Pritchards were sitting.

"Are they sweet?" Innocence asked, a little too loudly.

"Hush your mouth, Innocence!" Constance snapped at her.

Innocence rolled her eyes, and then turned to look at the couple, as they sat down. "You're the Muggle-born, hain't you?" she said to David. "Constance talks lots 'bout you, too, but she hain't never said you was colored!"

David froze. Angelique merely raised her eyebrows.

"Innocence!" Forbearance exclaimed.

David turned to look at Angelique. "You remember Darla telling us the wizarding word doesn't have these kinds of problems?"

Angelique was more amused than offended. "Oh, David. She's an Ozarker; she doesn't know any better."

She realized her own mistake when all three Ozarker girls stared at her.

"I just meant... that is –" Angelique began stammering.

By now, the Rashes had arrived in the cafeteria and spotted them. They marched over with their mouths set in firm, angry lines.

"What are you'uns doin' sittin' here with *them*?" Benjamin demanded.

Alexandra bit back a retort, waiting for the Pritchards to respond.

"I guess we'uns just don't know any better," Forbearance said, her eyes on Angelique.

"You oughter sit with us," said Mordecai.

"I reckon we oughter," Constance said.

Alexandra wanted desperately to curse the Rashes – figuratively and literally – but she said nothing as the Ozarker girls rose from their seats to join their 'kinfolk.' Constance and Forbearance didn't look at anyone. Innocence, however, waited until they had turned their backs, and then made a horrible face, sticking her tongue out at Angelique, before following her sisters to another table.

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Chapter 4 — The Ghost Writer



Alexandra spent the rest of lunch listening to Angelique and David argue.

“I can't believe you think it's funny!” David was full of indignation. “She called us 'colored'!”

Angelique rested her chin on one hand, smiling. “I'll bet she's jealous.”

“It wasn't a compliment!”

“You're getting awfully upset at a silly little sixth grader.”

“Maybe Constance and Forbearance think of us as 'colored,' too!”

“I don't understand why that word bothers you so much.”

David's Muggle sensibilities were clashing with Angelique's pureblood upbringing. Alexandra wasn't sure what to think – she knew you didn't call people 'colored,' but she was pretty sure Innocence hadn't known it was offensive. She glanced occasionally at the Pritchards' table, where the Ozarker girls were

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now surrounded by the Rashes, and Larry and his Old Colonial friends. Forbearance looked up for a moment, and from beneath her bonnet gave Alexandra a small smile. Alexandra smiled back at her, then caught Larry looking at her, and turned her smile into a sneer. He sneered back.

“Well, that's silly,” Angelique was saying. “Wizarding society just doesn't care about such things – it has nothing to do with how magical you are.”

“Right,” David grumbled. “Wizards only care about whether you're pureblood or not.”

“Or have a Dark wizard for a father,” Alexandra muttered.

Angelique looked taken aback, and then she put her hands on her hips. “You know, I don't think I like boys with no sense of humor.”

While David stammered, Marguerite walked over to their table, and announced that they would be going to Boxley's to pick up their textbooks.

Constance and Forbearance rejoined them, still looking at Angelique resentfully.

“David,” said Constance, “Innocence didn't mean –”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Forget it,” David said brusquely.

Oblivious to the tensions among her charges, Marguerite led them back upstairs and out of Grundy's, and down the street to Boxley's Books. There was still quite a large crowd there. Alexandra saw a poster in the window that said, 'Book signing today by Simon 'Ghastly' Grayson.' The moving wizard photograph below the banner seemed to be in black and white. It showed a long-haired man wearing a black shirt and matching pants – unusual for wizards – fading in and out of sight.

Inside the store, Marguerite handed them all slips of paper. “Here are your required books for this year. I looked up each of your class schedules before leaving Charmbridge, so everything each of you needs should be here. Alexandra, remember your scholarship only covers required textbooks.”

Alexandra nodded. She was grudgingly impressed by Marguerite's efficiency. *Magical Beasts of North America*, for her Magizoology elective, was listed along with the usual required textbooks for eighth grade.

Half of the store was filled with witches and wizards waiting in line for the book signing. Most of them were middle-aged or older, and Alexandra saw many wearing tie-dyed t-shirts or fluorescent sneakers beneath their robes. Witches and wizards alike were wearing long hair and beaded headbands, along with more bizarre accessories, like a clanging cowbell dangling from one woman's long, gray, braided ponytail. Alexandra did a double-take at the sight of a fat, grizzled old wizard wearing a kilt and a t-shirt that said: “*Dead Not Gone: Ghastly World Tour '99*.” Next to him was a tall, skinny witch wearing a plain white gown with white lacy gloves and the oddest earrings – Alexandra blinked, because for a moment she thought they looked like radishes, before the line moved and the radish-adorned witch disappeared behind a bookshelf.

Radicalists, Alexandra thought. She knew there were a few children of Radicalists at Charmbridge; they were very fond of Muggles, and emulated them in a comical, clueless sort of way.

Although she was curious about this Ghastly person, she was more interested in exploring the store. At Charmbridge Academy, much of the school library was off-limits to her. Age restrictions kept some of the most interesting magical texts out of her hands. She was hoping she might be able to find the knowledge she was looking for on the bookstore's shelves.

She wasn't surprised that there was no section labeled 'Dark Arts' or 'Necromancy.' Nor did browsing the *Spirit Matters* section turn up any books about raising the dead. However, as she edged her way past some of the customers crowding that end of the store, she saw a sign pointing towards one corner: 'Very Special Interests (Adults Only).'

That sounded promising. She followed the arrow and found a door made of black oak, almost

invisible until she was standing in front of it. The same sign she had just seen was hanging on the door, in much smaller print.

She checked right and left and over her shoulder; no one was looking in her direction. She reached a hand out, and froze when a high, nasal voice demanded: "Can you read?"

She looked up, and saw a small portrait hanging over the door. It was a painting of one 'Justice Boxley,' a surprisingly young-looking wizard despite his long beard. He was scowling at her disapprovingly.

"Can you read?" Justice Boxley repeated.

"Yes," Alexandra replied sullenly.

"Then are you simple?" the portrait asked. "Empty up here, or just addlepatated?" He pointed a finger at his ear and made a twirling motion.

She glared at him. "Is that how you're supposed to talk to customers?"

He snorted. "Little girl, there is an Age Line past this door. You'll never get upstairs."

"Do you keep books about advanced magic up there?" she asked. "Magic to do with... the dead?"

Boxley studied her suspiciously. "Among other things. None of which are appropriate for a witch your age. Even if you did somehow get your hands on one of our Special Interest volumes, they're all jinxed to turn your hair white." He ran a hand over his beard. "Come back when you're old enough for the counter-jinx."

Angrily, she turned away. Sometimes it seemed the entire wizarding world was set against her learning what she really wanted to know.

As she headed back towards the textbook section, however, she found her way blocked by the crowd that had gathered for the book signing, so instead, she was gradually squeezed towards the back of the store, where a banner hung from the wall with a more detailed announcement: "Book Signing Here! Simon 'Ghastly' Grayson: Musician/Ghost Writer/Posthumous Rights Activist!"

Against the wall was a table piled high with books, and hovering over it, sitting in a cross-legged position in mid-air, was the man on the poster outside; or rather, the ghost.

Simon Grayson looked exactly like his photograph, right down to the colorless translucent image that Alexandra had assumed was an artistic effect. His black pants and shirt resembled a pair of pajamas, and matched his long, dark hair. He was quite unremarkable in appearance, aside from being a ghost, and seemed to be speaking continuously as an assistant held up one book after another in front of him.

"*Haunting* is a phasmophobic word," he admonished a plump, rosy-cheeked witch, as he held a quill over the book that the assistant had opened. The quill appeared to be solid enough, and Alexandra heard it scratching on the pages of the book as Grayson continued to speak. "It presumes that the world exists primarily for living people to reside in, and that posthumous residents *haunting* it are an aberration."

The witch looked chastened as she slunk away, clutching her book.

"I was in Rome for your deathly world tour," said the next wizard in line. "You sounded even better than you did when you were alive."

The ghost's expression was odd, for a moment, before he smiled thinly. "The Italian Ministry of Magic was quite accommodating; more accommodating than our own Bureau of Hauntings has been, I might add. But even two-thousand-year-old Roman ghosts are still oppressed by their prejudiced living descendants."

Grayson continued to lecture his mostly sympathetic audience; the Radicalists, in particular, were all nodding as the ghostly writer/musician pontificated about haunting restrictions and 'corporeal

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privilege.' Alexandra's eyes were fixed on the ghost, but her thoughts were elsewhere as she proceeded through the line. It was only when she finally reached the head of the line that she saw the title of the book: *Deathly Society*.

"Well," Simon Grayson said, raising his eyebrows as he regarded Alexandra from above. "A young witch who appreciates classic wrock!" He smiled – the first time Alexandra had seen him displaying anything other than a stern, admonishing expression. "I assume that's the case, anyway, since you're a little too young to have heard me perform before I transitioned."

The assistant, a young witch in plain blue robes with a Boxley's Books pin on her collar, looked tired as she picked up another book off the table. She offered Alexandra a forced smile.

"Actually, I've never heard of you," Alexandra said. "But I saw that you were a ghost, and –"

Grayson's smile faded, while the store assistant made a coughing sound in the back of her throat.

"Oh, I see!" Grayson sneered. The table beneath him trembled suddenly, and the assistant grabbed at a pile of books threatening to spill off of it. The ghost abruptly descended, until he was nose-to-nose with Alexandra in the blink of an eye, and she was staring him in the face. His eyes were now glowing a pearlescent white, and she could feel a chill radiating from him as he spoke. "What are you, Muggle-born? Never seen a real, unliving ghost before? Go ahead, little girl, take a good, long look at the spook! Shall I say 'boo' and rattle some chains for you?"

"I've met ghosts before," she said. "I just wanted to know... how you became a ghost."

The ghost stared at her, and though she wasn't intimidated by his gaze, the cold that poured off of him gave her goosebumps.

"How did I become a ghost?" His tone was mocking. "Are you seriously asking me that? *Are you asking me how I became a ghost?*"

Abruptly, he rose high overhead, darting through the air like a fish, as books flew from the table, accompanied by a little cry from the witch trying to keep them in place. "What is this? I have twelve-year-old girls asking me questions like –"

"I'm thirteen," Alexandra said.

"– 'How did I become a ghost,' as if I'm her personal spirit guide to the afterlife!"

More books flew off of nearby shelves, as Grayson's voice rose to a screech. "This, *this* is corporeal privilege! You don't give us the most basic courtesy of educating children about the posthumous population so that we aren't obligated to answer questions about our personal transitions –"

"I'm sor—" Alexandra started to say, and then the ghost was looming over her again, enveloping her in his chilly aura.

"– just to satisfy some morbid, trivializing, adolescent fascination with death!" he bellowed. "You children who are so desperate to shock the grown-ups by *playing* at darkness! Where's your black makeup and your little green skulls and your silver mask to appall Mummy and Daddy with?"

Alexandra's eyes narrowed, and she resisted shivering. "I'm not *fascinated* by death, jerk!"

The angry ghost pulled back at that, and glowered at her.

"My brother died, and I thought maybe you could tell me why he didn't come back," she said, in a quieter voice. Her words caught in her throat; until that moment, she hadn't actually been certain why she wanted to talk to the ghost writer. Angrily, she turned away. "Sorry I bothered you. You know, if you don't like people asking you questions about being a ghost, maybe you shouldn't go around trying to sell books about being a ghost."

She was probably going to get in trouble for that, she thought. The older wizards and witches around her were staring at her, and she saw Marguerite in the back of the crowd, looking horrified and

dismayed.

She started to make her way towards the senior, expecting a scolding, and then Grayson said, "Wait."

The other bookstore patrons backed away from him as he descended to float next to Alexandra once more. She paused, but didn't look at him.

The ghost made a sound like a groan echoing from inside an empty cupboard. "We get asked that all the time, you know," he said. "Everyone has loved ones who have passed on, and they all want to know what happened to them, and why they can't talk to them."

His tone was less angry now. He just sounded exasperated. Alexandra looked up at him with a frown.

"What do you expect?" she asked.

The ghost regarded her for a moment, then let out a long, whispery sigh. "I can't give you the answers you're looking for. No ghost can. But I can give you a complimentary copy of my book." He snapped his fingers. His quill floated towards him, and the bookstore employee, who was still trying to restack the books he had sent flying, hurried over with a copy of *Deathly Society*.

"What was your brother's name?" he asked, a little more gently.

"Maximilian," Alexandra murmured.

The ghost nodded, and scribbled something on the title page. The assistant witch snapped the book shut and handed it to Alexandra.

"If your brother has passed beyond, then he no longer needs your help," the ghost said. "Death has claimed him. Save your concern for those who are still with you, the corporeal and the posthumous."

"Thanks," Alexandra mumbled, and pushed through the crowd, clutching the book to her chest. Everyone parted before her.

"Have you got all your schoolbooks, Alexandra?" Marguerite asked. Alexandra had to admit that she hadn't actually done any of her school shopping yet. The chaperone tapped her foot impatiently, while Alexandra hurriedly gathered the textbooks on her list.

Outside, everyone was waiting for her, but while Marguerite looked irritated, her friends offered sympathetic smiles.

With their school shopping done, they had nearly an hour before the rest of the Charmbridge students would be gathering to reboard the bus. Marguerite gave the eighth graders permission to walk around the plaza at the center of the Goblin Market.

"Can we go to Goody Pruett's?" David asked, pointing at the ice cream shop on the corner. He glanced at Angelique, who smiled coyly.

Marguerite eyed the two younger students. "All right, but don't go anywhere else."

"They *are* sweet!" Constance sounded mildly scandalized, as David and Angelique walked across the plaza together, and into *Goody Pruett's Witch-Made Pies, Cakes, and Other Confections*.

"They're still too young for courtin'," said Forbearance.

"Who's courtin'?" demanded Benjamin, as he and his brother joined them. Alexandra realized the Rash twins must have followed them yet again from Boxley's Books.

Constance gave him a forced smile. "No one, Benjamin."

"We weren't talking to you," Alexandra said.

Benjamin glowered at her, while Mordecai looked on, stone-faced, but Marguerite was standing only a few feet away, watching all of them. Alexandra realized the Rashes weren't going to go away, and she didn't feel like standing there exchanging glares.

"I want to go to the Owl Post," she said to Marguerite, pointing across the street.

Marguerite looked doubtful.

"You let *them* go!" Alexandra gestured at the Goody Pruett's shop where Angelique and David had

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gone. "I just want to send an owl!"

"Oh, all right. But straight there and straight back and don't cause any trouble."

Alexandra bit her tongue, and nodded. She walked across the plaza, pausing as a shiny brass Clockwork golem cut across her path, oblivious, scooping up litter from the street.

The Owl Post was a small, round tower with large, open gaps in the walls, high above the surrounding buildings. A steady stream of owls was flying in and out through the gaps, and Alexandra noticed several Clockworks diligently scraping droppings and feathers off the ground. Suddenly those wide-brimmed hats so many witches and wizards wore made more sense – she looked up warily as she darted through the door into the tower.

There were a fair number of customers waiting in line; Alexandra was surprised to see that one of the Owl Post employees behind the counter was a goblin, looking just as surly as the ones she'd seen at Gringotts the previous year.

She purchased two small mailing scrolls, and went over to the table set up to one side to hastily pen letters to Anna and Julia.

She had written to Julia a few days earlier, so she mentioned only that she was in Chicago now, and asked Julia to continue writing to her from Salem, where her sister would be starting tenth grade. They had talked often during the summer of Alexandra coming to visit again, but the Department of Magical Transportation's travel restrictions had quashed those plans. Julia had suggested perhaps a Christmas or Easter visit, and Alexandra hoped that would be possible, though returning to Croatoa also filled her with an uneasy, hollow feeling deep in the pit of her stomach that she refused to think about.

Her letter to Anna was briefer, saying only that she was worried, and asking the other girl to write back, or better yet, call her.

Of course she's okay, she thought. Anna's family had probably just gone on vacation or something. Or maybe her father was bringing her to Charmbridge personally. On a flying carpet, perhaps.

Then came the undesired thought: *Maybe he decided not to send Anna back to Charmbridge at all*. Alexandra tried to practice her Occlumency, pushing that thought down deep where it wouldn't bother her, and got back in line to mail her scrolls.

"But doesn't it concern you, when Governors have been given the power to declare virtually anyone a Dark Wizard?" asked a man with mutton-chops and a stovepipe hat standing in line ahead of her, wearing the breeches and overcoat of one of the Old Colonial communities. He had apparently been arguing with a taller, plumper wizard, who looked grandfatherly with his long white beard flowing down the front of his blue robe.

"I think it's about time the Wizards' Congress realized we're at war!" the bearded wizard said, in a deep, booming voice.

"They should have shut down the Automagicka while they're at it," grumbled a witch wearing traditional black robes and a tall, pointed hat.

"I don't like the Automagicka or any of these other newfangled contrivances, Clockworks and flying carpets and other foreign fancies, but I don't like this WODAMND Act either," said the Old Colonial wizard, shaking his head.

"Well, I think the WODAMND Act doesn't go far enough," the tall, grandfatherly wizard said. "You know that the Enemy has a daughter going to Charmbridge Academy, don't you?"

"I've heard," said the witch, as Alexandra stood very still. "So?"

"So, why haven't they interrogated her?" The blue-robed wizard leaned forward, and whispered conspiratorially, though still loudly enough to be heard throughout the post office. "I've heard two of the Enemy's children went through the Veil to treat with Dark Powers – and it was only the girl who

came back!"

Alexandra looked straight ahead, with her teeth clenched together so tightly her head started to hurt.

"Not sure I believe such tales," the Old Colonial said, his brow wrinkling beneath the brim of his hat.

"Why hasn't the little sorceress been chained up?" demanded the first man, brushing aside the other wizard's skepticism. "It might bring her father out of hiding!"

The witch in black frowned, and glanced at Alexandra. Alexandra was forcing her expression to be neutral, while in her pocket, her hand was gripping her wand tightly, and she prayed that she wouldn't suddenly produce another burst of 'spontaneous magic.'

"You're talking about a little girl," commented another man standing in line. "We don't punish children for the sins of their fathers."

"How many people died on the Roanoke Underhill?" The wizard with the long white beard was sounding less grandfatherly all the time. "And how many will die when the Enemy strikes again? If Cruciating one sorceress will save hundreds of lives..."

"Now, you can't be serious," said the witch.

"Of course I'm serious! We're dealing with the Dark Convention! As far as I'm concerned, they should bring back Dementors!"

There were a few gasps from the other people in line. Alexandra didn't know what Dementors were, but she was grateful when one of the Owl Post clerks called the elderly wizard to the counter next, and his rants were cut off as he began arguing about the rising cost of pigeon-rate postage.

Alexandra took slow, deep breaths and practiced pushing away her thoughts again, until it was her turn. The goblin hardly looked at her as he made change for the golden eagle she handed him with her letters, shoving a few pigeons back across the counter at her. Alexandra pocketed the change and hurried out of the Owl Post, before the adults resumed their conversation.

Agitated, she walked back across the plaza, and saw David and Angelique headed in the same direction. The two of them were both holding cones of Wyland West's 99-Flavored Ice Cream.

David nodded at her, then gagged as he licked his ice cream. "Eww! Tastes like... wet dog! Who'd make an ice cream flavor out of that?"

Angelique giggled, as she licked her scoop. "I got peppermint."

And then she almost dropped her cone. "Darla!" she squealed.

Alexandra froze. So did David.

In front of the Colonial Bank of the New World, a girl in frilly pink and gold robes, with her hair falling around her shoulders in tight black ringlets, turned and stared at them. Her hand was resting on the shoulder of a younger girl, who was also wearing a soft pink robe; Alexandra thought she looked about Bonnie Seabury's age. But it was the older girl on whom Alexandra's attention was fixed.

Darla Dearborn looked almost blank for a moment, as her eyes quickly scanned the crowded plaza – and then her gaze settled on Angelique, and her face broke into a smile. "Angelique!"

She leaned over and whispered something in the ear of the dark-haired younger girl, while Angelique hurried across the plaza, leaving David behind, standing there dumbfounded. Darla came down the stone steps in front of the CBNW building, and the two girls embraced, with Angelique carefully holding her ice cream cone away from Darla. From across the plaza, Alexandra could hear them speaking excitedly to one another.

She slowly walked over to join David.

"What the hell?" David muttered.

The last Alexandra had seen of Darla Dearborn had been during a furious magical duel – Darla and John Manuelito, the leader of the Mors Mortis Society, had tried to prevent Alexandra and her brother

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from opening the gate to the Lands Below. Alexandra and Maximilian had left the two Mors Mortis Society members battered and unconscious on the floor of the cavern beneath Charmbridge Academy, and when Alexandra had returned, she learned that Darla and John, along with nearly a dozen other MMS members, had been expelled for practicing Dark Arts.

Now, she wondered if it wouldn't have been better if Darla and John had won that fight.

Darla and Angelique looked just like their old selves, laughing and giggling and admiring one another's hair and robes, until a well-dressed man and a woman emerged from the CBNW branch, followed by a half-naked house-elf carrying a large purse. Darla looked up at them, and back at Angelique. She said something and leaned forward to kiss her friend on the cheek, and then glanced in Alexandra's direction.

Their eyes met for a moment, but Alexandra could read nothing in the other girl's expression. She kept her own face impassive. Then Darla and the younger girl hurried up the steps to join the two adults.

"What was she doing here?" David demanded, when they all rejoined the group of students at the edge of the plaza.

Angelique frowned at his tone. "Shopping with her parents. Her father was just made President of CBNW in Central Territory, you know."

David looked angry. "Crazy bitch should be locked up."

Angelique gasped. Marguerite heard him, too, and her mouth dropped open. "David Washington! Shame on you! That sort of language is completely unacceptable!"

"You got a dirty mouth," Benjamin said, from where he stood with his brother and the Pritchards. "Dirty like mud."

David growled, and Alexandra reached for her wand, but Marguerite stepped in front of them. "Don't you dare start a fight!"

"Oughter be limbed for cursin' 'round *respectable* girls!" Benjamin said.

Angelique looked quite offended; Constance and Forbearance looked appalled also, though it wasn't clear whether it was by David or the Rashes.

"You two mind your own business!" Marguerite said to Benjamin and Mordecai. She turned back to David, whose smirk faded when she glared at him. "I should tell Mrs. Speaks!"

"That girl cursed me!" David said.

"Well." Marguerite pursed her lips. "That's no excuse. If she hadn't been expelled, I'd make you apologize to her..."

"I'll apologize when she apologizes for cursing me! I had these huge mega-zits for weeks!"

"How about apologizing for cursing in front of *me*?" Angelique demanded.

David gaped at her.

"I don't like boys who use bad words, either," Angelique said, and with her nose in the air, she walked over to join a couple of ninth grade girls who were returning from a trip to a robe shop. David looked at Alexandra helplessly, but all she could do was shrug.

They waited for all the other Charmbridge students to return. When Innocence arrived with the sixth graders, she ran up to her sisters to show them what she had bought at *The Familiar Corner*: a large, squirming green toad.

Constance looked appalled. "Girl, why in heaven's name did you spend money on *that*?"

"We got plenty of toads back home," Forbearance said.

"But Mr. Jolly said this hain't just a toad, it's a *familiar*!" Innocence hugged the poor creature to her as its legs kicked frantically.

The ride home was even less fun than the ride to Chicago had been. Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence once more sat with Benjamin and Mordecai, and Angelique sat with the older girls, laughing a little too hard at their jokes. David sat with Alexandra, looking unhappy and confused.

Eventually, they started a game of wizard chess to relieve the boredom. Alexandra was rather glad when they reached David's house in Detroit before they could finish the game, as she was losing.

"Lucky," he said, packing up the pieces. "I'll totally own you next time."

"Yeah, whatever." Her retort lacked conviction, and he paused for a moment, before shouldering his bag of school supplies.

"Hey, don't worry about Anna," he said. "I'm sure she'll be there when school starts."

"Sure." She nodded. "See you next week."

He glanced at Angelique, and cleared his throat. "Bye, Angelique."

The other girl paused – when David had gotten up, Angelique had suddenly become very animated in expressing her opinion of whether shimmering or iridescent trim was this year's fashion in dress robes – and she turned her head to look at him as if only now noticing he was leaving.

"Good-bye, David," she said, rather coolly.

David unhappily trudged down the aisle to the front of the bus, and Alexandra noticed Angelique watching him, once his back was turned.

"Bye, David!" piped up Innocence, as he passed their booth.

"Hush, girl!" Benjamin and Mordecai both said at once, but then Constance and Forbearance both said, "Good-bye, David!" as well. He turned to look at them, and gave them a wan smile and a wave, before exiting the bus. Alexandra saw his parents waiting outside the large house he lived in, in what was obviously one of the nicer parts of Detroit.

With David dropped off, Alexandra was alone for the rest of the trip back to Larkin Mills. Angelique was not quite so active in her conversation at the next table over, and Alexandra didn't hear much conversation from the Ozarkers' table at all.

As the bus sped along the Automagicka, Alexandra took out her signed copy of *Deathly Society*. Simon 'Ghastly' Grayson's ghostly countenance leered at her from the black cover, as he faded in and out of view, with his arms crossed over his chest. She could see a few other ghostly figures who seemed to be appearing and disappearing just out of view behind him. She flipped the book over, to read a rather uninteresting biography of the former wrock star-turned-posthumous rights activist, and then opened it at last, to look at what he had inscribed in feathery handwriting on the inside cover of the book:

"For Maximilian and those who remember him.

Death only wins

when you have been forgotten.

Simon Grayson"

Chapter 5 — The Girl Who Came Back



Alexandra hurried to check her email as soon as she arrived home that night. To her surprise, she had a message from her sister Valeria, who was studying history in Europe. Alexandra had sent her an email at the beginning of summer, but Valeria had warned her that she used Muggle computers only rarely.

“Dear Alexandra,” began her message, *“I hope this electronic mail message finds you well.”*

Valeria White had never actually met Maximilian – Alexandra had met Valeria and her twin sisters, Lucilla and Drucilla, for the first time at Maximilian's funeral – and so her grief over the loss of their half-brother was not as acute, but she was concerned about how Alexandra and Julia were coping. She also suggested that she might be returning to America again over the holidays to visit her family, and

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hoped to see her younger sisters as well.

Alexandra was pleased to receive the email, and pleased that she might see her sisters again soon. But she had really been hoping for a message from Anna, and there wasn't one.

There was none the following day, either.

Summer school was out, and Alexandra didn't feel like staying in the house. She decided to go to Old Larkin Pond, since she wouldn't have many more opportunities to seek solitude there. Her stepfather had the day off, which meant she had to get past him first.

When she walked into the living room, Archie was sprawled on the couch, watching football on TV.

"I'm going to the library," she said.

He sat up and pressed the mute button. "Not so fast. I want to talk to you, Alex."

"About what?" She frowned. Conversations with her stepfather were few and far between, especially the last few years. She didn't really dislike him, and she didn't think he disliked her. But they had never been close, and she was totally not in the mood for one of his rare attempts at 'bonding.'

"Sit down," he said, patting the couch next to him.

With a not-very-well-concealed sigh, she plopped herself down on the couch, and looked disinterestedly at the football players running around on the field.

"Your mother is worried about you, you know," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I'm fine. Have I gotten into any trouble this summer?"

"Compared to usual, not much." He smiled wryly. "Listen, Alex, your mother and I have noticed you're starting to talk to boys more, on the phone and at school, apparently –"

"What?" Alexandra wondered where this was coming from.

"– I just thought it would be a good idea for us to have a talk about that."

"Oh, my God." She turned to stare at him. "You're not going to try and tell me about the birds and the bees, are you? Seriously? Mom is a *nurse* – I knew where babies come from when I was six!"

Archie cleared his throat, looking amused and exasperated. "Yes, I'm sure your mother has biology covered. But you're probably starting to become interested in boys, and boys may be getting interested in you, and I know what boys are like – now listen, Alexandra!" he snapped. She was groaning, as she put her head in her hands.

"I don't need you to tell me about boys!" She couldn't imagine ever wanting to have this conversation with Archie, but she was especially not in the mood for it right now. And then, as she looked away from him and her eyes fell on the TV screen again, she dropped her hands, and her eyes widened.

"That's David's father!" she said.

"What?" Archie blinked, confused.

The camera had momentarily panned away from the field, to the players sitting on the bench. One of them was a large, bald, black man, encased in shoulder pads and armor beneath his blue and white uniform, with his helmet sitting next to him on the bench. Alexandra was quite certain that he was the man she had seen in front of David's house in Detroit.

"David – the boy who sent you the cell phone last Christmas?"

Alexandra groaned again. Archie looked at the screen. "That's Davon Washington."

"That's David's dad."

"Davon Washington's son goes to your school?"

"I guess so." Alexandra had little interest in football, and didn't even know who the teams playing were.

"Hmm." Archie looked at her again. "So you've met his father?"

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"No! I've only seen him out the window of the bus when we stop at his house."

"Okay." Archie scratched his chin.

"Would you stop looking at me like that? Me and David are just friends. He likes another girl."

"Ah."

Alexandra felt her face starting to turn red. "That's not – look, I am totally not interested in him!"

"Okay." Archie's expression was perfectly deadpan.

"Stop that! I'm not interested in any boys, and no boys are interested in me, and I don't need you to warn me about what boys are like!" She looked up at him, with a miserable expression. "Can I please just go to the library?"

He folded his arms. "Be back by dinner. We're going to talk about this later, Alex."

She grabbed her backpack and stormed out of the house.

After her indignation wore off, she felt a little silly. She knew she didn't like David except as a friend, but Archie probably thought David was some popular football player's son now, and that she had a crush on him. She just hoped she could avoid being trapped into any more conversations with her stepfather about boys for the rest of the week.

She spent the rest of the day at Old Larkin Pond, lying in the grass, ignoring the snakes that occasionally slithered around her. She stared up at the sky, wishing she hadn't provoked Diana Grimm into destroying her broom, wishing Anna would send her an owl or an email, wishing she didn't have to deal with her mother and stepfather worrying about her, and most of all, wishing Maximilian wasn't dead. After three months, it still hurt, knowing that her brother was dead and it was her fault.



Her mother was home that evening, so for once, Alexandra and her parents all ate dinner together. Claudia tried to draw her out a little, but Alexandra was now feeling depressed and sullen. When Archie mentioned David again, it didn't improve her mood any.

"I didn't even know his father was a football player," she said.

"Huh." Archie grunted. "I didn't think you went to a private school where professional athletes send their kids."

"He's probably the only one." Alexandra looked at her mother for a moment, and her mother looked back at her uncomfortably. Alexandra wondered what Archie would think if she told him that Davon Washington's son was actually a wizard.

"That's a shame." Archie chuckled. "I was hoping you could get us tickets. Too bad your friend's father doesn't play for a better team."

Alexandra gave him a sour look.

"I'm joking." Archie's expression grew more serious. "Listen, about David..."

"Would you knock it off?" Alexandra shook her head. "I keep telling you, David's just a friend."

At that moment, her cell phone rang. Although Alexandra had been thrilled to finally have a cell phone, she didn't actually use it very often, and there were only a handful of people who ever called her. She reached into her pocket, pulled out the phone, and looked at the screen. She stifled a groan.

"Who is it?" Claudia asked.

"David," she mumbled, as she texted him to call back in a little while, trying to ignore the way her mother and stepfather exchanged glances.

To her immense relief, her parents did not grill her further, though she suspected it wasn't going to be the last she'd hear about it. David called her again just after she returned to her room.

"How you doing, Alex?" His voice sounded more tentative than usual.

"Fine, except my stepfather has decided he needs to talk to me about boys."

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“What for?”

She snorted.

“Have you heard from Anna?” he asked, after a moment.

“No.” Alexandra told David about Anna's father's threat to pull her out of school. David tried to sound upbeat, but they were both uneasy about the lack of owls, phone calls, or emails from California.

The prospect of starting a new year at Charmbridge without Anna, and with Constance and Forbearance being forbidden to associate with her, filled Alexandra with gloom, and David's voice trailed off after another unsuccessful attempt to reassure her.

There was an uncomfortable pause, and then Alexandra said, “So, I hear your dad's a pro football player.”

There was an even longer pause.

“Who told you?” David said at last.

“I saw him on TV.”

“Oh.” He sighed. “Today's game sucked.”

“Why didn't you ever tell me?”

“Cause it doesn't matter. Are you a football fan?”

“Not really.”

“Nobody at Charmbridge cares. So why's anyone need to know about my dad?”

Though her own situation was very different, Alexandra could sympathize with that. “I won't tell anyone. Though you're right, hardly anyone else would even know what it means. You didn't seem to be having much luck getting Angelique interested.”

“Yeah. About that.” David took a breath. “I wanted to talk to you about Angelique.”

Alexandra blinked. “You wanted to talk to *me* about Angelique?”

“She was all pissed off at me Friday! You saw how she barely even said good-bye to me.”

“Well, yeah.” Alexandra snorted.

“So, what do I do?”

“What do you do?” Alexandra stared at the phone in astonishment.

“I mean, I know she's mad at me, but what am I supposed to do? Should I just say 'Hi' when we get on the bus next week, like nothing happened, or do I have to apologize to her even though I'm not sure what I did wrong, or what?”

“How should I know?” Alexandra rolled her eyes, and then her mouth dropped open. “Wait a minute. Are you calling me for *girl advice*?”

“Well, you're a girl, aren't you?” David said, sounding a little testy.

“You are such a dork!”

“C'mon, Alex...”

“You want me to help you make up with Angelique?”

“You were the one who tried to help me get with her last year.”

“Yeah, and look how well that turned out.”

David was quiet for a moment. “Good point,” he admitted. “But it was Darla's fault I wound up in the infirmary.”

Alexandra sighed. “Well, if you want Angelique to stop being mad at you, you should probably apologize for calling her best friend a crazy bitch.”

“Darla *is* crazy! That Pustulant Pimples Curse *hurt*!”

“Do you want to make up with Angelique or not?”

She could almost hear David grimacing.

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“Will apologizing work? Maybe I should give her candy, too? Like, those little chocolates that girls like...”

“Why don't you give her football tickets?”

“Funny.”

By the time she got off the phone with David, her spirits had been lifted a little. After putting the phone down, she took Nigel out of his cage, and let the snake coil around her hands, provoking a jealous squawk from Charlie.

“Quiet, Charlie. I'll give you some owl treats in a minute.”

And Alexandra realized suddenly that for just a minute, she had forgotten that Anna was missing, that her friends were being isolated from her, and for just a little while, she had forgotten that Maximilian was dead.

Is this how it happens? she wondered. Is this how the dead get forgotten? One stupid phone conversation at a time?

She wasn't going to forget Max, she swore. She wasn't going to let death win.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

By the end of the week, Alexandra still hadn't heard from Anna. She struggled to remain optimistic.

She read *Deathly Society*, when she wasn't able to escape to Old Larkin Pond. She was annoyed that the ghost writer spoke very little about his own death, and said almost nothing about his experience of becoming a ghost. She did learn that ghosts had their own cliques and societies, annual galas, commemorations, and even ghostly militias. There was apparently no solidarity among wizards in death: Grayson resented the 'haunt-bound specters of ages gone by' as much as he did the Bureau of Hauntings. The posthumous wrock star had a tendentious and self-aggrandizing style, and Alexandra was let down that a book written by an actual ghost proved to be so uninformative and boring.

As she expected, Archie insisted on giving her a few more lectures about boys and why (as she interpreted his warnings) she should lock herself in her room and have nothing to do with them until she was thirty. Her mother, in a vague, indirect way that Alexandra would have found comical if she weren't in such a sour mood, seemed to be trying to find out where Alexandra stood regarding David, and boys in general. After she overheard her mother and stepfather referring to her as 'moody' and 'turning into a teenager,' Alexandra realized that they thought the bad mood she had been in since the beginning of summer was due to adolescence.

Of course, she knew that had nothing to do with it. She wasn't some hormonal teenager like other girls. She was completely in control of her emotions, and she had a very good reason for being 'moody' – it was just a reason she couldn't share with her parents, and didn't want to talk about.

If they think that's all there is to it, maybe they'll leave me alone, she thought, which made it easy to continue sulking, avoiding conversation, and behaving as if all interaction with Claudia and Archie were an intolerable imposition upon her.

When the Charmbridge bus came to collect her the following Friday, Alexandra was ready to go. She held Charlie's cage in one hand – as usual, the raven was complaining loudly about being caged – and Nigel's in the other. Her mother stood next to her, and briefly ran a hand over her daughter's newly-shortened hair. Alexandra frowned, but allowed it.

“Are you sure that's all you need to take to school?” Claudia asked, for at least the third time. Alexandra didn't even have a single suitcase this time, just her backpack.

“I'm sure.” Alexandra could have told her that it was a magic backpack and contained nearly as much space inside as her bedroom closet, but she didn't like watching her mother flinch when she mentioned magic.

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"You do want to go, don't you?" When Alexandra turned to look at her mother in surprise, Claudia said, in a quiet voice, "You don't *have* to go to Charmbridge. I know they've probably told you that you don't belong in a normal school –"

"For normal people?" Alexandra asked.

Claudia's eyes clouded over. "That's not what I meant."

"I'm not normal, Mom. Not for this world." She gestured at the suburban Muggle neighborhood around them. Down the street, she saw other kids walking to their own bus stop, waiting to be taken to Larkin Mills Middle School. Brian was probably there, and Billy Boggleston, too.

"If you're not happy in that world –" Claudia said.

Alexandra shook her head. What did her mother expect her to do, suddenly decide to abandon the wizarding world, right now, while she was waiting for the bus?

"What makes you think I'd be happier here?" She shrugged, then looked at her mother, meeting her eyes for the first time that morning. "Don't worry about me, Mom. It's where I belong."

The Charmbridge bus came around the corner, and Alexandra heard Billy Boggleston hoot something she was meant to hear, something about riding the short bus, but it was the same stupid comment he'd made for the last three years and not even worth a glare in his direction.

Claudia looked a little wistful and a little sad, and Alexandra felt a sudden pang of guilt for making her worry. It wasn't really her mother's fault that she'd turned away from the world – the world of Alexandra's father – that had rejected her first.

"I'll be back," Alexandra said. She looked away, as the Charmbridge bus rolled to a stop in front of her and the door opened. "I'll miss you," she mumbled.

Claudia smiled. "Don't forget to write."

Alexandra nodded, and boarded the bus.

"Take your seat, Miss Quick," Mrs. Speaks said rather curtly. The bus driver looked unusually tired, so Alexandra just nodded to her and walked to where Angelique was sitting. The Pritchards would already be at Charmbridge, she knew, and she would not find out if Anna had arrived yet until they got there.

Angelique was applying a shimmering, moist effect to her lips with the tip of her wand, and didn't even look up from her mirror when Alexandra sat down. Sitting on the seat next to her was a traveling cage, in which Alexandra knew was her pet jarvey, Honey. Alexandra hung Charlie's cage from a hook overhead, and set Nigel's cage on the table. Angelique put away her mirror, and gave a little shudder, looking at the snake.

"Really, Alexandra, a raven *and* a snake? Are you going to add a toad to your menagerie next?"

"Says the girl with a talking rat."

Angelique sniffed condescendingly. "Well, at least you don't have something ridiculous, like a falcon. I mean, a familiar like *that* is just showing off, don't you think?"

Alexandra shook her head and rolled her eyes.

They picked David up in Detroit. He was carrying a hooded cage, which he held aloft in one hand as he dragged his luggage behind him, and paused for a moment, uncertainly, when he reached the booth where Alexandra and Angelique were sitting. Then, before either of them could say anything, he set his cage on their table. Angelique opened her mouth. Inside, David's falcon, Malcolm, uttered a soft keening sound.

David shoved his bags under the table and sat down next to Angelique.

"Okay, wait," he said, as the bus began moving again, before Angelique could protest.

Angelique's mouth stayed open. She looked caught between outrage and astonishment.

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"I shouldn't have called Darla a bitch and I'm sorry," he said in a rush.

Angelique's eyebrows went up. Alexandra leaned back and watched with interest.

"But she *did* curse me," David said.

Angelique frowned.

"But my mom told me a gentleman doesn't talk like that in front of a lady," he continued hastily.

"And also that she'd have slapped the taste out of my mouth."

"I think I like your mother," Angelique said.

David looked at her hopefully.

Angelique pressed her lips together for a moment, with a pouty expression.

"Darla's not evil," she said softly. She glanced at Alexandra, who did not react. "She did a lot of stupid things last year. But her family's been pretty hard on her, especially after what happened with her sister."

"The girl who was with her in the Goblin Market?" David asked.

"No, that was her younger sister, Mary," Angelique said. "I meant her older sister, Hilary."

Alexandra didn't want to hear about Darla or her problems, so she interrupted the conversation and asked, "So who's your roommate going to be this year?"

"I don't know," Angelique shrugged. "I don't see why I need a new roommate."

"You think you'll get a room to yourself? That would be pretty sweet," David said.

"Sweet?" Angelique giggled.

Alexandra closed her eyes. David and Angelique's chatter no longer interested her, and it was only when they left the Automagicka to begin climbing a winding mountain road that she opened them again.

At the top of the small mountain, the Charmbridge bus came to a halt, and Mrs. Speaks ordered everyone out. There were fewer sixth graders than last year, and Alexandra expected Mrs. Speaks to help the other teachers escort the handful of Muggle-borns across the Invisible Bridge, but instead, to Alexandra's surprise, no sooner did the last student disembark with her bags than the bus driver closed the door and turned the bus around to head back down the mountain.

Alexandra frowned in puzzlement, and then turned to walk to the bluff overlooking a wide river valley. Ms. Gale, the portly Charmbridge groundskeeper and head custodian, was there, along with Mrs. Price, the Dean of sixth grade, dressed in her usual black robes and tall hat, and Mrs. Murphy, the school nurse, whose bright red hair and round figure made her look much younger than she was. Mrs. Murphy smiled at Alexandra, but neither Ms. Gale nor Mrs. Price looked delighted to see her. In fairness, they probably weren't paying much attention to her at all, as one of the sixth graders, a chubby boy who had not even bothered to put on a robe over his jeans and sneakers, was backing away from the edge of the cliff, even as older students were beginning to step off of it.

It must have looked to the boy at first as if everyone were marching blindly to their deaths, but they didn't fall when they went over the edge – instead, they began walking across the Invisible Bridge, high above the valley.

The young Muggle-born boy did not find the line of students walking on air to be reassuring. Instead, he began shaking his head, resisting Mrs. Price's attempts to coax him onto the bridge, and when she took him by the hand, he burst into tears.

"They told me about wizard bridges and trains!" the boy wailed. "They told me that bridge fails every seven years and kills a Muggle-born!"

"That's ridiculous!" Mrs. Price snapped. "Who told you such nonsense?"

"Anyway, the last time it failed was *two* years ago," said Ms. Gale. "So –"

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The rest of her response was drowned out by the boy's scream of terror as he dug in his heels, while Mrs. Price gave the groundskeeper a withering look.

"I hope they didn't tell him who was on the bridge when it failed," David said.

"Me, too." Alexandra wasn't in the mood to be amused.

Angelique, walking ahead of her with David, was doing a credible job of looking unconcerned – she only swallowed once, as Alexandra stepped onto the bridge behind her, and then they were all walking over the valley together. Some kids, even after crossing back and forth over the Invisible Bridge many times, still weren't able to look down, but Alexandra was staring down past her feet as she walked. Down there on the valley floor, where a river wound its way between the trees, Alexandra had spent many afternoons the previous year, learning to wizard-duel with her brother and his fellow Stormcrows from the Blacksburg Magery Institute. They were some of her fondest memories.

Once she reached the other side of the valley, she quickened her pace, and even opened Charlie's cage, allowing the raven to fly ahead. She knew Charlie would find the window to the room she and Anna shared – hopefully Anna would be there, to let the raven in.

The seven walls of Charmbridge Academy rose ahead of them as they emerged from the forest. Alexandra didn't look at the surrounding lawns, sandlots, athletic fields, and greenhouses; she ascended the steps, and walked with the other students through the front entrance hall.

Many students would be here already, having arrived during the previous week. The Pritchards, Alexandra knew, would have already settled into their room, down the hall from hers. David's roommate, fellow Muggle-born Dylan Weitzner, greeted him as they headed towards the eighth graders' dorms. Alexandra and Angelique left them behind as they went up the stairs to the girls' dorms, and passed under the portrait of the Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall monitor.

The bearded wizard in the painting greeted them jovially. "Welcome back, Miss Quick, Miss Devereaux."

Alexandra looked up. "Have you seen Anna?" she asked him.

The warlock raised his bushy white eyebrows. "Why, no, I don't believe I have seen Miss Chu yet this week."

"Maybe she's just arriving late," Angelique suggested. "With the trains still not running..."

When she opened the door to her room, Alexandra found Anna's bed bare, her desk empty, and no sign that the other girl had been here since the start of summer. Outside the window, Charlie was sitting on the sill pecking at the glass. With a heavy heart, Alexandra opened the window and let her familiar in.

"Looks like it's just you and me, Charlie," she murmured, stroking the bird's feathers.

"Alexandra," Charlie cooed.

From next door, through the bathroom that they shared with the adjoining room, Alexandra heard a loud, obnoxious voice screech: "Where's the bitch?"

Angelique and Darla had shared this two-room suite with Alexandra and Anna for the past two years; now, Angelique, too, would be unpacking her things in an empty room. Empty except for her jarvey, whom she must have freed from her cage, with its Silencing Charm.

"Shut up, Honey!" Angelique cried, sounding more distraught and angry than she usually did when scolding her foul-mouthed pet, and whereas usually her remonstrations were futile, Alexandra heard no further retorts from Honey.

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At dinner that night, Alexandra found the Rashes sitting with the Pritchards, but the presence of the boys wasn't enough to prevent Innocence from jumping out of her seat when she saw Alexandra enter

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the cafeteria with Angelique, David, and Dylan.

"Hi, Alex, David!" she greeted them, holding her skirt up away from her feet as she rushed over to stand in front of them before they could reach the serving line. "It's alright me callin' you Alex, hain't it?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess." Alexandra was a bit nonplussed, as was David.

"Git back here, you unmindful ornery little brat!" Benjamin called angrily.

"Benjamin!" Constance said, in almost as sharp a tone, startling him.

"We'll be back directly," Forbearance said soothingly, as she and Constance rose from their table to fetch their little sister. The Rashes were half-rising from their seats as well, but Constance made a staying gesture with her hand, eyeing them, and the boys frowned and slowly sat back down.

"I'm sorry I called y'all colored," Innocence said to David and Angelique. "I didn't mean nothin' bad by it, swear on my witch's honor. Put a needle through my eye an' stitch my lips shut if I'm lyin'!"

Angelique winced a little. David opened his mouth, and then shook his head.

"It's all right," he said. "Just don't use that word, 'kay?"

"We're awful sorry," Constance said, joining them.

"Terrible sorry," Forbearance said, giving Innocence a reproving look.

"I still can't figger what's wrong with bein' colored, though," Innocence said. "I think your skin's real purdy. Like chocolate!"

Constance and Forbearance turned red. Angelique put a hand over her mouth to stifle a squeal of laughter, while David's jaw dropped.

"Innocence!" Constance and Forbearance exclaimed together.

"I'm so sorry, David," Constance said, as they each grabbed one of the girl's hands and began dragging her back to their table. "We'll learn her to mind her tongue!"

"We'll talk to y'all later," Forbearance whispered, as they retreated, with Innocence stuttering: "But – but – but –!"

Angelique's shoulders were still shaking with laughter. David shook his head.

"Chocolate," he repeated. He glared at his roommate, who was also snickering.

"She was trying to be sweet." Angelique put a hand on David's shoulder, and all of his indignation seemed to vanish, along with his power of speech. He nodded mutely, and Alexandra exchanged a sympathetic look with Dylan.



Back in Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall that night, freed of their chaperones, Constance and Forbearance visited Alexandra in her room. Alexandra was glad to talk to them without either the Rashes or their 'high-headed' little sister around, but Anna's absence weighed heavily on her mind, and the Pritchards' well-meaning reassurances sounded empty to her. When Angelique knocked on the door, hearing their voices, Alexandra realized the other girl probably missed her roommate as well.

By the time everyone returned to their own rooms, Alexandra was tired, both physically and mentally.

She had been hiding her grief all summer. She didn't want her friends to worry about her, and she didn't want her parents asking questions. But she had been unprepared for the renewed flood of emotions triggered by being back at Charmbridge. The previous three months seemed to have vanished, and it was as if Maximilian had just died again.

But she swore she was not going to break down. She hated crying, and she was determined not to shed any more tears for Maximilian. Tears wouldn't bring him back.

She went to bed, and dreamed of a flying bird-monster, flapping across a rough, uneven surface, like

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a cave painting moving across a stone wall. It opened its mouth and shrieked, and below it, a human-like stick figure fell backwards, tumbling into a dark hole and disappearing.

Alexandra screamed, and begged the stick-figure to come back. She reached out, holding her wand, wanting to call the figure back, and then she heard the bird-creature cawing again.

“Alexandra!” cawed Charlie. Alexandra sucked in a breath. She was sitting up in bed, shaking, and a noise at the door had awoken her.

With a click, the door swung open, and a shadowy figure stood outlined in the light from the hallway outside. Alexandra stared at the silhouette, and then a voice said, “Lights.”

The lamps in their room magically blazed alight, and Anna stood in the doorway, wearing her red cloak with its hood pulled up over her head, staring at her.

“Are you all right?” Anna asked. “I thought I heard you scream—”

Then she let out a muffled squeak, as Alexandra leaped out of bed and almost tackled her friend, wrapping her arms around the smaller girl so tightly that Anna groaned a little.

Alexandra loosened her grip, taking several deep breaths as she squeezed her eyes shut, almost hard enough to give herself a headache. Her eyes burned, but when she opened them again, there were no tears. She pulled away and looked down at her friend.

“I... where were you?” she whispered.

Anna was staring at her, her eyes wide and her mouth open, and then, slowly, a smile crept across her face.

“Sorry,” Anna said. “I didn't mean to make you worry.”

Alexandra swallowed hard and shook her head, forcing a smile of her own. “I knew you'd come back.”

Anna had been carrying an enormous birdcage, while behind her, one of Charmbridge's elves was wobbling a little with a smaller bag balanced atop its head, and a larger suitcase being dragged behind it. Anna carried her caged familiar into the room, and Alexandra quickly relieved the elf of its burden.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the bag in one hand and the handle to the suitcase in the other. “That was very nice of you, to help Anna carry her bags upstairs.”

The elf, comically cross-eyed, stared not-quite-at her, and then straightened the frayed rag with armholes that he was wearing. “It's Mubble's job, Miss.” She expected him to disappear with a pop – the elves avoided being seen by students – but instead he turned and wobbled quickly back down the hall.

Alexandra turned around. Anna's great horned owl, Jingwei, hooted a rather predatory greeting at Charlie, who squawked and fluttered over to Alexandra's shoulder.

“You didn't come along for the shopping trip to the Goblin Market,” Alexandra said, almost accusingly. “And you never answered my letter—”

“I couldn't come earlier – there's no Wizardrail service from California to Central Territory,” Anna said. “And if you sent a regular letter to my house in San Francisco, I was at my grandparents' house.”

“Your grandparents? I thought they were dead.”

“My other grandparents,” Anna said quietly. “My Muggle grandparents.”

From her tone of voice, it did not sound like it had been a happy visit. Alexandra knew Anna had little contact with the Muggle side of her family – she was under the impression that Anna's mother had not had a good relationship with her parents, and that it had deteriorated further after she had married a wizard. Anna looked very tired, now, as she pulled her clothes out of her suitcase and began putting them away. Alexandra took her by the shoulders and turned her around.

“What's going on, Anna?” she asked.

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Anna looked down. “You know my father is running for the Wizards' Congress, right?”

“Yes.” Alexandra nodded. Anna had been both proud and worried about that.

“His enemies are trying to frame him... he was accused of being a Dark Wizard.”

Alexandra's mouth dropped open, and she started to say, “That's ridiculous!”

Anna's shoulders shook, and she put her hands over her face and began crying. “They arrested him! They won't tell us what he's being charged with or when there will be a trial or if there's a trial, and all the other Chinese wizards in California are furious and threatening to split the Territory again if they don't free him, but nobody cares about me or my mother! Nobody helped us at all!”

As if she had been bottling up her tears for days, Anna was suddenly unable to speak further, and she would have collapsed to the floor if Alexandra hadn't helped her to her bed instead, where the other girl sat and sobbed for nearly five minutes before she could speak again.

“My m-m-mother insisted I go to s-school,” Anna stammered, wiping at her face with her sleeve. “But I know sh-she hates s-s-staying with my grandparents, and nobody from the Wizard J–Justice Department is ever going to tell her what's going on.” She blew her nose messily.

Alexandra shook her head. “That's terrible.” She felt very selfish for wanting Anna to be here, now. “You could have stayed with your mother – I'm sure Dean Grimm would let you make up your missed classwork...”

Anna shook her head. “M-mom said, I'll be n-n-othing without an education. She made me go.” Her lip trembled, and she looked about to burst into tears again.

Alexandra picked up her wand and pointed it at Anna's damp handkerchief. “*Exaresco*,” she muttered, and then took the now-dry handkerchief and applied it to Anna's face.

“Has your father got a lawyer?” she asked.

“I don't know. I don't know how to find a wizard lawyer.” Anna sniffled, as Alexandra continued wiping away her tears. “It probably wouldn't matter, anyway, because of the WODAMND Act.”

“I'm sorry, Anna.”

She wanted to tell Anna that it would be all right, that surely it was a misunderstanding, or the WJD would decide they'd made a mistake, or the Chinese wizarding community would force them to set Mr. Chu free. Anything to make her friend feel better. But she knew only too well how useless such meaningless assurances were.

Anna looked at her, and managed a small half-smile. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.” Alexandra sat back on the bed. “How did you get here from California, anyway?”

“Mrs. Speaks picked me up. We had to take the Automagicka all the way from San Francisco.” Anna yawned. “I think she's been having to drive all over, 'cause of all the kids who can't get here by Wizardrail or Portkey.”

Alexandra nodded. “You look tired. We should go to bed.”

“How have you been, Alex?” Anna asked softly. “Really?”

Alexandra smiled. “I'm fine.”

Anna clearly didn't believe her, but they were both too tired to continue the discussion. Charlie retreated into the cage Alexandra kept by her bed as Anna set Jingwei free to fly out into the night, and then the two girls climbed into their beds and fell asleep.

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“I don't want to tell everyone about my father,” Anna said to Alexandra, the next morning.

Alexandra nodded. “Just say you were late because Mrs. Speaks had to pick you up from California. It's no one else's business.”

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Anna looked relieved. “How about you?” she asked quietly. “Have you talked to your family?”

“You mean Julia? Yes, we wrote back and forth all summer. I couldn't visit, though.” She sounded regretful, for a moment, and when Anna looked at her with concern, she added, in an almost cheerful tone: “And Valeria actually sent me an email.”

“That's great.” Anna still sounded concerned. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “What about... your father?”

Alexandra shook her head. “As far as I'm concerned, I hope I never hear from him again.”

Anna's worried expression faded when they emerged into the hallway. Constance and Forbearance let out joyful exclamations when they saw her, and, joined by Angelique, the girls made their way downstairs for breakfast.

David was waiting for them. Though it was clear that he was mostly waiting for Angelique, he grinned happily when he saw Anna.

“Someone's gotta keep an eye on Alex,” he said. “Specially since C&F aren't allowed to hang around with us Mud – er, unrespectable sorts, in public.”

“Cee and Eff?” Constance looked at David as if he'd grown a tentacle in the middle of his forehead, while Angelique frowned at him.

They explained to Anna the uncomfortable situation with the Rashes, as they approached the eighth grade bulletin board. On the Sunday before the first week of class, there were usually a host of announcements about dress codes, forbidden items, changed room locations, and other administrative matters. Ahead, Alexandra saw Lydia Ragland and her friends looking at the morning's announcements, and back at her, and then they hastily scuttled away.

Even before they reached the bulletin board, a piece of paper folded into a bird-like origami shape came flapping its way through the air and made a zig-zagging line towards Alexandra.

“Uh oh,” said David, as Alexandra stared at the approaching office note, feeling more resignation than dread. Sure enough, it almost flew into her face before unfolding itself and hovering insistently before her eyes, until she snatched it out of the air to read it.

“How could I have done anything?” she protested. “I just got here last night!”

Yet the note was clear: she was being summoned to the Dean's office, immediately.

“Don't fret none.” Forbearance tried to sound reassuring. “It's prolly just...”

“Dean Grimm wants to welcome Alex back to school, like she does every year?” David said dryly.

“I'll see you later,” Alexandra said to her friends. She patted a very worried-looking Anna on the shoulder, and trudged down the hall towards the administrative wing.

Many possibilities went through her head as she walked past other students who were making their way towards the cafeteria for breakfast, none of them good. Maybe Dean Grimm had talked to her sister, and was going to punish Alexandra for her illegal broom rides, or for calling Diana Grimm names. Or maybe she had decided that the daughter of Abraham Thorn just didn't belong at Charmbridge after all.

Even in her distracted state of mind, Alexandra didn't fail to notice the stares and the whispers. A group of eleventh grade girls actually detoured to the other side of the corridor when they saw her coming. Alexandra would have found it hilarious that older girls were afraid of her, except that she knew why. She now carried the reputation that came with being one of Abraham Thorn's children, and her father had made sure it would be no small burden. It was exactly what Maximilian had feared, what he had tried to protect her and Julia from. She fixed the girls with a hard stare as they continued to mutter amongst themselves as she passed by, and they averted their eyes.

She heard “Lands Below,” and one girl whispered, “– she's the girl who came back.”

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At the administrative office, Miss Marmsley, Charmbridge's school secretary for generations, gazed down at her from her full-length portrait frame. "The Dean is expecting you, Miss Quick," she said. "You may go directly in."

"I don't suppose you can tell me what I did?" Alexandra asked the portrait.

Miss Marmsley only had two expressions, in Alexandra's experience: disapproving and aghast. Now the long-dead secretary's portrait seemed unsure which one was appropriate.

"I do not discuss disciplinary matters with students," she said, pointing a finger down the hall.

Disciplinary matters, Alexandra thought, walking down the hall to the Dean's office. She hoped they'd at least let her have some breakfast before they kicked her out of school. Since Miss Marmsley had told her to go directly in, she didn't bother knocking, but simply opened the door and walked in.

Being summoned to the Dean's office was not a new experience for Alexandra, and walking into Ms. Grimm's office with a mixture of defiance and dread was also familiar. But she was completely unprepared for the *deja vu* she felt when she saw Lilith Grimm sitting behind her desk, and Darla Dearborn standing demurely before her, dressed in fine multilayered blue robes that shimmered a bit around the cuffs and collar.

Alexandra paused, and then walked forward very slowly. Darla glanced at her warily, then turned her attention back to Ms. Grimm.

"Well," Alexandra said. "I guess it really does pay to have an uncle who's a congressman."

"Watch yourself, Miss Quick," the Dean said softly.

Stone-faced, Alexandra closed her mouth and stood next to Darla, with her hands at her sides.

The Dean was wearing a traditional black witch's dress. Alexandra thought traditional witching garb made most witches look like *Wizard of Oz* characters, but not Ms. Grimm. A black cat's tail disappeared around the huge wooden desk, and then abruptly, the Dean's familiar, Galen, jumped onto the desk and commenced staring at the two girls.

Ms. Grimm gestured at Darla. "As you have surmised, Miss Dearborn will be returning to Charmbridge this year."

Alexandra's mouth tightened a little, but she said nothing. Rather than looking at Darla or Ms. Grimm, she studied the portraits of former deans hanging on the wall behind the Dean's desk. They studied her back.

"I have already discussed with her the conditions of her return," Ms. Grimm continued. "Starting with this." She held up Darla's hawthorn wand, which had a small silver knob fitted tightly around it. "Miss Dearborn will not be permitted use of her wand, except for classwork. She will pick it up each morning from Dean Cervantes's office, and return it at the end of each school day. The Wand Collar will prevent her from casting anything but minor charms, and needless to say, her wand will be thoroughly examined for every spell that was cast, each and every day."

Darla looked down, her face red.

"I think her family has exhausted just about all the influence they have keeping her out of prison and with her wand unbroken. I doubt even Congressman Dearborn can get her out of trouble if she transgresses again."

Ms. Grimm's tone was almost spiteful. Her gaze was pitiless, and Darla trembled before her. Alexandra, for once not the focus of the Dean's ire, didn't mind seeing Darla cowed and humiliated – but she wondered how much of it was an act.

Ms. Grimm set Darla's wand back on her desk, and turned to Alexandra.

"Notwithstanding the conditions under which Miss Dearborn has returned to school, I want to make it very clear that I will be keeping a close eye on *both* of you. Whatever you may feel about this

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situation, there is to be no trouble from either of you. It might occur to you, Miss Quick, that Miss Dearborn is virtually defenseless, and therefore an easy target for retribution.”

Alexandra's attention was on the Dean; she saw Darla stirring, in the corner of her eye, but the other girl said nothing.

“I will *not* tolerate any feuding,” Ms. Grimm continued. She glanced at Galen, who was attempting to bat Darla's wand off her desk with one paw. With an annoyed frown, she picked the cat up and dropped it on the floor beside her. Galen meowed indignantly. “Whatever grievances you have with each other, bury them. Stay away from each other, but do not attempt to settle any scores or you will both be going home, I promise you that.”

Alexandra, who had been slowly simmering throughout Grimm's speech, said, “If I wanted to settle a score with Darla, it wouldn't matter if she has a wand or not.”

Darla gasped. Ms. Grimm stared at her, and for just a moment, Alexandra thought she saw a glint of amusement in the woman's eyes, and then the Dean opened a desk drawer in front of her and dropped the collared hawthorn wand into it.

“Then I expect not to hear about any curses or experiments with forbidden magic this year,” she said. She shut the drawer with a bang that made Darla jump. “Naturally, I don't think it's wise for you to share a suite any more – Miss Dearborn has been assigned a new room, at the other end of the hall from yours. Miss Devereaux may join her there, if she so chooses.” She waved a hand dismissively at Darla. “You may return to your dorm.”

“Yes, Dean Grimm,” said Darla, very quietly.

Alexandra assumed she was being dismissed also, and turned to go, but Ms. Grimm said, “Wait, Miss Quick.”

Alexandra paused, while Darla exited the room, without looking back. The door shut behind her.

“Is there anything you'd like to say?” Ms. Grimm asked.

Alexandra turned to face her, slowly.

“There's a lot I'd like to say. But we both know life's unfair, right? May I go now, *ma'am*?”

Ms. Grimm's eyes narrowed, and her mouth compressed into a straight line. “I meant what I said about pursuing vendettas.”

“What would be the point? Darla didn't get my brother killed, and cursing her won't bring him back.”

The Dean leaned back in her chair. Galen jumped into her lap.

“Is there anything I can do for you, Alexandra?”

Alexandra regarded her warily. It was rare when the Dean showed concern for anyone, and Alexandra was never quite sure whether she believed it was sincere.

“I don't think so, *ma'am*.”

Ms. Grimm studied her a moment longer, then sighed. “It's only been four months since your brother died. I know you're still grieving. I cannot make allowances for any misbehavior on your part. Remember, you're still on probation for your participation in the Mors Mortis Society last year.”

Alexandra scowled and looked away, at the trees outside the window of the Dean's office.

“But,” Dean Grimm continued, “if you have any other difficulties, with your classes, or adjusting...”

“I'm fine,” Alexandra said flatly.

Galen purred, while Grimm's hand stroked the cat's ears. Then the Dean nodded. “Very well. You may go, Miss Quick.”

Alexandra was stewing all the way back to her room. Breakfast was forgotten. She was angry and resentful, and yet she really didn't blame Darla and had no particular desire to do anything to her. She just knew it was manifestly unfair that Darla was back in school, despite everything she'd done the

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previous year – much of which even the Dean was unaware of. Alexandra wondered if Darla had ever been threatened with the WODAMND Act. Surely if Alexandra cast an Unforgivable, she would be chained up and her wand broken.

She was lying on her back on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, while running her fingers up and down her own wand, when Anna returned, looking anxious and sounding a little breathless.

“Alex!” she gasped. “Did you know –?”

“Darla's back,” Alexandra finished for her. “That's why the Dean called me to her office – to make sure I'm not going to curse the little snot.”

Anna sat down on the bed next to her. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Sure.” Alexandra shrugged. “I don't think Dean Grimm wanted to let Darla return. Her family must be pretty powerful.” She snorted. “Maybe if your father gets elected to the Wizards' Congress...” She paused, and almost bit her tongue when she glanced at Anna and saw a shadow pass over her friend's face. “Sorry,” she said softly. “I forgot.”

“It's all right,” Anna said quietly.

From next door, they heard Angelique moving about, and Honey demanding loudly: “What are you doing? What are you doing? What are you doing? Where are we going? Where are we going? Where are we going?”

“Honey, shut up, or *you* won't be going anywhere!” Angelique said.

Alexandra sat up and got off her bed. Anna followed her through the bathroom and into the next room, where Angelique was pulling a ridiculous number of robes out of her closet. She jumped when she saw Alexandra.

“Alexandra!” Her voice suddenly became high and nervous-sounding. “I, um...”

“Is that a girl?” sneered Honey. “It's *that* girl!”

“You're going to go be Darla's roommate again,” Alexandra said.

Angelique nodded, licking her lips nervously. “She asked me to. She's pretty lonely – a lot of kids are shunning her now...”

“Oh, really?” Alexandra said. “That must be awful for her.”

“Sorceress!” Honey shouted.

“Shut up, Honey!” Angelique sighed. “Please don't hate me.”

“I don't. But I'd be careful around her.” Alexandra eyed Honey. “And keep an eye on your familiar. Darla might decide to try to sacrifice her again.”

“Mudblood!” screeched Honey.

“Shut up, Honey!” Angelique picked up her wand, and pointed it at the jarvey's cage. “*Silencio!*” The jarvey's next insult was swallowed by silence.

Alexandra shook her head. “When did Darla get here, anyway?”

“Late last night. Mrs. Speaks brought her directly from her home.” Angelique was hastily stuffing her clothes and other things she'd unpacked the previous night into her bags.

Alexandra turned to Anna accusingly. “You didn't tell me Darla was on the bus with you!”

Anna shook her head vigorously. “She wasn't!”

“But...” Alexandra frowned. “How could Mrs. Speaks have driven you all the way from California, and picked up Darla to bring her here, too, all in one night?”

“Mrs. Speaks has been picking up students from all over the country,” Angelique said. “Me and all the other students who usually come up from down South on the Wizardrail.” She tossed one more suitcase onto the pile in the center of her room, jostling the stack next to it on which Honey's cage sat. The cage tumbled off the pile of boxes and clothes bags, bounced on the floor, and rolled, before

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Angelique grabbed it.

"Honey!" she cried. "I'm sorry, Honey." She picked up the carrier and looked inside. Alexandra almost smiled, to think of the profanities Honey was undoubtedly uttering inside her Silenced cage.

An elf appeared in Angelique's doorway. Alexandra recognized Mubble, the same elf who had helped Anna the previous night.

"Is this all of Miss's things that is to be moved?" asked the elf, looking with a little dismay at the pile of boxes and suitcases.

"Yes," Angelique said, cradling Honey's cage and not even looking at the elf. "Down the hall to Room 43."

Alexandra considered offering to help, but she really didn't want to see Darla, so she just told Angelique, "See you in class," and retreated to her own room, with Anna in tow.

"I wonder if we'll get new suitemates," Anna said.

Alexandra shrugged. She was still puzzling over the problem of ferrying students from across the country in one bus. The Automagicka wasn't *that* fast. "I thought Mrs. Speaks looked pretty tired," she said. "How does one bus collect everyone? We've got students from all over the country."

"Maybe she's using a Time-Turner," Anna said.

"A what?" Alexandra stared at her.

"A Time-Turner. If she has one on the bus, then she could pick up kids in different places at the same time, as long as she doesn't meet herself when she drops them off."

Alexandra looked at Anna as if she suspected her friend were making this up. "A Time-Turner," she repeated.

"They're really rare, but Mrs. Speaks said the Department of Magical Transportation is allowing magic they don't usually permit, because of the crisis..." Anna's voice faltered, as Alexandra continued staring at her. "I mean, I'm just guessing."

"You're talking about *time travel*," Alexandra said slowly. "You're not putting me on? Magic can actually do that? Let you go back in time?"

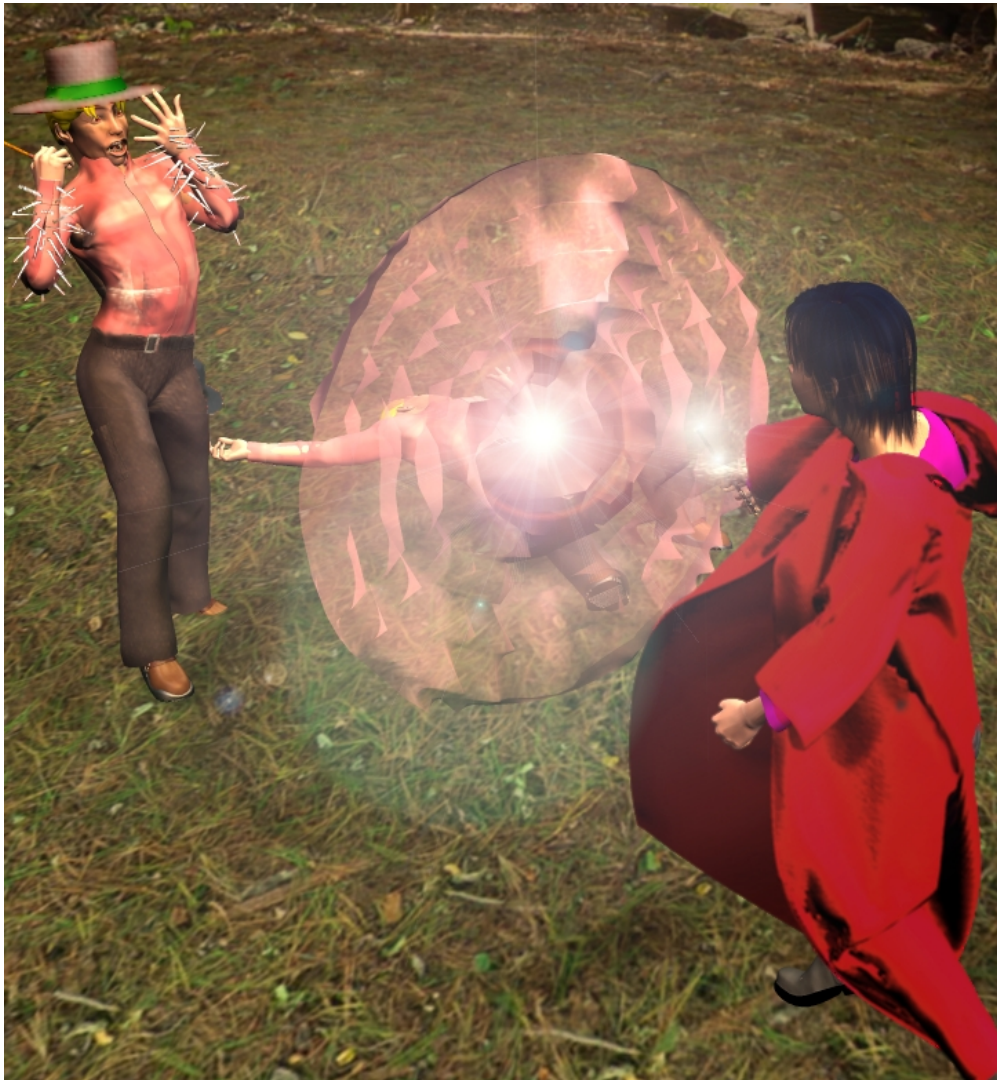
"Well, sure. Haven't you ever heard that old Arithmancy problem? 'If Merlin has a Time-Turner and leaves at midnight to go back to noon the previous day, and Arthur has a Time-Turner and leaves at noon to go back to midnight'..." Anna's voice trailed off. "Sorry. I guess you wouldn't have."

Alexandra's mind was whirling. She didn't know how long she stood there, her thoughts somewhere else entirely, but she finally realized that Anna was watching her uneasily, and she smiled. "That's pretty cool," she said. "You know what? I never got any breakfast. I'm hungry."

Relieved, Anna readily agreed to accompany Alexandra back to the cafeteria, even though she had already eaten. They discussed the classes they were taking, and who their teachers would be for the coming year, and they made plans to play Heart of Three Kingdoms or Wizardopoly in the recreation room that night. But Alexandra was only pretending to be engaged in the conversation, because there was really only one thing she was thinking about, a thought that she was turning over and over again in her head:

Time travel.

Chapter 6 — Finding Trouble



Angelique and Darla, it turned out, were displacing Sonja Rackham and Carol Queen, who moved into the room adjacent to Alexandra and Anna that afternoon.

Sonja, a pretty girl with curly red hair and an explosion of freckles across her face and arms, was loud and extroverted. Her roommate, a somewhat awkward-looking girl with mousy brown hair and glasses, was the opposite – Alexandra wasn't sure she'd heard Carol speak out loud in class the entire previous two years.

Alexandra and Anna heard the other two girls as they began moving their things into their new room Sunday afternoon, and walked through the connecting bathroom to greet them.

“– that's why they're calling her 'the girl who came back,' because no one's ever come back from the Lands Below before,” Sonja was saying to Carol, as she balanced a whirling, spinning contraption on her dresser. It was a sort of wire sculpture that appeared to be magically suspended in air.

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Carol turned pale when she saw Alexandra in the doorway. Sonja turned around slowly, with a blush spreading beneath her freckles.

"That's not true," Alexandra said. "Indian wizards used to come and go from the Lands Below."

Sonja recovered quickly. "Really? Says who?"

"They don't tell us everything here at Charmbridge," Alexandra said, walking into the room uninvited. "And not everything they tell us is the truth."

Carol looked worried. Sonja stood there, a little warily, but she didn't back away from Alexandra. Anna smiled nervously.

"I'm sorry about your brother," Sonja blurted out.

"Thanks." Alexandra looked around the room. Sonja seemed to be a fan of Hamlet's Clowns – she had plastered posters of the macabre-wrock band all over her side of the room. The lead singer was hanging prominently over her bed. He was juggling skulls, and when Alexandra looked at him, he caught one of the skulls, gave it a kiss, and winked suggestively at her, before tossing it into the air again.

Carol had framed wizard photographs carefully lined up on an already-packed bookshelf, but no posters. There was a cage under her bed, but it was empty; its resident, a large brown rat, was sitting docilely on her shoulder.

"Anyway, as long as you don't hog the bathroom like Darla and Angelique did, we'll be fine," Alexandra said. She turned to look at her new suitemates. "If you do, I'll have to curse you."

Sonja's eyes widened, and Carol shrank away from her. Her rat chittered nervously.

"Just kidding." Alexandra caught Anna's eye, and winked. Anna shook her head.

"Hah hah," Sonja retorted.

Alexandra gave her a small smile, and walked back towards her own room.

"Hey, are you going to join the Dueling Club this year?" Sonja asked.

Alexandra paused. She had almost forgotten about Charmbridge's Dueling Club. It was restricted to eighth graders and above, and she had been looking forward to joining it since sixth grade.

"Yeah, probably."

Sonja nodded. "Great. Me, too."

"Are you crazy?" Alexandra heard Carol whispering, as she closed the door behind them.

"Are you really going to join the Dueling Club?" Anna asked, back in their room. They hadn't quite finished unpacking everything and rearranging their room for the coming semester, but Anna was lining up her books, while Alexandra took the last of her own belongings out of her backpack to put away.

"I guess so." Alexandra frowned, as she took a picture cube out of her pack. It displayed images on all six sides, wizarding photographs taken the previous year, of her and her brother and his friends from BMI. Some had been taken down in the valley below the Invisible Bridge, where Maximilian had taken her to practice wizard-dueling. She had been looking forward to using all the spells he'd taught her.

In the photograph facing her now, she and Maximilian were both wearing their Junior Regimental Officer Corps uniforms, and Maximilian had thrown an arm around her shoulders and pulled her tightly against him, winking at the camera. Alexandra was flushing with embarrassment, but there was a silly grin on her face. Behind Alexandra, Maximilian's best friend Martin Nguyen was holding a wand over her head; in the next moment, Alexandra knew, he would be casting a Bubble-Gum Jinx on her hair. Beatrice Hawthorne was holding the camera for this picture, but Alexandra could see her rolling her eyes in the photograph next to it, where Alexandra had snapped the three juniors posing with wands drawn. Maximilian was scowling and Martin was snickering – Alexandra recalled that she'd been holding the camera with one hand and giving a sticky pink middle finger to Martin with the other.

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She only realized her mind had wandered again when she sensed someone beside her. She turned and saw Anna looking at her, sympathy and concern etched on her face.

"I'm okay, Anna," she said, putting the picture cube on her nightstand, next to her alarm clock.

That's when she noticed the pictures hanging on the wall over Anna's desk. Last year, Anna had put up very little in the way of decorations, but now she had a framed photograph of a proud man in imperial-looking robes, folding his arms and practically puffing out his chest for the camera. Next to that picture was another one that looked flat and lifeless by comparison. A woman with long black hair and large brown eyes, much like Anna's, smiled timidly from her frame, frozen and unmoving, unlike the wizard photograph next to her.

"Your parents?" she asked. Anna nodded. Her eyes were distant for a moment, and Alexandra felt guilty for forgetting that Anna, too, wasn't coming back to school under happy circumstances.

"Are *you* okay?" she asked.

Anna blinked. A couple of tears glistened, and she wiped her eyes. "Yes." She smiled at Alexandra. "I think it's great if you want to join the Dueling Club. It would be, you know, something for you to do. To... to take your mind off..."

Not likely, Alexandra thought, but she said, "You could join, too."

Anna laughed quietly, shaking her head. "No way. You scare me enough without a wand."



Although Charmbridge Academy students had more choices in electives available as they advanced, Charms, Transfiguration, and Alchemy were core courses, and it was rare for anyone to skip levels, which meant these classes stayed much the same from year to year.

Their Charms teacher was the familiar, humorless Mr. Newton, whom Alexandra did not like much. He was always squinting at her behind his thick spectacles, as if not quite sure why she was in his class, and he lectured in a slow, pedantic tone about *proper* incantations (always Greek or Latin) and correct wand movements. Alexandra thought she could learn more spells faster if Mr. Newton weren't so picky about making sure every last syllable and gesture was correct.

For Transfiguration, they again had the befuddled but harmless Mr. Hobbes. He looked a bit mad, with white hair that always stuck up away from his head as if he'd just gotten out of bed, and a grin that bordered on maniacal as he spoke about Gamp's Law and the Arithmantic Principle of Conservation. He told them that their focus for the entire year would be inanimate transformations, as they wouldn't be introduced to complex animate transformations until their freshman year.

Alchemy II took place in the same classroom where Alchemy I had been held, and Basic Alchemy before that, and the same teacher was waiting for them.

"Doesn't anyone else teach Alchemy here?" Alexandra whispered to Anna, as Mr. Grue watched the eighth graders file into his classroom. He looked unchanged since the previous year, or the year before that. She'd never seen him wearing anything but his thick black robe that matched his shaggy black mane. Both his hair and his robe were perpetually glittering with metal dust, and Grue's scarred and blistered face made him look sinister even when he wasn't scowling – which was almost all the time.

"Yes!" snapped the teacher from across the room, looking at Alexandra as if she were a bug he'd caught crawling across his classroom floor. "But unfortunately, not at your grade level." He stomped across the room, glowering at her, until his bushy black beard was practically in her face. "Each year, you've *barely* passed my class, Miss Quick. If you can pass this year, I will never have to see you again."

"Good," Alexandra said. "All you have to do is not fail me, then."

There was a collective intake of breath. Anna looked a little nauseous. Darla, sitting in the back with

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Angelique, was trying to hide a smirk.

"*You. Have. To. Pass,*" said Grue, leaning forward until she was staring at his large, yellowing teeth.

He straightened up, and addressed the room. "You also have to stop *whispering* to your friends in class." He held up a small vial. "Aural amplifying drops. Commonly referred to as 'Auror's Ears.' *Some* of you will learn to make this this semester. Those of you who do not *listen to directions* and measure *very, very carefully* will probably go deaf."

Everyone was very quiet for the rest of Mr. Grue's class.

After third period was lunch. As they approached the cafeteria, David found himself awkwardly caught between two groups that had separated themselves after exiting Mr. Grue's classroom.

Angelique was walking with Darla and Lydia, who were trailing well behind Alexandra, Anna, and the Pritchards. Alexandra and Darla had made a point of not looking at or addressing one another in any of their classes, but the chill between them was as palpable as it had been last year.

"So," Alexandra whispered to her friends, observing David's dilemma, "do you think he likes Angelique or dislikes Darla more?"

David seemed to be pondering that himself, as he shuffled along, glancing over his shoulder.

"More koosy lally-gaggin'!" Constance muttered, shaking her head. "Didn't y'all learn nothin' last year?"

"Hi David!" Innocence suddenly darted ahead of a group of sixth graders who were also heading for the cafeteria, and fell in alongside David. "You hain't still put out with me, is you?"

"No." David gave Constance and Forbearance an odd look.

"Oh, I'm so glad. Constance says you play Quidditch. I hain't never seen Quidditch – our brothers say it's for sissy furriners."

"Innocence!" Constance turned red.

"What I meant to mean is I'd like to watch!" Innocence said, as David frowned at her. "Noah an' Burton just plays Quodpot with twig brooms an' a noggin, an' I don't think they's as skilt as they conceits."

"Innocence, leave him be!" said Constance, grabbing her younger sister by the wrist.

"Hi, Alex!" Innocence said to Alexandra. "And, uh –" She looked at Anna for a moment, and leaned over to whisper in Constance's ear: "What's the Oriental gal's name?"

"Are Oriental girls deaf where you're from?" asked Anna, irritated.

Constance smacked Innocence lightly on the back of her head. "Ask her yourself proper!" She shook her head.

They entered the cafeteria as a group – with David still trailing a little behind them – while Constance and Forbearance continued lecturing their younger sister. Almost immediately, Benjamin whistled from his table, and Mordecai gestured at the Ozarker girls.

Alexandra's eyes narrowed, but she bit her tongue.

"Do we'uns have to sit with them every day?" Innocence asked, sticking her lower lip out.

"Hush, Innocence!" said Forbearance. They both looked apologetically at Alexandra, who just sighed and nodded. She noticed that Constance's cheeks had gone a little red – she looked stiff and angry as the Ozarker girls walked over to the older boys' table.

"Going to sit with us, or with your girlfriend and the crazy bitch?" Alexandra asked David.

He coughed. "Actually, I'm gonna sit with the team." He pointed at the table where the Quidditch players were congregating. "Tryouts are on Friday."

"Chicken."

David rolled his eyes at her, and joined the other 'brooms.'

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Alexandra endured the rest of the day, which consisted of Magical Theory, Magizooology, and American History of Magic. Magical Theory was taught by the same new teacher who had taught last year, Miss Hart, and Alexandra didn't think they would be covering anything related to time travel or the afterlife.

Mr. Fledgefield's Magizooology class promised to be a little more interesting: he promised a field trip into the woods later in the semester. Fledgefield was a short, unassuming man who wore a long coat and breeches, marking him as an Old Colonial. With his balding head, he looked a bit like a younger, thinner Benjamin Franklin, and certainly not the sort of wizard who could tame wild Thestrals, fight manticores, and ride dragons, as he claimed he had before becoming a teacher.

"If we're lucky," he said, winking at the students, "we may even encounter the legendary hodag! And if we're *very* lucky, we'll make it back alive." He chuckled at his little joke, and most of the students chuckled along with him, some a bit nervously.

Alexandra wasn't amused.

The last class of the day was American History of Magic, which was another required course for all eighth graders. It was taught by the matronly, patronizing Mrs. Middle, so Alexandra expected it to be as boring and whitewashed as last year's Wizarding Social Studies class.

She didn't really care – she knew now that anything she really wanted to learn probably wouldn't be taught in class.

"So, are you allowed to play games with us in the rec room?" Anna asked Constance and Forbearance as they all headed back to their dorms. She tried not to sound sarcastic, but the twins glanced warily at her.

"Course we are," Constance said.

She and Forbearance exchanged looks.

"Course," Constance admitted, eyes downcast, "Ma and Pa wouldn't 'zactly approve..."

"Who's going to tell them?" Alexandra asked.

Forbearance sighed. "Benjamin and Mordecai."

Alexandra shook her head. "Are you really going to put up with this all year?"

"Alexandra, we'uns really will get called home if we – Innocence!" Constance interrupted herself, as Innocence came shuffling down the hall from the opposite direction, hanging her head and looking disheveled.

"*Tsk!* Lookit you, girl! You're a frazzled sight!" Forbearance tut-tutted and grabbed the loosely hanging strings of Innocence's bonnet. She cinched the cords under the younger girl's chin and made her tilt her head up as she tucked her loose hair back under the head covering.

"You hain't been away from home but a few days and you're unpresentable as a flowzy wild hen!" Constance said.

"If Ma and Pa saw you like this –" said Forbearance, and then she gasped. "What in heaven's name?"

Innocence had a bruise on her cheek and her lip was split, and when Alexandra took a closer look at the girl, she saw that her knuckles were skinned and that her skirt was torn as well.

"What happened to you?" Constance demanded.

"I got detention." Innocence would not meet her sisters' eyes. "Twice."

"Twice?!" Constance and Forbearance said together.

"Mr. Grue is *mean!*" Innocence said angrily.

The twins sighed and shook their heads. Alexandra struggled to keep a straight face.

"How'd you get a *second* detention?" asked Forbearance.

Innocence mumbled something inaudible.

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“What?” Forbearance demanded.

“*Fightin'!*” Innocence said, more loudly.

“Fighting?” Constance and Forbearance echoed together.

“With who?” Forbearance added, in a shocked voice.

“With my roommate, stupid, whiny, cymlin-headed *Ouida Francie Miriam Noel!*” Innocence raised her voice and wiggled her hips side to side mockingly. “She said Ozarkers is backwards an' uneducated an' I look like a li'l baby doll with my *quaint old-fashioned* bonnet an' she implicated my wand was just some stick I broke off a tree...”

“I'm shamed at you, Innocence!” Constance said.

“Do you want to go home?” Forbearance asked.

“Come 'long, we need to fix you up presentable.”

“A'fore the Rashes sees you!”

The appalled twins began dragging their sister off to their room. Alexandra and Anna looked at each other.

“Even I've never gotten detention twice in one day,” Alexandra said.

“They're awfully strict,” Anna said, noting the way the elder Pritchards were fussing and scolding Innocence all the way down the hall.

“I guess they have to be, with those two jerks keeping tabs on who they socialize with and whether they're 'dressed proper' and if they're being 'good,' which I guess means being obedient,” Alexandra said in disgust. “But I swear I'm going to hex Benjamin and Mordecai.”

“I think you should let Constance and Forbearance fight their own battles,” Anna said quietly.

Alexandra started to issue a sharp retort, and then glanced at Anna, and fell silent.

“I just don't want you to get into trouble, too,” Anna said.

“No trouble this year.” Alexandra patted her friend on the shoulder. “I'm going to the library. Want to come? Maybe we can find out how to help your father.”

Anna shook her head. “What can a couple of kids do, Alex?” She sounded so dejected, Alexandra almost forgot about her own plans.

Then Anna looked at her, and offered her a small, sad smile. “Thanks – maybe later. But right now, I need to write a letter to my mother.”

“Okay. See you at dinner, then.” Alexandra smiled back at Anna... but her smile disappeared after Anna walked away.

The Charmbridge library was a huge space near the center of the septagonal building. Alexandra was never exactly certain where it was in relation to the other wings of the academy, nor how much space it occupied, because it was one of those places that was larger from the inside than it was from without. Three floors full of books – but Alexandra had learned that somehow it always turned out that books containing information she was really interested in – like the Dark Arts, the Lands Below, and her father – either weren't in the library, or were off-limits to most students.

Mrs. Minder, the librarian, was one of the few adults at Charmbridge Academy who had always been friendly to her, and Alexandra was glad that the events of the past year hadn't changed that – the librarian greeted her cheerfully enough, and then asked her, with a touch of concern, how she was doing. This was something Alexandra was coming to dislike almost as much as the opposite reaction – the baleful looks and the averted eyes. But she gave Mrs. Minder her practiced smile, and told her that she was fine.

“Well, I'll bet you'd like to visit with Bran and Poe,” Mrs. Minder said, in a near-whisper.

Alexandra's smile in response to that was a little more genuine. “Yes, please.”

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For the past two years, Alexandra had been a frequent presence in the library, and she was one of the few students who were even aware of the two elves who worked invisibly behind the stacks, let alone had made friends with them. Despite the incursions of Clockwork golems to do much of the manual labor, Charmbridge Academy still had many elves working behind the scenes, out of sight of the student population. For Bran and Poe, the library was their domain. Behind the bookshelves, in back rooms, or late at night, they were always busy, cataloging and repairing and sorting books and cleaning up after students who were less respectful of the library than Alexandra.

Mrs. Minder took Alexandra into her office, and then snapped her fingers. “Bran, Poe.”

With a pop, the two elves appeared in front of her. Most Charmbridge elves wore discarded clothing items scavenged from the school's Lost & Found. Apparently, some girl had never reclaimed a fuzzy pink sweater, because Bran was almost lost in it, with its sleeves hanging to his knees. Poe wore the tattered remains of an old robe, and a shapeless wool cap.

“Miss Alex!” The two elves beamed with delight.

“Hi, guys.” Alexandra looked at them fondly. They had been true friends to her, these past two years – even when she had taken advantage of them for her own schemes.

Bran bounded over, or rather, stumbled over, almost tripping in his ridiculously oversized pink sweater. “Did Miss Alex have a good summer?” he asked. Poe followed him, looking at her with big eyes and droopy ears.

Conscious of Mrs. Minder standing behind her, Alexandra nodded. “It was okay.”

Poe tilted his head, and looked dubious. Alexandra squatted to face the two elves.

“I missed you guys,” she said. “And I think I'm going to be spending a lot of time in the library this year.”

“That's the spirit, dear,” Mrs. Minder said kindly. “If you devote yourself to your studies, it will... you know.” Her hands fluttered a bit, as Alexandra turned her head to look up at her.

“Take my mind off of things?” Alexandra said calmly.

Mrs. Minder nodded, relieved. “Yes, exactly.”

Alexandra's smile didn't reach her eyes. “Sure.” She turned back to the two library elves, and her expression became a little warmer. “Anyway, I just want you to know that I'll be here to read and study. I'm not looking for any trouble this year.”

“That is good,” Poe said seriously.

“We is happy to hear that,” said Bran.

“And we will always be here to help Miss Alex find bookses,” said Poe.

“Great.” Alexandra's smile broadened. “Because there are some things I'm really interested in reading more about.”

After visiting with the elves for a while, Alexandra thanked Mrs. Minder for letting her talk to them, and promised she would indeed be back.

“That's a lot of books,” Anna commented, when Alexandra brought the stack she'd checked out back to her room.

“I have a lot of reading to do.”

Anna looked a bit puzzled, but nodded; like Mrs. Minder, she apparently believed that Alexandra needed to occupy herself, to take her mind off her brother and the events of the previous year. It was only when she noticed the titles – all of them to do with time travel, ghosts, and theories of the afterlife – that her brow wrinkled with concern again.



Alexandra was unsurprised to learn that none of the books she'd checked out actually answered the

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questions she wanted answered. 'Time travel' was spoken of only obliquely, in reference to historical research, or else used as a plot device in children's stories like *Marty the Muggle's Travels Through Time*. Hapless Marty was constantly being sent to places like Cleopatra's court or Camelot, thanks to a broken Time-Turner he'd stolen from a wizard. The only other book that made direct reference to Time-Turners was a volume in the *Paracelsus Series on How Magic Works*: the chapter on Artificing, after explaining some of the basic charms and enchantments used to create flying brooms, magical cameras, Wizardrail locomotives, Clockworks, Sneakoscopes, Seven-Lock Boxes, and Underwater Bicycles, mentioned other, much more powerful artifacts that only the most skilled Artificers could enchant, like Portkeys, Hallucinoglobes, and Time-Turners.

"But *how* do they make Time-Turners?" Alexandra asked the friendly illustrated wizard on the last page of the chapter.

"Oh, it's very difficult and complicated," Paracelsus said.

"I know that, but what enchantments do they use?"

"You must first study Charms, Transfiguration, Arithmancy, and Astronomy," Paracelsus told her, in a patronizing tone that was all the more infuriating because it came from a drawing. "It will take you many years before you can even begin to learn the actual enchantments."

"We'll see," she grumbled, and slapped the book shut.

The books about ghosts were interesting, inasmuch as they told her a little more about the witches and wizards who became ghosts, and where they took up residence, and what they were and were not allowed to do. (The International Confederation of Wizards, for example, had added a few clauses to the International Statute of Wizarding Secrecy which allowed ghosts to make limited appearances before Muggles.) But even those ghostly autobiographies that mentioned the ghost's death and subsequent unliving state were maddeningly vague about what *happened* when a wizard died – and where those who didn't become ghosts went. The books about afterlives were no more authoritative or enlightening than anything Alexandra had heard in Vacation Bible School the previous summer.

There were many more books remaining in the library, though, and if she couldn't find her answers there, she knew she would just have to look elsewhere.

Despite her dismissive attitude towards classroom learning, Alexandra was, for the first time, beginning to realize how much she didn't know. To this point, they had learned magic by memorizing incantations and wand gestures. Alexandra assumed that she could accomplish anything, if only she knew the right words and had enough determination to make the magic work.

It was Miss Hart, the inexperienced new teacher whom Alexandra had assumed knew nothing of value, who gave her her first insight into what great magical works required. That Friday, as she lectured the class on Ptolemy's Principles of Magic, Thomas Klaus raised his hand.

"Yes, Thomas?" she asked. She called the students by their first names, which pleased the boys a great deal. Miss Hart was pretty and blonde, and her robe had a tendency to cling to her ample figure, so that even though she was dressed as conservatively as any other teacher, Alexandra knew that the boys were wishing they had a pair of those fabled See-Through Spectacles.

"I heard Ptolemy's Principles of Magic have been disproven," Thomas said, in an eager voice that unfortunately chose that moment to crack, making 'Ptolemy' come out as a high-pitched squeak. Most of the class snickered, and Thomas turned red and slid lower in his seat.

Miss Hart looked at the boy, blinking in surprise. Alexandra was surprised, too. Thomas was a shy, awkward boy who turned red whenever he was called on.

Instead, the teacher took a deep breath (which captured the attention of all the boys in the class far more effectively than any of her lessons did), and said, "Yes, technically that's true."

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Now a few students were actually becoming interested. Not everyone – Darla was tapping her wand against her mirror, Angelique was giving David a sour look, and David, like the other boys, was watching Miss Hart's chest rise and fall. But Thomas sat up straighter, and Sonja raised her hand, then asked a question before Miss Hart called on her.

“If they're wrong, why are we learning them?” she asked, echoing Alexandra's thoughts.

“They're not wrong. They describe a certain model for how magic works, a model that has worked well for hundreds and hundreds of years.” Miss Hart was no longer stammering to recite her tedious, carefully-prepared lesson, and suddenly sounded much more self-assured.

“I don't understand,” Sonja said.

“Magic exists in the world, and we wizards and witches can use it to do wonderful things.” Miss Hart looked around, encouraged, at her students, who seemed to be coming out of their lecture-and-hormone-induced daze. “But without a set of principles to follow in working magic, you're likely to do unpredictable things. Maybe even terrible things.” For a moment, she glanced at Alexandra. Alexandra returned a blank look. “Ptolemy described magic as he understood it, and the principles he developed based on his understanding happen to apply to most magic that we do. But yes...” She took another breath, and the boys once again forgot everything she'd just said. “The *Academie de Magie* actually published a paper six years ago that proved most of Ptolemy's Principles are wrong. *But,*” she added hastily, “the reasons they're wrong only matter if you're doing magic far above the level any of you will be learning for a very long time. Don't think you can just pretend the rules you've learned don't matter when you try to cast a spell. And you still need to remember them for your SPAWN.”

Everyone else groaned at the reminder of the Standardized Practical Assessment of Wizarding kNowledge they'd have to take at the end of the year, but Alexandra took a different lesson away from class that day: *You can break the rules, if you're good enough.*

She also realized that maybe she should try to get better grades in Principles of Magic, so that she could join Anna and the Pritchards in their more advanced class.

“I don't get it,” David grumbled. “Why do they test us on stuff that's wrong? They don't teach us stuff people believed a thousand years ago in Muggle school!”

“Well, if you think Muggle school is so wonderful, why are you here?” Angelique said haughtily. David gaped at her, as she brushed past him, followed by Darla, who looked a little smug but was carefully not looking at either him or Alexandra.

“Now what did I do?” David whispered to Alexandra.

She rolled her eyes at him, and proceeded to her Magizoology class.

By the end of sixth period, Angelique and David were talking again. As they left their American History of Magic class, and the eighth graders moved in a solid mass towards their dorms, Angelique was giggling in his ear. The Pritchards walked alongside Alexandra, and from their expressions, Alexandra guessed they were starting to get annoyed by David and Angelique, too.

Everyone usually returned to their rooms following the last class of the day, before dispersing to various after-school activities. When the girls separated from the boys to go upstairs, Angelique said, “See you later, David!” and gave him a wink and a coy little finger wave. Darla followed her up the stairs, expressionlessly, while David stood there with a goofy smile on his face.

“See you later, David!” mimicked Dylan in a high-pitched voice, before giving his roommate a punch in the arm. “Dude!” he whispered, grinning.

The two boys looked utterly smug and pleased with themselves.

“David!” called out a familiar voice. David's smile faltered, and he frowned and turned around as Innocence came running down the hall.

Finding Trouble

“Quidditch tryouts is today, hain't that right?” she asked breathlessly, coming to a halt in front of him.

“Yeah...” he answered slowly.

“Cool!” she said, pronouncing the word as if trying out a foreign phrase. She looked at her sisters. “We'uns can go watch, can't we?”

Forbearance frowned. “I don't know, Innocence...”

David rolled his eyes. “Yeah, don't wanna get in trouble with your boys.”

Constance puffed up, in a way Alexandra had rarely seen before.

“I done told you the Rashes hain't *our boys*!” She looked at Innocence. “I don't see why we can't watch, if you can settle and mind us!”

Innocence nodded eagerly.

“Great. See you there,” David said, a bit nonplussed, while the girls filed past him. “You coming, too?” he asked Alexandra and Anna.

Alexandra glanced at Anna, who shrugged.

“Sure... dude.” Alexandra gave him a punch in the arm as she walked past. Anna actually laughed as they headed upstairs, leaving David grumbling and rubbing his arm behind them.

They changed out of their school robes, and into more casual clothing, which for Alexandra meant throwing a casual robe over her regular Muggle clothing. Technically, dressing like a Muggle was forbidden at Charmbridge, but increasingly, Muggle fashions were infiltrating the wizarding world, and students from a Muggle background got around the restrictions by combining 'wizard clothing' with their jeans, t-shirts, and sneakers.

Anna wore her usual red cloak over her robes as they headed outside. Alexandra heard the Pritchards arguing and fussing even before they emerged from the academy building, looking around almost furtively.

“If'n the Rashes sees us, they gonna give us heck for sure,” Forbearance said. She looked at Innocence. “Don't you be jawin' unnecessary 'bout Quidditch an' suchlike front o' them boys!”

Innocence made a face. Alexandra was beginning to feel sorry for the sixth grader.

The Quidditch field was one of several athletic fields lying on Charmbridge's grounds, and it was smaller and more distant from the academy building than the more popular Quodpot field. Alexandra and Anna and the Pritchards made their way across the grass to the stadium, and took their seats on the benches overlooking the large oval sandlot with the high Quidditch hoops rising overhead at either end. Below, a group of about twenty kids all clutched their brooms while the Charmbridge Quidditch team captain went over the rules and procedures. Alexandra saw David looking nervous – he was one of the youngest would-be players, and last year he had only made Reserve Seeker, and spent all year on the bench.

Tryouts took over an hour. As the players zoomed about, dodging Bludgers and trying to send Quaffles through the hoops, Alexandra's mind drifted back to her own flying lessons with Maximilian. Max had not been too interested in broom sports, which was a shame – Alexandra was sure he'd have been good at them. But he'd been preoccupied with more important things.

She watched a cocky tenth grader swoop about on his broom, and wished she could be doing that – not to play Quidditch, but just to fly.

Of course, now the only flying she would do would be on a wobbly old school broom. She thought about her 2009 Valkyrie, the birthday gift from her brother that Diana Grimm had blown apart over Old Larkin Pond, and, lost in bitter, regretful memories, almost missed it when David took to the air in pursuit of the Snitch.

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“*WEEHAW!* GO, DAVID!” shouted Innocence, leaping to her feet, before Constance grabbed her elbow and pulled her back down, shushing her.

Stop feeling sorry for yourself, Alexandra thought, watching as David flew about, not half-badly. She hadn't seen the other players trying out for the Seeker position, so she didn't know how he compared, but he looked relieved when he finally landed, with the Snitch in hand.

When tryouts were over, most of the spectators began trickling back inside, but Innocence leapt from the bench and bounded down to the field before her sisters could stop her. Constance and Forbearance rose from their seats and gathered up their skirts, sputtering as they followed their younger sister down the stairs. Alexandra and Anna followed, bemused.

The players were told by the team captain that selections would be posted by Monday morning, and then they were dismissed, and David broke away from the group to join his friends.

“That was the most spectacularest bodacious thing I ever witnessed in my entire life!” Innocence declared, running over to him.

“Yeah?” David said, with a bemused smile.

“You was the best of all of them!”

“Thanks.” David looked a little uncomfortable.

“I thought you looked fine,” said Angelique, who had been watching on the ground. She and Darla both joined the small group – Darla standing a few paces away.

“Really?” David grinned.

She leaned forward and gave him a very quick kiss on the lips, then wrinkled her nose. “But you don't smell so fine. Go take a shower. I'm going to eat. See you in the cafeteria?”

“Yeah, okay,” he mumbled.

Angelique looked at the other girls, and winked, then she and Darla began walking back inside.

“You did look fine,” Innocence agreed. David gave her another small smile, then walked off towards the boys' locker room.

“She's sure bossy!” Innocence said, folding her arms and watching Angelique retreat across the field.

“You mind your tongue, Innocence!” said Forbearance.

“And stop your fussin' at David,” said Constance. “I hain't likin' those koosy-eyes you been makin'.”

Innocence gasped at that, and turned on her sister in a fury. “I am *not* makin' *koosy-eyes* at *nobody*!”

They walked slowly back across the field, following the same path Angelique and Darla and the other kids who'd watched the tryouts had gone, with Innocence arguing loudly and indignantly with her sisters. Alexandra and Anna exchanged glances, and shook their heads.

Then Innocence said, “Whuh-oh,” and Forbearance murmured, “Oh, dear.”

Stalking across the lawn towards them were Benjamin and Mordecai.

“There you are!” Benjamin said, looking angry. He was walking a little ahead of his brother. The Pritchards stopped walking as the Ozarker boys, wearing matching long-sleeved shirts and dark gray trousers with suspenders, marched up to them. Alexandra and Anna slowed to a halt as well.

“You hain't told us where you was goin',” said Mordecai. “We 'spected to eat dinner with you in the cafeteria.”

“We can eat dinner now, Mordecai,” Forbearance said.

“We been waitin' for you!” Benjamin's eyes flashed as he looked over their shoulders at Alexandra and Anna. “What are you'uns doin' out here? We done told you 'bout consortin' with these rullions!”

Alexandra bristled. Anna clenched her jaw, but put a hand on Alexandra's arm.

Constance and Forbearance were both looking at the ground.

“We're sorry, we didn't mean to make you'uns wait,” Forbearance said. “Or give you cause to worry.”

Finding Trouble

Innocence stuck her lip out. “I hain't sorry!”

“Look what a wicked tongue she's sproutin'!” Benjamin scowled at Innocence. “This is what happens when you let girls prancy 'bout unreg'lated.”

Alexandra clenched her fists. So did Constance. Anna was holding onto Alexandra's arm now.

“We'uns don't need reg'latin', you maple-headed blaggards!” Innocence said. “We was just watchin' Quidditch!”

Constance sucked in a breath. Benjamin stepped towards the younger girl, and raised his hand. “Girl, I'm fixin' to reg'late that mouth of yours.”

Forbearance stepped in front of him.

“You will not,” she said.

Benjamin stared at her. Behind him, Mordecai grabbed his brother's hand, looking around. There were no adults in sight – Miss Gambola had been at the Quidditch field, overseeing tryouts, but she had either gone to the locker rooms or was putting brooms away.

“You'uns better straighten your brooms and start mindin' us,” Benjamin said. “If your Ma and Pa knew how you'uns are behavin' or what wickedness your little sister is up to –”

“I hain't up to no wickedness!” Innocence shouted, before Constance put a hand over her mouth.

“We're sorry, Benjamin. We're real sorry. Please don't tell our folks,” Forbearance pleaded.

Benjamin pointed at Alexandra. “I don't want to see you'uns consortin' with this sorceress again.”

Alexandra could no longer hold her tongue. “They can consort with whoever they like.”

“Stay out of this, girl,” Mordecai said. “This don't concern you none.”

“My name isn't 'girl,' and like heck it doesn't!” Alexandra advanced on the Ozarker boys, shrugging off Anna's grasp and ignoring Constance and Forbearance's horrified expressions. “You're just a couple of bullies! You have no right to tell them who they can be friends with.”

“You hain't no kind of friend,” said Benjamin. “You're a sorceress! Dark begets Dark. Your own brother died on account o' your wickedness and now you want to drag others into –”

Alexandra's wand came out in a flash, and she pointed it at him with an expression that made everyone else turn pale.

“Take that back,” she said coldly.

“Alex,” gulped Anna.

“Benjamin, Mordecai...” Constance spoke in a pleading tone.

“You got wrackspurts in your head, girl,” sneered Benjamin, drawing his wand. “Ain't no Mudblood witch who's a match for –”

“*Expelliarmus!*” Alexandra shouted, and Benjamin spun about a hundred and eighty degrees as the spell caught his hand and his wand both, sending the wand flying and almost yanking him off his feet. Anna squealed as Mordecai drew his own wand and cast a hex that Alexandra deflected into the grass, splattering green goo at Anna's feet.

Benjamin dived for his wand while Alexandra and Mordecai exchanged hexes and the other girls scattered out of the way. Alexandra blasted Mordecai's hat off his head, and as the other boy tried to Stun her, she threw a Spinning Jinx. Mordecai whirled violently around, almost knocking his brother over as Benjamin rose to his feet grasping his wand. He tried to Stun Alexandra also, but she cast a Shield Charm and the red beam fizzled harmlessly against it.

“No!” Alexandra shouted, as Anna began drawing her own wand. She saw that Constance and Forbearance, too, had their wands out, and Alexandra held her hand up in a forbidding gesture. Her friends all looked aghast as Benjamin swung his arm in a circle to cast another hex. Already, more students were running over to watch the fight.

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She let her Shield Charm repel Benjamin's hex, and said, "*Tarantallegra*," just as Mordecai began to stop spinning. The already winded and dizzy boy's feet began jerking and kicking violently beneath him.

Benjamin flicked his wand and shouted, "*Flagration!*"

Alexandra felt the heat just before she deflected this spell like the others. It went rolling across the lawn, igniting the grass in a long fiery streak. Her Shield Charm dissipated; Benjamin tried to hex her again, and she pointed her wand and cast a jinx that collided with Benjamin's spell, making a bright flash in the air between them.

They're both good, she thought. *But they don't work together*. She had practiced against multiple opponents with Maximilian, Beatrice, and Martin. She'd always lost, of course, but the Stormcrows were older and better and used teamwork.

"*Stupefy!*" Benjamin yelled, and Alexandra whispered a Blocking Jinx; the Stunner rebounded and almost struck its caster. Mordecai finally managed to undo the *Tarantallegra* hex; Alexandra promptly knocked him off his feet with a Stunning Spell of her own, and then struck Benjamin in the face with another curse.

He reeled back, while his teeth began growing and his nose began shrinking, and Alexandra snapped, "*Piikkikipu!*" with a sharp flick of her wrist. Quills spontaneously sprouted from Benjamin's arms, tearing through his cotton shirt from his wrists to his shoulders, and causing him to drop his wand and yelp in pain as the sharp spines began stabbing him every time he moved.

For just a second, he stared at Alexandra in horror, even as his face continued transforming. Then Alexandra said, "*Feordupois*," and a Deadweight Jinx made his knees buckle. He collapsed to the ground, struggling to hold his arms away from his body, though he could barely lift them.

His face was deformed and rat-like, with his front teeth sticking grotesquely out of his mouth and his nose shrunk to a tiny, wet nub, but his eyes were still normal. They widened in shock and fear as Alexandra leaned over him and pressed the tip of her wand to his throat, with her eyes blazing.

"Don't ever call me a Mudblood again, me or any of my friends," she said, in an icy voice. "And Don't. You. Ever. Talk. About. My. Brother." She jabbed him with the point of her wand, and he flinched. "Do you understand?"

"QUICK!" yelled a woman's voice in a commanding tone. Alexandra stood up slowly.

She was surrounded by a ring of spectators, and her shocked friends. Anna looked as if she might be sick. Constance and Forbearance were horrified, but Innocence was staring at her with her mouth open and her eyes as wide as saucers. Benjamin lay at her feet, groaning; Mordecai lay several yards away, knocked out cold.

Ms. Shirtliffe, the formidable commander of Charmbridge's Junior Regimental Officer Corps, and the teacher in charge of the Dueling Club, was sprinting towards them, dressed in boots and black pants and a leather jacket. From the opposite direction, a little further away, Miss Gambola was running their way.

"Why is it always you, Quick?" Ms. Shirtliffe demanded, when she arrived at the scene of the duel, looking around at the defeated Ozarkers and the scorched grass. "Why?"

Alexandra looked up at the older woman, with her short-cropped gunmetal gray hair and scarred face, and shrugged. She felt no sense of victory, no remorse, and no dread, even as Shirtliffe ordered her to the Dean's office. The only thing she did feel was relief, when she saw that Shirtliffe wasn't dragging Anna or Constance or Forbearance with her. At least this time, she'd kept her friends out of trouble.

Chapter 7 — In the Basement



Alexandra sat quietly on the bench in front of the Dean's office, where Miss Marmsley had curtly bade her to sit. Now that the fight was over and adrenaline was no longer pumping through her, she felt weary. Ms. Grimm probably would expel her this time. She shook her head at the thought, unwilling to allow it to proceed further. There was no point in feeling regret now.

The door that finally opened, however, was not Dean Grimm's, but another one down the hall. A deep male voice called, "Come here, Miss Quick."

Alexandra rose to her feet and walked down the corridor. The sign on the door read: 'Cesar Cervantes, Dean of the Eighth Grade.'

Dean Cervantes was a handsome older man with slick, dark black hair and a full mustache; he obviously spent a great deal of time grooming both. Alexandra remembered his brief introduction

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during the beginning-of-semester assembly, when Dean Grimm had given the student body the usual announcements and warnings.

The Assistant Dean regarded Alexandra with an unsmiling, vaguely curious expression. Ms. Shirtliffe was standing to one side, a few feet from his desk, with her arms folded across her chest and an angry look in her eyes.

“Well, Miss Quick,” the dean said, folding his hands on his desk. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?”

Alexandra glanced at Ms. Shirtliffe, and back at the Assistant Dean. “Where's Ms. Grimm?”

He raised an eyebrow. “You've become used to receiving the personal attention of the Dean, have you? She's a very busy woman, which means your fate is in my hands, now.”

Alexandra imagined him cackling and twirling his mustache. Instead, he scratched his chin.

“You are on probation already,” he said, “and fighting is a serious offense.”

He seemed to be waiting for a response. Alexandra couldn't think of one, so she said nothing.

As if disappointed by her lack of defense or pleading, he sighed. “Is there any reason why I should not suspend you, Miss Quick? Trouble seems to follow you, year after year. When everyone in school knows your name by the start of the eighth grade, that's either a very good thing or a very bad thing.”

“What was the cause of the fight, Quick?” Ms. Shirtliffe asked.

Alexandra glanced at her. The other teacher's expression was still stern and disapproving.

She shrugged. “They insulted me.”

“You put a transfiguration curse on Mr. Rash because he insulted you?” Dean Cervantes shook his head. “Am I to believe that this was a matter of honor? Because it is my understanding that you have not been raised according to pureblood traditions.”

“Oh, so it would be okay if I cursed him for insulting me if I were a pureblood?” Alexandra said. “How about because he called me a Mudblood?”

Cervantes pressed his fingertips together thoughtfully.

“You know,” he said, “in my day, Muggle-born and half-blood students weren't allowed at Charmbridge. They had their own schools to go to.”

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. Shirtliffe was also frowning, but then Dean Cervantes continued. “But these are different times, aren't they? We do not allow that sort of language anymore. Messers Rash will be dealt with. Also, I am given to understand that one of the young men cast a Conflagration Spell at Miss Quick?” The dean glanced at Ms. Shirtliffe, who nodded. He *tsked* and shook his head. “That's a dangerous spell to be throwing around in a schoolyard duel... it's remarkably lucky for you, Miss Quick, that Ms. Shirtliffe intervened before those two boys hurt you.”

Alexandra started to sputter, then caught Ms. Shirtliffe giving her a warning look, and closed her mouth.

“Notwithstanding the fact that two boys have no excuse for fighting a girl – and a girl who's two years younger than them – your status at this school leaves you with little leeway when it comes to your own behavior, Miss Quick.” Dean Cervantes stared at her, as if hoping to impress upon her the seriousness of her situation with the intensity of his gaze. She stared back at him, still biting her tongue.

The dean sighed and leaned back in his chair. “If it were me alone making this decision, I would be inclined to suspend you, pending expulsion by the Dean, but Ms. Shirtliffe, for reasons inexplicable to me, wishes to give you one more chance.” Alexandra blinked, as Dean Cervantes suddenly leaned forward again. “Of course, it is still my decision.”

“Of course, Dean Cervantes,” Ms. Shirtliffe said.

Cervantes seemed to be studying Alexandra, as if trying to discern what it was that Ms. Shirtliffe saw

in her. Alexandra was wondering the same thing. Then he said, “Ms. Shirtliffe is willing to accept you into the Junior Regimental Officer Corps again this year, and take responsibility for disciplining you.”

Alexandra stared at Mr. Cervantes, and then at Ms. Shirtliffe.

“The entire year?” Alexandra asked.

“The entire year,” Ms. Shirtliffe said.

“That will be in addition to a month's detention, including weekends,” said Cervantes.

Alexandra's face clouded over. She had sworn she was never going to wear the Junior Regimental Officer Corps uniform again. She had spent all last year in JROC – initially as punishment, with Anna, and then she had continued because of Maximilian. What had started out as the worst time in her life had become something special – something now gone forever.

“Or, you can go home,” the dean said, noting her expression. “JROC or suspension, most likely followed by expulsion. Either way is quite fine with me. You're very lucky to have a choice at all, young lady. You should be on your knees thanking Ms. Shirtliffe.”

For a moment, Alexandra felt a wild urge to tell them both off; to say: “The hell with Charmbridge Academy and the wizarding world!” Maybe her mother would be happy to have her back in Larkin Mills, if she left this world behind forever.

But there were no wizard libraries in Larkin Mills. Alexandra didn't think a church was going to tell her what she needed to know about what happened when someone died. She would never learn magical theory in Larkin Mills, and it was very unlikely she'd stumble upon a Time-Turner like foolish Marty the Muggle.

And, a smaller voice murmured in the back of her mind: *Your friends aren't in Larkin Mills.*

“JROC,” she said.

Ms. Shirtliffe didn't smile, but there was a satisfied look in her eyes.

“Very well.” Dean Cervantes nodded, and scribbled something on a scroll on his desk. “I give you over to Ms. Shirtliffe. Your detention starts tonight, with Ms. Gale.”

Alexandra nodded silently, until Ms. Shirtliffe hissed, “Yes, sir!” at her.

“Yes, sir,” Alexandra said sullenly.

She walked out of Dean Cervantes's office, followed by Ms. Shirtliffe. Alexandra thought the teacher would immediately begin lecturing her, but Ms. Shirtliffe walked silently behind her, past the disapproving gaze of Miss Marmsley, until they had left the administrative office and were out of sight of the secretary's portrait. Only then did Ms. Shirtliffe say, “You'd better not disappoint me, Quick.”

Alexandra turned around and regarded the older witch. Ms. Shirtliffe had been one of a handful of people who'd known who Alexandra's father was from the moment she'd arrived at Charmbridge. And she had first suggested that Alexandra join JROC at the end of her sixth grade year. Alexandra had always found Shirtliffe a little bit mysterious; fierce, sometimes frightening, and not always nice, but she was one of the few teachers Alexandra respected, deep down.

Right now, though, she was just angry and resentful. “Why do you want me in JROC, anyway?”

Shirtliffe inspected Alexandra, looking down the ridge of her slightly crooked nose.

“You have a lot of potential, Quick. For good or for trouble.” She shook her head. “Ozarker boys learn to hex about the time they learn to talk. Those two should have sent you to the infirmary, not the other way around. You shouldn't even know half those spells you used. Where did you learn the Deadweight Jinx and the Porcupine Curse?”

Alexandra looked steadily back at her. “You know where.”

Shirtliffe nodded slowly. “Your brother was a really remarkable young man. Enormous talent – I could see that, in the short time I knew him. And also that he was troubled. I wish –”

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"It doesn't matter what you wish!" Alexandra snapped. "It won't change anything."

Shirtliffe's expression hardened, while Alexandra looked away, startled and angry that she'd allowed herself such an outburst.

"From now on, I'd better hear a '*ma'am*' at the end of anything you say to me, Quick." When Alexandra didn't reply, Shirtliffe's tone softened a little. "You could be a really remarkable witch, Alexandra. Or you could go down another path."

"Maybe I'd be remarkable going down another path, too," Alexandra said. "Ma'am."

Shirtliffe's eyes narrowed, very slightly. "Is that what you want? To be like your father?"

"Is that what you're afraid of? And you're, what, trying to save me, 'cause I'm such a troubled kid?" Alexandra shook her head. "May I go, ma'am?"

"Exercise, Monday morning at six a.m. Don't be late."

Alexandra gave her a sardonic salute, and marched off to her dorm.

Anna was waiting in their room, wringing her hands anxiously.

"Detention," Alexandra said wearily, in answer to Anna's unspoken question. "For a month. And I have to join JROC again. For the whole year."

Anna's mouth dropped open. "That's terrible!" she said, after a moment of stunned disbelief.

"At least I didn't get expelled," Alexandra threw herself on her bed, and looked up at the ceiling, while Charlie cawed, "Troublesome!" from the windowsill.

Anna walked over and hesitantly sat down on Alexandra's bed next to her. "I don't know what I'd do if you got expelled," she said.

"Probably get in less trouble."

Anna laughed softly. "Probably. But –"

There was a knock on the door to their bathroom. Before either of them could answer, Sonja opened the door. "Hi." She took one hesitant step inside. "Is it true you got in a fight with Benjamin and Mordecai Rash? And won?"

Alexandra sighed and sat up. "Yeah."

"Wow!" Sonja sounded impressed. Behind her, Carol was standing in the bathroom, but looked afraid to follow her roommate into Alexandra's room. "Do you think you could teach me some of your hexes?"

"Why, are you planning to get in a fight?" Annoyed, Alexandra got up from her bed. "I'm hungry. Let's go eat."

"Maybe we could, you know, be partners in the Dueling Club," Sonja said, as she and Carol followed Alexandra and Anna downstairs.

Alexandra scoffed. "Like Ms. Shirtliffe is going to let me join the Dueling Club now?"

Everyone stared at her when she entered the cafeteria. Word of the fight had obviously gotten around the school. Alexandra heard 'Dark Arts' and 'curses' being whispered, as she stood in line for her meal. She was sure that by Monday morning, the whole school would believe that she'd used the Cruciatus Curse on the Rashers.

Constance and Forbearance were already sitting at the eighth graders' table. After getting her meal of ham and scalloped potatoes, Alexandra walked over and sat down across the table from them. Anna and Sonja followed. Carol reluctantly joined her roommate, as far away from Alexandra as she could.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra said. "I know you wanted me to stay out of it, and I probably made things worse for you, but –"

Constance looked away, and Alexandra sensed that she was holding her tongue. Forbearance sighed, and said, "You're right, Alex, we're proolly in for it now, 'specially if Benjamin an' Mordecai sees us with

you again.” When Alexandra looked down, Forbearance's voice softened. “But Benjamin oughter not spoken ill of your brother... or used that word.”

“What word?” asked Sonja.

“The m-word,” Anna said quietly.

Sonja's mouth made a shocked little 'o'.

David entered the cafeteria, accompanied by his roommate and some other boys from Quidditch tryouts. He looked at Alexandra and gave her a thumbs-up, grinning. She rolled her eyes.

“Innocence!” Constance hissed. “Git over here!” Alexandra saw that Innocence had followed the boys into the cafeteria. She bounded over to where her sisters were sitting,

“Would you stop applicatin' David?” Constance said.

“Stay here, Innocence,” Forbearance said, taking her younger sister's hand.

Innocence tried to pull her hand away, and turned to Alexandra, still wrestling with Forbearance.

“That was some fearsome hexin', Alex! I hain't never seen no one deal a whuppin' like that!”

“It hain't admirable!” Constance snapped, before glancing at Alexandra, and blushing. “I mean...”

“She means don't get in trouble like me,” Alexandra said. “I've got detention for a month.”

“I got detention tonight, too!” Innocence said. “It's my last night. Maybe we'll have it together! Ms. Gale hain't so bad, an' I got to captain Clockworks...”

“Detention hain't s'posed to be *fun*!” Constance said.

Innocence's enthusiasm was undiminished, even when Benjamin and Mordecai walked into the cafeteria, slouching and avoiding eye contact with anyone.

Benjamin's face still looked a little rat-like. The two boys got in line for their meals, never looking in Alexandra's direction. Alexandra expected they would whistle or snap their fingers and beckon the Pritchards over. Clearly Constance and Forbearance were expecting it, too, as they immediately became tense, and looked down at their trays.

Innocence, however, looked smug and unconcerned.

As the girls continued eating, the Rashes carried their trays past their table. Not once did they look in the girls' direction. Constance and Forbearance's heads swiveled to follow them. Benjamin and Mordecai sat down at the end of the table where other tenth graders were seated. A few snickers could be heard from the boys around them.

“I'm surprised they didn't lose it when they saw you sitting with me,” Alexandra said.

Constance glanced at her, and back at the Rashes.

“They must've takin' a grievous blow to their pride,” Forbearance said.

“They surely will be aggervated with us,” Constance said. “We'll catch an earful later.”

Alexandra opened her mouth to say something, but Innocence responded first. “No we won't. Them Rashes hain't gonna bother us no more!” She looked extraordinarily pleased with herself, as she stabbed a slice of ham with her fork and shoved it into her mouth.

Constance looked at Innocence suspiciously. Forbearance raised her eyebrows. “Why do you say that, Innocence?”

“Finish chewin', girl!” Constance said, as Innocence started to reply, with her mouth still full.

Innocence glared at Constance, and took her time chewing her food and swallowing it, while everyone waited.

“I went an' had a talkin' to with Benjamin an' Mordecai whilst they was in the 'firmary,” Innocence said at last. Her smile, for a moment, was almost cat-like. “I told 'em they best leave us be and not try to mind us no more, and not say nothin' aspersin' us to our ma and pa neither.”

Her sisters stared at her. Innocence, obviously pleased with being the center of attention, waited,

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looking like the proverbial cat who'd swallowed a canary.

"An' why would they harken to that?" Constance asked at last.

Innocence grinned. "'Cause I told 'em if they undid us back home we'd tell everyone in the Five Hollers how they both got whupped like a Mudblood stepchild by a girl!"

"You told them *what*?" Forbearance exclaimed.

"Like a *what*?" Alexandra demanded, at the same time.

Innocence's grin faltered when she realized that now everyone was scowling at her. "I din't mean that word the way Benjamin an' Mordecai did – I wasn't callin' y'all..." Alexandra and Anna both glowered at her, and she looked down. "S'just a sayin'."

Constance was fuming. "Some sayings oughtn't be said."

Forbearance shook her head. "I plumb can't believe you, Innocence! You told Benjamin and Mordecai we'd slander them?"

"Hain't slander, it's the truth!"

"It's wrong!"

"Well, fine, you jus' go make a liar of me, and they can keep overseein' us an' whistlin' us over like we was dogs!" Innocence shouted. "You'uns just go right ahead!"

Down the table, heads turned in their direction. Constance and Forbearance's mouths dropped open. They turned red, and started to make shushing noises, but Innocence stood up angrily. "I gots to clean my half of the room a'fore detention or Ouida Noel will have kittens." She looked at Alexandra. "See you tonight, Alex." She smiled at her, then gave her shocked sisters a glare, and turned around with her nose in the air and flounced off.

Constance and Forbearance were still sitting there with their mouths open. Alexandra and Anna looked at each other. Sonja's eyes were wide, while Carol was hunched over her tray, as students all around them stared. The Rashes' eyes followed Innocence as she stalked out of the cafeteria, then they looked in the direction of her sisters.

"I don't know what's gotten into that girl!" Forbearance said.

"She kind of has a point," Alexandra said, tearing off a piece of bread.

"Beg pardon?" Constance blinked at her. "Alexandra Quick, we don't need Innocence gettin' any *encouragement* from –"

"A Mudblood?"

The Pritchards turned red. Forbearance stammered, "We'd never say such a thing!"

"Or think it!" said Constance.

Forbearance nodded. "You know that, Alex."

Alexandra shook her head. "I'm sorry if you don't think I'm a good role model. I'll try not to give Innocence any more encouragement."

She rose from the table, leaving the Pritchards flustered.

Anna followed her up to her room. She said nothing as Alexandra straightened up her books and fed Nigel and Charlie. Finally, Alexandra turned to face her silent roommate. "What?"

"You're being kind of a jerk again," Anna said.

Alexandra sighed. "I didn't ask for Innocence to look up to me, and I didn't ask for that fight with the Rashes."

"You were pretty hard on Constance and Forbearance. They're just worried about their sister. And being bullied. Not everyone can just fight back and not worry about the consequences like you do."

Alexandra paused, as she shrugged off her school robe and put on her coat, and looked at Anna.

"Was I wrong?"

In the Basement

"I don't know. Maybe the fight wasn't your fault." Anna shook her head. "But you should be gentler with your friends, Alex. And stay out of trouble."

Alex finished putting on her coat, then gave Anna a quick hug. "I'll try."

"Try harder," Anna whispered, as Alexandra left their room to go to detention.

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Alexandra paused at the top of the steps that went down to the basement.

The main basement level was where Ms. Gale's office was located. They stored the school's Clockwork golems in the basement, and Alexandra knew that Charmbridge's elves also lived down there somewhere.

But below the main basement were several deeper basement levels, forbidden to students. They predated Charmbridge Academy, carved in subterranean rock ages ago. It was in May that Alexandra and Maximilian had descended to the deepest basement level, and been transported from there to the Lands Below.

Only Alexandra had come back. She hadn't been down to the basements since.

She stared downwards at the foot of the stairs, dimly lit by the basement lamps, and felt cold air blowing past her. For a moment, she felt a chill much deeper than that caused by the breeze.

But that was stupid. What was she afraid of, ghosts? Angry at herself for hesitating, she clenched her jaw and descended down the steps.

"Yoohoo! Alex! Over here!" She heard Innocence calling out to her as soon as she walked out into the basement corridor. The sixth grader was standing in front of the custodian's office, trying to levitate a push broom with her wand, without success.

Alexandra walked slowly down the corridor to join her.

"I can't move it," Innocence said, frowning. "Mr. Newton says a Levitatin' Charm don't make no nevermind how heavy somethin' is, it oughter move if your wandwork's right."

"Yeah. He's always saying things that you haven't learned to do yet should be easy."

The door to the office opened just then, and the Charmbridge custodian looked down at the two girls, frowning. Ms. Gale was a fat, taciturn woman with rosy cheeks that would have made her look friendly if she ever smiled.

"Stop playing around," she said to Innocence. She squatted to pick up the push broom, then stood up and handed it to the younger girl. "Pritchard, take the Clockworks and finish emptying out those storage rooms. Quick, I have a special job for you."

Warily, Alexandra followed the custodian into her office, and waited while Ms. Gale marched a squad of Clockworks out for Innocence to lead down the corridor. The rotund witch then went to her desk, piled high with odd jars and bottles and something that looked like a helmet, and picked up an enormous pair of goggles with dark green lenses at least six inches in diameter and two inches thick. They were attached to a leather cap and held on with black elastic bands. She held them out to Alexandra, along with a parchment with a map of Charmbridge Academy's several floors.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked.

Alexandra shook her head.

"It's a spectrescope. Ghosts and poltergeists leave spectral residue. Start in the basement – if you pick up anything on the scope, mark the location on the map and let me know."

"What for?" Alexandra asked slowly.

"Annual ghost-sweeping. We don't want any ghosts taking up residence here, or Merlin forbid, a poltergeist."

"You want me to hunt ghosts?" Alexandra was still looking at the goggles in the custodian's hand. "If

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a ghost wants to stay here, why can't we just let him?"

"It's not allowed." Ms. Gale shrugged. "Dean Grimm says there have been no hauntings at Charmbridge Academy for over twenty years. You don't have a phobia of ghosts, do you?"

"No." Alexandra took the goggles. "What about the lower basement levels?" she asked, with forced casualness.

Ms. Gale peered at her for a moment, blinking slowly. "Those have been sealed off. All the doors are locked and warded and spell-alarmed. Don't try to open them."

Alexandra nodded, and walked out of the office. In the corridor, she grimaced a little as she slipped on the leather cap and tightened the strap around her head. The goggles felt cumbersome and awkward. She began walking down the corridor, and had to light the end of her wand to see, with the thick glass lenses turning everything a murky shade of green.

The Charmbridge basement roughly circumscribed the floor above, in a great underground loop, but there were side corridors and bisecting corridors and a multitude of doors, some leading to storage spaces or lavatories or old abandoned classrooms, and some leading to stairs going up or down. It was maze-like and parts of it were unlit. Alexandra had gotten lost in the basements before – and Ben Journey, Ms. Gale's predecessor, had once tried to kill her down here.

Yet she didn't feel particularly afraid as she proceeded down a long, dark corridor, with only her wand and a small lamp at the other end to guide her.

She saw nothing through the green lenses of the spectroscope, even when she closely examined the doors that she knew led down to the sub-basements. No signs of 'spectral residue,' whatever that might look like. The goggles made it difficult for her to see anything, and they were uncomfortable and dorky-looking, so after shuffling around in the dark for half an hour, Alexandra took them off, and sat down in front of a set of double-doors with a hand-painted wooden sign saying 'Laundry.' She wondered if this was where the Charmbridge elves did students' laundry.

There were so many things Charmbridge students took for granted, she thought. Like clean sheets magically appearing on their beds, and their dirty clothes reappearing clean in their closets and drawers. Like food being served morning, noon, and night with no sign of the cooks. Like books in the library, left scattered on tables, being reshelved each night.

Like the staff making sure no ghosts haunted Charmbridge Academy.

After what she judged to be a sufficient length of time, Alexandra got up and made her way back towards the custodian's office. She found Innocence waving her wand in time to an imaginary band as she shouted dance calls at the Clockworks. Either the golems were not very good dancers, or Innocence wasn't very good at directing them – there was a lot of clanking and crashing as the Clockworks reeled into one another or bounced off of walls. Innocence giggled at the mayhem, then lowered her wand quickly when she saw Alexandra.

"Hi Alex! You done with your chores? What's that?" She let the Clockworks grind to a halt as she gestured at Alexandra's goggles.

"I don't think Ms. Gale will like it if she catches you making them dance instead of clean," Alexandra said.

Innocence snorted. "Ms. Gale just instructs me what to do then goes back to her office 'til detention's over. I hain't never seen her do a lick 'o work."

"Well, it's about time for us to go back to our dorms." Alexandra walked between the now-motionless Clockworks, forcing herself to ignore the slight shiver this gave her, and the memory of being seized by metal hands and carried, struggling and shouting, towards a blazing fire pit – another one of Mr. Journey's covert murder attempts when he had been the head custodian.

In the Basement

Innocence followed along after her. “You hain't still mad at me, are you, Alex?”

Alexandra put the spectrescope back on her head, to avoid looking at Innocence and her earnest, pleading expression. “No. But if I ever hear you use the m-word again, I'll whup *you* like a Mudblood stepchild.”

Innocence winced. “I'm real sorry, Alex. Constance was fit to hex me to yonder and gone for that... I plumb forgot you *are* a Mudblood stepchil– wait, I din't mean that!” She squeaked and covered her mouth in horror as Alexandra rounded on her.

“You really don't have any filter between your mouth and your brain, do you?” Alexandra said, clenching her wand.

Innocence gulped. “Please don't curse me, Alex!”

Alexandra rolled her eyes, behind the green lenses of the spectrescope, and then paused.

“Alex?” Innocence asked, after Alexandra stood unmoving in front of her for several seconds. Behind Innocence, the Clockworks had clanked to a halt and now stood in two neat columns, equally unmoving.

Over Innocence's shoulder and past the Clockworks was a door they had passed moments ago, before Alexandra had donned the goggles. There was a faint, luminescent green glow around it. Alexandra slowly lifted the goggles from her eyes.

Innocence turned to look where Alexandra was staring. Without the spectrescope, the door looked perfectly ordinary. Alexandra slipped the goggles back on, and saw the green glow reappear.

As she walked towards the door, edging between the motionless Clockworks, Innocence followed.

“You see somethin'?” Innocence whispered. “Is them some kinda special *magic* goggles?” She sounded excited. Alexandra made a shushing gesture with her hand, and mercifully, Innocence fell silent.

There was something familiar about that door, but all the doors and corridors down here in the basements looked alike. It was only when she was close enough to see through the dirty glass window set in the top panel of the heavy wooden door that Alexandra felt yet another chill, this time of recognition. This was the door that she and Maximilian had taken to go down to the next lowest sub-basement level below Charmbridge.

Innocence walked directly up to it and stood on her tip-toes to look through the window. “Alex!” she said excitedly. “There's stairs goin' *down*! Did you know there was even more cellars *below* this one – ?”

“Get away from there!” Alexandra snapped. Innocence jumped and spun around. Alexandra grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her away from the door. “You stay away from any lower basements, or any stairs going down, understand? Don't be innocent *and* stupid!”

Innocence flinched, and then looked at her feet in a manner very similar to the way Constance and Forbearance hung their heads when the Rashes were admonishing them... or when Alexandra was short with them.

You should be gentler with your friends, Alex, she heard Anna saying.

I didn't choose her as my friend, Alexandra replied silently to herself, but she released her grip on Innocence's wrist. With one last glance over Innocence's shoulder, where a ghostly green aura still illuminated the door to the basement, she pulled the spectrescope up away from her eyes, and looked down at the younger girl. “I mean it. Don't try to go down there. It's... dangerous.”

Innocence's eyes were wide with awe and dread. “Is down there where...?” She looked down again. “Constance an' Forbearance is real worried 'bout you,” she mumbled. “They reckon you miss your brother somethin' terrible.”

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Alexandra fought the urge to smack the girl or yell at her. After several seconds, she let out a long breath.

“Yeah, I do. But Constance and Forbearance don't need to worry about me.” She turned away, and began walking back the way they had been heading, towards Ms. Gale's office.

Innocence followed, but once more, she could only remain silent for a few paces.

“Constance an' Forbearance say he was right handsome,” she said quietly.

Alexandra glanced sidelong at the girl. “Yeah,” she said at last. “He was.”

“Alex?” Innocence asked, as they continued down the corridor. She gestured with her wand, and the Clockworks resumed following them, with the clanking sound of metal feet on stone. “How do you get boys to notice you?”

Alexandra made a choking sound. “You're asking me?”

“Well, you're friends with boys, an' I only ever knowed my brothers. I hain't never been friends with no other boys an' I hain't met any boys I wanted to be friends with, 'specially not them Rashes.”

“I don't blame you.”

“So, how do you make friends with boys, 'specially, you know, if'n there's a boy you sorta like...”

“Why don't you ask your sisters this?”

Innocence stared at her. With a perfectly deadpan expression, she said, “You can't be serious.”

Alexandra struggled to control the laughter that threatened to erupt from her. It felt raw and painful to want to laugh like that, after she had just been thinking about her brother. “Don't you think you're a little young to be interested in boys?” She gave Innocence another sideways look. “Especially older boys?”

Innocence flushed. “I din't say nothin' 'bout older boys! I'm just wonderin', s'all!”

“Uh huh.” Alexandra shook her head. “Look, I'm sorry, but I'm pretty sure you aren't David's type.”

Innocence turned redder. “Who said anythin' 'bout –?” She frowned. “What's his type?”

Alexandra couldn't help laughing now. “Gee, I'd say tall, dark, and...” She held up her hands and cupped them in front of her chest, with plenty of room to spare. “Like most boys.”

Innocence looked down at her own chest, with a small frown. She mulled that over, until they reached the custodian's office, then asked, “Is that why David likes Angelique 'stead of you?”

Alexandra snorted. “David's not my type either.”

“What's your type?”

Alexandra turned around slowly to stare at her. “Do you ever have a thought you *don't* say out loud?”

Innocence was spared from answering by the door opening. Ms. Gale looked down at the two girls, yawning as if she'd just woken up from a nap.

“Are you finished?” she asked the two of them. Alexandra and Innocence nodded.

As the custodian stepped aside to let the Clockworks march in, she asked Alexandra, “Did you find any spectral traces?”

Alexandra handed her the goggles and the map. “No.”

Ms. Gale nodded; that seemed to be the answer she wanted to hear. “Well, we'll continue tomorrow.”

As she headed back upstairs with Innocence, Alexandra thought about that green glow around the door leading down to the sub-basements. She knew that by 'we,' Ms. Gale meant *her* – which meant, if she was lucky, that she would have plenty of opportunity to go ghost-hunting without any adults looking over her shoulder. She nodded distractedly in response to Innocence's chatter, but she wasn't really paying attention – she was thinking about the ghost in the basement.

Chapter 8 — Ghost Sickness



Alexandra spent most of Saturday and Sunday evening in the basement. It was huge and labyrinthine, so Ms. Gale believed her when she said she hadn't finished checking every room and side corridor yet. Innocence was right – Ms. Gale never checked what students serving detention were doing, so as soon as the custodian retreated back into her office, Alexandra returned to the door leading to the sub-basement, and then began checking every other doorway to the lower levels she could find.

By Saturday night, however, the 'spectral residue' around the door she had discovered the previous night had faded, and as hard as she looked, she didn't find any more green spectral traces in the basement that weekend.

She spent a long time standing in front of that door, staring at it, and thinking about opening it. But Ms. Gale had said they were warded and alarmed. (*Now they think of doing that*, she thought bitterly.) There was no point getting herself into more trouble... yet.

Alexandra didn't see much of her friends over the weekend, except at mealtimes. When she wasn't in detention, she was reading the books she had checked out. She didn't realize that she had been

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practically ignoring Anna until Sunday night, when she returned from another fruitless evening spent in the basement.

“Did you find any ghosts?” Anna asked. She was sitting at her desk, writing on a piece of parchment with a slender quill.

“No.” Alexandra felt guilty about not telling Anna about the spectral traces in the basement, but she didn't want to voice the thoughts that had been stirring in her head since Friday.

Anna nodded. She hadn't looked up from her parchment. When Alexandra walked over to look over her shoulder, she saw neat lines of Chinese characters flowing across the page.

“A letter to your mother?” Alexandra asked.

“My father told me I should write in Chinese more,” Anna said quietly. “He said he doesn't want any letters from me in English. And my mother said I could write to her in Chinese, too, to practice, even though usually I write to her in English. But Father wants me to practice my Chinese...”

The hand clutching her quill trembled, and Anna lifted it from her parchment. She kept her face turned downward, but Alexandra saw her shoulders shake a little.

“Have you heard anything?” Alexandra asked, now feeling even more guilty.

Anna shook her head. “I already sent letters to the Wizard Justice Department, and the North California Governor's Office, and to the Governor-General, and even to some of our neighbors in Little Wu— in San Francisco. Not that I think anyone will answer me.”

Her voice trailed off. Alexandra saw a tear fall onto the parchment, staining the wet ink. Anna sniffled, and then Alexandra put her arms around her.

“Shh. It's all right,” Alexandra whispered, as Anna began crying. Alexandra sat there holding her as her friend struggled to control her tears. It was difficult to look at Anna's face.

Anna's breathing gradually became less labored, and after a minute she was able to speak. “I'm sorry.”

“For what? I'm sorry. I wish I weren't stuck in stupid detention all day.”

Anna's eyes fell on her letter, where her tears had turned an entire row of Chinese characters into blurry, black squiggles. She let out a horrified little moan.

“Anna, it's okay.” Alexandra held out her wand, and said, “*Yumo shui niuzhan.*” The black smears of ink squirmed and reformed into the neat symbols Anna had written. “See? No problem.”

Anna wiped at her eyes. “I can't believe you remembered that.” She smiled tearfully at Alexandra.

Alexandra smiled back at her. “You made me practice it enough.”

“Alex,” Anna murmured. She looked down. “You remember when Governor-General Hucksteen gave you a card, to contact his office?”

“Yes, but I told you, I burned it.”

“But Dean Grimm's sister gave you another one, right?”

Alexandra nodded slowly. “Yes...”

“Do you think —” Anna mumbled, still looking down. “Do you think if you used it to contact her that she could...?”

“Tell me about your father?” Alexandra sat down as she thought about that. “I don't know, Anna. She gave it to me so I could report any contact from my father — like I'm actually going to do that!”

Anna looked up quickly. “Has he contacted you again?”

“No.” Alexandra frowned. “Anyway, I can use the card, I guess, but if I don't have anything to tell her...”

Anna shook her head. “No, you're right.” She looked away. “It was a stupid idea. I just —”

“It's not a stupid idea.” Alexandra put her hand on Anna's shoulder. “But I don't trust Ms. Grimm. I

think she'd just be all, 'Help me catch your father, and I'll help Anna's father.'"

"You're right," Anna said softly.

"They can't keep him imprisoned for no reason. They have to let him go sooner or later."

Anna nodded, looking unconvinced.

Alexandra got ready for bed, knowing she'd need to get up before dawn. She didn't fall asleep for a long time, though, because she was thinking about Anna's situation. She wished there was more she could do for her friend, and she felt a little guilty that she'd been preoccupied with her own problems.

I need to do something about that, she thought, but as she drifted off to sleep, she was thinking about Maximilian again, and the ghost in the basement.



It was raining the next morning, but Ms. Shirliffe still made the Junior Regimental Officer Corps run two laps around Charmbridge Academy, before bringing them into the gym to finish their morning exercises.

Alexandra had hated JROC for most of the previous year – and then, seeking her brother's approval, she had begun to excel, despite resenting the discipline and regimentation. She wasn't any happier about the regimentation now, nor about being involuntarily 'enlisted' again, but she went through morning calisthenics with weary resignation. She'd become used to the sweating and yelling and drills last year, and it was something she could endure, if it meant staying at Charmbridge and getting what she wanted.

"My, you've all gotten soft and lazy over the summer," Ms. Shirliffe said, as they did Deadweight Drills. The students ran, climbed, and jumped over obstacles that Ms. Shirliffe conjured, while the new Mage-Sergeant Major, Eric Strangeland, cast Deadweight Spells on them. The weight was light at first, but as he continued to add more magical weight to each of them, movement became more difficult and they slowed more and more, until they were shambling about with leaden feet and limbs. One by one, the students collapsed and lay panting on the hard-packed dirt.

Alexandra was the last to fall. Strangeland frowned at her, as if he couldn't quite believe that she was still standing, and when she finally did collapse, it was only after he had added as much weight as he could to her.

She smiled smugly, despite the crushing weight pinning her to the ground. Every time Eric had cast the Deadweight Spell on her, she'd waited until he wasn't looking, and then cast the counterspell Maximilian had taught her.

"Wipe that smirk off your face, Quick." Alexandra opened her eyes, and saw Ms. Shirliffe leaning over to look down at her. "I saw you slipping your hand into your pocket every time Strangeland Deadweighted you. Would you like me to confiscate your wand before exercises?"

"No, ma'am," Alexandra wheezed.

Shirliffe shook her head, and then began pointing her wand at the prone students, one by one. There were groans of relief all around the gymnasium as she removed the Deadweight Spells from each of them – Alexandra last of all.

"On your feet, wands!" the teacher barked. "Are you a bunch of flobberworms?"

"No, Witch-Colonel!" everyone answered loudly, as they sprang or staggered to their feet.

Next to her, one chubby young boy looked as if he might fall over again. His face was red and sweaty, and he was grimacing in pain.

"I thought this would be fun!" he groaned. "Like Cub Scouts."

Alexandra recognized him as the Muggle-born boy who'd been so terrified of walking across the Invisible Bridge.

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“It gets easier,” Alexandra said to him. “And Ms. Shirtliffe is probably just being extra tough because it's our first day back from summer vacation.”

He smiled at her. Then Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland bellowed: “Quit whining and moaning and fall in!”

Morning exercises three days a week and JROC drills on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, added to detention every evening, left Alexandra with little time for anything else but eating, sleeping, and homework. Despite her resolution not to neglect her friends, she found it easy to beg off invitations to play board games in the rec room after dinner – there were only a few precious hours in the week available to her to read her library books. She did homework with Anna some evenings, before going off to detention, but she saw little of her other friends outside of class. David had made Reserve Seeker for the Quidditch team again, and usually ate with the team in the cafeteria, though he walked between classes with Angelique. The Pritchards joined Alexandra and Anna for meals sometimes, but to Alexandra's dismay, they chose to sit with Benjamin and Mordecai most evenings.

“We'uns is just tryin' to keep the peace – we can't have the Rashes nursin' a grudge,” Forbearance said.

“They hain't gonna speak no more ill of you'uns,” Constance assured them.

“But they is our kinfolk,” Forbearance said, sounding less than enthusiastic.

Innocence muttered something under her breath.

“What was that?” Constance snapped.

Alexandra wasn't sure what Innocence had said, but her sympathies were with her. She didn't understand why Constance and Forbearance still felt a need to appease the Rashes. She was glad that at least the Ozarker boys had been humbled badly enough that they were no longer trying to control who the girls spoke to.

Alexandra spent Monday night's detention in the basement again, but after that, Ms. Gale told her to move on to the main floors. Walking around with the spectrescope strapped to her head made Alexandra feel silly when other kids saw her – it was dorky-looking and she could barely see where she was going, and she heard snickering as she walked up and down the main school corridors. But she was genuinely trying to find evidence of ghostly activity now, though Ms. Gale had told her that a ghost would be unlikely to haunt the well-trafficked parts of the school. Furthermore, the portraits hanging at the entrances to all the dorms would surely report it if they saw a ghost. Nonetheless, a sweep of every floor was necessary, and Alexandra dutifully did as she was told – albeit for her own reasons.

Occasionally, she crossed paths with Benjamin and Mordecai, who led Clockworks to and from the basement while serving out their own detention. Benjamin stared at her hatefully, while Mordecai maintained a sullen, impassive expression. Neither boy ever spoke a word to her, so Alexandra said nothing to them.

Thanks to her forced participation in JROC, her schedule had once again been changed: instead of Magizology, she now had sixth period Practical Magical Exercise, a required class for all JROC students. Her only consolation was that she was no longer a 'new wand,' and only had to wear the JROC uniform on drill days.

In the little free time she had, she pored over books about ghostly cotillions and ghostly advisors to Governor-Generals, and spells for revealing or barring or confining ghosts. None of this seemed useful, and she was likewise very far from having any idea how to go about managing time travel.

She resorted to asking Mrs. Minder about Time-Turners, making her inquiry seem harmless by telling the librarian about some particularly ridiculous Muggle movies she'd seen.

“So, I always thought time travel was just fantasy,” she explained, her expression one of earnest

curiosity. "I really want to know how wizards actually do it."

Mrs. Minder smiled indulgently. "Well, of course Muggles can't be expected to know how something that complicated actually works."

Alexandra nodded. "Of course not." She kept the sarcasm out of her voice, with difficulty.

"Time-Turners are among the most difficult artifacts to enchant." Mrs. Minder was now pointing her wand at the Card Catalog, itself a magical artifact which Alexandra occasionally found useful, but which she suspected had enchantments to obstruct overly-curious students who were delving into subjects it deemed 'inappropriate.' When the librarian asked it for help, however, cards flew out of its drawers as if being dealt by an invisible hand, and lined up neatly in the air before Mrs. Minder's eyes. "Very few students research such things, even in Advanced Magical Theory. It's unlikely you'd ever actually be able to use one, after all; there are so few Historicists..."

"Historicists?" Alexandra repeated.

Mrs. Minder nodded. "There are a few Historical Departments in the Confederation, but it's an almost impossible field to get into..." She smiled at Alexandra. "Of course, you're years away from thinking about career choices."

Alexandra nodded.

"Oh, dear, these books are all much too advanced, I'm afraid." The librarian *tut-tutted*, scanning the cards before her.

"That's okay," Alexandra said quickly. "I'd like to check them out anyway."

Mrs. Minder looked at her. "Really, you won't understand any of it..."

"Maybe some of them have pictures." Alexandra didn't succeed in hiding her sarcasm so well this time, but Mrs. Minder didn't notice.

"Well, they're not restricted..." Mrs. Minder seemed to be considering, while Alexandra held her breath, and then the librarian sighed. "All right, I don't see the harm."

Alexandra walked back to her room that evening with an armful of books, and dumped them on her bed without looking at them, before rushing off to detention. She didn't think she was going to learn how to time travel just by reading books, but suddenly, the possibility of getting her hands on a Time-Turner seemed much closer.

She had thought her half-sister Valeria was just a wizarding historian – reading books and visiting old monuments and battlefields. But when Valeria had first told her what she did, she'd said she was a *Historicist*. Alexandra hadn't understood why Valeria had said she was unable to do that in America – now she cursed herself for not having asked more questions. It all made sense now.

I'll bet Valeria knows how to get a Time-Turner, she thought excitedly. Maybe she even has one! Maybe she knows how to make one. Or she knows time-traveling spells...

She thought about this all night, as she continued her search for ghosts. Ms. Gale was now sending her up to the attics, another maze of lost passageways and forgotten rooms where one could easily get lost – and another place where Ben Journey had tried to kill her. But Alexandra was so preoccupied with thoughts of time travel, and just what she would do once she acquired a Time-Turner, that it never even occurred to her to be wary. And she found no spectral residue up in the dusty labyrinth of plumbing and old furniture and moldering books and dried-up potion bottles and pieces of quods.

It was when she returned to the basement, and did a quick check of the usual egresses to the levels below, that her ruminations about time travel ground to an abrupt halt. Because once more, she saw a green glow through the spectroscope, by the same door that had betrayed evidence of ghostly passage before.

She walked to the door, and pulled the goggles off her head. She was alone in the corridor. The

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Rashes hadn't returned yet with their Clockwork crews, and Ms. Gale, as usual, was secluded in her office.

Alexandra reached a hand out, and touched the door. Nothing happened.

She licked her lips, as she stood there with her hand pressed against the door. Her throat felt very dry.

She opened her mouth, and whispered, “Max?”

There was no answer.

“Max?” she repeated, very softly. “If you can hear me...”

She didn't know it was Maximilian's ghost. She reminded herself of that, trying not to get her hopes up, knowing that it would be better if it weren't, but still, having actually given voice to her deeply suppressed desire, her heart was now pounding unbearably in her chest, and she could barely force more words out.

"You wouldn't hide from me, would you, Max?"

“Who is Miss talking to?”

Alexandra jumped and almost yelled in surprise. She whirled around, looking wild-eyed and a bit mad.

The house-elf standing behind her jumped back, and stared at her with alarm.

Alexandra felt blood rushing to her face. Shock was replaced by embarrassment and anger.

“Is Miss all right?” asked the elf.

“You snuck up on me!” Alexandra snarled.

The elf took another step back, looking nervous. “Em is sorry.”

Alexandra took several deep breaths, trying to calm herself.

“Is Miss stricken?” Em’s eyes were wide, now, and concerned.

“Stricken? No. What do you mean?”

Em shook her head. “Never mind,” she mumbled. “Miss is just... upset.”

Alexandra ran a hand through her hair. How much had the elf heard? “I’m sorry, Em. You startled me, is all.”

Em nodded.

Alexandra looked at the wrinkled old elf. Em was the one who had sent her and Maximilian to the Lands Below – though not willingly. Alexandra had summoned her, and forced her to accept a magical coin as payment.

Em had warned her. Em had not wanted them to go.

"I should never have gone," Alexandra blurted out. "You were right. I shouldn't have given you that obol. I'm sorry, Em. I'm so sorry, for everything –" Her voice choked.

Em's expression twisted into amazement, concern, and then pity.

Further conversation was cut off by the sound of clanking and tromping in the stairwell to her right. Benjamin and Mordecai appeared at the bottom of the stairs, and gave Alexandra dirty looks before leading their mop-and-broom-bearing Clockwork brigade down the hall to Ms. Gale's office.

Alexandra turned around, and saw that Em had disappeared. She took several more deep breaths, until she was sure that she was once more fine – she could not face Ms. Gale or the Rash twins if there were still stray emotions threatening to surface. But she had them under control again. It was a moment of weakness, she told herself, and she wouldn't let it happen again.

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“Merlin, would you get your fat behind in step?” snapped Adela Iturbide. The JROC was marching with brooms and wands, and William Killmond, the Muggle-born sixth grader, had almost stumbled over his untied boot laces.

Ghost Sickness

“How many of those Muggle-fried grease-burgers do you eat every day, Killmond?” sneered Theo Panos.

William was getting better about not making a face like he was about to cry, but the unfortunate new wand had quickly become the butt of jokes in JROC, and a target of abuse whenever Ms. Shirtliffe wasn't looking.

He turned red, but it was Alexandra who snapped, “Why don't you shut up, Panos? You don't look like you miss too many meals yourself!”

Snickering rose from the marching students, until Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland yelled at them. They fell silent and finished their drills, but no sooner had Strangeland dismissed them than Alexandra saw Theo waving a wand at William. The sixth grader, who had almost broken into a jog back to the academy, took a dive and went flat on his belly as his boot laces magically whipped loose and wrapped themselves around his ankles. Theo and his friends laughed. A few of the older students noticed, but they rarely intervened when junior wands were harassing each other. Supriya Chandra just smirked, and Charlotte Barker and Ermanno DiSilvio shook their heads.

Alexandra walked over to William, and undid the knots around his boots with a gesture from her wand.

“Poor Muggles – no magic, they can't even tie their shoes,” sneered Jordan Klein, one of Theo's friends, a fellow Mage-Private First Class.

Alexandra glanced right and left, and then flicked her wand while uttering a curse. Jordan's jacket twisted and squirmed around him. He let out a muffled yell, tried to resist the sudden constriction, and then fell over as his uniform became a straitjacket, squeezing the breath out of him.

“Help!” he screamed.

“That was Dark magic!” Theo shouted, as he ran to Jordan's aid.

“No, adding Envenomation would make it Dark magic,” Alexandra said, in a threatening tone.

Even the older kids blanched at that.

“No more Muggle cracks,” she warned, pointing her wand at Theo and Jordan, as Theo fumbled with a counterspell. She looked down at William, who was staring up at her with his mouth open.

“Keep your boots tied,” she said to him.

“Yes, Witch-Private!” he gulped, as she helped him to his feet.

Even knowing that it was unwise to risk getting caught throwing curses, Alexandra couldn't find it in herself to feel any regret. In fact, she had rather enjoyed cursing Jordan.

She barely gave William another thought, until she found him waiting for her as she left her American History of Magic class the next day.

Thanks to her schedule change, she was now taking the class fifth period, instead of sixth period with all of her friends. She exited the classroom alone, snubbing and being snubbed by the other eighth graders in the class (and the two ninth graders who were repeating it), and was surprised when she almost walked into a very nervous new wand. William stood at attention, in his blue and gray JROC uniform, and announced: “Good afternoon, Witch-Private Quick, ma'am!”

Snickers echoed up and down the hallway.

“Don't do that,” Alexandra said. “I'm not even in uniform.”

Assuming the encounter was accidental, she walked past him, proceeding towards the gym and sixth period Practical Magical Exercise, but she was surprised when the sixth grader fell into step alongside her.

“I... I was wondering if I could ask you a favor, ma'am.”

“Stop calling me 'ma'am.'”

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“Yes, uh, Witch-Private —”

“Just Alexandra, okay?” She shook her head. “What do you want?”

William looked around. The hallway was filled with other students, including other sixth graders and older JROC members heading into the gym, and many were looking at the pudgy boy who was talking to Alexandra Quick. He lowered his voice, and whispered, “Can you teach me hexes and jinxes?”

She stopped walking and stared at him. “What?”

“Ms. Shirtliffe says we're not supposed to know those kinds of spells in sixth grade, but practically everyone else does. And everyone says you knew all kinds of curses when you first came to Charmbridge.”

“Right, because my father supposedly taught me all his Dark magic?” Alexandra gave William a sour look.

He swallowed nervously. “N–No. But you do know how to duel!”

“Do you know how much trouble I've gotten into for it?”

“But at least you can fight back.”

Alexandra studied the boy, feeling conflicted, sympathetic, and annoyed. “If I teach you to throw hexes, you'll only get in trouble, and then when Ms. Shirtliffe asks you where you learned them, *I'll* get in trouble.”

“I won't tell!”

Another voice broke in: “Tell what?”

Alexandra groaned as Innocence walked directly up to them, separating herself from the other sixth graders who were coming into the gymnasium for their mandatory P.M.E. class.

“I heard you'uns talkin' 'bout hexin'!” Innocence said, eyes sparkling. “I been waitin' for us to do hexes in P.M.E.!”

“Shh!” William said frantically.

“You don't learn hexes in P.M.E.” Alexandra shook her head at the girl. “I have to go change. Straighten your belt, William.”

She left the two sixth graders standing at the entrance to the gym, with William grimacing as he cinched the leather belt around his belly.

He seemed a little more cheerful that day during JROC drills, though, and he hurried away after they were dismissed, without asking Alexandra about hexing again.



Alexandra devoted Friday afternoon to spending time with Anna, Constance, and Forbearance before dinner. She didn't feel she was really making a lot of progress reading library books. As Mrs. Minder had warned her, the level of theory and jargon in *A Guide to Observing Past Epochs* and *Rules and Principles of Temporal Apparition* made her eyes glaze over. Some parts were – barely – comprehensible to her, enough for her to realize that waving a wand wasn't going to send her back in time. The magic was much, much more complex than that. Most of it, however, was gobbledygook. There were Arithmantic calculations measuring how many Motes of Impossibility accrued for each hour of transtemporal repositioning, astronomical and astrological calculations for determining Observable Epochs and Conflict Times, the Thirteen Mutually Exclusive Laws of Paradox that every Historicist had to memorize and simultaneously avoid, the Cat-In-The-Box Failsafe Principle that apparently had nothing to do with either cats or boxes, and so on.

The one thing that was clear, because it was repeated over and over, was that you couldn't actually change the past. Readers were admonished that it was impossible, forbidden, and a disaster even to try.

Alexandra took this as a prohibition, not a statement about what the laws of magic would allow.

'Prohibited' was different from 'impossible,' and she refused to accept that what she wanted to do was impossible.

“Alex? It's your turn.”

Alexandra blinked, and sat up in her chair. They were playing Heart of Three Kingdoms in the recreation room. In front of her, Constance's columns of fire and air were blasting at Forbearance's metal pyramid, while a sheet of flames tried to boil away Alexandra's L-shaped incursion of water into Anna's territory, guarded by wood and metal.

Alexandra couldn't even remember what her plan had been. She conjured air to battle the flames, and then Innocence entered the room, followed by William Killmond, still in his JROC uniform.

“What are you doing here?” Alexandra asked William.

Immediately, he stood at attention and locked his eyes straight ahead. “Helping Miss Pritchard find her familiar, Witch-Private Quick, ma'am!”

Alexandra groaned, as snickers echoed around the recreation room. Innocence, despite looking quite distraught, put a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle. Even Anna smiled.

“I told you not to do that,” Alexandra said. “Especially when I'm not in uniform.”

“Have y'all seen Misery?” Innocence asked.

Constance and Forbearance both sighed.

“Where'd you leave her?” asked Forbearance.

“In my room, but I bet Ouida Noel left the door open purposefully just 'cause she's a wicked l'il –”

“Have you tried a Finding Charm?” Constance asked.

Innocence gave her sister a scathing look. “Of course I did! But Misery hain't in my room nor anywhere's a Findin' Charm could find her!”

“Alright,” Forbearance said. “We'll help find your toad.”

“We're terrible sorry,” Constance said, giving an annoyed look to Innocence.

“No, it's okay,” Anna said. “We'll help, too.” She glanced at Alexandra, and Alexandra nodded.

They walked down the corridor to Innocence's room in Theta Zeta Kappa Tau hall. William was made to wait in the intersection by the hall monitor, an extremely old witch who looked as if she'd already been near death when her portrait was painted. From there, they spread out, looking in every corner and doorway where a toad might hide. William and Innocence ran ahead of Alexandra, falling to their hands and knees to look under display cases and benches.

After half an hour, Misery had yet to turn up. Innocence was almost in tears, and threatening to hex her roommate.

“We haven't searched the restrooms yet,” William said, exuding helpfulness. “I'll check all the boys' bathrooms.”

“Good idea,” Alexandra said. He beamed, and ran off to the nearest one.

“I think he's sweet on you,” Innocence whispered conspiratorially.

Alexandra looked askance at her.

“I told him he prob'ly hain't your type, though,” Innocence added.

Alexandra almost asked Innocence what she thought her type was, and then thought better of it.

“Could Misery have jumped out your window?” she asked.

“T'weren't open when I came in, but I wouldn't be surprised if Ouida Noel done that.” Innocence's hands flew to her mouth. “But there's snakes an' owls an' cats an' other critters out there! She'll get et!”

“There are snakes and owls and cats in here, too,” Alexandra pointed out.

That was a mistake. Innocence made a frantic keening sound as she ran to the entrance.

Since Innocence was checking outside, Alexandra began looking in girls' bathrooms. She even tried

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holding her wand out in each lavatory she visited and calling: “*Accio toad!*” This did not produce any flying toads, however.

Constance and Forbearance had moved upstairs, searching the hallway above. William had begun investigating the stairs going down to the basement. Alexandra was becoming annoyed that a search for a toad was taking away from time with her friends, or studying. Soon, she would have to report for detention. But she wouldn't have abandoned a search for her own pets, so she continued looking for Innocence's familiar.

She was about to check one last girls' lavatory, near the front entrance, when she heard Innocence sobbing dramatically. Fearing the worst, she turned away from the door and saw Innocence coming down the hallway, with David accompanying her, grimacing uncomfortably.

“– she's the best toad *ever* and I'll just *die* if somethin' awful done happened to her!” Innocence wailed, clinging to David's arm.

“Yeah... I'm sure she'll be fine,” David said. “Don't cry, okay?” He looked up to see Alexandra standing there with her arms folded and a bemused look on her face.

He silently mouthed a plea for help to her, but Alexandra just smirked at him. Then a high-pitched shriek emanated from the girls' bathroom behind her.

She turned around as Angelique came hurrying out of the bathroom, shivering and scrunching her face up in disgust. Darla followed her, holding a large toad in both hands, with her arms extended away from her.

“Misery!” Innocence exclaimed. Her tears stopped abruptly, and she released David's arm as she rushed over to Darla.

“Yours, I take it?” Darla said coolly.

“Oh, thanks for findin' her!” Innocence took the toad from her. “I don't know how she got all this way down here!” She hugged the amphibian to her chest. Misery let out a disgruntled croak.

Alexandra was squinting at Darla. Darla caught the look, and their eyes met for a moment, before Darla looked away.

Angelique cleared her throat nervously. Anna started to say something, and then they heard another shriek – this time from downstairs.

Everyone turned around as William came running up the stairs from the basement, looking white as a sheet.

“I saw a ghost!” he said, in a quavering voice.

“A ghost?” Angelique said. “You couldn't have. Ghosts aren't allowed here at Charmbridge.”

But Alexandra didn't hear the rest, as she pushed past William and dashed down the stairs.

By the time she reached the basement corridor below, it was empty in both directions. She ran back and forth, looking around frantically, but she was alone – there was no soul to be seen, living or dead, until Anna and David joined her.

“Alex, what's going on?” David asked.

She pushed past both of them and ran back upstairs.

Ignoring the confused expressions on her friends' faces, she reemerged into the hallway above and made directly for William, who still looked shaken.

“Who – what did the ghost look like?” she demanded.

He stared at her. “Uh, ghostly? I saw it float through a wall and I ran! I didn't get a good look...”

She gritted her teeth in frustration. “Ghosts can't hurt you!” she snapped. “You don't need to run from them!”

William looked confused and a little hurt.

Ghost Sickness

"That hain't true," Innocence said. "You can get ghost sickness if'n a shade touches you!"

"Ghost sickness?" William turned even paler.

"There's no such thing as ghost sickness," Angelique said. "That's an old superstition."

Innocence glowered. "Oh, I s'ppose it's just an old superstition 'cause Ozarkers say it's so?"

Angelique gave the younger girl an exasperated look. "Our family mansion is haunted. I grew up with ghosts. They brush against us all the time. Sometimes we walk right through them – accidentally, of course. It's rude to do it on purpose."

"Well, maybe it don't affect Dark families," Innocence said, as Constance and Forbearance joined them.

"Dark?" exclaimed Angelique, offended.

"What did you just say?" David demanded, also offended.

"Innocence!" Constance was actually brandishing her wand. "Do we'uns need to put a Glue Spell on your unmannered tongue?"

Forbearance just sighed and looked apologetically at Angelique and David.

"I have to go to detention, now," Alexandra said, not sorry to be walking away from yet another 'fraction' instigated by the youngest Ozarker. "See you later," she murmured to Anna, who nodded and looked as if she wanted to escape herself.

Alexandra could hardly wait for Ms. Gale to give her the spectrescope that night, or for Benjamin and Mordecai to take their Clockwork cleaning crews upstairs. As soon as Ms. Gale disappeared into her office, Alexandra hurried to the basement corridor where William claimed he had seen a ghost.

Sure enough, there was a faint glow at one end of the corridor, in the direction of Ms. Gale's office. Alexandra was a bit confused, as the spectral residue was not near one of the sealed stairwells to the sub-basements.

She didn't go upstairs at all that evening, but spent the entire time rechecking all the corridors in the basement. Nowhere else did she find spectral traces of a ghost's passing. Once again she found herself standing in front of the door that she had last gone through with Maximilian, on their final, fatal journey to the Lands Below.

She stared at it for a long time, before reaching out to lay a hand on the handle. She gently tried it; it was locked, of course.

"What is Miss doing?"

Alexandra jumped, then whirled around, to find herself once more facing Em.

"What are you doing, stalking me?" she demanded.

The house-elf shook her head. "No, Miss. But Em thinks children should not be in the basements by themselves." Her old eyes narrowed a little. "And," she added softly, "Em thinks Miss especially should not be *here*." She raised one hand and pointed a stick-like finger at the door behind Alexandra.

"I was just... wondering if the door was locked."

Em blinked at her slowly. Alexandra knew the elf didn't believe her.

"We elves has told Ms. Gale that the basements is not safe," Em said. "Mubble and Tam-tam has been ghost-struck."

"Ghost-struck?" Alexandra stared at her. "Are they all right?"

"They is feeling very awful, but they will be better."

Alexandra leaned closer. "But ghosts... they can't really do that, can they?"

"That is what Ms. Gale says. She thinks Mubble and Tam-tam is just elf-struck."

Alexandra ran a hand through her hair, frustrated. "And what's elf-struck? Did Mubble and Tam-tam see any ghosts?"

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Em shook her head. “Wizards used to blame elves when they got sick, but we gets sick, too. Wizards calls it elf-struck, but Mubble and Tam-tam was so cold when we found them...” The old elf shivered, and looked at the spectroscope on Alexandra's head. “Has Miss seen ghosts with Ms. Gale's goggles?”

Alexandra licked her lips. What if ghosts really could hurt people? Or elves?

“I haven't seen any ghosts.” That was true – technically. “I've met ghosts. I don't see how ghosts can make you sick.”

“Em should not expect Miss to believe her,” Em sighed. She wagged a finger. “Stay away from doors going down, Miss. They are all locked, and we will know if Miss unlocks them.” She disappeared with a pop, leaving Alexandra feeling relieved and guilty at the same time.

She spent almost all her time that weekend, when she wasn't in detention, reading about ghosts. She looked up 'ghost sickness' in the library, and found that belief in ghost sickness had fallen out of fashion in recent years, and many modern wizards shared Angelique's belief that it was nothing more than an Old Colonial superstition. Simon Grayson referred to it as 'vile phasmophobic slander' in his book. But the Cassadaga Clinic for Spiritual Afflictions reported dozens of cases every year, and detection and treatment of ghost sickness was still part of Auror training in many Territories. *The Incorporeal World* mentioned several types of magic involving ghosts – all of which, naturally, were classified as Dark Arts.

She knew she should tell Ms. Gale about finding evidence of a haunting in the basement. Yet she wanted to find the ghost herself, to confirm for herself that it wasn't her brother. If it were Maximilian... Alexandra couldn't stand the thought of the Bureau of Hauntings coming to forcibly relocate him, like some unwanted vagrant.

Maybe he'd be happier at Croatoa, she told herself. He could see Julia and his mother.

And so her conscience warred with itself, while she delayed saying anything to the custodian.

Other students had heard about William's panic when he supposedly saw a ghost, and Monday morning during JROC exercises, Witch-Corporal Chandra conjured ghostly mist-like shapes to spring out at him and chase him during their run around the academy. As they headed back inside, the teasing continued from the other boys. Alexandra didn't see the ensuing confrontation, but apparently William tried to jinx his tormenters, and received a nasty Wizard Wedgie from Theo. Only intervention by Witch-Corporal Barker and Mage-Sergeant Keedle saved him from worse retaliation.

At least he's trying to fight back, Alexandra thought, but she realized guiltily that she was the only one who knew that he really had seen a ghost. She wasn't sure that speaking up would actually help him, but her silence made her feel complicit.

And so she decided to admit to Ms. Gale that she'd found spectral traces – after one more attempt to find the ghost in the basement herself. That evening, after dinner and more reading, Alexandra descended the stairs to begin her final week of detention.

Unfortunately, Ms. Gale directed Benjamin and Mordecai to stay in the basement with their Clockwork crews that night and scrub the old stone corridors. Alexandra was supposed to go up to the attics again.

When Ms. Gale gave her the spectroscope and then went back to her office, as usual, Alexandra went upstairs. Then she walked to another wing of the academy, to take a set of stairs she knew led to the basements from near Mr. Grue's alchemy classroom.

The Clockworks made enough noise, as they moved about and mopped the floors, that Alexandra thought she could avoid the Rashes. She was more concerned about being caught by one of the elves again, so she was wary as she crept up and down the basement corridors, flipping the goggles on and off, and trying to be stealthy.

Ghost Sickness

As the evening wore on, and she found no green glow in the corridors or near any of the locked doors to the lower levels, she became anxious and a little desperate.

"Hello?" she called out in a very low voice, hoping that a ghost might hear her while an elf would not. "If there are any ghosts haunting the basement, you should really... appear, now."

She turned a corner, and walked down another dark hallway.

"Please," she pleaded. "I'm going to have to report you. Just talk to me."

There was no answer. She circled back to all the previous locations she had found evidence of ghostly passage, but there were no traces now.

And so she was drawn back to the same door she had returned to, again and again. She stood in front of it, holding her wand, thinking hard about simply going through it and charging downstairs, to ask – to demand – that any ghost hiding down there appear before her. Let Em report her. Let her get in trouble –

Then she heard a scream.

It was high-pitched and girlish, followed by a horrible strangled cry that was cut off abruptly. Alexandra jerked her head around, and then took off running in the direction of the sound.

A crew of Clockworks was cleaning one of the corridors at the foot of a stairwell up to the main floor. The Magic Band rehearsal room was just down the hall, and there were two bathrooms side by side next to the stairs. Lying on the floor in front of the bathroom doors was a body.

Alexandra was still wearing the spectroscope goggles over her eyes, and couldn't make out much except that there was a green glow all around the crumpled form. Then she pushed them up to her forehead, and saw that it was one of the Rashes. His eyes and mouth were open; he was lying on his back staring at the ceiling, and his face was deathly pale.

All around him, Clockworks continued to mop the floor and scrub the walls, oblivious.

Alexandra ran over to the boy. For a moment, she thought he was dead, until she saw that he was shivering a little. He didn't seem to recognize her, or even be aware of her presence. His lips trembled.

His twin came dashing around the corner and saw his brother lying on the ground – with Alexandra standing over him holding her wand.

"Benjamin!" he cried. He pointed his own wand.

"No, wait!" Alexandra said, but Mordecai was already throwing a hex. Alexandra ducked as a blue bolt went over her head and impacted against the wall, sending a cloud of blue dust billowing around her and the Clockworks.

"Wait!" she yelled. "I didn't –"

Mordecai threw another spell at her. She ducked behind a Clockwork this time, and his hex struck the golem. It shivered and rattled, and then its arms fell off.

Alexandra had no time to wonder what that hex would have done to *her*, as Mordecai was still trying to blast her. She shouted, "*Protego!*" and let him continue to pelt her Shield Charm as she backed away.

Then Em and half a dozen other elves appeared in the corridor between them. They all shrieked and scattered as one of Mordecai's hexes rebounded off of Alexandra's shield and then against the floor in their midst.

"Stop fighting!" cried Em. "Stop this at once!"

"I'm trying to!" Alexandra said, but then Em and two other elves pointed at her. Three more elves pointed at Mordecai. Both of them went flying in opposite directions, landing hard on the stone floor.

"Behave!" Em yelled shrilly at them. Mordecai sprang to his feet and Alexandra did likewise. They both pointed their wands, and then several elves clapped their hands, and Clockworks skidded across the floor as if being jerked on strings. One after another, they crashed into each other directly between

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the two would-be combatants, piling up in the middle of the corridor.

“Do not make us become vexed!” Em said, with one hand on her hip and another wagging a long, spindly finger at her.

“Help!” Mordecai yelled. “That sorceress cursed my brother!”

“I did not!” Alexandra yelled back, as Ms. Gale came huffing up the corridor. Her eyes became wide and panicked when she saw Benjamin lying on the floor.

“Go get Mrs. Murphy and Dean Grimm and Dean Ellis!” she commanded the elves, and several of them disappeared with a pop.

“Do something!” Mordecai said, as the custodian stood over his inert twin, looking fearful.

“I’m not a mediwitch,” she mumbled. “Wait until Mrs. Murphy gets here.”

Alexandra started to move towards Benjamin, thinking perhaps she could try one of the first-aid charms her brother had taught her, but Mordecai raised his wand to point it at her again.

“You’re gonna pay for what you done!” he snarled. “You used your Dark sorcery on my brother, sure as I’m standin’ here!”

“No fighting!” said Ms. Gale. “Or I’ll take your wands away!”

Mordecai bared his teeth, glanced at the anxious, uneasy elves, and reluctantly lowered his wand.

Alexandra kept her hands at her sides, with an effort, and waited.

Ms. Shirtliffe arrived first, dressed casually in clothes students were forbidden to wear – jeans and a leather jacket – followed immediately by Mrs. Murphy, carrying a small case of potions. Last came Vice Dean Ellis, a tall, red-faced man whose thinning blond hair was still tousled by sleep, and Dean Grimm, wearing a long black robe. She didn’t look half-awake, like Dean Ellis, but her expression was ominous.

As Mrs. Murphy knelt next to Benjamin, Mordecai and Alexandra both immediately began shouting their respective version of events, until Dean Grimm said, “Silence!”

“He’s not cold, but otherwise it’s almost as if he’d been frozen,” said Mrs. Murphy. “I’ve never seen anything quite like this.” She rose to her feet, and gestured with her wand. Benjamin levitated off the floor.

“Please, ma’am, you have to help him,” Mordecai said. For a moment, Alexandra almost forgot her animosity for the Rashers. Mordecai was genuinely scared for his brother.

“You can come with me to the infirmary, Mr. Rash,” the nurse said. As they proceeded upstairs, Mordecai gave Alexandra one last look of hatred and fury.

With Mordecai gone, Alexandra was able to tell the other adults how she had discovered Benjamin lying on the floor.

“I didn’t curse him or anything, I swear,” she said, as Ms. Gale, Dean Grimm, Dean Ellis, and Ms. Shirtliffe all listened to her with grim expressions. “I didn’t do anything to him. I heard him scream, and he was like that on the floor when I found him.”

One of the elves mumbled something.

“What was that, Jimmy?” Dean Grimm asked.

The other elves all covered their mouths and stared at the unfortunate house-elf, Jimmy. He looked at the Dean with eyes that seemed about to pop out of his head.

“Young master was s-s-s-stricken, D-D-Dean Grimm,” the elf stammered, trembling violently.

Dean Ellis rolled his eyes. “I do not want to hear more nonsense about *ghost sickness*!” he snapped. The house-elves all flinched.

“Well, something clearly happened to Mr. Rash.” Dean Grimm eyed Alexandra, who met her gaze uneasily. “I don’t suppose you’ve actually found any traces of ghostly activity, have you, Ms. Gale?” the

Dean asked, still looking at Alexandra.

Ms. Gale shook her head. “No, Dean Grimm. She – that is, we, have been searching all over the academy. No signs of any spirits.”

Alexandra shifted uncomfortably, and dropped her gaze for a moment.

“Miss Quick?” Ms. Grimm said. “Do you have something to tell us?”

“I, umm...” Alexandra looked where Benjamin had been lying. “I might have found some spectral traces.”

The elves gasped. Everyone stared at her. Ms. Gale's mouth dropped open.

“Around Benjamin.” Alexandra slowly took the goggles off her head.

“This was the first time you saw spectral traces, when you discovered Mr. Rash?” Dean Grimm asked, as Ms. Shirtliffe snatched the spectroscope from Alexandra and looked through the lenses herself.

Alexandra shuffled her feet a little, and looked down.

“I might have seen some before,” she mumbled.

“You *might* have?” Dean Grimm repeated, while Ms. Gale flushed.

Alexandra was silent, as she thought about what had just happened.

“Why didn't you tell Ms. Gale?” Dean Grimm asked.

“Why didn't Ms. Gale see them herself?” asked Ms. Shirtliffe.

“She told me she hadn't seen anything!” Ms. Gale said, pointing accusingly at Alexandra. “I asked her every night –”

“Weren't you *with* her while she was helping you hunt for ghosts?” Ms. Shirtliffe demanded.

Ms. Gale opened her mouth. Alexandra frowned, but said nothing.

“Ms. Gale, am I to understand that you sent an eighth grader searching the basements and attics for ghosts by herself?” Ms. Grimm asked.

“It – it's perfectly safe!” the custodian stammered. “There's no such thing as ghost sickness! Everyone knows that!” The look on her face belied her conviction, though. She was sweating profusely.

“Maybe not, but you still don't send students on their own into the basements and attics!” Ms. Shirtliffe said. “What if she'd found a Boggart, while she was all alone?”

“Mr. Journey let us go into the basements and attics by ourselves,” Alexandra said.

Ms. Shirtliffe gave her an incredulous look. “Mr. Journey was trying to *kill* you!”

Alexandra closed her mouth. It was a fair point.

Ms. Grimm's expression had become, if anything, even more unpleasant. “I am most displeased, Ms. Gale. Tonight, you will commence a *thorough* search of the basements, and you will continue that search nightly until you have personally inspected every room and corridor in Charmbridge Academy. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Ms. Gale said, trying not to cringe.

“Until we've resolved this, no more students will be left alone in the basement.” Dean Grimm fixed Alexandra with a chilly stare. “Your failure to report a possible haunting is mitigated only by the fact that you weren't supposed to be doing that job in the first place, Miss Quick. And once we determine just what befell Mr. Rash, I may have another talk with you.”

With that, she turned and swept back upstairs. Dean Ellis shook his head and yawned. “Terrible mess... you elves see that it's cleaned up, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” Em replied. She and the other elves had been completely silent since Jimmy's outburst.

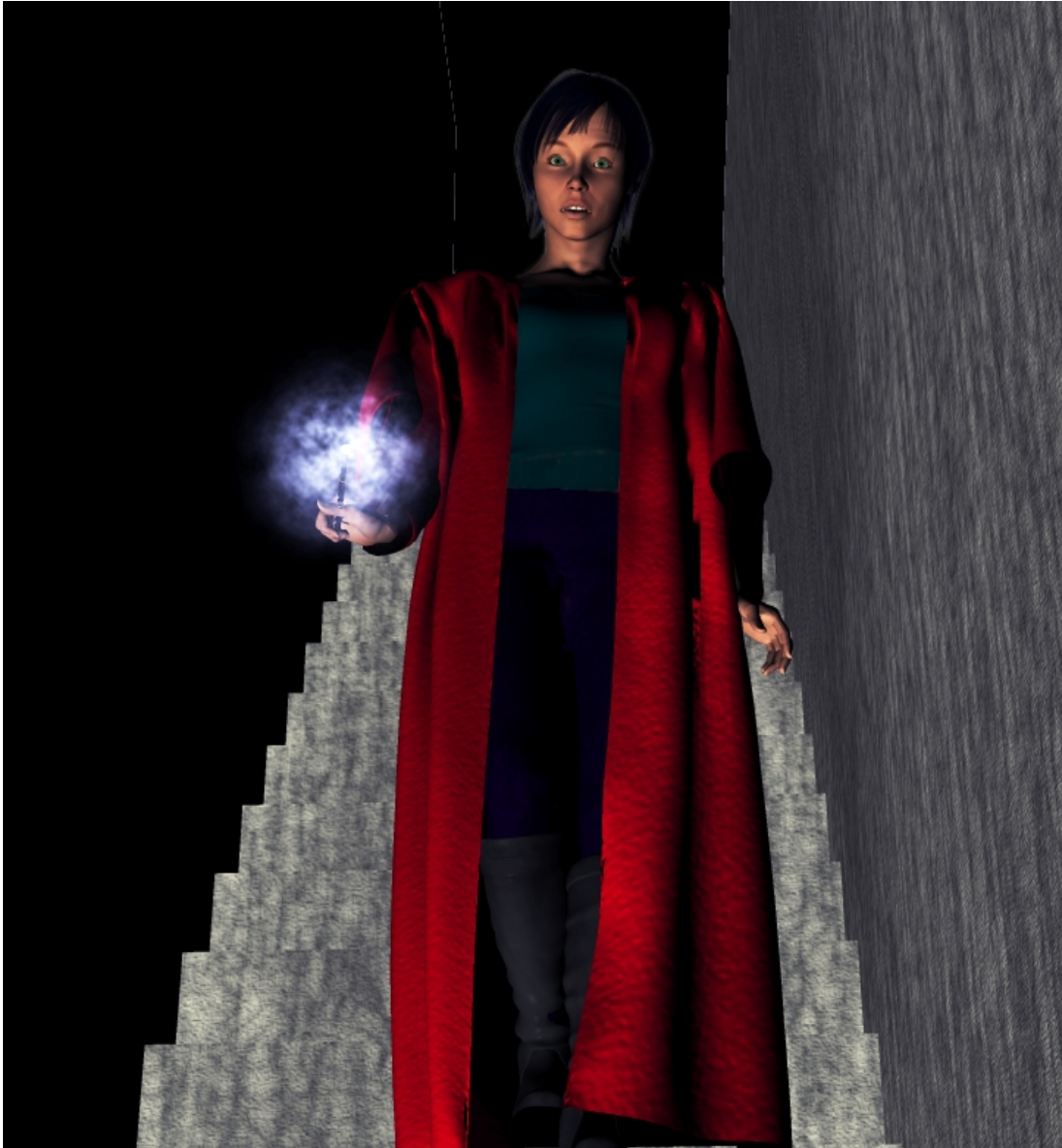
The Vice Dean followed the Dean, leaving Alexandra with Ms. Gale and Ms. Shirtliffe, as the house-elves began standing the Clockworks up and tidying the hallway.

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“If it were up to me, I’d fire your lazy ass!” Ms. Shirtliffe growled at the other witch. She looked at Alexandra. “I don’t know what’s going on in your head, Quick, but you couldn’t possibly be skating on thinner ice.”

With that, she spun on her heel and followed the deans. Alexandra glanced at Ms. Gale, who looked queasy, and decided her detention was over for the night. She retreated up the stairs and returned to her room.

Chapter 9 — Rebellion



The next morning, Alexandra's name was listed on the eighth grade bulletin board again: 'Alexandra Quick – Report to Mrs. Minder in the library for detention: 6:30 p.m.'

Normally, Alexandra preferred library detention, but now it meant that she wouldn't be able to search the basements. She feared there was little chance of her finding the ghost before Ms. Gale did.

"You sure you want to be seen with me?" she said to Anna, only half-joking, as they went to breakfast.

"Don't be ridiculous," Anna said, very seriously.

Alexandra felt a surge of warmth for her friend, who had not scolded her once the previous night. She put an arm around Anna's shoulders, and Anna cracked a small smile.

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Alexandra dropped her arm before they entered the cafeteria. A hush fell over the room as a hundred students stopped eating and stared at her.

Into the sudden lull, Alexandra announced in a loud voice: "I did not curse Benjamin Rash, okay?"

Anna looked nervous, as she felt all that attention focused on her, too, but she stood fast next to Alexandra.

"Please get your breakfast without the theatrics, Miss Quick," said Dean Black, who had cafeteria duty that morning, along with Mr. Newton, who just frowned at her.

Conversations awkwardly resumed, and Alexandra saw most of the students averting their gazes from her as she walked to the eighth graders' table.

"I believe you, Quick!" said a familiar voice from the table where the Rashers normally sat. Neither of them was at breakfast this morning, but Larry Albo and the other Old Colonials who usually joined the Ozarkers were all staring at her.

"I don't think you know any Dark magic," Larry said, leaning forward. "I think you're a posturing little brat who hides behind your brother or your father, and likes letting people think you're scary." He held his hands up, wagging his fingers mockingly. "Ooh, look, it's the Enemy's daughter!"

Alexandra felt Anna tensing next to her, as if about try to grab her, should she do something foolish.

"That's enough, Mr. Albo," Dean Black said. "Get in line if you're going to eat, Miss Quick."

"Have you heard about the special Regiment that's going to hunt your daddy in the Lands Below, Quick?" Larry called, as Alexandra walked on.

"One more word and you'll be serving detention, Mr. Albo!" Dean Black snapped.

Alexandra said nothing as she got her breakfast and sat down. If Anna noticed how tightly her fists were clenched, she didn't say anything.

Constance and Forbearance didn't come to breakfast, and neither did Innocence.

Alexandra began to worry a little when they weren't in Charms class that morning either. It was five minutes after the start of the period when one of the Pritchards walked into the classroom.

Mr. Newton scowled at her. "Miss Pritchard, why are you late to my class?"

"We was in the infirmary, Mr. Newton," she said meekly, eyes downcast.

The Charms teacher regarded her sternly for a moment through his thick spectacles. "Where is your sister?"

"She's still there, sir."

He squinted at her, then said, "Take your seat," and continued his lesson on Illusions, Disillusionment, and Glamour. Today he described their semester project. Anna took copious notes, but Alexandra barely paid attention, since she knew she could copy Anna's notes later. She looked at the bonneted Ozarker at the table next to her, wishing she could ask her what was going on. Constance (or was it Forbearance?) wore a serious expression and seemed to be paying attention to Mr. Newton, but her body language was stiff and unrevealing.

Alexandra waited until class was over and they were outside. She was embarrassed to realize that she had never seen one of the Pritchard twins alone before, and she couldn't tell them apart, so she said, "Constance," figuring she had a fifty-fifty chance of guessing correctly.

Behind her, David snorted. "That's Forbearance, dummy."

Forbearance paused, as they walked towards their second period Transfiguration class.

"You know I didn't curse Benjamin, right?" Alexandra said, deciding to just ignore her gaffe.

Forbearance's pale blue eyes reflected doubt for a moment, and then she smiled. "If you say you didn't, I believe you, Alexandra," she said softly.

"I didn't."

Forbearance nodded. She looked relieved.

"You really thought I might have?" Alexandra asked.

Forbearance looked down. "We'uns didn't know what to think. There's enough bad blood 'twixt you an' the Rashes..."

"I wouldn't do something like that!" Alexandra said, annoyed, but then she lowered her voice. "How is he? And why didn't Constance come to class?"

"She agreed to sit with Mordecai an' Benjamin a bit. Mrs. Murphy gave permission." Forbearance looked up at her friends. "Benjamin hain't woke up yet."

"Could it be... ghost sickness?" Alexandra asked.

Anna started to say something, and held her tongue.

"Mrs. Murphy reckons Benjamin caught himself a curse, messin' with somethin' or someone he ought not've," Forbearance said. "But if he weren't cursed, it must've been a shade."

Alexandra thought about that, as the day continued. In every class, only her friends spoke to her, while whispers and stares followed her everywhere she went. Rumors were flying around the school, and Alexandra knew that nearly everyone at Charmbridge believed that she was responsible for what had happened to Benjamin. And she supposed, in a way, they were right.

JROC drills were that afternoon. This time, they met in the JROC's 'headquarters' – a large classroom on the second floor – and the atmosphere was tense.

"Today," Colonel Shirtliffe said, "we'll review some basic defenses against Dark Arts."

"We'll need them, with Quick around," muttered Theo.

Alexandra turned to glare at him, but with the teacher watching, she kept her mouth shut.

"First, let's talk about ghosts," Shirtliffe said. "How many of you have actually met a ghost?"

Alexandra raised her hand. Several kids who'd been raised in the wizarding world did also. Snickers rippled through the group when William hesitantly raised his hand, too.

"Well, I've met dozens," Shirtliffe said. "Including Mage-General Sheridan Crowley, whom you have probably heard about in your American Wizarding History class. I know General Crowley personally."

Alexandra didn't remember anything about Mage-General Crowley from American Wizarding History, but it had only been a month; they'd barely gotten past the Plymouth-Salem Election.

"Ghosts may be forbidden here at Charmbridge Academy," Shirtliffe said, "but in many places they are welcome. No one I know has ever been struck with 'ghost sickness.'" She surveyed the uniformed students in front of her. No one said anything.

"However," she continued, "there are other sorts of spirits, conjured by Dark magic, and some of those can be harmful. That's why I'm going to start teaching you Banishing Spells." She pursed her lips, as if debating something. "You won't learn them in your regular P.M.E. class, or in your weekly magical self-defense lectures, because it's not part of the standard SPAWN curriculum. But I run the JROC, and I can teach what I see fit. That said, Banishing Spells don't distinguish between friendly spirits and unfriendly ones – and if you ever use it against another wizard's ghost, I hope you spend your afterlife as a ghost and are treated just as poorly."

With that admonishment, Colonel Shirtliffe began to show her rapt flight of JROC wands the Banishing Spell. Alexandra was as fascinated as everyone else – but she felt a chill go through her when Shirtliffe pronounced the words that accompanied the spell:

"Anathema Anima!"

They weren't quite the same words that Sue Fox, one of the seniors in the Mors Mortis Society, had used the previous year when banishing an evil spirit from the Lands Beyond, but they were close. And

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Alexandra had a terrible feeling that she knew what had struck down Benjamin.

She waited until JROC was over before she approached the JROC commander. Colonel Shirtliffe was talking to Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland. She saw Alexandra waiting, and scowled at her until Alexandra assumed a proper position of attention. Alexandra was made to wait while Shirtliffe finished her conversation with Strangeland; finally, as the senior walked away, the Witch-Colonel turned to her. "What is it, Witch-Private?"

Still at attention, Alexandra said, "I think I know what happened to Benjamin, ma'am."

Shirtliffe looked her up and down, giving her uniform a quick inspection. Apparently finding no faults, she said, "At ease."

Alexandra relaxed, and Shirtliffe said, "What happened to Benjamin, Quick?"

Alexandra took a breath. "I think he was attacked by a jibay, ma'am. From the Lands Beyond."

Shirtliffe clasped her hands behind her back, and studied the young witch in front of her.

"I spoke to some of the students who were expelled last year," the teacher said. "They told me about summoning spirits from a cave in the sub-basement. But the basements are sealed now, and I checked that cave last night." When Alexandra's eyes widened, Shirtliffe nodded. "Yes, I went down there. The rock wall is solid, and I found no traces of Dark magic or ghosts around it." She frowned. "Do you know anything else, Quick? Like how an evil spirit might have been summoned from the Lands Beyond? Or by whom?"

"Darla."

Ms. Shirtliffe sighed. "Dean Grimm and I questioned her last night also. Her wand was safely locked in Dean Cervantes's desk, and her roommate can account for her whereabouts. Incidentally, the Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall monitor, which, you may have noticed, is directly outside of Dearborn and Devereaux's door, won't be falling asleep any more, either. If you *or* Dearborn think you'll be getting away with the sort of sneaking around you did last year, think again."

Alexandra frowned, unconvinced.

"Aurors and professional ghost hunters from the Bureau of Hauntings will be here on Friday," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "Just to make sure."

"But there is a ghost down there," Alexandra said quietly.

"If there is, the ghost hunters will find it."

"*Him*."

Shirtliffe raised an eyebrow.

"If there is a ghost down there," Alexandra said slowly, "it's a person. A former person, anyway. Not an 'it.' Ma'am."

The teacher studied her long enough to make Alexandra uncomfortable.

"Alexandra," Ms. Shirtliffe said at last, "it's not Maximilian."

Alexandra kept her gaze steady. "How do you know that, ma'am?"

"If it were your brother, don't you think he would have spoken to you?" Shirtliffe said gently. "I don't think Maximilian would skulk around hiding in the basements, even as a ghost."

Alexandra didn't think so either. Max wouldn't hide from her.

Unless he was angry at her. Unless he blamed her.

"If it's an Indian spirit that's somehow escaped from the Lands Beyond," Shirtliffe went on, "the Aurors and ghost hunters will find it, too. In the meantime, would you please try to stay out of trouble?"

"I have been trying, ma'am."

"Try harder. Dismissed."

Rebellion

Alexandra gave a salute with the bare minimum level of effort, and stalked out of the room. She paused when she heard a muffled thumping sound, and looked up and down the hallway, which was lined by lockers.

"Hello?" she called out. Ms. Shirtliffe had gone out the other door from the headquarters classroom, and the other JROC students had already dispersed. The hallway was empty, and the sound didn't repeat itself.

Frowning, Alexandra descended to the main floor, planning to change out of her uniform and do her homework before dinner. She found Innocence waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

"Hi, Alex," Innocence said. "Is William behind you?"

"No," Alexandra said.

"Oh." The younger girl frowned. "But I been waitin' here since all y'all came downstairs, an' I hain't seen him."

"Why are you waiting for William?" Alexandra asked.

"It's a secret," Innocence whispered.

Alexandra raised her eyebrows. Innocence shook her head rapidly beneath her blue and white bonnet. "Oh, no, t'aint nothin' like that, Alex! He's a nice enough feller, but he ain't my type."

"I see," Alexandra said slowly, amused.

Innocence wrinkled her nose, and her face flushed with indignation. "I'm teachin' him hexes!" she whispered, more loudly.

"I see," Alexandra repeated, suddenly a little less amused. She looked over her shoulder, and then turned around to go back upstairs, to the hallway outside the JROC classroom. Innocence followed.

"William?" Alexandra called out.

There was no answer.

"William, is you hidin'? We hain't got time for hide'n'seek!" Innocence said.

Alexandra listened, but the hallway was perfectly quiet. She pointed her wand.

"*Accio* William's wand pin," she commanded, and a rattling sound came from one of the tall lockers. She marched over to it and tried to open it, but it was locked. The thumping sound she'd heard before was now definitely coming from behind the locker door, along with the sound of a piece of metal knocking against the other side.

"*Alohomora*," she said, and locker clicked and opened.

William tumbled out and sprawled on the floor in a state of complete disarray. His shirt and jacket had been pulled up over his head and wrapped around his face, blindfolding and gagging him while also binding his arms behind him like a straitjacket, and exposing his tubby white belly. His bootlaces were wrapped around his ankles, and his underwear looked as if it had been jerked almost up to his armpits. His wand had been stuck down his pants.

"Oh, my stars above!" Innocence gasped.

Alexandra had to use a counterspell to undo the jinx tying his jacket up. As soon as William freed his arms, he rolled away from her, turning his face away from both girls as he desperately tried to pull his shirt and jacket down and cover himself up, while pushing his underpants back below his waistband. He looked horribly uncomfortable and undignified.

"Why didn't you kick the door or something when you heard me calling?" Alexandra demanded.

He didn't answer. Alexandra and Innocence looked at each other, and back at the boy, and Alexandra saw his shoulders were shaking.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Do you need to go to the infirmary?"

"NO!" he yelled. "Just leave me alone!"

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"Leave you alone? Well, that's a fine thankee for fetchin' you outter a locker," Innocence said.

"William, who did this to you?" Alexandra asked.

"It doesn't matter!" William stumbled to his feet, once he got his boot laces untied, and ran for the stairs. His face was red and streaked with tears.

"Hey!" Alexandra called, standing up.

"William!" shouted Innocence.

He kept going, and disappeared down the stairs.

"You know," Alexandra said, "teaching him hexes might not have been the best idea."

"But he really wanted to learn!"

Alexandra sighed, and began walking back downstairs herself, with Innocence in tow. She didn't have much time to do her homework, and then she had detention again right after dinner. She wasn't about to chase after William.

"He hain't learned even the simplest hexes," Innocence said, as Alexandra walked towards Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, hoping Innocence would head towards the sixth graders' dorms. "I can't 'magine how Muggle-borns ever catches up when they comes to school so untutored!"

"We manage," Alexandra said dryly.

"Oh, well, you hain't really Muggle-born –"

"David does okay, too."

"That's true." Innocence frowned. "I'll just have to tutor William harder..."

"Maybe you shouldn't."

They reached the juncture where Innocence would have to separate from Alexandra if she was to return to her own room, but they found Constance and Forbearance waiting there.

"There you are, Innocence!" Constance said. "Where you been, girl, and who you been tutorin' what?"

Innocence bit her lip, and looked at Alexandra.

"Well?" Constance demanded.

"We hafter go to the infirmary," Forbearance said. "The Rashes are waitin'."

"I still want to know what you were talkin' 'bout just now," Constance said. She looked at Alexandra, who shrugged. As far as Alexandra was concerned, this was between Innocence and her sisters.

"Answer me, girl!" Constance said, grabbing Innocence's wrist.

To Alexandra's surprise, Innocence pulled away.

"I been tutorin' William Killmond how to throw hexes!" she said. "On account 'a Alexandra wouldn't!"

"Wait a minute," Alexandra said.

"You been what?" Forbearance exclaimed.

"He didn't even know how to wish a teeny little booger-hex, or unjinx his laces..."

"Teachin' *hexes*? You know better 'n that!" Constance was aghast. "An' who's this William Killmond?"

"Just a boy in my class. He's sweet on Alexandra –"

"*Wait a minute!*" Alexandra said.

"– an' he gets laywaid an' greened awful 'cause he's Muggle-born –"

Constance's face twisted in disapproval. "We'll talk 'bout this later. Now come 'long, we're goin' to see Benjamin an' Mordecai."

Innocence shook her head. "I hain't goin'. You'uns go be nice to 'em! I don't prefer to."

"Innocence!" Forbearance said.

Constance stepped closer to her younger sister, eyes flashing angrily.

"That's enough 'n more'n enough, Innocence Catharine!" she snapped. "You are gonna come with us an' be mannerable—"

"Am! Not!" Innocence said, stamping her foot. "I don't care if Benjamin Rash *dies*! Stick a needle in my eye if I'm lyin'!"

"Innocence!" Forbearance looked shocked now.

Constance grabbed Innocence again, with as furious an expression as Alexandra had ever seen on her. "That is a horrible, hateful thing to say! I'm shamed at you! You done turned into a wild wampus since you set foot out the holler!"

"Better'n turnin' into biddable li'l raggedy dolls like you'uns!" Innocence shouted back. "I'm surprised you don't ask 'em permission to peel!"

Alexandra heard the slap before she even realized what had happened. Innocence staggered back and raised a hand to her cheek slowly, in shock.

Constance stared at her younger sister, and at the hand with which she'd just struck her across the face. She looked nearly as shocked as Innocence.

"Connie," Forbearance whispered. Her eyes were wide. Her hands fluttered at her sides, helplessly. She looked from Constance to Innocence.

Alexandra watched, as Innocence took one step back, then another, still rubbing her cheek. Her eyes overflowed with tears, but she didn't make a sound as she turned and ran back down the hallway.

"Innocence!" Forbearance called, but the younger girl kept going.

Constance stammered: "I... I didn't mean to... she just vexed me so..."

Forbearance took her arm. "C'mon... we best go see if Benjamin is woke up yet. We'll set things right with Innocence after." She looked at Alexandra. "We're terrible sorry you saw that, Alex."

Alexandra shrugged, not sure what to say. She didn't know what to make of Innocence's rebelliousness. The girl was being horribly bratty, and yet Alexandra sympathized with her. "Don't worry about it."

"We'll see y'all at dinner," Forbearance said softly. The Ozarkers turned about and walked back the way they'd come, towards the infirmary, Forbearance still holding her twin's arm. Alexandra watched them go, and wondered what it would be like to grow up with a sister always at your side. That made her think of the Rashes – like the Pritchards, she almost never saw the Rashes apart. She knew how much losing a brother hurt, and she hadn't even grown up with Maximilian, and that weakened her loathing for Mordecai and made her feel guilty again, and none of those feelings were welcome, so she pushed them out of her mind.

She went upstairs to her room and tried to focus on her schoolwork, but after a few minutes she tossed aside the scroll she was supposed to write on how Glamours differed from Transfigurations, and opened *Rules and Principles of Temporal Apparition* instead.

These books were much more difficult than anything she was reading for class. She struggled to understand the Law of Subjunctive Observation and the Grandfather Theorem, then turned to the back of the book, where it actually talked about magic, but it was becoming apparent to her that time travel was like flying to the moon.

When she was eight, Alexandra had become obsessed with going to the moon. She wanted to build a rocket ship in her backyard. She and Brian had begun the project, but Alexandra was not going to be satisfied with some plywood simulacrum of a rocket – she wanted a real spaceship. She had checked out every book she could find in the library about space travel and rocket science, and though most of it went way over her head, she'd actually learned quite a lot about astronauts and space and how rockets

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worked.

It had taken her many months, though, to accept that she couldn't build a rocket ship to the moon just by reading enough books. She'd have to grow up to become an astronaut.

Of course, by the following summer, she had abandoned her dream of becoming an astronaut – she wanted to be a neurosurgeon instead. (Brian had been much less enthusiastic about her new project.)

Alexandra was never going to abandon her dream of bringing back Maximilian. But as much as she wanted him back *now*, she realized that it might actually take her a long time.



Her library detention was uneventful. Mrs. Minder had her straighten desks and tables, remove gum and ink stains from the furniture, and start cleaning the carpets. Alexandra didn't get a chance to speak to Bran and Poe. She did, however, wander over to the locked rooms where the Reserves and Restricted Collections were kept, and spend several minutes contemplating the locks that kept all those volumes of forbidden lore, uncensored histories, and advanced magic out of the hands of students.

Two things happened the next morning: William Killmond didn't come to JROC exercise, and Benjamin Rash was released from the infirmary. Alexandra arrived in the cafeteria with Anna, and saw Benjamin with his brother sitting at the tenth graders' table, and William sitting with the other sixth graders without his uniform.

Innocence was also sitting among the other sixth grade girls, rather than with her sisters, and when she finished eating, she hurried out with her classmates before Constance or Forbearance could talk to her.

The events of the past few days seemed to be affecting their schoolwork. Uncharacteristically, Mr. Newton gave his Charms class a free period in which they were allowed to practice making pidges disappear, in preparation for their test on Friday. About half the students had no difficulty, and began a competition to see who could make the most coins disappear with one charm. Alexandra and Anna did well enough, but Forbearance was unable to manage more than one, and Constance, after trying several times to cast a Disillusionment Charm over her pigeon, ended up melting it instead.

She stared in horror, as smoke curled up around her. Mr. Newton walked over, frowned at the burning hole in Constance's desk, and shook his head.

"I suggest you spend more time practicing before the test, Miss Pritchard," he said, repairing the desk with a wave of his wand. "Preferably outside."

Way to be encouraging, Alexandra thought, but Mr. Newton was mild compared to Mr. Grue, who took a sip of the Pritchards' preparation in Alchemy class and spat it out.

"Are you brewing potions or moonshine?" he snapped at the two Ozarkers. "If you cannot prepare a proper Unbittering Blend, you certainly can't prepare poison antidotes, nor make swallowable any of the Unswallowable Potions you need to know for your eighth grade SPAWN, which means I might as well just give you both Hocus Pocus marks now!"

They both hung their heads. Alexandra burned with fury at her friends' humiliation, but Anna put a hand over her clenched fist, and she remained silent while Mr. Grue came to sample their joint effort. Anna fairly trembled with nervousness; Alexandra just glared at the bearded teacher.

He sipped, grunted, and moved on.

"I'm only passing because of you," she said to Anna afterwards, but Anna shook her head.

"You do know what you're doing – when you study," Anna said.

"And when I have your notes to copy."

Anna smiled slightly at that.

"You want to study together tonight?" Alexandra asked. "If we go to the library, you can keep

studying while I do detention...”

“Actually, I’m meeting someone else in the library tonight,” Anna said. “But I’ll wait until you finish detention and walk back with you.”

Alexandra raised her eyebrows in surprise. Anna bit her lip and looked down. “Can I tell you about it later?”

“Sure.” Alexandra nodded, nonplussed.

Anna did sometimes join other study groups, particularly before SPAWNs. Alexandra didn’t like hanging out with the so-called ‘wyrms,’ who were obsessed with grades and test scores, and Anna had been doing less of it herself this year. Alexandra wondered briefly whether Anna had a boyfriend, and then dismissed the idea – surely her friend would have told her.

So she went to the library to study on her own that evening, combing the stacks for more books about ghosts, Temporal Apparition, the Lands Beyond, Indian spirits, and resurrection... as her search expanded, so did the number of books she had to pore over, looking for something useful. There were legends of wizards who’d traveled to the land of the dead and returned, and wizarding fairy tales about Death and magical stones that could raise the dead, and a tedious transcript of a trial from 1632 in which a Dark Wizard in Plymouth Territory was tried for necromancy and ‘disturbing spirits’ and sentenced to deportation to England, which didn’t sound so bad until she read in a footnote that the Confederation stopped doing that in 1710, after they raised their own Dementors.

I should probably find out what Dementors are, she thought, but it was almost time for her to report to Mrs. Minder for detention. She put the books back on the shelves and walked to the front desk, and stopped when she saw Anna sitting at a table all the way in the back of the library – with Tomo Matsuzaka.

Last year, the two girls had been bitter enemies. Alexandra didn’t really understand why there was such enmity between Japanese and Chinese wizards in California, but Tomo was the last person she expected to find Anna meeting. Anna looked up and saw Alexandra, and Tomo swiveled her head around to look at her. Both of them looked a little nervous, but Anna gave her a small smile and a wave. Alexandra nodded to them, and continued on to the front of the library.

She spent that evening helping Bran and Poe erase pencil and ink marks from books – a tedious chore, but one that the elves undertook with meticulous care. Alexandra hesitantly broached the subject of the Reserves and Restricted Collections, and the two library elves winced as they looked at each other.

“Alex wants to get into trouble again,” Poe said dolefully.

“No, I don’t!” Alexandra said. “But why have books in the library if we’re not allowed to read them? It’s unfair to put them in a locked room and say, ‘Sure, there’s all this information, but we’re not going to let you have it, you’re only allowed to be interested in what we say you should be interested in!’”

Bran and Poe squinted at her. “What information is Alex looking for this time?” Bran asked.

Alexandra hesitated, then answered, “Time travel.”

The elves blinked.

“Time travel?” they repeated, and looked at each other.

“It’s really interesting,” Alexandra said. “And advanced magic! I think I might want to be an Artificer someday...”

The elves groaned and shook their heads.

“We will not help Alex get into more trouble,” Bran said firmly.

“Okay.” She dropped the subject, and Bran and Poe breathed sighs of relief – though they were obviously suspicious at how quickly she acquiesced.

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Alexandra had not, of course, given up so easily. But guilt and uncertainty kept her from pressing the issue. She didn't think she'd find a book behind those locked doors that just happened to have the very spell she wanted. It was going to take time to learn everything she needed to learn; sneaking into the Restricted Collections once or twice wouldn't be enough.

And she didn't like using her friends.

But another voice whispered in her head: *You said you'd do anything to bring back Maximilian. If making a couple of elves do your bidding is what it takes, will you let that stop you?*

Anna was waiting for her at the same table she'd been sitting at earlier. Tomo was gone. Alexandra sat down with her, though they'd have to return to their room soon, as it was almost curfew time for middle schoolers, who weren't allowed to remain in the library as late as the upperclass students.

"What were you and Tomo talking about?" Alexandra asked, unable to hide her curiosity and puzzlement.

"Tomo knows what's happening in California," Anna said. "She asked her father to find out more for me."

Alexandra raised her eyebrows. "You're friends now?"

"Not exactly," Anna sighed. "The Majokai aren't happy about my father being arrested, even though they don't vote anyway."

Alexandra frowned. "I don't understand."

"Tomo's father is the head of one of the most powerful Majokai families," Anna said. "Some of them want to become regular members of the Confederation, like us, instead of being a Culture. My father was talking to them – making promises, I guess, if he gets elected."

"Do you think that could have something to do with why he got arrested?" Alexandra asked.

Anna shrugged. "I don't know. It's politics. Tomo and I have both heard all kinds of rumors – like the Chinese might withdraw from the Confederation and become a Culture, too, or the Majokai and us might go to war, or we might secede together and try to kick the Colonials out of California..." She looked down. "Xaoming and Tammy have heard a little bit, but their families don't want to get involved. Tomo is the only one here at school who can actually find out if he's been charged, if there's going to be a trial... What if there is a trial? I'll have to go back to California!" Suddenly agitated, Anna picked up a letter from the stack of papers and parchments on the table in front of her. "My mother says she's fine, but I know she's not, Alex! I should never have let her send me back to school..."

"Anna, calm down," Alexandra leaned over and put a hand on Anna's arm; Anna's hands fell back to the table, still clutching the letter from her mother.

"It will be all right," Alexandra said, while feeling helpless and frustrated. She cared – she wanted to help. But she could do nothing, and she felt as if her friends' problems were insoluble dilemmas distracting her from her own. "I think your parents both want you to stay here."

"Nobody in San Francisco replied to my letters," Anna looked down. "The Governor's Office sent me a form letter, and the WJD told me I have to send all inquiries through my parents!" She laughed bitterly. "I guess you're the only juvenile who gets to talk to Governors and Special Inquisitors personally."

"Lucky me," Alexandra muttered.

Anna bit her lip. "Are you sure there's no way you can ask them...?"

Alexandra sighed. "Maybe..." As Anna's eyes widened slightly, and her expression became hopeful, Alexandra whispered, "Ms. Shirtliffe told me there are Aurors and ghost hunters coming to the school at the end of the week. They're going to find the ghost who's haunting the basement, and make sure there really isn't anything evil down there." Alexandra scratched her chin, thinking. "I wouldn't be

surprised if they decide to question me while they're here. And... maybe I can tell them I kinda sorta know a little more about what happened last year, but I want them to tell me about your father first.”

“Will that work?” Anna whispered. “Do you know anything you haven't told them? Your father Obliviated your memories of the Lands Below...”

Alexandra hesitated. She almost told Anna, then, that she remembered everything, that her father had returned her memories to her – but then Mrs. Minder's voice sounded over the Wizard Address system: “Attention all students, grades eight and below. It is now time for you to return to your dorms. Don't let me catch you still in the library when I make my rounds, dears.”

Anna scooped up her homework, books, and letters, and together she and Alexandra exited the library. Other sixth, seventh, and eighth graders trickled out with them – Alexandra paused, and Anna tensed a little, when Darla and Angelique appeared near the exit and glanced their way.

Back in their room, Alexandra fed Nigel, and gave Charlie some owl treats, while thinking about the upcoming Aurors' visit. Everyone was always assuming Alexandra knew more than she did – could she take advantage of that? Or would they just force Veritaserum down her throat if she admitted to knowing more than she'd told them?

And how was she going to find the ghost in the basement before Friday?

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

William did not wear his uniform and did not join the JROC the next day for sixth period P.M.E.; instead, he retreated to the far side of the gym and played plunkballs with another group of sixth graders. Colonel Shirliffe looked in the boy's direction and frowned, but unlike Alexandra, William had joined the JROC voluntarily. Alexandra was slightly disappointed that the Muggle-born boy had decided to quit, and she was incensed at the smug expressions on Theo and Jordan's faces, but William wasn't her problem.

That didn't stop her from 'accidentally' knocking Theo off his broom during aerial drills that afternoon, though.

“Oops,” she said, as Theo lay on his back, twenty feet below, seeing stars. “Sorry.”

“You'll be sorrier if I see any more carelessness like that, Quick!” barked Shirliffe. She looked around at all the students on their brooms, and ordered, “Dismount!”

As they landed and got off their brooms, Shirliffe waved her wand. Instantly, two dozen bare broomsticks without brushes or handles or any decoration at all rose from the ground. “Twenty laps around the academy on these!”

The entire JROC groaned – Shirliffe's 'bare broomsticks' were enchanted with only the minimum charms necessary to make them fly. Steering them was difficult and required maintaining a death grip on the shaft. They had no Cushioning Charms or anything else to make it easier to stay on them. They were hard and wobbly, and sometimes produced splinters. Shirliffe insisted they'd be better fliers after drilling with them, but the JROC considered them pure punishment. Twenty laps would be tiring and painful.

“Thirty for Quick!” Shirliffe added.

Alexandra landed nearly half an hour later, tired and sore. Most of the other JROC students had already gone inside. Colonel Shirliffe watched, with folded arms, as Alexandra tossed her unfinished broom to the ground with the others and angrily limped inside.

She was in no mood to be confronted by Innocence, who had lingered after the end of sixth period to watch the JROC drilling.

“Did you know William done quit the JROC?” Innocence asked.

“Yes, I noticed,” Alexandra said, brushing past her. Innocence ignored her short tone, and walked by

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her side.

"You can't let him do that!"

Alexandra stared at her. "Excuse me? I didn't *let* him do anything. I'm not his big sister."

Innocence frowned. "But he can't just up'n quit like that! He can't let them suggins whip him! You gots to talk some sense to him, Alex! He confidences you –"

Alexandra turned on the girl. "I don't *gots* to do anything!" she snapped, and this time Innocence did notice her tone, and took a step back, eyes widening. "William isn't my responsibility, and he's not yours either!"

"Don't you care none?" Innocence asked. A note of disappointment crept into her voice. "I thought you did."

Alexandra put a hand over her face. "Don't you Ozarkers have a saying about killing your own snakes or something?"

"William just needs a mite a' couragin'."

Alexandra dropped her hand and glared at the girl. "Then you encourage him!" She paused, and looked at Innocence more closely. "Are you wearing makeup?"

Innocence's lips were unnaturally bright, her cheeks were rosy and glowing, and her eyelids glittered slightly. She batted her lashes several times, and smiled bashfully. "Darla showed me how –"

"*Darla?* Are you nuts?" Alexandra shook her head. "Your sisters will love that."

"I don't rightly care what my sisters think." Innocence turned away, with her nose in the air. "We hain't on speakin' terms at the present time."

"Constance feels terrible, you know."

Innocence sniffed.

"And if you still have a crush on David, Darla is the *last* person you should be taking advice from."

Innocence turned red. "I do not! An' Darla's been nice to me! Actually, nicer'n either you or certain bossy older sisters!"

Alexandra shook her head, and resumed walking back towards her dorm. "You know, it's kind of ironic that you want me to tell William what's best for him. Do you know what *hypocrite* means?"

Innocence stopped in her tracks, and stared at Alexandra, with her mouth hanging open indignantly. Alexandra kept walking. She had enough problems without worrying about the antics of sixth graders with crushes.

She lingered in the library after her detention that evening; she caught up halfheartedly on her homework, and then, when Mrs. Minder's curfew announcement sent all the other middle schoolers back to their rooms, she retreated to a secluded table on the third floor, behind a row of collected Mixed Poetry. ('Mixed,' she'd learned from Bran and Poe, was how schools and libraries were euphemistically referring to the introduction of Muggle arts and sciences into wizarding literature.) Aside from a few students taking Muggle Studies, no one ever disturbed the shelves of Shakespeare and Milton and Yeats.

Long after she was supposed to be in her room, she snuck out of the library, unnoticed by the few older students who were still studying late. She approached the portrait of the bearded warlock hanging at the entrance to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, staying close to the wall, and pressing herself behind the archway at the bend in the corridor. Sure enough, when she peeked around the corner, the warlock was quite awake, with his hands folded across his expansive belly, twiddling his fingers and looking rather bored. Alexandra didn't know how Dean Grimm had done it, but Ms. Shirtliffe was right – their hall monitor wouldn't be as easy to sneak past as in previous years, when he could frequently be found napping after hours.

Rebellion

Her next action, she knew, was very likely to break that thin ice Ms. Shirtliffe had warned her about: but it was better to find out now whether or not it would work. With one quick motion, she leaned into the corridor, pointed her wand at the portrait, and said, "*Pictogell!*"

The warlock froze in his frame, as if he were a still Muggle painting. Alexandra rushed past him, and hurried to her room, where she found Anna had already changed into her nightgown and was about to go to sleep.

"It's past curfew," Anna said quietly.

"I know. I had to check on something," Alexandra replied.

Anna looked at her sadly, and Alexandra thought she would scold, or ask questions, but she just shook her head and climbed into her bed.

When there was no notice on the bulletin board the next morning summoning Alexandra to the Dean's office, she smiled to herself. Her Freeze-Frame spell had gone undetected.

That meant she just might get away with going into the basements one more time, to find the ghost before the ghost hunters did.

Constance and Forbearance joined her and Anna at the bulletin board. They both still looked downcast and worried, not at all their usual cheerful selves.

"Have you talked to Innocence?" Alexandra asked.

Constance shook her head. "We're fixin' to. Girl's been avoidin' us, but not today – we're gonna set ourselves down with the other sixth graders if we have to."

Alexandra and Anna looked at one another. Alexandra wasn't entirely certain that taking a hard line with Innocence was the right approach – but she wasn't her sister.

When they reached the corridor into which sixth, seventh, and eighth graders spilled on their way to the cafeteria, they all paused to wait, and watched other students hurry past on their way to breakfast. Most averted their eyes from Alexandra – some went so far as to veer to the other side of the corridor. Darla and Angelique went by, and politely said, "Good morning." Only Alexandra did not reply. David gave a sardonic wave to the girls, with the look of someone trying to act cool in the presence of his peers, as he and Dylan walked past with several other eighth grade boys. Alexandra was not the only one who rolled her eyes. William hurried past, and flushed and looked at the floor when he saw Alexandra. Alexandra didn't say anything to him.

And finally came a gaggle of sixth grade girls, giggling and shuffling their way down the corridor, in no particular hurry – and Constance and Forbearance's mouths dropped open in mirrored expressions of astonishment. For a moment, Alexandra thought their jaws were both going to hit the floor.

"Innocence Catharine Pritchard!" they both exclaimed together. All down the hallway, other kids turned around.

Innocence was walking with her classmates – wearing a brightly colored witch's robe with shimmering cuffs, and matching slippers. Her bonnet was gone; instead, her hair was tied with a red and white ribbon. Alexandra had never seen any of the Ozarker girls' heads bare, so even to her, it was almost shocking to see Innocence's blonde curls uncovered. Innocence's face was more made up than it had been the previous day; her lips were a delicate, glistening shade of cherry pink, and her eyes, deeper and bluer than her sisters', sparkled in a way that Alexandra knew only came from Glamour Charms. She looked very pretty, and completely unlike the eleven-year-old who'd first arrived at Charmbridge.

The girls with her were made up similarly. Alexandra had seen them before, but taken no notice of the other girls in Innocence's grade. Now, they paused and looked a bit fearful as the older girls bore down on them, Constance and Forbearance in the lead.

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“Innocence. Catharine. Pritchard!” Constance repeated. She and Forbearance both looked as appalled as if Innocence had decided to walk down the corridor stark naked. “What have you done to your face? What are you wearin’? *Where is your bonnet?*”

“Oh, Innocence,” said Forbearance, sounding almost tearful. In her distress, her Ozark accent emerged more thickly than usual. “You cain’t feist about dressed like that, you just cain’t!”

“I can so!” Innocence declared. “I can wear what I want so long’s it’s in the dress code!”

“You look shameful!” Constance sputtered. “You look *foreign*! Your head’s *bare*! Why if Ma and Pa saw you –”

“You gonna tell ‘em? Then you’ll be made to stay home ‘long with me!” Innocence gave her stunned sisters a haughty look, and then frowned briefly at Alexandra.

“What’s the hold up here?” demanded an Assistant Dean, moving through the hallway, parting students ahead of him. “You girls, you know you aren’t supposed to stand around in the hallways gabbing. Move along now.”

“Come long, y’all.” Innocence thrust her nose into the air, and marched forward. Her young friends nervously followed her. “Don’t worry none ‘bout them, Ouida.”

Though the rift with Innocence obviously weighed heavily on her sisters, Alexandra felt unable to say much – she had mixed feelings about Innocence’s ‘rebellion,’ and it wasn’t really her business anyway. So she halfheartedly suggested they all do something that Saturday, to celebrate her first weekend without detention, even knowing that what she was going to do that night might get her more detention, or worse.

Tomorrow was Friday – the ghost hunters from the Bureau of Hauntings would arrive. No doubt they had magic more sophisticated than Ms. Gale’s spectrescope, and the ghost would be unable to remain hidden from them.

Alexandra knew that Ms. Shirtliffe was almost certainly correct – it wasn’t Maximilian. She’d been told last year by the ghosts who haunted the Thorn family crypt on Croatoa that Maximilian had passed on, not lingered on Earth as a ghost.

She and Julia had agreed that that was for the best. They didn’t want Maximilian to be trapped on Earth forever as an unhappy spirit.

Yet a tiny part of her, a tiny, selfish part that she tried to silence and wished she could ignore, hoped that her ghostly ancestors were wrong, and that Maximilian had remained behind – here, at Charmbridge.

The library closed at midnight, except during the last two weeks of each semester, when it was open around the clock; most nights only a few seniors were still there after ten o’clock, and Alexandra knew Bran and Poe wouldn’t come out until after closing. There was only the occasional teacher or Assistant Dean on nighttime duty to worry about, and they rarely did more than walk around on the ground floor of the library.

An older student, wearing a braided belt and leather jacket that she associated with one of the Western wizarding communities, saw her as she snuck out of her third floor retreat, to descend the stairs towards the library’s entrance. He just frowned at her, and she pretended not to notice him. If he recognized her, if he chose to report her, she’d be in trouble, and that was that.

No one stopped her as she exited the library, and no one intercepted her as she made her way towards the nearest basement stairwell.

Please, please answer me, she thought, as she stepped out into the cold stone floor of the main basement corridor, with lamps providing just enough illumination to walk down the corridor without bumping into walls. She did not light her wand – encountering Em or another elf would bring an abrupt

end to her adventure.

“Hello!” she called out in a loud whisper. “It's me – Alexandra!”

She walked around a corner – more dim corridors. Soon she'd reach the unlit parts of the basement, and she'd have to light her wand.

“I'm Alexandra Quick!” she whispered, more loudly, her words sounding raspy as she tried to make them carry down the corridor without actually vocalizing them. “I'm looking for the ghost who's been hiding down here! Please come out! I want to help you! The Bureau of Hauntings is coming tomorrow!”

It could be a Dark spirit, she knew, in which case she'd have to hope that what she'd learned in the Mors Mortis Society and from Ms. Shirliffe would be enough to keep it at bay. But irrationally, despite what had happened to Benjamin, she told herself that it was not.

Finally, she returned to that same corridor that she had walked so often over the past few weeks, the one with the locked and warded door, behind which might be her only chance of knowing what – *who* – was hiding down here. She felt frustrated and helpless. If only she knew more magic! If only she could Apparate, or undo the alarms! She had so little time – it wasn't fair!

When she reached the door, it was open.

Alexandra paused and did a double-take, but there was no mistake – the door to the stairwell that led down to the first sub-basement was several inches ajar.

She reached a hand out and laid her fingers on the door. No alarm sounded.

She pushed it open further, and it swung inward with a slight creak. She felt cool air blow past her.

Looking around, she saw no one. So she stepped through the doorway, and descended the stairs.

After half a dozen steps, it was almost pitch black. The doorway above was just a dimly lit outline. Alexandra thought about lighting her wand, but felt her way with her feet instead. Her heart was beginning to beat faster. By the time she judged herself to be almost at the bottom of the stairs, she could not see her hand in front of her face.

She held up her wand, and started to say, “Hello?” in a soft voice, when her foot, searching for the next step, struck something soft and bulky in her path.

Alexandra froze, and nudged the obstacle at her feet, while her heart began pounding in her chest and her mouth went completely dry. Whatever it was, it did not budge, and it was blocking her from taking another step.

She took a deep breath, and said, “*Lumos!*”

Light filled the stairwell from the tip of her wand, and she let out a startled cry.

Ms. Gale was lying on her back at the foot of the stairs, her eyes wide open, staring back at Alexandra with an expression of frozen horror. She wasn't moving. She didn't even blink when Alexandra cried out.

Alexandra's mouth hung open for a second, as cold chills went through her, and then she sucked in a breath and screamed, “HELP!”

She screamed twice more, before two elves appeared in the cramped space of the stairwell with her, shivering fearfully. They both jumped and let out little shrieks when they saw Ms. Gale, and then they spun about to stare at Alexandra in horror.

“What has Miss done?” squealed one elf, and then they disappeared again, leaving Alexandra – for the moment – alone in the near-darkness with the head custodian.

Alexandra flattened herself against the cold stone wall, shivering, until she forced herself to kneel at Ms. Gale's side and put a hand on her neck.

The woman's skin was slightly warm to the touch, but Alexandra could not feel a pulse. She

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swallowed, and with a grimace, pressed her ear to the custodian's large, flabby bosom. There was no heartbeat.

“Oh, God,” Alexandra whispered.

Ms. Gale was dead.

Chapter 10 — The Doorway



Em and another elf reappeared in the stairwell a moment later. The second elf's eyes almost popped from his head as he stared at Alexandra, and then he cowered away from her. Em put her tiny hands on Ms. Gale's face, and her expression became woeful.

"Oh, Ms. Gale!" Em moaned. "Ms. Gale is dead!"

The second elf began wailing. Em turned to Alexandra.

"What did Miss do?" Em asked, horrified.

"I didn't do anything! I found her like this!" Alexandra stared at Ms. Gale. "Get help! Bring Mrs. Murphy –"

"We is doing that." Em looked at Alexandra's wand, still clenched in her fist.

"I didn't do anything!" Alexandra repeated.

Em clapped her hands, and a lamp flared behind Alexandra. "Please put away your wand, Miss," the

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elf said, in a very polite but strained tone.

Alexandra hesitated, then said, “*Nox*,” and tucked her extinguished wand into her pocket.

Dean Grimm and Dean Cervantes were the first to arrive, followed by more Assistant Deans, Mrs. Murphy, and Ms. Shirtliffe. The nurse gasped and knelt next to the inert form of Ms. Gale. After attempting to cast a Renervation Spell, and pouring several potions down her throat, Mrs. Murphy looked up at Dean Grimm, her face pale, and shook her head.

“Take her to the infirmary,” Ms. Grimm said. “Everyone, please ensure no students see her. I’ll send notices to her family and” – the Dean sighed – “the Wizard Justice Department immediately.” Her baleful gaze fell upon Alexandra. “Ms. Shirtliffe, if you would be so kind as to remain a moment?”

Ms. Shirtliffe nodded, while the other staff levitated Ms. Gale’s body, conjured a blanket to wrap around her, and retreated upstairs.

“You have a great deal of explaining to do, Miss Quick,” said the Dean.

Alexandra started speaking: “I didn’t hurt Ms. Gale! I found her –”

The Dean held up a hand to cut her off, and extended it, palm out. “Give me your wand.”

Alexandra did so, and Dean Grimm held her own wand over it and said, “*Prior Incantato*.”

A ghostly ball of light floated out of Alexandra’s wand, and then the flickering traces of other spells, one by one, as the Dean examined each spell cast from it recently.

Alexandra waited nervously. At last, the Dean handed Alexandra back her wand, regarded her coldly for several seconds, and then said, “Tell me everything, and I do mean everything.”

Alexandra closed her eyes, gathered her thoughts, and then told the two adults, in a flat tone, about sneaking down to the basement, searching the corridors, finding the door to the sub-basement ajar, and then her descent down the stairs, until she encountered Ms. Gale’s body.

“You saw nothing else?” Ms. Grimm demanded. “Nothing and nobody?”

Alexandra shook her head. “Not until I called for help.”

“*Why* were you down here?” Ms. Shirtliffe asked.

Alexandra looked at the JROC commander evenly, and said, in a steady voice, “I was looking for the ghost.”

Ms. Shirtliffe exhaled between her teeth. Dean Grimm’s eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips.

Alexandra abruptly turned away from the two women, and stepped down the corridor.

“COME OUT!” she yelled. “Come out of hiding! They’re going to find you tomorrow!”

“Miss Quick!” the Dean snapped.

Alexandra ignored her. “PLEASE!” she called out. “Please... show yourself! You have to explain – they’re going to think you had something to do with this!”

“Miss Quick, stop that! If there’s a ghost haunting the basement, it’s not going to appear now!”

“*He!*” Alexandra spun around and glared at Ms. Grimm.

The Dean blinked at her in astonishment.

“A ghost is a person,” Alexandra said, through clenched teeth. “A *he*, not an *it!*” She felt something hot and prickly in the corner of her eyes, so she focused on meeting Dean Grimm’s stare, difficult as it was, and holding onto her anger to keep away the feeling of desperation and hopelessness that threatened to overwhelm her.

Ms. Grimm and Ms. Shirtliffe were both silent for a moment. They glanced at one another, and then Ms. Shirtliffe stepped forward.

“Alexandra,” she said quietly. “We talked about this –”

“You don’t know!” Alexandra shouted.

Ms. Shirtliffe frowned. “I know that Maximilian wouldn’t do something like this.”

The Doorway

“No! He wouldn't!”

“So it's not Maximilian. Probably not a ghost at all.”

Alexandra's mouth hung open, and then she closed it.

“I agree,” Dean Grimm said. “But we must find out what *it* is. In the meantime...” She looked at Alexandra with an expression that was a mixture of anger, disappointment, and pity. “You worry me, Miss Quick.”

Alexandra frowned, and looked down at her feet.

“For being out after curfew, and where you had no business being, you've earned yourself another month of detention. If you commit a single infraction during that time, I'll put you on wand restriction along with Miss Dearborn.”

Alexandra clenched her jaw, but said nothing.

“We need to do some more investigation, before the Aurors arrive tomorrow,” Dean Grimm said to Ms. Shirliffe. “Miss Quick, you will return to your room.”

By the time she was back in her room, Alexandra's sense of failure and frustration had given way to numbness, so when Anna raised her head from her pillow, Alexandra just shook her head at her and sighed.

“You got in trouble again, didn't you?” Anna said.

“Yeah.” Alexandra sat down on her bed and began taking off her shoes.

“Troublesome!” squawked Charlie.

“How bad?” Anna asked.

“Another month of detention.” Alexandra fell silent, and only realized she had been staring at the floor for a long time when Charlie squawked again. Alexandra looked up at Anna, who was still watching her.

“Ms. Gale is dead, Anna.” When she said those words, her numbness suddenly gave way to regret and guilt and grief, and she had to look away, while trying to determine why she was feeling this way. Certainly she was sorry that Ms. Gale had died, but Alexandra barely knew the woman, and she wasn't responsible for her death.

Anna sat up in shock, and Alexandra had to tell her the whole story.

“But how did she die?” Anna's face had turned white. “Did an evil spirit get her?”

“I don't know. I didn't see anything.”

“*You* could have been killed!”

Alexandra shook her head. “I don't think so.”

“You don't know that! You never –” Anna stopped herself, and shook her head. She didn't say anything else while Alexandra undressed, but then she asked in a soft voice, “Was it worth it?”

Alexandra paused, and looked at her roommate.

“It would have been,” she said quietly. Anna didn't ask any more questions, and Alexandra changed into her pajamas, brushed her teeth, and went to bed.



Friday morning was cold and damp. It was the beginning of October, and the weather was turning chilly. Ms. Shirliffe said very little, turning the JROC over to Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland for calisthenics and a Deadweight obstacle course. Alexandra wanted to ask her what she and Dean Grimm had found the previous night, but Shirliffe left the yard as soon as exercises were over.

Alexandra returned to her room after showering and changing, and went down to breakfast with Anna. They all sensed the tension in the air – conversations in the cafeteria were furtive and muted, as the teachers on duty paced the room looking unusually tense and snapping at anyone who made too

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much noise. Mrs. Grinder, one of the school's history teachers, stared directly at Alexandra as she entered the room, and the gazes of dozens of students followed hers. Alexandra tried to ignore them.

"Hey Alex, something's going on," David said, as he joined her in line for breakfast.

"Funny how when something's going on, you decide you want to hang out with me," Alexandra said. "As if I might know something."

Usually David ate breakfast with a bunch of boys, except when he sat with Angelique when Darla wasn't around. He had the decency to look abashed, but he didn't miss the expression on Anna's face. He lowered his voice. "You *do* know something, don't you?"

"I'm sure we'll all find out soon enough." Alexandra knew Dean Grimm would have to tell the school something. They sat down at a long table and were joined by Constance and Forbearance, who were both wearing very unhappy expressions. Alexandra glanced over her shoulder. Innocence was sitting with the other sixth grade girls. Her hair was still uncovered, and had a red bow in it. Her lips were the color of persimmon.

Alexandra looked back at Constance and Forbearance. Constance looked angry; Forbearance tense and anxious. Alexandra didn't know what to say, and then Dean Grimm's voice was heard over the school's Wizard Address system.

"Good morning, Charmbridge Academy." Conversations halted, everyone stopped eating, and all eyes looked up. Other than at assemblies, the Dean rarely addressed the entire school at once like this.

"It is my sad duty to inform you that our Groundskeeper and Head Custodian, Elizabeth Gale, passed beyond last night in a tragic accident."

A chorus of whispers, mutters, and gasps filled the cafeteria. Anna swallowed and looked at Alexandra. Alexandra noticed that many other eyes were turning in her direction as well.

"Although I am loathe to release details that do not concern anyone but her family, I wish to squelch the inevitable rumors now," Ms. Grimm went on. "Ms. Gale did not perish as a result of 'ghost sickness.' No magic of any sort was involved – sadly, Ms. Gale died after falling down a flight of stairs."

"Oh, dear heaven!" Forbearance gasped, while a few other students cried out in shock as well.

Ms. Grimm continued speaking in the same calm, somber tone. "A routine inspection of the grounds will commence this morning; the Central Territory officials you may see around the school were scheduled to arrive previously, and their presence today, on this sad occasion, is purely coincidental. I expect everyone to be on their best behavior, as always, and treat our guests with the utmost courtesy. Teachers, I do not expect the work of our visitors to interfere with the conducting of your classes, but feel free to speak to me or your department head if you have any concerns.

"That is all. Please finish eating your breakfast and prepare yourself for another challenging day of magical education at Charmbridge."

There was a moment of silence after the Dean's speech ended, and then the noise of conversations in the cafeteria rose to a din, until the staff on duty began quieting the breakfasters down with threats of detention.

Alexandra and Anna ate breakfast without saying much, and Constance and Forbearance seemed too upset by the Dean's announcement to talk about Innocence. Alexandra responded to David's questions by giving him an extremely abridged version of the previous night's events.

None of them had much appetite. They joined the other students flowing out of the cafeteria, heading for their first period classes. As they passed the school entrance, the usual hallway chatter became muted – when Alexandra got there, she saw that there was a pair of red-robed Aurors standing by the doors. Anna visibly flinched when she saw them.

The Doorway

Not surprisingly, everyone was distracted during their Charms test in Mr. Newton's class. The teacher set out a chess board on his desk, and summoned students one by one to perform their Disillusionment and Glamour Charms on it. When it was Alexandra's turn, the teacher told her to make as many pieces as she could disappear. Alexandra waved her wand and cast the spell to blend an object with its background, and the entire board vanished.

Mr. Newton squinted at the space where the pieces had been. Making even small objects turn completely invisible was difficult magic. "Very good," he said grudgingly. "Now undo it."

She tried – the pieces did not reappear.

The Charms teacher put his hand on the board, where the concealed pieces should have been. There was nothing there.

"You were supposed to put a Disillusionment Charm on them, not Banish them!" he snapped, as he conjured another set.

Alexandra looked at her wand. She didn't know why her spell had gone wrong.

It was some small consolation that hardly anyone else did much better, though David looked rather pleased with himself after turning the pawns into queens – a little cheat he'd attempted once while playing chess with Alexandra – and Anna at least managed to make the king vanish. Constance turned a few pieces semi-transparent; Forbearance's Glamour Charm made the pawns look like pebbles.

Darla, with her collared wand, spent several minutes in front of Mr. Newton's desk. He finally waved her away after she burst into tears, unable to do anything.

With a start like that, Alexandra would have been happy if she were summoned to the Dean's office to escape any more classes, but the summons she was expecting did not arrive until the end of P.M.E. class. That last class of the day was particularly unpleasant, as the whispers and suspicious looks from her fellow JROC mages were more pronounced than ever, and some students audibly grumbled under their breaths when ordered by Colonel Shirliffe to drill with Alexandra.

Shirliffe looked unsurprised when a paper bird fluttered to her with a message from Miss Marmsley. She read it, and said, without looking in Alexandra's direction, "Quick, to the administrative wing."

Everyone knew that meant 'Dean's office.' Alexandra put away her wand, pivoted on her heel, and marched out of the gym, while the other uniformed students gave each other knowing looks.

She didn't see any Aurors or other WJD officials on her way to the administrative wing. She wondered if the ghost hunters were down in the basements now, or if they had already come and gone. Did they drag unwelcome ghosts away in ghostly chains, or did they cast a spell to banish spirits from the premises? She knew that the Bureau of Hauntings relocated spirits in Roanoke Territory to the island where Croatoa was located, but she didn't know what they did in Central Territory.

Miss Marmsley was her usual stern self, gazing down at Alexandra from her picture frame. "Dean Grimm is waiting for you," she said.

"What else is new?" Alexandra replied. She marched to the Dean's office and opened the door.

Dean Grimm was behind her desk, as usual. Sitting in a chair across the desk from her was her twin.

Alexandra's eyes were fixed on the Special Inquisitor as she walked into the office. Diana Grimm was wearing a plain red robe thrown on over black pants and a white shirt. She was holding the Dean's cat in her lap, stroking it gently.

"Come to arrest me?" Alexandra asked. Though her tone was sarcastic, she wouldn't have been terribly surprised if that was exactly why the other Ms. Grimm was here.

The Special Inquisitor arched an eyebrow. "Wandering around after curfew is a school disciplinary matter, not a criminal offense, but if you have something to confess...?"

Alexandra started to respond, but the Dean said, "That will be enough, Miss Quick."

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The Dean's sister very gently lifted Galen off her lap and set the cat down, then stood up.

"You and I have some things to talk about, Alexandra," she said.

"Like what?" Alexandra asked. "I already told Dean Grimm everything about last night. I had nothing to do with what happened to Ms. Gale. Or Benjamin Rash."

Diana Grimm turned to her sister. "I'll bring her back when we're finished, Lilith."

"No need." Dean Grimm was already looking at papers on her desk. "I do have a school to run, Diana. I'm sure you can find your own way out after you're done with Miss Quick."

Diana Grimm nodded, with a thin smile, and gestured for Alexandra to precede her out the door.

Alexandra didn't say anything as the Special Inquisitor walked with her out of the hallway lined with the offices of other school administrators. Outside the administrative wing, other students stared and then averted their eyes from the red-robed witch who looked exactly like the Dean.

They walked past the cafeteria and the main entrance, and into a familiar hallway. The stairs down to the basement had bright red ribbons blocking them, but they parted for Alexandra and Ms. Grimm before floating back across the stairwell. The two of them went downstairs, and found a pair of wizards just coming up from the sub-basement.

"We've found some more traces of spectral activity," said one of the wizards, who was wearing a brown robe and carrying something that looked like a more elaborate version of Ms. Gale's spectroscope, with many more sets of lenses mounted in a rotating assembly that seemed designed to let various combinations of lenses be popped into place to look through. "And there were traces of Dark magic in that cave. But our Summoning Charms haven't drawn any ghosts out. If there was a ghost here, it may have fled after it saw all the commotion – or of course, it may have heard that we were coming."

Alexandra stared icily at the ghost hunter, as Ms. Grimm nodded and replied: "Finish checking the attics and the exterior. The Aurors will see to it that the sub-basements are sealed – permanently – after this."

She then continued down the stairs. Alexandra paused, then followed her.

"Did Ms. Gale really die falling down the stairs?" she asked.

"It appears so," Ms. Grimm said. "But to die in such a manner is very unusual for witches."

Alexandra knew that mundane accidents rarely killed witches and wizards. Maximilian had once told her, "You have to try really hard to die like a Muggle."

They reached the sub-basement, and Ms. Grimm lit her wand and walked on.

"Where are we going?" Alexandra asked.

"Where do you think?" Ms. Grimm replied. They reached another door, with more stairs on the other side. The Special Inquisitor began descending them without looking back. Alexandra continued following her.

"What's the point of bringing me down here?" Alexandra asked. They were now in a sub-basement below the one they'd just left. Below was the lowest level beneath Charmbridge Academy, where the Mors Mortis Society had conducted its activities.

"I know you don't remember being down here," Ms. Grimm said. "But I am thinking perhaps you might recognize *something*..." Sure enough, she was heading for a set of stairs leading down to the deepest sub-basement.

"I do remember being down here," Alexandra said. "The Mors Mortis Society met in a room in the basement below this one. My father didn't erase *those* memories from me."

"Ah, yes. Of course." Ms. Grimm nodded, and Alexandra clenched her fists, as she realized that the Special Inquisitor was testing her – trying to see if her story remained consistent.

The Doorway

She doesn't believe me.

They reached the last set of stairs, and Ms. Grimm paused, as Alexandra stood there looking down into what seemed like a descent into pitch darkness.

Ms. Grimm was watching her closely. Alexandra looked up at her, and scowled.

“Do you think my brother's ghost is down there?” she asked.

Ms. Grimm seemed surprised at the question. “No, I don't. His ancestors' ghosts already told us that Maximilian passed beyond – he didn't remain here.”

A thought occurred to Alexandra, then: *But what if they lied to you?*

Possibilities whirled through her head. Her ancestors could have lied to the Aurors. You couldn't make a ghost drink Veritaserum. But why would they lie to Maximilian's family as well? She kept her expression neutral.

They went deeper. In the lowest sub-basement, the walls were carved into the rock – most likely by magic. Most of the rooms and tunnels appeared to have been formed from pre-existing natural caverns. It was cold down here, and utterly dark except for the light cast by Ms. Grimm's wand. Alexandra had not been down here since returning from the Lands Below, and she wasn't supposed to remember that.

And that was the room where Ms. Grimm took her – a large cavern, deep in these hidden tunnels beneath Charmbridge Academy, with rock walls still in their natural state, as they had been carved by time, rather than human intervention. But the floor of the cavern was a dark clay color unlike that of the rest of this sub-basement,

This was the secret gateway to the Lands Below. According to Maximilian, it was the very reason Charmbridge Academy had been built – to prevent Indian wizards from accessing it, and to deprive them of one of the magical locations from which they had performed their own powerful magic.

Alexandra looked around with an affected air of detached curiosity. She forced herself not to think about herself and Maximilian plunging through that floor, after Em had turned it insubstantial, and she likewise tried to banish the memory of returning – alone – to be greeted by her father, here in this very room.

That was what Occlumency allowed you to do – clear your mind, bury memories, master your thoughts. Alexandra knew she wasn't doing a very good job of it. The memories she wanted to bury were very near the surface, tormenting her with renewed pain and horror, and she had to maintain a straight face and calm demeanor before Ms. Grimm. Would the Special Inquisitor be using Legilimency on her now? She turned to look at the other witch.

“So why did you bring me down here?” she asked. “To see if I freak out? Am I supposed to be shocked into remembering something?”

“No,” Ms. Grimm said quietly. “Memories that are truly Obliviated can never be restored. But your father might have left something that you don't remember that you remember –”

“And what if he did?” Alexandra asked. “Let's say I do remember something. How would that help you? You already know he can travel through the Lands Below now. What could I possibly tell you that would help you catch him?”

“Do you want to help us catch him?” Ms. Grimm asked.

Alexandra blinked. “I... I don't know. But even if I did, I can't.”

“You can.” Ms. Grimm leaned towards her. “One of the things that makes Abraham Thorn so elusive is the Fidelius Charm cast over his followers – we don't even know who they are, let alone where they are hiding.”

“I know, I know, I'm the Secret Keeper for the Thorn Circle. That's why you won't leave me alone. *If* I knew who they were, I could rat them out. But I don't. I didn't know Mr. Journey was one of them

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until he tried to kill me. And my father doesn't even trust his own children. The man who was with him on Croatoa was using Polyjuice Potion – because they *knew* you'd question me and Max afterwards. You know, maybe he's just smarter than all of you. Is that why you harass us, because we're the only ones you can get at?"

Diana Grimm scowled at her. "You have no idea, Alexandra," she said. "You have no idea what 'harassment' is. All you've been subjected to thus far is periodic questioning which you find unpleasant. If the Office of Special Inquisitions suspects that you are actually aiding and abetting your father as he conspires to bring down the Confederation..."

"All my father has ever done is use me!" Alexandra said, with honest anger. "Why would I help him?"

"I don't know," Ms. Grimm said. "But I truly hope that you aren't, Alexandra."

"Is this where you threaten me with the WODAMND Act again?"

Ms. Grimm's eyes became hard. "Do you know that your father killed a Special Inquisitor last week?"

Alexandra paled a little as Ms. Grimm continued. "We've begun pursuing the Thorn Circle even into the Lands Below – and they are striking back in earnest. WJD agents have *died*, Alexandra. Last week it was one of my colleagues in the Office of Special Inquisitions. He had a wife and children."

Alexandra was silent.

"Come." Ms. Grimm turned on her heel and led the way out of the room. Alexandra was forced to follow, or be left in darkness. She glanced back once, and then mentally shoved down, hard, on the thoughts in her head.

Ms. Grimm led her to another familiar cave, this one smaller and with smoother walls. There was one wall in particular, painted with drawings of humans and other creatures, that held Alexandra's attention as Ms. Grimm raised her wand to shine light on its reddish-orange surface.

"The Aurors said they found Dark magic here," Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm nodded. "This is where you performed your illegal rituals last year, is it not?"

"I didn't perform any illegal rituals. I quit when I found out the Mors Mortis Society was teaching the Cruciatus Curse."

"But your brother didn't."

Alexandra kept her face still, and continued staring at the cave paintings.

"How much did your brother tell you about this place?" Ms. Grimm asked.

Alexandra didn't answer right away; she had to sort through the things she should remember and the things she shouldn't, all while hoping her novice attempts at Occlumency would be sufficient, if Ms. Grimm was in fact probing her for information. Finally, she replied: "The Indians used to come here and do magic. Before Charmbridge Academy was built."

"Yes." Ms. Grimm approached the wall, and laid a hand upon it. "They did dark things down here... very dark."

"Like what?"

Ms. Grimm turned towards her, with narrowed eyes and a small smile. "Still curious, Alexandra? You don't yet know enough to stay away from magic you don't understand, that you've been told is Dark?"

Alexandra almost snapped something back, but she held her tongue at the last instant. She thought a moment, then said instead, "I'm more curious to know why students were able to come down here at all, if you've always known about this place."

The Special Inquisitor's smile stretched tightly across her face. "Surely you've learned by now how

The Doorway

difficult it is to prevent... inquisitive children, who can do magic, from getting into places they shouldn't. It's not as easy as you might imagine to simply seal a doorway in such a manner that no one – not even a wizard – can ever get through it. Let alone an entire subterranean complex.” She looked back at the rock wall, and her smile faded, as she continued running her hand over the rough surface. “And of course, no one thought *this* doorway could still be opened – especially by students.” Her hand fell back to her side. “We suspect,” she went on, “that the doorway through the Veil that your friends foolishly opened may not have been completely closed.”

“They aren't my friends,” Alexandra said. “They never were.”

“And so,” Ms. Grimm continued, as if Alexandra had not spoken, “spirits, of the sort I understand you saw before you quit, may have slipped through.”

“Jibay, you mean.”

“Some Indians call them that, yes.”

Alexandra studied the wall, remembering when the drawings *moved* across its surface, and another time, when the wall had turned darker than the darkness around it, opening into the Lands Beyond. The spirit that had been called forth was not like a ghost at all – it had been smoky and black and full of malice, without any hint of humanity.

“So a jibay may have killed Ms. Gale? And struck down Benjamin?”

“Possibly. We have now made certain this doorway – and the other one – is closed. And we will be putting much stronger barriers in place to prevent students from coming down here. There will be no more secret rituals down here, no more sneaking around exploring the forbidden, meddling with things no one was meant to meddle with.”

“Good.” Alexandra turned to Ms. Grimm. “Are we done?”

“For now.” The Special Inquisitor eyed her. “I'm still not sure you fully appreciate the gravity of your situation. I get the feeling that you are still being resistant, still trying to avoid telling anyone anything. What will it take to make you realize that this is for your own good, Alexandra, as much as it is for the good of the Confederation?”

Alexandra eyed her back. “You know,” she said, trying to sound more confident than she felt, “all you do is threaten and warn me. If you really wanted my help – if you wanted me to believe you're the good guys – you might actually offer to help me.”

Ms. Grimm tilted her head. “Help you? What sort of help do you want?”

“Actually, I don't need help. But Anna does.”

The Special Inquisitor's brows knit together thoughtfully. “I see. I'm aware of the situation with Mr. Chu, but that's a Territorial matter. If you think I can simply ask the Governor of North California to let your friend's father go, you're mistaken.”

Alexandra hid her disappointment. She began bombarding Ms. Grimm with questions instead: “What has he been charged with? And is he going to have a trial? Where is he being held prisoner? And why won't anyone answer Anna's letters, or notify her mother? Doesn't the wife of a wizard who's been arrested deserve to know what's happening to him?”

Ms. Grimm folded her arms. “I can't answer for the North California Auror's Office or Wizard Justice Department, other than to tell you that Mr. Chu is probably being held beneath Mount Diablo.” She paused. “I will see what else I can find out for you.”

Alexandra nodded. “Thanks,” she said, with an effort. The Special Inquisitor turned away, and Alexandra wondered if she would ever get answers to any of her questions.

She followed Ms. Grimm back to the main floor of Charmbridge Academy, and only glanced back over her shoulder once more as they climbed the stairs, leaving the dark sub-basements behind.

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Alexandra told Anna that she had asked Diana Grimm about Mr. Chu. Anna looked so grateful, Alexandra felt guilty for raising her hopes.

The Aurors and ghost hunters were gone by Friday evening. Alexandra's plans to celebrate being freed from detention turned into more chores, Friday evening and all day Saturday and Sunday.

On Monday morning, all the bulletin boards included a notice informing students that the basement was off-limits to everyone. Even the Magic Band had to relocate to a room upstairs. There was a particularly ominous line at the end of this announcement: *'All exits from the basement to other parts of the academy are now permanently Sealed and Barred. Any student discovered to be attempting to bypass these will face severe disciplinary actions.'*

Alexandra stared at those words, feeling Anna's eyes on her. Part of her wondered why they hadn't done that last year. Another part of her wondered how she would get past a doorway magically sealed with something much more powerful than a standard lock.

Not that she had any plans to do so – yet. But just in case she had reason to go down there again.

Dean Grimm's admonishments notwithstanding, the presence of Aurors and ghost hunters in the school left more rumors than ever before circulating the school. Many concerned Alexandra's alleged role in Ms. Gale's demise.

A week after Diana Grimm's visit, Charlie came flapping in through the open window of their dorm room, squawking in a panic and fluttering all about the room before Alexandra could calm the bird.

“Charlie, calm down! Is Jingwei chasing you?”

Anna, sitting at her desk doing her homework, said, “I sent Jingwei to deliver a letter to my mother yesterday. She's probably halfway between here and California right now.”

Alexandra frowned at her familiar. “Then what are you making a fuss about, scaredy-bird?”

Charlie squawked as a sinister-looking screech owl appeared outside the window. Anna sat up, and Alexandra turned to face the owl, as Charlie hopped off her shoulder and fluttered up into a far corner of the room.

The screech owl bore an unmarked envelope. Alexandra took it, and the owl silently took off without even waiting for an owl treat.

Cautiously, Alexandra opened the envelope. It contained a short, stiff piece of parchment, with the Seal of the Confederation on it, and below that, the stamp of the Office of Special Inquisitions.

“It's from Ms. Grimm,” she told Anna. “The *other* Ms. Grimm.”

Anna waited tensely, while Alexandra read.

“Your father is being held under Mount Diablo,” Alexandra said. “Ms. Grimm says under the WODAMND Act, he can be held for up to six months without charges, or indefinitely if there is 'compelling evidence' that he represents a 'threat to the safety and security of the Confederation or any of its Territories.’”

“How do they decide that?” Anna asked, looking distraught.

“I don't know.” Alexandra handed the letter to her. “Ms. Grimm says in February, the Governor of North California will either have to charge him, label him a threat and continue the investigation, or let him go.”

“February,” Anna whispered. Tears welled up in her eyes. “Tomo said pretty much everyone agrees that my father is being railroaded. The rumor is, the Governor has offered to let him go if he agrees to drop out of the campaign. I guess no one expected that the Majokai would make trouble too if they saw a Chinese wizard being persecuted. And now the National Association for the Abolition of Blood Status is getting involved... it's a big mess.”

The Doorway

"I'm sorry." Alexandra felt let down by the small amount of information that Ms. Grimm had given her.

"At least I know a little bit, now." Anna looked down. "I wonder if they allow visitors at Mount Diablo – maybe my mother and I can go see him, when I go home for Christmas break."

"Maybe he'll be out by then," Alexandra said.

"Maybe." Anna was struggling to hold back tears, and Alexandra gave her a hug, feeling completely inadequate.

"Thank you for trying," Anna mumbled.

"I wish I could do more."

"Me, too," Anna sighed.

Maybe I can do more, Alexandra thought that night. It was her father that the Wizard Justice Department wanted. She'd told Ms. Grimm the truth when she'd said that she didn't want to help him. She didn't owe Abraham Thorn any loyalty – so why did the thought of turning against him bother her?

Chapter 11 — Cursing and Fighting



There were usually a few other students serving detention with Alexandra, though their punishments were rarely longer than a few days. Since they were temporarily without a head custodian, everyone on detention was assigned to scrub, clean, and mop, or rake leaves and maintain the grounds outside.

Only a few days after the owl from Diana Grimm, Alexandra was waiting with her fellow delinquents for Mr. Bludgeleg, the school's Quodpot coach, to march the Clockworks out. There was an unusually large group tonight, so she was standing apart from everyone else so as not to have to put up with the whispers and evil eyes and accusations of being a sorceress.

She sighed when she saw a familiar blonde head pushing through the sulky mob of students.

"Hi, Alex." Innocence didn't look or sound quite as chipper as usual, despite the Glamour Charms brightening her face.

"You got detention again?" Alexandra asked.

Innocence nodded.

Cursing and Fighting

“You want to tell me what for?”

Innocence bit her lip. “Fightin’.”

Alexandra sighed. “With?”

Innocence made a face. “Ouida Noel. 'Least she got detention too, this time.” She pointed, and Alexandra saw the other sixth grader, wearing fancy clothes that really weren't suitable for working in, standing uneasily with the older kids. Ouida was pretending not to notice Innocence or Alexandra.

Alexandra shook her head. Apparently Innocence's relationship with her roommate was a tumultuous one. “Have you made up with your sisters yet?”

Innocence scowled and scuffed her toe against the ground, but a series of clanks and scraping sounds cut off any further conversation as the Clockwork golems came marching up the stairs. Mr. Bludgeleg, a short, fat wizard who looked like a most unlikely former Quodpot player, dispatched groups of students to lead them in various chores.

“Not you, Miss Quick,” Bludgeleg said, as he assigned the last two golems to Innocence. He beckoned with a thick, stubby finger, and Alexandra shuffled over to him.

“You,” the rotund teacher informed her, “have been assigned to kitchen duty for the rest of the month. Report to Mister Remy.” He waved a hand in dismissal.

Banished from the sight of other students, Alexandra spent the evening using Scouring Charms to scrub pots and pans, finding that she often had to supplement her wand's magic with elbow grease. The kitchen elves seemed more amused than anything else; they were used to students serving detention in the kitchens, and they were less easily cowed than most house-elves.

Mister Remy, in particular, was an old, sour-looking elf with a face like a shrunken apple. He was always carrying a very long butcher's knife, and he would cross his hands over his diminutive chest, holding the knife clasped to him with the point sticking up above his head like a great bayonet held at port arms. He snapped orders at Alexandra and watched her continuously, until she wondered whether he'd been warned about her by Em, or if he was like that with all students.

Kitchen duty was the most miserable detention she'd been assigned yet, made all the more intolerable by the fact that she suspected she'd only been sent to the kitchen so the other kids wouldn't have to work with her.

Alexandra was now more ostracized than Darla – who, largely thanks to Angelique, had been warily accepted back into the ranks of the popular girls and once more sat with them at lunch. No one but Anna, Constance, and Forbearance would sit with Alexandra. (Or, occasionally, David, though he mostly sat with other boys now during mealtimes, when he and Angelique had not ditched Darla and taken up one end of a cafeteria table to themselves.)

Alexandra's father was in the news again, though rarely mentioned by name. The Enemy of the Confederation was supposedly being hunted by a specially-trained Regiment of hit-wizards and magical beasts, and there were rumors that the Confederation was enlisting Dementors, ghosts, and other beings in the war against Dark Arts. Alexandra also heard of deaths being blamed on the Dark Convention. She didn't know how much to take seriously and how much was hysteria – it seemed that



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whenever some wizard came down with a curse, there was some presumed connection to the Dark Convention. But she remembered what Diana Grimm had told her about WJD agents being killed by her father.

Though she pretended it didn't bother her, the suspicion, the hostility, and the *fear* were beginning to wear at her.

So were the curses. Most kids – even in older grades – were either afraid of her (or her father) or unwilling to risk sharing detention with her, but at least once a day Alexandra would get jinxed or hexed, usually from behind. Sometimes she saw the culprit and retaliated, and bystanders scattered as hexes flew. The combatants usually limped away before a teacher was alerted to the commotion, but Alexandra had visited Mrs. Murphy repeatedly to have eyebrows regrown and teeth shrunk, ears turned back around, boils healed and stingers pulled out, and in one embarrassing incident, a tail removed.

Alexandra sent Charles Murphy, Michael Lester, and Karina Knutzen to the infirmary as well. Mrs. Murphy questioned everyone, but no one was willing to snitch. The nurse was used to periodic outbreaks of cursing, either as a result of pranks or grudges, and she didn't usually press too hard, as long as the injuries she saw weren't serious.

The harassment was not entirely new – Alexandra had been targeted before, starting back in sixth grade, when rumors first began circulating about her sinister parentage. She was more worried about her friends than she was about herself. But Anna denied that she was being bullied, and Constance and Forbearance shushed her when she asked if they were going to get in trouble for associating with her.

It was the morning after the tail incident that Alexandra finally snapped. She was still sore and trying not to show it – the procedure to remove the unwanted appendage had not been painless. Theo and Jordan were making mocking comments behind her back, and then she heard the word 'Mudblood' from Adela Iturbide.

Alexandra had been called a Mudblood before, but never in JROC. That afternoon, she had had enough. Consumed with fury, she whirled and tackled the other girl. Adela was taller than her and a year older, but Alexandra dragged her to the ground and began pummeling her, and by the time the other kids dragged her off, the freshman girl was screaming and curled into a ball.

"What's going on here?" Colonel Shirtliffe yelled. Everyone snapped to attention except Alexandra and Adela. Alexandra couldn't unclench her fists, and Adela was still sitting on the ground, shaking, with tears streaming down her face.

"That little... savage attacked me!" Adela screamed.

Shirtliffe's eyes darted in Alexandra's direction, and back at Adela. "What was this fight about?"

Adela looked away.

"Well?" Shirtliffe demanded, but no one spoke.

Finally, Eric Strangeland sighed. "I believe I heard the word 'Mudblood' used, ma'am."

Colonel Shirtliffe's eyes turned cold and stony. "True, Iturbide?"

Adela's face darkened, but she couldn't meet the teacher's gaze.

"I've made it *very* clear that I will not tolerate that sort of hate speech," Shirtliffe said, through clenched teeth. "Blood status doesn't matter in the Regiments."

"Serving with non-purebloods I could stand!" Adela said, angrily rising to her feet and wiping blood from her split lip. "Serving with *her* I cannot!" She pointed at Alexandra, with a venomous look. "Her father is an enemy of the Confederation! The Iturbides are among the Elect! We *built* the Confederation! It's an insult to have the Enemy's bastard half-breed child here!"

Alexandra lunged at Adela. Shirtliffe snapped her fingers, and two of the older Mage-Sergeants stepped between the two girls. Daniel Keedle grabbed Alexandra and almost had to wrestle her to the

ground.

"Stop it!" he hissed. "You want to show everyone you *are* a savage?"

Breathing heavily, she struggled in his grasp, and then subsided, until he loosened his grip.

"I'm not my father!" she snarled. "And I'm not a –"

"Get yourself under control, Quick!" Shirtliffe snapped, and turned coldly to Adela. "It wasn't just the Elect who built the Confederation."

Alexandra finally noticed that she was not the only one who'd been outraged by Adela's words. She was aware that not everyone in JROC was a pureblood – Ermanno DiSilvio had mentioned Muggle grandparents once, and she thought Daniel was a half-blood – but she was surprised at how many glares were now being cast in the arrogant pureblood girl's direction. Even those who Alexandra knew were purebloods, like Charlotte Barker and Supriya Chandra, didn't look happy.

"Both of you," Shirtliffe said. "Forty laps on the bare sticks."

"No. I quit!" Adela spat on the ground at Alexandra's feet, and stomped off.

Ms. Shirtliffe barely reacted. She gestured with her chin at Alexandra. "Go on, Quick – get your tailbone on a broomstick or I'll make it fifty."

Gritting her teeth, Alexandra complied. She in fact had a note from Mrs. Murphy excusing her from exercise for several days, while the tailbone Ms. Shirtliffe had mentioned healed. But she left the note in her pocket, and said nothing, and though the pain from balancing on the hard wooden broomstick was terrible enough to bring tears to her eyes after twenty laps, she completed all forty without stopping or making a sound. She was glad that everyone but Ms. Shirtliffe had left by the time she was finished; she was unable to avoid wincing with every step. The Witch-Colonel just nodded at her curtly and dismissed her. Nothing more was said about the incident with Adela.

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Two more students quit the JROC. Ms. Shirtliffe said nothing, but Alexandra knew that they shared Adela's sentiments. This made it even more of a surprise when William reappeared one morning. He was barely in better shape than he had been at the beginning of the semester, and he looked thoroughly miserable, but he didn't complain as Colonel Shirtliffe and Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland ran him and the rest of the JROC relentlessly through morning calisthenics and a broom-balancing endurance exercise.

Alexandra caught up to him after they were dismissed to return to their rooms. He turned when she called his name, and crossed his arms self-consciously and looked down as she approached the sweaty, breathless sixth grader.

"I thought you quit," she said.

"I changed my mind," he mumbled. "Decided I didn't want to be a quitter."

"And Ms. Shirtliffe let you come back, just like that?"

He frowned, still looking down, then shook his head. "I practically had to beg her. She told me she never wanted to see me again if I quit a second time."

Alexandra stood there, not sure what to think of this, and then patted him on the shoulder. "It does get easier," she said.

His face brightened, and Alexandra sighed inwardly.

"William," she said, in as gentle a tone as she could manage. "You didn't return because of me, did you?"

He turned red, and she rolled her eyes, but he spoke again before she could say anything.

"It's because you don't quit!" he said. "Everyone says all this bad stuff about you, and hexes you, and... and it's like totally prejudiced! We're both discriminated against! The Charmbridge Academy

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Equal Education Policy says it doesn't matter if we have wizard parents or not, but all the pureblood kids just snicker whenever the teachers talk about Muggles.”

Alexandra smiled slightly. “Not all of them.”

“Anyway, Innocence really, uh, chewed me out. Used lots of Ozarker expressions I didn't even understand, but she said no one likes a quitter.”

“Innocence.” Alexandra's mouth twitched. “You know, I think she must like you.”

He blushed again. “Actually, I think she likes you. She talks about you all the time. You and that other Muggle-born kid...”

“David.”

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “She even got detention for punching some girl who used the m-word.”

Alexandra groaned.

“I'd better get back to my room,” William mumbled. “Gotta shower and change into my uniform. Umm, see you sixth period.”

“Yeah.” Alexandra watched him go, bemused and oddly touched that she was being defended by a pair of sixth graders.

While Clockworks and students serving detention did a lot of the cleaning work around the school, there was a great deal of work they could not do, particularly where magic was concerned. The magical lamps and torches, the talking bathroom mirrors, the doors spelled against Unlocking Charms, the monitor portraits, the classrooms full of magical apparatus and books and alchemical supplies, all required wizardly maintenance. Without a head custodian, many of these chores were taken up by elves, and the normally invisible Charmbridge elves were seen more frequently about the school, cheerfully repairing broken mirrors, touching up portraits whose paint was peeling, and making sure that locked doors stayed locked.

In the weeks that followed, the ranks of students serving detention swelled considerably, but it turned out that most of them had not actually been assigned detention. The kids joining Alexandra and her fellow troublemakers were wearing bright red ASPEW t-shirts; the school's ASPEW club had decided that they needed to step in to prevent more work from being given to the elves.

When David showed up one evening, Alexandra told him, “You know that none of you are actually replacing any elves, right? They're still doing as much work as they ever did.”

“We're making a statement,” David said. “But I suggested we stage a sit-in in the Dean's office.”

Alexandra smiled skeptically. “Really? Let me know when that happens. I want to be there to see it.”

David rolled his eyes at her, and walked off to do outdoor chores – maintaining the Quidditch field, something the elves never did anyway. Innocence, Alexandra noticed, had also turned up for voluntary 'detention' after having finished her actual detention the previous week. She was also wearing a baggy ASPEW t-shirt over her dress.

But JROC and ASPEW and detentions were only a distraction for Alexandra. As her faint hope that Maximilian's spirit might still be haunting Charmbridge Academy faded, she became less optimistic about finding a way to bring someone back from the Lands Beyond. In her obsession with ghosts, she realized, she had been neglecting the more promising possibility of time travel. She re-immersed herself in the books she'd found in the library, and even spent what little remained of her converted wizarding currency on an owl order from Boxley's Books, for *The Journal of American Wizarding History* and *A Guide to Careers in Arcane Research*.

She also sent a letter to Valeria by International Owl. Of course she could not ask her sister, “Can you get me a Time-Turner?” Even if she weren't worried about her letter being intercepted, she doubted

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Valeria would simply send her one by return owl. Instead, she wrote about how interesting her American Wizarding History class was (which was a lie), and that she thought she might want to be a Historacist. Could Valeria give her any advice, she asked? And was it fun using Time-Turners to study history?

Maybe I'll have to move to Europe, too, she thought. Of course then she'd have to bring a Time-Turner back to America. She didn't have a real plan, yet – just ideas. But she had time. If time travel were possible, then she had all the time in the world, didn't she?

As October wore on, Alexandra waited for a response from Valeria. Instead, she received a letter from Julia, telling her that the Department of Magical Transportation had lifted most travel restrictions on Portkey travel – and inviting her to Croatoa for Thanksgiving.

Alexandra read the letter twice, and it took her a while to write a reply. She wanted very much to see Julia again, and Ms. King, but she dreaded returning to their large mansion, feeling the emptiness caused by Maximilian's absence, and walking past his room...

You're being stupid, and feeling bad won't bring him back, she thought, disgusted with herself. Julia had to live with that pain every day when she wasn't at school. If anyone was entitled to grieve, it was Julia – not Alexandra.

She was uncomfortable with the thought of Ms. King paying for a two-way Portkey trip, which she knew was very expensive, but she wrote back to Julia that she would love to see them at Thanksgiving, and then wrote a letter to her mother asking for permission to visit her 'friend' Julia again over the holiday weekend.

After receiving a signed permission slip back from her mother, Alexandra's mind turned to the Thorn family crypt in the woods surrounding Croatoa. Her brother's ancestors – *her* ancestors – haunted those woods. Would she get an opportunity to speak to them? What questions could she ask them? Could they tell her anything about the Lands Beyond? Did they, perhaps, know more than Simon Grayson would admit?

And what would Julia and Ms. King think if they found out about the nature of Alexandra's inquiries?

Preoccupied with these questions and with her attempts to decipher the mysteries of time travel and death, she would have all but forgotten about tests and term projects if not for Anna.

Anna found her in the library one weekend, surrounded by old newspapers. Alexandra had developed a morbid fascination with wizard obituaries.

Wizards had their own euphemisms for death: 'passed beyond' or 'crossed the Veil' was the most common expression. Until the turn of the previous century, the departed was sometimes said to have 'entered the Lands Beyond,' and twice, in the oldest papers she found, Alexandra read an announcement that the deceased had 'joined the Deathly Regiment.' There were also uniquely magical posthumous dispositions listed for a few souls, such as 'Currently haunting her childhood home in Peoria,' or 'Relocated to the Shawnee Hills Undead Retirement Community.'

Alexandra wasn't sure what this information would tell her, but she had even subscribed to the *Chicago Wizard Times*, just so she could read the obituaries.

"You haven't even started studying for the test on Friday, have you?" Anna asked, looking at a black and white photo of wizards doing some sort of victory dance.

"Umm, which one?" Alexandra carefully folded the old paper from the 1940s and slid it back onto the pile.

"American Wizarding History. The Goblin Tariffs, the first Confederation Census, the Roanoke Revolt..." Anna's voice trailed off, and she sighed, as Alexandra looked at her blankly. "You're going to

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get Hocus Pocus marks and wind up back in Remedial classes.”

“Don't worry about me, Anna.”

To her surprise, Anna looked angry. “Don't worry about you? Don't worry about the fact that you're going to fail out of school, or be kicked out –”

“Anna, what are you talking about?” Alexandra protested.

Her roommate grabbed one of the books sitting next to the newspapers, and read the title: “*Looking Back Magically: Why We Don't Know History*.” She turned to Alexandra. “Well, I know why *you* don't know history.”

Annoyed, Alexandra snatched the book back. “I *am* studying history.” She gestured at the other reading material. “This is all history!”

“You're studying time travel. And other things.” Anna picked up another book. “*The Veil and Beyond*.” She looked at Alexandra; Alexandra shrugged uncomfortably.

When Anna spoke again, her voice was very soft: “You can't bring him back.”

Alexandra's expression made Anna shake her head sadly. “What, I wasn't supposed to figure it out? Do you really think I'm that dumb?”

“I've never thought you're dumb, Anna.”

Anna dropped the book back on the table. “Everyone knows you can't change the past,” she said gently. “Even with a Time-Turner. It just doesn't work.”

“Everyone *says* that,” Alexandra replied. “Just like everyone says there's no such thing as hodags, and ghost sickness isn't real, and nobody can come back from the dead, and no one can survive a Killing Curse. Except when someone else says different – and we're talking about *magic*! How do you know what's really possible and what's not? They tell us lots of things here – they tell us what they want us to believe.”

Anna looked down. Alexandra hadn't realized her voice was rising, but she had become agitated by Anna's skepticism, and she paused.

Be gentler with your friends, Alex.

“Would you give up, if they told you there's no way you can help your father?” Alexandra asked.

Anna blinked, and shook her head. “No.” She looked up. “But Alex, what you want to do – if it were possible, don't you think someone else would have done it already? Wouldn't Historicists change history all the time?”

“Maybe they have. Maybe they do. How would we know?”

Anna slowly sat down across from her. “Alexandra, I'm really, really sorry about Max.” She spoke earnestly, almost pleadingly. “I know you miss him – you won't talk about him at all, you won't talk about anything that happened – maybe it's because you don't remember, that makes it so hard for you.”

Alexandra looked away, though not for the reason Anna thought, and her friend took her hand.

“I'm worried about you. I'm worried that you're obsessed with trying to do impossible things that even wizards can't do, because you can't accept –” Alexandra turned back towards her with an expression that made Anna suck in a breath. “Please don't be angry at me!”

Alexandra closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, her expression was softer. She spoke quietly, but her voice was still as firm as before.

“I'm not angry, Anna. But don't tell me to forget and accept it. I won't give up. Maybe it is impossible – maybe I'll never succeed.” A fierce light burned in her eyes. “But I'll never give up.”

Anna just sat there. It was hard for her to meet her friend's stare. But it was just as hard for Alexandra to look into Anna's eyes; she saw compassion and sympathy and everything she liked about Anna, and everything she didn't want right now.

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Alexandra dropped her gaze first.

"I'm not saying you should give up, Alex," Anna said hesitantly. "I'm worried that you're going to get yourself into trouble again, or that you're going to start trying to do magic you really shouldn't. But even if you have to do this, do you have to give up everything else?"

Alexandra frowned. Anna leaned forward. "Maximilian wouldn't want you to spend your entire life trying to bring him back, would he?" she whispered. "Even if it's possible." She bit her lip. "Your friends are still here... and so is your schoolwork. You can't learn much of anything if you get kicked out of Charmbridge, can you?"

Alexandra stared at *The Veil and Beyond*. It was about how wizards had attempted to explore the afterlife, to find out what happened after death without dying themselves. Almost all of them ended up insane, imprisoned, or dead. Sometimes all three.

"I guess... I don't have to spend *all* my time reading about ghosts and time travel," Alexandra mumbled.

Anna smiled. "Will you study with me for the history test?"

Alexandra nodded. "Okay."

Anna gave her a small grin, but Alexandra added, "It will have to be later tonight, though." She sighed, and stood up, and piled books on one of the little tables for Bran and Poe to gather and reshelve, much later that night. "I have to go to detention now."

Anna nodded, looking relieved. Alexandra walked to the library exit, and paused when she saw Darla asking Mrs. Minder for help with the Card Catalog.

She couldn't remember ever seeing Darla in the library before. Her thoughts were interrupted by a hand slapping her on the back – startled, she spun around and drew her wand.

"Whoa, Troublesome!" Torvald laughed, holding his hands up. "Easy!"

Behind him, his friend Stuart just rolled his eyes; Alexandra noticed that Stuart didn't look directly at her.

"Don't do that!" Alexandra said, sheathing her wand quickly before Mrs. Minder noticed. The wand-sheath was another trick Maximilian had taught her.

"All those hexes getting you paranoid," Torvald said. He grinned at her. "So, what's for dinner tonight, Troublesome?"

"Dragon poison, if I find out you've been hexing me," she snapped, and pushed past the two boys, exiting the library to head for the kitchens.

Behind her, Stuart whispered nervously, "You don't think she really has access to dragon poison, do you?"

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Although Alexandra's performance on the American Wizarding History test and Mr. Grue's midterm was nothing to boast about, she was sure she'd at least scored better than Hocus Pocus. Anna reminded her, however, that her aural amplifying drops would be half of her Alchemy grade, and she hadn't even started steeping the bat ears she'd need to brew the final solution. Anna's persistence forced Alexandra to spend more time on schoolwork and less researching other subjects, but she told herself she'd catch up on her reading once she was no longer serving detention.

There were other distractions besides schoolwork. The Halloween Feast was one of the most anticipated events of the year, as Clockworks were banished from the kitchen and the house-elves prepared every dish. (The school's ASPEW club objected, but Alexandra noticed that they had yet to actually boycott the feast.)

As in previous years, the week before Halloween was marked by parties and special events.

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Alexandra had to spend extra afternoons with the Junior Regimental Officer Corps as they rehearsed for their Drill and Ceremonies performance for the school. The Magic Band put on a concert, and Mr. Fledgefield brought out a couple of winged horses from the stables for students to ride.

Teachers were traditionally a bit more tolerant of games and pranks during Halloween. Alexandra ran into a crowd of sixth and seventh graders blocking the path to her dorm, yelling enthusiastically, until they saw her and abruptly fell silent. They parted before her to reveal several young students on their hands and knees – including Innocence, wearing a fancy robe that glittered with magical sparkles, and William in his dress uniform. They were coaxing their toads down the corridor, but one of the amphibians abruptly leaped the wrong way, sailing between the spectators to land on Alexandra's boot.

“Anthony!” William exclaimed. He scuttled over to retrieve his familiar.

Alexandra looked down at the boy and his toad. “Your toad is named Anthony?”

“Yes, ma'am.” He stood in front of her, blushing, while Anthony ribbeted loudly.

“Dang it, Misery was winnin’!” Innocence said.

Alexandra shook her head at them, and walked on.

Besides impromptu toad races in the hallway, there were school-sponsored competitions. Anna entered the Arithmancy contest; Constance and Forbearance spent most of their free time writing entries for the eighth grade essay contest.

Alexandra signed up for the dueling competition. Thanks to her seemingly endless series of detentions, she could not join the Dueling Club, but the Halloween competition was open to everyone – and she knew how to duel. Maximilian had taught her.

The contest would be nothing like wizard-dueling with Maximilian, Martin, and Beatrice. The Stormcrows from BMI weren't afraid of injuring each other, and they hadn't gone much easier on Alexandra. Only a few pre-approved categories of spells were allowed in Charmbridge's dueling contest, and mostly the matches consisted of unskilled students zapping each other ineffectually with Stunning Spells.

When Alexandra joined the others at the raised platform that had been erected in the middle of the Quodpot field, she could feel tension in the air – and if some of her fellow competitors were eyeing her with fear and suspicion, she also sensed anticipation among the spectators; the sort of anticipation stirred up by the prospect of a fight. The previous year's dueling competition had ended abruptly when Darla had tried to cast a Killing Curse at Alexandra.

Alexandra saw Darla standing with Angelique and David among the spectators. David waved, then laid a finger against the corner of his eye, and pointed at Darla with a knowing look: *I'm keeping my eye on her*. Alexandra rolled her eyes and gave him a small smile. Darla wasn't competing this year, and Alexandra wasn't worried about her.

Everyone in the Junior Regimental Officer Corps, as well as everyone in the Dueling Club, had signed up for the dueling tournament. Alexandra saw Adela Iturbide standing with the other high school students on the opposite side of the dueling platform. Adela sneered; Alexandra glanced quickly around to make sure no teachers were watching, and then made a gesture at the other girl that was the same in the Muggle and wizarding worlds.

I hope you win, Alexandra thought. Sixth to eighth graders dueled first – Alexandra wouldn't get to duel Adela unless she won in the middle school division, and Adela beat all the other upperclass students.

Then she noticed that Adela was standing next to Larry Albo. He followed Adela's gaze, and smirked at Alexandra. His hand was brushing against Adela's elbow, and she looked down with a coy smile as he whispered something in her ear.

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Huh. Larry and Adela. She curled her lip. Too bad I can't whup both of you.

"Don't get cocky," Anna told her, as if reading her mind. Alexandra turned to her, and smiled.

"You know I'm going to win," she said, loudly enough for the other middle schoolers to hear her. Some of them snorted; most looked nervous. She glanced over to where the handful of sixth graders were standing. William, in his JROC uniform, was bent over with his hands on his knees, as if he might be sick. Next to him, Innocence was trying to reassure him.

"I promise I'll go easy on you," she said, patting his shoulder.

"Thanks," William mumbled. "But I'm not afraid of getting hexed – I just don't want to look like a doofus in front of the whole school."

"What's a doofus – ?" Innocence started to ask, and then her voice trailed off, as Constance and Forbearance walked over to her.

Alexandra knew they didn't approve of dueling. And Innocence was dressed, as she had been for the past few weeks, in borrowed robes, leaving her head scandalously uncovered. She stared sullenly at her older sisters.

"Innocence," Constance said. She drew a breath. "We'uns don't condone your feistin' –"

"Connie," said Forbearance.

Constance sighed. "But... good luck."

Innocence blinked, and Forbearance leaned forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek. Then the twins turned away and walked back to where the other spectators were standing, joining the Rashes.

"Sixth graders, line up!" called Ms. Shirtliffe.

There were only four sixth graders competing. William and Innocence were the first match.

The two of them faced each other across the platform, and Alexandra could see William's knees shaking as they bowed. The entire school was watching, with Dean Grimm and the Vice Dean and Assistant Deans in the front row.

Innocence pointed her long oak wand and said, "*Peterficus Totalus!*"

"Oh, she misspoke it!" Forbearance moaned, as William made a shaking motion with his wand and said, "*Ribbet!*"

"What kind of spell was that?" asked Corey McCluskey, behind Alexandra.

Innocence let out a horrified croaking sound as she tried to hex William again.

William extended his wand and pointed it at her. Innocence tried several more spells, and each time, she produced nothing but croaks, amidst growing laughter from the audience. William licked his lips nervously. By the rules of the competition, he could continue hexing her until she yielded. He just kept his wand pointed at her, and finally, Innocence furiously lowered her wand in a gesture of surrender.

"William Killmond wins the first match!" declared Ms. Shirtliffe. Cheers erupted from the spectators, especially from the JROC. Blushing, William bowed, and then his grin was replaced with a worried look, as he followed Innocence off the dueling platform.

Constance and Forbearance hurried over to their sister as she stepped down to the ground, followed by the Rashes.

"*Finite,*" Constance said, pointing her wand at Innocence's throat.

"That was a Croaker!" Forbearance exclaimed.

"I taught him that hex!" Innocence croaked. Her voice still sounded frog-like. She glared at William.

"You taught Ozarker magic to a foreigner?" Benjamin growled.

Innocence shoved past her sisters and the Rashes, and stalked off.

"Innocence!" said William. He started to follow her, and then Ms. Shirtliffe called his name. The duel between the next pair of sixth graders had lasted only seconds, and William was being summoned

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back to face the winner.

Reluctantly, he trudged back onto the platform. His opponent was Niles Moreau, a thin boy with dark brown skin, wearing formal black and green robes. William barely managed to take his wand out of its sheath before his opponent cast a Stunning Spell. William fumbled his own spell, and seemed unable to focus as the other boy kept trying to Stun him; finally, William's wand fell from his hand, and Ms. Shirtliffe declared Niles the winner.

Most of the seventh graders were equally unimpressive. Tomo Matsuzaka was the only one able to cast a Stunning Spell with any power, and Alexandra was unsurprised that she won in her grade.

Then came time for the eighth graders. The first match was a virtual replay of the previous year, with Sonja Rackham facing Ebenezer Smith. Sonja had gotten better, though. The two of them exchanged Stunning Spells just like the previous year, but this time, after Sonja hit Ebenezer several times, he swayed and fell over.

“Alexandra Quick and Corey McCluskey,” called Ms. Shirtliffe, and Alexandra took her position opposite Corey. He was a pimply-faced boy with glasses; Alexandra was somewhat interested in seeing what spells he would cast, since he was a member of one of the druidic denominations that were allowed their own magic under a Cultural Practices Exemption. She was disappointed when he used the same spell everyone else had attempted: a Stunner. The red beam struck Alexandra in the shoulder with enough force to numb it a little, but she'd withstood much worse from her brother and his friends.

She took her time pointing her wand at Corey, and when she said, “*Stupefy!*” her Stunning Spell struck him directly in the chest and knocked him flat on his back. Alexandra turned away even before Ms. Shirtliffe declared her the winner. She winked at Anna, who clapped her hands while shaking her head.

None of the other eighth graders fared better against her; her final match was against Michael Lester, one of the kids who'd been hexing her in the hallways, and she knocked him clear off the platform.

This left only the remaining matches between the lower grades. Alexandra was spared from having to strike down a sixth grader when Tomo defeated Niles, but Tomo fairly trembled when facing Alexandra, and Alexandra ended their duel quickly with a Body-Bind Curse.

She half-expected to draw boos and cries of “sorceress!” But when Ms. Shirtliffe declared her the winner in the middle school division, cheers from her friends and the JROC drowned out the few mutters and hisses, and she felt an unfamiliar flush of pride.

In the upperclass division, they saw a few more interesting spells, and Alexandra was so gleeful that she didn't regret losing the chance to duel her when Adela was hit with a curse by Tucker Robb that turned her purple and puffed her up like a giant blueberry, with steam venting from her ears.

Torvald defeated Tucker, but was no match for Larry. Alexandra watched sourly as Larry defeated everyone else he duelled. He turned to look at her as Ms. Shirtliffe announced his fourth victory, over Theo Panos, and raised his wand as if to say, *You're next*.

Larry's last opponent was Eric Strangeland, the student commander of Charmbridge's JROC company, and a boy two years older than him. Eric had made quick work of all the other eleventh and twelfth graders, and it was almost unheard of for a sophomore to beat a senior. But the audience was murmuring with excitement, and Alexandra knew why; even she could see that Larry was surprisingly good.

She knew from JROC drills that Eric was also good – very good. Not as good as Maximilian had been – but better than her.

The duel between Eric and Larry lasted nearly ten seconds – longer than any of the previous duels. Unlike most of the previous duelists, they both knew how to block and deflect, and Eric had a

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formidable Shield Charm. His Stinging Hex made Larry yelp, and then he almost ended the duel with a Deadweight Charm – but to Alexandra's surprise, Larry countered it. Eric, who also thought his opponent was about to fall, did not raise his wand quickly enough, and Larry caught him with a Stunning Spell that knocked him out cold.

Loud cheers hailed Larry's victory, along with a few disgruntled boos from the JROC – quickly silenced by a glare from Ms. Shirtliffe.

The JROC commander and head of the Dueling Club looked around, as the crowd fell silent. The tension that had been in the air before was now electric. The Charmbridge Dueling Champion would be determined by the match between the underclass and upperclass winners. The older student almost always won; according to Ms. Shirtliffe, it had been seventeen years since the last time a middle schooler had won the school championship.

“Alexandra Quick and Larry Albo!” Ms. Shirtliffe called.

Even Alexandra felt nervous flutters in her stomach as she stepped back up onto the dueling platform. It was one thing to want to fight Larry – it was another to do so in front of the entire school, knowing that everyone was hoping that she'd lose.

No, not everyone. She saw her friends smiling at her encouragingly. Innocence had apparently returned from her sulk, and was now standing near David, Angelique, and Darla. The younger girl grinned and waved.

And the JROC was gathered at one edge of the platform. Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland, still looking a little woozy, nodded and winked at her. William gave her a thumbs-up, and Charlotte cupped her hands over her mouth and shouted, “For the Corps, Witch-Private!”

They were rooting for *her*.

Ms. Shirtliffe put one hand on Larry's shoulder and another on Alexandra's, and dragged the two of them together to the center of the platform, before leaning close to speak just loudly enough for them to hear her.

“All right, you two,” she growled. “I know very well there is a *history* between the two of you. This duel will be clean and by the book. I know more dirty tricks than you'll ever learn, so don't even think about trying to get one past me. Cast a spell not on the approved list, pretend not to hear a call, or do anything else even the least bit questionable, and I'll make you wish you'd never picked up a wand. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Alexandra and Larry replied together, and then Larry added, “Only warlocks and losers use Unforgivables.”

Shirtliffe scowled at Larry. “Get back to your positions.” She didn't notice Alexandra's clenched jaw, or the way her fist shook as it gripped her wand.

The eighth grader and the tenth grader stood opposite one another across the wooden stage. Everyone was silent. Ms. Shirtliffe raised her wand, and then lowered it.

“*Expelliarmus!*” Alexandra shouted. She hadn't yet used a Disarming Spell in any of her duels, and she hoped Larry wouldn't be expecting it. She thought she was fast, but he was faster. His own spell collided with hers, and he cast another one before she saw the result. A hex struck her in the head and it felt like her face was on fire.

“*Stupefy!*” she hissed, ducking to one side. Larry deflected her Stunning Spell and returned fire with one of his own. That was followed rapidly by three more hexes, each of which Alexandra stopped with a Shield Charm. She attempted a Body-Bind Curse, and then a Deadweight Spell, and then she tried conjuring worms in Larry's mouth. He gagged and spit after the last spell, but made her dance with “*Tarantallegra!*” before she could follow up. Everyone thought that was the end of the duel, but

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Alexandra removed the curse before she'd kicked her legs three times, causing even Ms. Shirtliffe's eyebrows to go up. Larry's triumphant smirk froze on his face, but he still managed to deflect her next hex. She tried to yank his feet out from under him with another wave of her wand, and didn't see the green ball of light coming directly at her face until it struck her like a kick to the head. Just like that, she was lying on her back, seeing stars, and Ms. Shirtliffe raised her wand.

"The winner – and Charmbridge Dueling Champion – is Larry Albo!"

Cheers and applause rang all the way to the edge of the woods surrounding the academy, sending birds fluttering from the trees. Alexandra lifted her head dizzily, and saw Adela – reduced back to a normal size, though still colored purple from head to toe – flinging her arms around Larry and giving him a kiss on the cheek, as other students crowded around him to congratulate him. He looked over Adela's shoulder and his eyes met Alexandra's for a moment. Behind Adela's back, he raised one hand and returned the gesture Alexandra had made earlier.

Alexandra fumed, feeling bitter and defeated, but then her friends were crowding around her, helping her to her feet, and the JROC was there, congratulating her, and making her feel less like a loser.



Chapter 12 — The Dueling Club



All detentions were suspended for Halloween, so for one night, Alexandra pushed grudges, schoolwork, and Time-Turners to the back of her mind and enjoyed the feast with her friends. Even though she'd lost the dueling competition to Larry, classmates who usually didn't talk to her at all congratulated her for taking second place, and Sonja sat with her and Anna once more. Innocence was holding court at the sixth graders' table, having apparently forgiven William and made up with her roommate again.

Popularity and acceptance, Alexandra realized, were not so hard to come by – and equally easy to lose. She suspected she'd be shunned again as soon as her father was blamed for something else.

She returned to her room with Anna, feeling stuffed and contented, though a bit weary. Socializing in middle school, and the attention that had to be paid to the ever-shifting dynamics of friendship, rivalry, and who was angry at whom was proving to be more of an effort than Alexandra had ever imagined. She didn't want to care about such things; they felt like distractions.

By Monday, things were back to normal, and Alexandra's focus was once more on her studies. Not so much for school – she did the bare minimum in class – but the study of death and time, two subjects so vast and overwhelming that she was only just beginning to appreciate what an enormous task she was trying to take on. She had accumulated quite a list of legends, spells, and books to read on the subjects of the afterlife and time travel, but it seemed that the few wizards who had made any progress at all in those fields had been madmen who'd spent their entire lives at it – and never obtained what they

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wanted in the end.

Anna would tell her there was a lesson in that, which was why Alexandra avoided the subject around her roommate.

It was frustrating. Like flying to the moon, Alexandra remained convinced that it was possible to defeat death, but she could not see how she would ever accomplish it. Especially with the filtered book selection she had available at Charmbridge Academy.

But at the end of the month, she would be returning to Roanoke, a visit that filled her with excitement and dread, and she would not – could not – visit Maximilian's empty tomb and admit that she'd given up, that she was no longer trying to undo what she had done.

No one but Anna noticed Alexandra's obsession. Nearly everyone was looking forward to Thanksgiving and to winter vacation after that, though the holiday season was made somewhat less festive by the rapid approach of midterms and SPAWNs as well. Alexandra did her homework perfunctorily, spent a little time studying with Anna, and whatever free time she had left, she spent in the library. Remembering how happy Bran and Poe were when she visited them, when she finally served her last day of detention, she made a point of saying good-bye to all of the bemused kitchen elves, even sour, squinty-eyed Mister Remy.

The week after her detention ended, Eric Strangeland stopped her after the JROC was dismissed for the afternoon.

"Why haven't you joined the Dueling Club, Quick?" he asked her.

"I've been doing detention for the last two months," she said. "Sir." She hated having to stand at attention while the Mage-Sergeant Major addressed her.

He grinned. "Yeah, I heard. But you're not anymore, right? Think you can stay out of detention for the rest of the school year?"

"I hope so," she replied, thinking, *I wouldn't bet on it.*

"Well, everyone in JROC who's old enough is also in the Dueling Club. You should ask Colonel Shirliffe if you can still join."

"Isn't Larry Albo in the Dueling Club, too?"

"Yes, the smug bastard." Eric's mouth twitched. "I'd love to see the look on his face when you show up."

"Er, why? Sir."

"Usually, I'm the only one who can beat him." He coughed. "Of course, he got lucky on Halloween."

"Of course," Alexandra said.

Eric grinned again. "But you almost held your own against him. If we get you trained right, I'll wager he's in trouble next year. We need someone who can kick his arrogant ass, since I'm graduating. What do you say?"

Alexandra had wanted to join the Dueling Club since sixth grade, but now, it hardly seemed to matter. It would take time away from more important things.

But she'd spent the last two months serving detention, and she had done very little that she might consider fun. And dueling was fun. Even when it hurt. She had loved the time spent dueling with her brother – she shook her head, banishing those thoughts. Wouldn't she like to wipe that smirk off of Larry's face?

"I'll ask Colonel Shirliffe, sir."

He clapped her on the shoulder, much the way her brother had, and didn't notice her sudden frown. "Excellent! Dismissed, Witch-Private."

She tossed him a salute and returned to her room. When she told Anna about her plans to join the

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Dueling Club, Anna merely nodded. "It sounds like fun."

"You could join, too."

Anna shook her head. "It sounds like fun for *you*."

Alexandra didn't really expect Anna would want to join the Dueling Club, but she felt a bit melancholy at her friend's flat refusal, and the way they spoke only about homework and cleaning their room. Anna had heard nothing new concerning her father.

When she asked Ms. Shirtliffe about the Dueling Club the next day, the teacher gave her a narrow, jaundiced look.

"You just got off of two months serving detention, and you're still in the JROC as punishment," Shirtliffe said. "I don't allow troublemakers in the Dueling Club."

Alexandra frowned. "You allow Larry."

Shirtliffe stared at her.

"Ma'am," Alexandra added.

After another few moments of staring, the corner of Shirtliffe's mouth turned upward slightly. "There are *rules* – it's not a free-for-all. It's not like that 'wizard dueling' you were doing with your brother."

"I know that, ma'am."

"Get in any more trouble, and you're out. No one who's serving detention or on academic or disciplinary probation is allowed in the Dueling Club."

Alexandra nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

Alexandra told her friends over dinner that she would be joining the Dueling Club. The lack of enthusiasm from Constance and Forbearance was unsurprising, but Sonja, across the table, became quite excited.

"That's great!" she said. "You know, usually we partner up in Dueling Club with someone our own age, but I'm the only eighth grade girl, so I usually get stuck with Matt or Corey or" – she grimaced – "Torvald Krogstad."

"And?" Alexandra asked dryly.

Sonja's smile faltered. "Well, I thought..." She hesitated. "We could be a team?"

Alexandra glanced at Anna. Anna shrugged, and shook her head.

"Sure," Alexandra said to Sonja.

Sonja smiled again. "Excellent!"

Dueling practice was held three days a week, alternating with JROC drill days. When Alexandra showed up at the large sandpit where the Dueling Club practiced, most of her fellow JROC mages were there; the JROC made up about half the membership of the club.

Eric had been right; Larry's expression, when he saw Alexandra, was angry and disbelieving. Adela was there, too, and she was furious.

"Ms. Shirtliffe, you can't let *her* join the Dueling Club!" Adela exclaimed, pointing at Alexandra.

Ms. Shirtliffe, who had just joined the students in the sandpit, gave Adela a sharp look. "Excuse me?"

"She's – she's always in trouble! And she's dangerous! And – *she has no right to be here!*"

The teacher's eyes narrowed. Everyone else had gone very quiet.

"If you want to quit the Dueling Club like you quit the JROC, Iturbide, feel free," Ms. Shirtliffe said, in a quiet, ominous tone. "But the next time you try to tell me what I can and cannot do, you'll be talking to Dean Calvert. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am," Adela mumbled, looking down.

Adela and Larry were casting venomous looks at Alexandra as Ms. Shirtliffe grouped everyone into

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same-grade pairs and had them practice bowing and challenging.

“Well, that was kind of awkward, wasn't it?” Sonja said.

Alexandra shrugged. “I'm used to it.”

Dueling as a sport was considerably less intense than trading hexes with her brother and his friends, and Ms. Shirtliffe didn't let Alexandra do anything but practice the formalities and rituals. Even Sonja and the other eighth graders were allowed to get up on the platform and take turns dueling each other with Stunners and Disarming Spells, but Alexandra bridled under Ms. Shirtliffe's insistence that she learn the rules properly first.

“I took second place in the dueling competition!” she protested.

“With brute force and recklessness,” Shirtliffe replied.

“I'm better than them!” Alexandra pointed at Matt Prester and Corey McCluskey, who were trying to Disarm each other.

“Stop arguing with me, Quick.” Ms. Shirtliffe stared her down much as she had silenced Adela. In a quieter voice, she said, “You're twice as good as most children your age, and not half as good as you could be. You want to skip straight to the blasting and the hexing; why do you think Albo beat you?”

“Because he's had two more years of practice than me.”

Ms. Shirtliffe folded her arms. “Formal dueling isn't just a way to make wizard-duels prettier and less lethal. There are things to learn from the forms we practice. Patience, precision, timing, strategy... I'll bet you couldn't hit the broad side of a barn from more than ten paces away, Quick. Your brother had the same problem.” At Alexandra's fierce scowl, the instructor nodded. “Oh yes, he was quite formidable – against other teenagers. Do you just want to be able to beat your classmates?” Shirtliffe gestured at Sonja, who was hopping around and rubbing her hands after being hexed by Torvald.

Alexandra grudgingly returned to the wand drills Shirtliffe was having her do, which were tediously similar to those she'd spent much of her first six months in JROC practicing the previous year. She wasn't sure what the point of learning the 'right' way to draw and hold your wand was, or formal challenges and acceptances, or bowing, approaching, and withdrawing – wasn't a duel just a fight between wizards? Whoever was better at magic won.

It wasn't until the end of her first practice that she realized that for the first time since returning to Charmbridge this year, she had been wholly focused on something other than regret and guilt. She had not been running through scenarios in her head to undo what should never have happened, and she hadn't been thinking about how what she was doing might aid her in accomplishing that.

It was very strange to realize that, and just as strange to realize that she had, in fact, been thinking about Maximilian, Time-Turners, and the Lands Beyond almost constantly for the past few months. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. Didn't she have to keep thinking about what she needed to do? If she forgot, or lost her focus, she might never succeed. She might give up!

She walked back inside, confused and troubled. She all but ignored Sonja and her other classmates, and was so deep in thought that even Anna only received a mumbled response when she returned to her room.

Much, much later that night, as she lay in bed thinking about dueling, and time travel, and raising the dead, and seeing Julia in a few weeks, and how much she missed Max, she finally thought about Ms. Shirtliffe's words, too.

“Do you just want to be able to beat your classmates?”

Well, Alexandra wasn't exactly *planning* to duel anyone else. Of course she'd like to be great at whatever she did – but she wondered just what Ms. Shirtliffe had meant. Did she think someday Alexandra might compete in the Confederation Wizarding Decathlon or something? Or did she think

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Alexandra was going to have to duel someone besides other students?

She heard Anna toss and turn in her sleep, and moan something. She wished she could comfort her friend. If she ever spoke to her father again, maybe she could ask him to help Mr. Chu, though she had no idea how.

Her head was filled with entirely too many thoughts, and she forgot most of them by the next morning; they had been banished by dreams that she also mostly didn't remember, except that, as in many of her dreams lately, she had been looking for Maximilian.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ..

It was another week before Ms. Shirtliffe allowed Alexandra to actually duel. At first, she was only allowed to duel other eighth graders. One by one, she knocked everyone else down, with great care and precision.

"You really are good," Sonja said, shuffling over to where Alexandra was watching the ninth graders duel each other. She grimaced. "Did you have to hit me in the chest?"

"Would you have preferred a Stunner to the face?"

Sonja gave her a wary look.

Alexandra watched Torvald beat Adela, and then get beaten by Theo. Tenth graders dueled next, and Larry handily defeated all of his opponents. After juniors and seniors finished dueling each other, the club was dismissed for the day, and Alexandra saw that Innocence was watching from the sidelines.

"I watched you duel, Alex," she said cheerfully. "I wish I could join the Duelin' Club!"

"You'll have to wait until eighth grade, just like I did," Alexandra said.

"You gonna duel that Larry Albo again?" Innocence asked.

"Maybe when we do open challenges on Friday."

"Cool!" Innocence said. "Do you think you'll whup 'm this time?"

"We'll see." Innocence's enthusiasm notwithstanding, Alexandra wasn't as certain as she'd like.

On Friday, Alexandra was surprised to find that quite a few spectators had gathered after school to watch the Dueling Club practice. She narrowed her eyes when she saw Innocence sitting between William and Darla. She stalked over to them.

"What are *you* doing here?" she demanded, staring at Darla.

Darla raised her eyebrows, and tilted her head back in the direction of the athletic fields. "Angelique is watching David play Quidditch."

"We came to watch you duel!" said Innocence. "I told everyone you was gonna whup Larry Albo this time!"

"You *what*?" Alexandra stared at her.

William smiled encouragingly. Alexandra saw the Rashes walking towards the sandpit, looking smug.

"Good luck," said Darla, sounding just a little bit smug herself.

Annoyed, Alexandra returned to the students waiting to challenge other club members. Corey challenged Sonja, and won with some sort of transfiguration curse. Sonja shrieked as she staggered off the platform; her long red hair had been transformed into branches and twigs that were snapping as she clawed frantically at her head, until Ms. Shirtliffe grabbed her wrists and told her to calm down.

Alexandra was not terribly surprised when Torvald challenged her. The ninth grader grinned at her and winked as he bowed. Alexandra bowed back, and then Disarmed him in a flash. Torvald looked at his empty hand in astonishment, and his wand, lying ten feet away, and back at Alexandra, who was poised to throw another spell.

"Umm, yield," he mumbled. His face fell.

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Nearly everyone dueled at least once, and while the Dueling Club members were generally more skilled than the non-members who had participated in the Halloween competition, Alexandra could still see that most of them only knew a small number of spells and an even smaller range of tactics.

Eric Strangeland challenged Larry before Alexandra could. Everyone buzzed excitedly at the rematch; Alexandra knew, from what other club members had said, that Eric did usually beat Larry in practice matches, but Larry had been winning more often lately.

Eric and Larry dueled for nearly twenty seconds – a long duel, at such close range. Larry snuck some sort of jinx beneath Eric's Shield Charm and caused the senior to do a backflip, landing on his stomach, but Eric rolled out of the way of the Stunner with which Larry tried to finish him, caught the younger boy with a Leg-Locker Curse, and then struck Larry's Shield Charm repeatedly until it collapsed, and Larry with it.

The JROC all cheered, as did most of the spectators.

"Too bad you weren't so agile at the tournament," Ms. Shirliffe said to Eric. "You'd better improve the coverage of your Shield Charm before you join the ROC."

"Yes, ma'am." Eric picked himself up and smiled with satisfaction as Larry stumbled to his feet.

Alexandra noticed that Ms. Shirliffe was much harder on her JROC mages. She barely criticized Larry at all, whether he won or lost.

As Larry grimaced and lifted one leg and then the other, shaking off any lingering effects from the Leg-Locker Curse, Alexandra stepped up and called out, "I challenge Larry Albo!"

Ms. Shirliffe scowled. "The Dueling Club isn't for grudge matches, Quick."

Alexandra heard groans of disappointment behind her. It was obvious that the spectators had been hoping to see just that. But Larry, still standing on the dueling platform, brushed himself off and said, "If Quick wants to duel me, Ms. Shirliffe, I'm willing." When the teacher turned around to look at him, he smiled. "I promise not to hurt her."

Shirliffe turned back around to regard Alexandra, tapping her fingers against her wand.

"Very well," she said at last, and Innocence cheered. So did the Rashes, and Larry's friends Wade and Ethan, who had also arrived to watch. Alexandra saw Larry winking at Adela, who blew a kiss in his direction. Alexandra rolled her eyes and snorted with disgust.

"Everything I said on Halloween still goes," Shirliffe warned, as the two duelists took up their positions. "If you two are so eager to bruise egos, fine, but I will not have you doing harm to each other."

Alexandra knew that 'harm' didn't mean the same thing here as in the Muggle world – wizards didn't treat injuries very seriously, as long as they weren't too severe to be healed by magic.

Larry bowed, with a smirk. Alexandra bowed back, and then immediately yelled, "*Protego!*" She barely stopped Larry's first hex, and his second.

He could block, too, and for the next ten seconds, their attacks flashed against one another's Shield Charms – green and red and yellow, fiery jets and crackling sparks and whirling gusts of wind, each of them trying to break through the other's defenses, trying to find a weakness. Alexandra didn't recognize a couple of the hexes that Larry threw at her, and she could see by his expression that he hadn't been expecting her to produce anything he hadn't seen in their first duel.

She remembered her wizard-dueling lessons with her brother, how Maximilian had just flung hex after hex, furiously and fearlessly, hardly even bothering to defend himself. When a blue bolt from Larry's wand struck through her Shield Charm and almost knocked her over, rather than dodging or casting another, she began flicking hexes at him, fast and furious, aiming at his face, his chest, his knees, his fingers – Larry gritted his teeth as he tried to deflect the onslaught, and then he lunged at her

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yelling, “*Caedarus!*”

A green ball of light flew directly at Alexandra, struck her in the face, and knocked her off her feet. She hit the hard wooden platform and bounced, painfully.

“Match!” yelled Shirtliffe. “Albo wins.”

Alexandra heard the cheers of Larry's friends through the ringing in her ears. She lifted her head, and tasted something salty on her lips. Ms. Shirtliffe was kneeling next to her.

“Nose looks broken,” she said. “Go see Mrs. Murphy. And learn to block – in a real duel, that spell could have been lethal and you'd be dead.”

“I dow how do block,” Alexandra mumbled, with blood filling her nose and garbling her speech.

She glimpsed Larry staring at her for a moment – he looked furious. Then he turned away.

Why is he so pissed off? Alexandra wondered. *He won.*

Eric and Charlotte helped her to her feet, with Charlotte pressing a cloth to her nose to soak up the blood.

She noticed, just before Eric and Charlotte led her off to the infirmary, that Darla had joined the crowd that was congratulating Larry.

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By that evening, everyone at school had heard about the 'rematch.' Larry and his friends were laughing loudly at dinner, and shooting Alexandra triumphant, mocking grins. At the eighth graders' table, Anna shook her head. “Sooner or later, he'll try to hurt you for real.”

“Duelin' is just violent an' awful,” said Forbearance, looking at the bandage over Alexandra's nose. Mrs. Murphy had performed a Healing Charm and given Alexandra a potion to drink, but it was still sore.

“Speakin' of which, we'd much 'preciate you not encouragin' Innocence,” said Constance.

“Excuse me?” Alexandra looked up from her plate of turkey and squash – not her favorite dish – and frowned at Constance.

“She's quite taken with that cursin' and hexin',” Constance said. “Thinks she could be good at it.”

“She probably could,” Alexandra said.

“Alexandra, duelin' hain't respectable!” Constance said, then quickly amended: “For Ozarker girls.”

Alexandra eyed the twins. The very first time she had met them, they had boasted about already knowing how to cast hexes.

And then, she recalled, they had immediately been scolded by the Rashes. She glanced at the older boys' table, where Benjamin and Mordecai were sitting with Larry. Their laughter increased in volume when they noticed Alexandra looking their way.

“I haven't encouraged Innocence to do anything,” she grumbled. She got up from the table, feeling aggrieved and irritated. Her throbbing nose didn't help. “Don't blame me because your sister has problems.”

“That hain't what we meant,” Constance said.

“Innocence don't have *problems* –” Forbearance protested.

Alexandra stalked out of the cafeteria without listening to the rest. Not wanting to return to her room, no doubt to be scolded by Anna, she went to the library instead.

At first, she was going to sit down and read *Why I Came Back*, another ghostly autobiography, but she realized she hadn't visited Bran and Poe for a while. Mrs. Minder was gone for the day, so Alexandra walked around to the back room behind the librarian's office where she knew the library elves often worked. She knocked on the door, but there was no response. She paused, and then tried to open it; it was locked.

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Alexandra thought a moment. If Bran and Poe weren't in the back room, they were probably downstairs, below the librarian's office. She could knock more loudly, though that would disturb other students in the library and perhaps draw their attention. Her eyes fell on the lock.

Mrs. Minder was responsible for the library. She probably put the same locks (magical and otherwise) on the Restricted Collections that she put on the other rooms off-limits to students. So when Alexandra took out her wand, and after a quick look around, succeeded in opening the door with her Unlocking Charm, she smiled.

"Hello?" she called out softly into the dark room on the other side of the door. She stepped inside and closed the door quickly behind herself, before another student saw her.

There was another door in this room, she remembered, and stairs behind it. But just as she raised her wand to murmur "*Lumos*," she heard metallic rasping sounds, and then cold metal fingers closed around her arms.

"Hey!" she exclaimed. Alarmed, she tried to pull free, but both of her arms were held fast, and when she struggled and kicked, she felt her foot strike something hard and unyielding, with a dull thud.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized what had grabbed her: Clockworks! It was like before, when they had seized her and dragged her away to throw her into a fire pit – she felt a cold sweat and a panicky hammering in her chest.

She almost started blasting the Clockworks, with her wand still in her hand, but she took a deep breath and thought quickly. There was no fire pit here; where could they take her? She'd only get in big trouble, whether they dragged her outside to a teacher or she blew them apart with hexes.

When she was little – before she had learned about the wizarding world, and before she was given a wand – she had performed magic with made-up nursery rhymes. At Charmbridge, she'd been told that this was 'doggerel verse'; unreliable and not to be used. But it worked.

Sometimes.

She chanted:

*"Tick, tock, stop the clock,
Clockworks drop me,
Grind and stop."*

The Clockworks ground to a halt and stopped moving.

Yes! she thought triumphantly. Once again, what her peers called 'baby magic' had worked. Then she tried to pull free, and realized that the Clockworks, while no longer moving, were frozen in place with their hands still locked around her arms in painfully tight grips. She pulled this way and that, trying to free herself, to no avail. She thought about trying another rhyme, to make them let go, and then her jerking and tugging pulled one of the Clockworks off-balance, and it toppled to the floor, dragging her with it. Landing with the Clockwork didn't hurt, but the other Clockwork falling on top of her did. She cried out in pain as the golems crashed together, with one of her arms and half of her body between them. And they were both still holding her arms, so she was twisted painfully around on the floor.

"Ow!" she hissed, thinking the crash had sounded awfully loud. Then the room was alight, and Alexandra found herself looking up at Bran and Poe.

"Hi, guys." She grimaced. "Umm, can you... help me?"

"What is Alex doing here?" Bran asked.

"I came to visit you." She pulled at her arm, and the elves commanded the Clockworks to let go of her, but the golems only released her arms when the two elves grabbed their hands and pried their fingers apart. They began extricating Alexandra from the grasp of the metal golems, until she was able to roll free.

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“Alex should not be here!” Poe whispered.

Alexandra rose to her feet, rubbing her arms. She glared at the Clockwork golems, who were still lying on the floor, unmoving. Bran was tugging at one, and then kicked it peevishly.

Alexandra breathed a sigh of relief, and then saw that Bran and Poe were both looking at her with distinctly accusing expressions. They did not look quite as pleased as usual to see her. She cleared her throat. “Something must be wrong with the Clockworks – they shouldn't have tried to grab me like that.”

Bran said, “Mrs. Minder told the Clockworks to catch any childrens they find.”

“But we only lets them into the library after it closes,” said Poe.

Bran nodded. “Mrs. Minder was worried about childrens sneaking into the library, not her office!”

Alexandra felt herself shrinking a little under their accusing stares. “I'm sorry.”

“Bran and Poe is always happy to see Alexandra Quick,” said Bran.

“But Miss Alex is still getting herself into trouble,” said Poe.

“And,” Bran said, “Bran thinks Alexandra Quick is up to something... again.”

Poe nodded slowly. “Poe thinks so, too.”

Alexandra looked down at the elves, and her first thought was that perhaps they were going to report her to Mrs. Minder... or worse, the Dean. She thought she could talk them out of it. She was very good at cajoling elves into doing what she wanted. But the twinge of guilt she was already feeling turned into a stab.

“I am,” she said. She sank slowly to the floor, sitting in a cross-legged position so she was eye-to-eye with the elves. She met their gazes, and spoke in a level tone.

“I want to bring back my brother.”

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She wasn't surprised that the elves' initial reaction was astonishment and horror. But she was disappointed that her persuasive powers were unable to bring them around.

Bran shook his head, with his hands pressed to his face. “Alex,” he groaned, in a creaky voice, “we knows you is very, very sad about your brother.”

“We is very, very sorry,” said Poe, who indeed, looked on the verge of tears, after Alexandra had spent nearly half an hour explaining her plan.

She had been enthusiastic at first – actually voicing aloud what she wanted to do was a relief, and her zeal, as she spoke of Time-Turners and saving her brother, left the elves wide-eyed. But they only shook their heads and moaned when she came around to the subject of the Restricted Collections.

“What Alex wants to do is impossible,” Bran said.

“How do you know that?” She was becoming argumentative, when the elves proved surprisingly resistant. She tried to soften her tone when she saw them flinch, but she persisted. “You aren't wizards, are you? Do you actually know about time travel and how it works? Or do you just 'know' it's impossible because that's what everyone says?”

Bran and Poe looked at each other.

“No, we is not wizards,” Bran sighed.

“But maybe we understands some magic things more than wizard childrens does,” Poe said.

“Tell me,” she said. “Tell me what you understand about time travel. Tell me how you know what I want to do is impossible!”

The two elves looked at her with large, mournful eyes.

“What we knows,” Bran said at last, “is that there is no book in the Restricted Collections that will bring back Alexandra Quick's brother.”

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Alexandra looked down, biting her lip. She wanted to argue – she didn't expect to just find a Time Traveling Charm, or a Bring Someone Back From the Dead Spell. But she knew the elves knew that.

Her lip started to tremble. If she couldn't even convince Bran and Poe, if not even they would help her, then she was further from her goal than ever, and their sad, solemn expressions were making her feel like a silly little girl with a stupid idea. For months, she'd been chasing this idea, and she'd learned *nothing*! She might as well have been memorizing Confederation Governor-Generals and studying how to make... whatever their current assignment was in Alchemy. She could feel the sense of futility and wasted effort beginning to overwhelm her, so she stood up.

"Alex," Poe said, in a tiny voice. "We is sorry..."

"No, no, it's okay." She cleared her throat; her own voice sounded entirely too hoarse. "Maybe you're right. And I'm sorry, I shouldn't have come to you, expecting you to just let me into the Restricted Collections..." She saw them wince – even the thought of doing so, she knew, was probably making them twitch with the urge to beat their heads against a book to punish themselves.

"If Alex wants to research Time-Turners," Bran said, "we can help – there is bookses Alex is allowed to read..."

"I've read all the books in the library I'm allowed to read!" Her voice rose in frustration. She lowered it quickly. "I need to know what I don't know – I need to know how wizards learn to do things that aren't just written in a book!"

Bran and Poe blinked.

"That is why Alex is going to Charmbridge Academy, Bran thinks," Bran said. Poe nodded.

Alexandra stared at them, and then burst out laughing, a little bitterly.

"You're right. Maybe I should just study harder in my classes."

The elves' expressions brightened; they missed the sarcasm in her tone.

"That is a good idea, Alex." The elves were nodding with approval, as they walked her back to the door to the main library.

"Poe thinks Alexandra Quick will be a great witch someday," said Poe.

"If she is a good student and does not gets herself into more trouble," Bran said.

Alexandra paused at the door, and looked down at the library elves. She tried to hide her disappointment. "Thanks, guys. I'll just knock harder next time."

They nodded. "Please come visit us again, Alex."

"We will try to find more bookses about Time-Turners."

Alexandra doubted anything they'd find that wasn't off-limits to her would help, but they were so earnest, she could only give them a small smile. "Thank you."

She looked around a bit furtively as she left the back room, but the door was deliberately located far in the back of the library, near shelves full of untranslated Latin and Greek and Sanskrit texts. Students almost never ventured back here. She thought she would be able to leave the library unnoticed, but as soon as she emerged from the Ancient Languages section, she almost ran into Innocence.

"Hi, Alex." The younger girl looked at her curiously. "I thought I heard a clamorin' back there, and someone said they seen you 'bout."

"You heard a clamoring and figured it had to be me?" Alexandra asked dryly.

Innocence blushed. "That hain't what I –"

"It's all right." Alexandra shook her head, and her eyes fell on the books under Innocence's arm: *A Junior Wizard's Guide to Dueling*; *A History of Hexes*; *Twenty-One Usually-Legal Curses*; and *Age-Appropriate Magic for Self-Defense*. She raised an eyebrow. "Studying for when you're old enough to join the Dueling Club?"

The Dueling Club

Innocence grinned.

Alexandra distinctly remembered having been forbidden to check out anything to do with hexing and cursing when she was in sixth grade. One of the titles caught her eye: *The Master of Death*. She reached out and plucked it away; sure enough, it had a magical sticker on it indicating that it was for eighth graders and up. She knew Bran and Poe had attached those stickers, and she knew from experience that removing them without destroying the book was almost impossible.

“How did you check this out?” she asked. She flipped to the inside back cover, and found the sign-out slip.

The last signature was 'Darla Dearborn.'

“I'm just returnin' that one for Darla,” Innocence said.

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. “So Darla's signature isn't on the rest of those books?”

Innocence shuffled her feet and looked down. “You hain't gonna tattle on me, is you?”

A nagging suspicion crystallized as Alexandra studied Innocence, with her glossy, cherry-colored lips and darkened lashes, her bright, sparkling blue eyes, her brilliant yellow hair, and her soft multilayered robes of blue and silver and peach. Alexandra was no fashion maven, but she thought they looked quite expensive, and she knew that the Pritchards were anything but wealthy.

“What are you doing hanging around with Darla?” she asked.

Innocence looked surprised at the question, and a little defensive. “I hain't hangin' 'round with her. She just sometimes... lends me advice, is all.”

“And clothes?” Alexandra looked pointedly at Innocence's robes. Innocence's blush deepened.

“Innocence, stay away from Darla. She's... not right. She's trouble.”

Innocence's expression shifted into a frown. “Well that's a how-do, seein' how folks say the same thing 'bout you!”

“I'm serious. Do you even know all the things she did last year?”

“I know what they say *you* did.”

“We're not the same!” Alexandra snapped.

“Come to think of it, you hain't,” Innocence retorted. “Darla don't talk to me like I'm a Muggle chile, unlike certain other girls, 'cludin' some who's my sisters and some who ain't.”

“I don't –” Alexandra stopped, and scowled. “Like you're a what?”

Innocence's face was now quite red. “Can I have my book – I mean, Darla's book – back? That one really is hers. I mean, she borrowed it.”

Alexandra looked down at it. There was something intriguing about *The Master of Death*. On the cover, a sinister, cowed figure faced a wand-wielding wizard. “I'll return this one for her.”

“Oh, well fine!” Innocence huffed, and turned up her nose as she spun about and flounced off to the basket for book returns. Alexandra watched her go, saying nothing.

She was vaguely disturbed, but she couldn't quite see how lending clothes and makeup was dangerous. Moreover, Innocence's remarks had hit home, and Alexandra was uncomfortably aware of how she'd have reacted in Innocence's place.

Anyway, it wasn't her job to mind either Innocence or Darla.

She shook her head and left the library, carrying the book with her.

Chapter 13 — Reunion

The Master of Death wasn't a spellbook, or a book about magic at all. It was a collection of legends, loosely assembled into a sort of novel. The eponymous 'Master of Death' (who was never actually named in the book) was supposedly one of the greatest wizards ever, having never lost a duel. But there was one opponent he had yet to defeat, and to prove himself invincible, he sought out Death himself.

This might have been a very interesting story, except that it was written in archaic, meandering prose with frequent philosophical tangents. Alexandra found it very abstract, and after reading a couple of chapters, set it aside to concentrate on her schoolwork, and on her other books which actually had something to say about magic.

In the last week of November, there was a school assembly. The Drama Club put on a production of *The Fountain of Fair Fortune*. Alexandra had never heard of it before, but Anna told her it was a classic wizard fairy tale from Beedle the Bard.

On the other side of her, Forbearance nodded. "We grew up with Beedle the Bard, and Brother Randolph's Tales, and Troublesome and Responsible."

At the end of the play, before dismissing the assembled students, Dean Grimm took the opportunity to introduce the school's new groundskeeper and head custodian, a large, intimidating woman named Boudica Fletcher.

Ms. Fletcher wore colorful robes of dyed wool. Alexandra didn't think she looked very friendly, but then, Ms. Gale hadn't liked students much, either. After Mr. Journey, Alexandra had learned not to put too much faith in friendliness.

As they filed out of the auditorium, Angelique was talking to David about the play.

"Beedle the Bard is for children, of course," Angelique said. "I wish we could see a more modern play."

"Maybe they should do something from a Muggle fairy tale," David said.

"A Muggle fairy tale?" Angelique looked skeptical.

"We – I mean, Muggles have fairy tales, too. And plays."

Angelique sniffed. "But, what do Muggles know about magic?" And when David frowned, she said, "Oh, David, you know I didn't mean it that way."

David looked like he was about to argue, and then Constance said, "I'd like to see a Muggle play."

Forbearance nodded. "Our Muggle Studies class is gonna have a field trip to see a Muggle movie picture next month."

"If I could figure out how to make electronics work here, I could show you one on my phone," David said.

Angelique rolled her eyes.

Alexandra quickened her pace; listening to David and Angelique bicker was annoying. Anna tagged along after her. They had plans to study together; Alexandra was feeling a bit guilty that she was going to Roanoke for Thanksgiving and leaving Anna behind, so she was spending as much time as she could with Anna before the weekend. But as the press of students squeezing through the hallways carried them forward, she found herself trapped behind Larry and Adela.

"My father says it's subversive," Adela was saying. "The Pureblood Preservation League has been trying to have it banned for years."

"It's just a stupid play," Larry grumbled. His exasperated tone sounded very similar to David's when he was arguing with Angelique. "It's a children's fairy tale, Adela! Who cares?"

"A Muggle, marrying a witch? That part wasn't in the original Beedle tale – Muggle-lovers inserted it in the –" Adela's voice trailed off, as she caught sight of Alexandra and Anna behind them. She sneered. "And look, *this* is what we have to put up with as a result! Charmbridge used to be pure."

Alexandra was determined to make Anna proud by holding her temper. To her surprise, it was Anna who reacted, saying something in Chinese. Alexandra didn't understand it, but it wasn't hard to guess the general meaning from her tone.

"Excuse me? What did you say, little Mudblood?" Adela demanded.

The tide of students was beginning to eddy around them and form a circle, as onlookers sensed a fight.

"Anna," Alexandra whispered, grabbing her friend's arm with one hand and reaching for her wand with the other. She looked around quickly, watching out for approaching adults.

"My father says our ancestors commanded armies of stone soldiers and dragons, summoned fire from the sky, and raised castles from the earth, while *your* ancestors were playing with goat entrails and scratching lines on rocks," Anna said. "I may be a Mudblood, but you're a –"

The word Anna used was Chinese, but even without knowing the translation, Alexandra could feel it almost blistering her ears. Adela turned red with anger, but Larry grabbed her arm.

"Later!" he hissed. "Look!" He tilted his head, and Alexandra followed the direction of his gaze, and saw Dean Cervantes heading their way.

Adela glowered at the two eighth graders, and then she and Larry turned around and continued down the hallway. Anna and Alexandra mingled with the kids around them and likewise let themselves be drawn down the hall and away from the scene.

When they got back to their room, Anna just stood there for a moment, trembling with anger and nervousness, looking abashed and indignant at the same time.

"Wow, Anna, what got into you?" Alexandra asked, not without a touch of admiration. She was almost smiling.

"My father..." A tear slid down Anna's cheek. "He told me to always be proud of my ancestry. We're better than *them*." She swallowed. "He's brave enough to go to prison, and I just let people say those things and they're talking about *my mother* –"

"Your father would be proud," Alexandra said. "And your mother."

"Not if I get expelled."

Alexandra laughed softly. "So let me be the one to get in trouble."

Anna shook her head. Alexandra brushed a tear off of Anna's cheek. "Who's *them*, by the way?"

Anna looked back at her solemnly. "You," she answered quietly. "Non-Chinese." She sighed.

"Sometimes my father isn't much better than the PPL."

Alexandra hesitated, then patted her shoulder.

"Trust me," she said. "It's okay to think your father's wrong about some things."

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Two days later, Alexandra was saying good-bye to Anna in front of the school, as Mrs. Speaks and Ms. Fletcher tossed students' bags onto a hovering carpet.

"I wish you could come," Alexandra said. "I mean, I'm sure Ms. King wouldn't mind having another guest. Croatoa is big enough –"

"I'm not family," Anna said softly. "And anyway, a Portkey ticket..."

Alexandra nodded. She felt uncomfortable enough letting Ms. King pay for her trip. She didn't ask whether Anna's mother had access to wizarding money.

"I'll be fine, Alex." Anna gave her a hug. "Charlie will be okay, and I'll feed Nigel and make sure he

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stays warm, and I won't be all alone – Constance and Forbearance are staying, too.”

“And with me gone, Sonja and Carol might be willing to hang out with you.”

Anna smiled. “Sonja doesn't mind hanging out with you.”

“Only to practice dueling.”

They separated, and looked over to where David and Angelique were holding hands and giving each other little kisses – one, then another, then another, smiling fatuously.

Alexandra and Anna looked at one another, and simultaneously stuck their tongues out and gestured with their fingers as if to shove them down their throats.

“All right, that's enough, you two,” said Mrs. Speaks. David and Angelique reluctantly let go of each other's hands.

“I'll send an owl soon as I get home,” David said.

“Have a good Thanksgiving,” Angelique said. “Maybe you can bring me back one of those movie pictures.”

“Umm, yeah. We'll see.” David nodded. Alexandra rolled her eyes.

Darla had been standing a few yards away, looking nearly as disgusted as Alexandra and Anna. As always, when forced to be in proximity to one another, David and Darla did their best to ignore each other.

Angelique separated from David and gave Darla a good-bye hug, and then waved as everyone leaving for the long weekend began walking down the path away from the academy and into the woods. Relatively few students went home over Thanksgiving weekend, so they were all taken on a single bus to their various destinations. Alexandra and David walked together; Darla kept her distance, well behind them.

“You'll send an owl?” Alexandra snickered. “We're only going to be gone for four days.”

“So?” David replied, flushing a little.

“Can't falcons carry letters?”

Inside his cage, David's falcon let out a little screech.

“Malcolm isn't good with other people.” David looked at Alexandra's backpack. “Where's Charlie?”

A shadow passed over her face. “Charlie's staying behind this time. Animals don't travel well by Portkey, and you have to pay full fare for them.”

Charlie had not been happy about being left behind; Alexandra had had to lock the raven inside its cage when she left, and Charlie's squawks and cries of “Alexandra!” still sent pangs of guilt through her. She suspected Charlie was going to be a very disgruntled familiar when she returned.

“Man, teleportation!” David said. “Wish I could take a Portkey.”

“It's not as much fun as you think.” Wanting to change the subject, she asked, “How are you going to bring Angelique back a 'movie picture'?”

“I don't know.”

“You could give her a DVD, and tell her it's a magic disk. She just has to spin it real fast –”

“Funny.”

Alexandra grinned. They didn't say much else until they'd crossed the Invisible Bridge and reached the bus waiting on the far side of the valley. Alexandra paused as she boarded the bus, letting David go on ahead to take a seat and standing next to Mrs. Speaks while Darla and then the younger kids behind her squeezed past.

“How have you been, Mrs. Speaks?” she asked. “You looked like you were pretty tired when you were bringing us all to Charmbridge in September.”

The elderly bus driver looked surprised. “I'm fine, thank you, Miss Quick. I hope you've had a good

semester?”

“Not too bad.” Alexandra smiled. “I was wondering... did they make you use a Time-Turner to pick up everyone while the Wizardrail was shut down? That must be pretty hard. It seems kind of unfair to make one person do all that work.”

Mrs. Speaks's thick white eyebrows went up. “Well... I didn't mind, not really. It was only for a short time.” She smiled. “And I got paid for *my* time, so really, it was like being paid twice.” Her face grew serious. “Not that I would want anything like that to happen again...” Then her expression became graver still, as she remembered who she was talking to.

Alexandra nodded. “I understand. Where did the Time-Turner come from, anyway? You don't still have it, do you?”

The elderly witch squinted at her. “No, I returned it to the Department of Magical Transportation. Why are you so interested in Time-Turners, Miss Quick?”

Alexandra shrugged. “I was just kind of curious... I read about them, and was wondering what one looked like.”

“Mm. Well, you'd best take your seat.” Mrs. Speaks gestured towards the back of the bus, as she closed the door.

“Okay. Thanks.” Alexandra gave the driver a cheery smile, which faded the moment she turned around.

She was sure Mrs. Speaks was watching her in the mirror as she walked down the aisle and joined David in his booth. She ignored Darla, who was sitting by herself a few booths down, alone except for her cat, which she was taking out of its carrying cage.

David, fortunately, had not been paying attention to Alexandra's conversation with the bus driver. Alexandra was thoughtful as they proceeded to Chicago, which meant she was no longer inclined to tease David about Angelique. They played wizard chess for most of the trip.

“Well,” David said, when they reached the Wizardrail station, where Alexandra was getting off. “Have a happy Thanksgiving, Alex.”

“You, too.” She didn't think it would exactly be a happy Thanksgiving, but she forced another smile. “It will be good to see Julia again.”

David nodded. “I hope... well, you know. Take care, 'kay?”

They hadn't talked much this semester, Alexandra realized. David looked a little abashed – without Angelique or his friends around, he was much less cocky.

“Yeah.” She waved. “See you in a few days, dork.”

She didn't need or want his concern, but down deep, she appreciated it.

About half of the students on the bus got off with Alexandra at the Wizardrail station. The rest, including David and Darla, would be driven by Mrs. Speaks to their homes. Alexandra was obliged to walk into the station with a senior who'd been assigned to see off the middle school-aged students.

The Chicago Wizardrail station was less busy than it had been on her previous trips. The Wizardrail had resumed operation, since the Thorn Circle's attack in the summer, but not all lines were running – in particular, many inter-Territory lines were still shut down for 'maintenance.' The Roanoke Underhill from Chicago to Blacksburg was one of them.

Alexandra was one of the few people in the Confederation who knew why. So long as her father had the power to enter the Lands Below, no train that passed through that realm was safe.

So, instead of riding a train all day to Roanoke Territory like last time, Alexandra would be taking a Portkey – those, so far as anyone knew, Abraham Thorn had not yet figured out how to sabotage.

According to a letter from Ms. King, her Portkey fare had already been paid for; she only had to go

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up to the booth and identify herself, and so she did.

"I'm Alexandra Quick," she told the witch on the other side of the bars separating the occupant of the ticket booth from the line of customers. "I'm going to Blacksburg – there should be a ticket for me..."

"Right here," said the witch, consulting a list. She rang a bell, and a porter came forward.

"This way, Miss," the porter said, beckoning toward a row of booths with a sign over them saying, 'Portkeys.'

It was so easy, Alexandra was suspicious, as she waved good-bye to the senior chaperone and followed the porter.

On all of her previous trips, either by Wizardrail or Portkey, she had at some point been intercepted and interrogated by Diana Grimm, so she was looking around, more than half-expecting that the Special Inquisitor would suddenly appear and delay her trip. But there was no sign of Ms. Grimm as the porter stepped into one of the booths, carrying a very large, red office stapler on a pillow. He set the pillow down on the shelf inside the booth, and gestured to Alexandra.

"Wait until I close the door, and then just touch the Portkey and you'll be transported to your destination," he said. "Try not to hold your breath, and remember, it may be a little disorienting."

She nodded. "I've traveled by Portkey before."

'A little disorienting' – yeah, right. More like being yanked out of your socks by your belly button.

She looked around one more time, and wished Charlie were coming along. She felt her heart pounding as the porter closed the door, and not just in anticipation of the Portkey jump. Julia was waiting for her at the other end, and the ghosts of Croatoa.

And maybe Ms. Grimm, too, she thought, and with that in mind, she reached out and touched the stapler.

Perhaps because she had done this before, it didn't seem quite so bad this time, but it was still an uncomfortable sensation to feel that sudden jerk, like someone had grabbed her spine, and then a sensation of tumbling haplessly through space, barely able to breathe, before she could feel her feet beneath her once more. She slumped against the wall of the Portkey booth, breathing heavily, and then the door opened.

She was looking out into a much smaller building, and she could see a shaded copse of trees outside, with a dirt road running through them.

It wasn't Diana Grimm looking down at her, but another porter, a wrinkled old man with heavy jowls. "All right there, Miss?" he asked.

She nodded, and stepped out of the booth, shouldering her backpack.

"Alexandra!"

Just past the painted line separating the booths from the main floor of the Portkey station, a pretty girl with long, brown hair was waving at her eagerly, almost bouncing up and down with excitement.

Alexandra beamed as happiness and relief flooded over her, and she stepped directly across the line, dropping her backpack to embrace her sister.

Julia was wearing lavender robes and soft velvet slippers. A pair of glittering earrings floated just below her ears as if dangling from an invisible string. Alexandra had dressed a little more carefully this time, wearing one of her nicer pairs of slacks and a long-sleeved shirt under a yellow robe, but as usual, she felt quite plain next to her half-sister. Julia squeezed her tightly, and then stepped back to look her over.

"Still determined to dress like a tomboy," she sighed. "And you've cut your hair so short!" She clucked her tongue, but her smile was teasing. She ran her fingers through Alexandra's straight black hair.

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“Let the poor girl recover from the Portkey trip before you begin criticizing her appearance, Julia,” said a tall, dark-haired woman wearing deep blue robes. “In fact, don’t criticize her appearance at all.”

Alexandra let go of her sister, and walked over to Julia’s mother.

“It’s okay, Ms. King. I really don’t mind. Thank you so much for letting me come. And for paying –”

“Shush,” said the older witch. She laid a finger on Alexandra’s lips, and then wrapped her in an embrace that was almost smothering. “We’re delighted to have you. I’m sorry we weren’t able to bring you here over the summer.”

Alexandra nodded. She felt happy and relieved and anxious and sad, all at the same time. The combination of Portkey travel and seeing Julia and Thalia King again was making her stomach flutter and forcing her to squeeze her eyes shut, so at first, she didn’t hear Ms. King when she released her and said something about a surprise, but then another voice said, “Hello, Alexandra.”

Alexandra opened her eyes, and realized a third witch had been waiting with Julia and her mother. She was a curly brunette, barely Julia’s height despite being ten years older, and stockier than either of the other two girls.

“Valeria!” Alexandra exclaimed.

“Valeria will be joining us for Thanksgiving also,” said Ms. King.

Alexandra walked over to her other half-sister, a little uncertainly – she still felt as if she barely knew Valeria. But Valeria held out her arms, and so Alexandra embraced her as well.

“It’s so good to see you again, Alexandra.” Valeria patted her back. “How have you been faring?”

“I’m okay.” Alexandra stepped back to look at her sister, the Historicist. “I thought you were still in Europe – you never answered my letter...”

“I thought this would be a nice surprise.” Valeria glanced at the Kings, who were smiling.

“Are Lucilla and Drucilla here, too?”

Valeria shook her head. “I’m afraid not.” She sighed. “I visited them before coming down to Roanoke. Lucy has a beau, and she’s spending the holiday visiting his family, so Dru is staying with our parents. I wish I could spend more time with them before I return to Europe, but since I have so few chances to see you –”

They continued to talk as they walked out of the Portkey station. Unlike Chicago, the Blacksburg Portkeys were down the road from the Wizardrail station. Alexandra was relieved when they made it out to Ms. King’s carriage without any Aurors or Special Inquisitors stopping them. Alexandra glanced at the black, skeletal creature in front of the carriage and then tried to ignore it – the last thing she wanted to do was remind Julia that she could see Thestrals.

Valeria sat in front, next to Ms. King, while Alexandra and Julia sat in the back. For a while, the two adult women chatted – about traveling, and Europe, and Valeria’s older sisters – while Julia and Alexandra caught one another up on their semester thus far. Alexandra spoke only of her classes; Julia likewise. Alexandra wondered if Julia was leaving things unsaid – how her life had changed now that she’d been exposed as Abraham Thorn’s daughter, how she was coping with her brother’s death – but she knew Julia was probably wondering the same thing about her. It was impossible to say everything that needed to be said.

They reached the beach, and the Thestral spread its wings and pulled them onward, straight into the surf. Then the carriage was skimming across the waves, heading over the sound, towards Croatoa.

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The Kings' mansion sat at the top of a hill overlooking the island. It seemed even larger than on her last visit.

Because it's emptier, Alexandra thought. She glanced at Julia, who smiled back at her, with a touch of sadness.

Samuel Hunter, the ranch hand who took care of the Kings' winged horses, was waiting for them, and helped Ms. King down from the carriage before taking the reins of the Thestral. He nodded to Alexandra. "Good to see you again, Miss Quick," he said gruffly.

"Miss Alexandra!" exclaimed a reedy voice. Several of Croatoa's house-elves were waiting to take everyone's luggage as she hopped to the ground.

"Hi, guys." Alexandra didn't bother arguing, but handed her backpack to Gun-Gun. She was perfectly capable of carrying her own things, but she knew that denying the house-elves an opportunity to serve would be like taking Bran and Poe away from their books. It took two elves to carry Julia's

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trunk, and a fourth to take Valeria's suitcase. The elf looked quizzically at the airline tags that were still attached to it.

There was a round of introductions for Valeria, who had never been to Croatoa before. Mr. Hunter shook her hand warmly, and the house-elves were overjoyed to meet another of Abraham Thorn's daughters. Whatever his reputation might be elsewhere, Croatoa's elves loved their former master.

"Deezie has prepared Miss's room, just like last time," said one of the elves, appearing at Alexandra's side. "And if Miss needs anything at all, Miss only needs to call for Deezie. Deezie will be there –"

"– snap-snap-snap," Alexandra finished, holding her fingers up to snap them along with the elf. "Thanks, Deezie."

The four witches all proceeded up the steps into the mansion, surrounded by helpful elves. Alexandra was a little unsettled, as always, by their eagerness to wait on her hand and foot, but they had spent months with only Ms. King to take care of. Having four humans in the mansion to do things for had practically sent them into a tizzy.

"I'll give you three girls some time to settle in, and change out of your traveling clothes," Ms. King said. "And I'm sure you want to catch up amongst yourselves. We can all talk over dinner, which will be served shortly."

"Yes, Mother," said Julia, embracing her mother and giving her a kiss.

"Thank you, ma'am," Alexandra and Valeria said together.

Valeria's room was downstairs. She told her younger sisters, "If you don't mind, I must send an owl before nightfall, but I'll join you shortly to talk." She gave Alexandra and Julia another hug, and retired to her room.

Alexandra and Julia went upstairs and walked down the hall, under the watchful gazes of generations of Kings and Thorns hanging on the walls. Several greeted the girls from their portraits. Alexandra paused as they passed the door to what had been Maximilian's room.

Julia slipped her hand into Alexandra's, and Alexandra took it.

"How have you been?" Alexandra asked, in a soft voice.

"As well as can be expected." Julia smiled at her. It was definitely a sad smile, now. "Some days I almost feel fine. I was used to being away at Salem and not seeing Max for months at a time. But then, sometimes I remember I won't be seeing him again, even when I come home, and..." Her voice caught in her throat.

Alexandra nodded. Julia swept her up in a fierce embrace, and held her tightly. Alexandra put her arms around Julia, and could feel her sister trembling a little. She knew Julia was crying. Her own throat hurt, with the lump she was trying to force down, and she stared at one of the few blank spots she could find on the wall and tried to think about nothing, to keep the stinging in her eyes from turning into traitorous tears.

"And you?" Julia asked at last. "How have you been, dear Alexandra?" Slowly, she loosened her hold on her younger sister and stepped back. Tears were running down her face, but she forced herself to smile at Alexandra, as she laid a hand on her cheek.

Alexandra wondered if perhaps Julia would think she didn't miss Max, because she wasn't crying. Should she allow herself to cry, to make Julia feel better? Or was it better not to show as much grief as Julia? She knew she wasn't entitled to grieve, not really. She suddenly realized she wasn't sure how to comport herself. She didn't want all these emotions that confused her and made her unsure of how to act.

"I've been..." What should she say? Okay? That would sound like Maximilian's death didn't bother her. Terrible? That would make Julia worry about her, and Alexandra should be concerned about Julia,

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not the other way around.

I've been trying to find a way to bring Maximilian back. No, clearly, that wouldn't do.

Julia nodded, saving her from having to answer. "It's hard, isn't it?" she whispered.

Alexandra swallowed, and nodded.

"I'm so glad you're here." Julia kissed her cheek. "We must always stay close, Alexandra."

"Yes," Alexandra agreed.

"And you'll tell me if you're having any trouble – if memories are bothering you, if you're having bad dreams – oh, Alexandra, you say so little in your letters, but I know you must feel guilty, sometimes."

Alexandra knew Julia didn't mean that as an accusation, but her words rang in her ears as a condemnation: *You must feel guilty!*

"I will," Alexandra said, in a voice that was barely a whisper.

Julia rubbed Alexandra's cheek, even though there were no tears there, and then wiped at her own. "Oh, look at me! I've only been home for five minutes and I'm already a mess! You must think I'm such a silly, frail thing!"

"No!" Alexandra said, much more firmly.

"Well, I'll go get cleaned up." Julia took a deep breath, and glanced over her shoulder, at that door. "It's difficult," she murmured. "Mother says it will get less difficult, as time goes by, but the pain will never go away."

Not unless I fix things, Alexandra thought. *I will fix things.*

That Valeria was here was so fortuitous, Alexandra would have thought it was an omen, if she had believed in that sort of thing. It was wonderful, if bittersweet, seeing Julia again, and she really was happy to get a chance to get to know her other sister better as well. But it was much more important to learn what Valeria knew. If she did indeed have access to a Time-Turner, then she was Alexandra's best hope of getting her own hands on one. And if she could do that, then all of her months reading about them might not have been wasted. She wasn't going to leave Croatoa without knowing that her efforts hadn't been in vain.



The house-elves had prepared a feast for them, even though Thanksgiving wasn't until the following day. But there was fish and lamb, golden potatoes and pumpkin, green beans and peas and corn, pitchers of pumpkin juice for Julia and Alexandra, carafes of wine for Ms. King and Valeria, and the elves kept bringing more until Ms. King finally told them to stop.

"Well, I'm not used to being served by elves, but I must admit, they know how to cook," Valeria said, patting her round stomach.

Rolly, carrying empty plates away from the table in precariously tall stacks balanced on his hands, beamed.

"You don't have house-elves?" Julia asked.

Valeria shook her head. "Not at the *Academie*, and I didn't grow up with them, either." She had been rather quiet at first, but with several glasses of wine in her, she had become more talkative. "Lucy and Dru remember when Father was still married to our mother, and we had house-elves, but I was a baby when they separated, and Father took his elves with him."

"Miss Valeria never had another elf to take care of her?"

It was the oldest of Croatoa's house-elves, Triss, standing quietly in a corner, who spoke. Alexandra realized that she had been there throughout most of the dinner, while the other elves were running in and out carrying plates and pitchers. Now, the old elf's rheumy eyes were fixed on Valeria, who turned

to look at her in surprise.

"No," she replied, in a friendly tone. "My stepfather... well, he doesn't approve of keeping house-elves." She glanced at their host. "No disrespect, Ms. King. I can see that you treat your house-elves very well."

Alexandra noticed that Valeria spoke to the elves very politely. Even Julia, while always nice to the elves, was rather imperious at times. Maximilian had been the same way.

Ms. King smiled. "No offense taken, my dear." Her smile faded, as Triss suddenly began bawling. Everyone turned to stare at the old house-elf. Rolly and Deezie looked at her in horror.

"Miss was abandoned!" Triss wailed. "No one took care of Triss's Valeria after Triss left her!"

Valeria's mouth fell open.

"Oh, my stars above," Ms. King said. She looked from Triss to Valeria. "How foolish of me. I never realized –"

"Triss didn't want to leave, but Master Thorn said we must!" Triss sobbed. "Master Thorn promised Miss Valeria and her sisters would be taken care of!"

Rolly hurried over to the older elf, carrying a handkerchief, while Deezie whispered something frantically in her ear. Alexandra suspected the other elves were finding Triss's conduct most unbecoming of a house-elf.

Valeria, however, rose from her chair and walked over to squat in front of Triss.

"We were taken care of," she said gently. "By our mother. And our stepfather – he's a good man. He's... really the only father I ever knew. I'm sorry, Triss. Lucy and Dru might remember you, but I don't. But please don't be sad on our account."

"It is horrible! Horrible! Master Thorn's daughters grew up without any house-elf taking care of them!" Triss blubbered.

Valeria patted the house-elf on the shoulder, and looked at Ms. King helplessly.

"Dear Triss, you must get a hold of yourself," Ms. King said. Rolly and Deezie were standing on either side of Triss, now, trying to calm her down while looking quite embarrassed.

"Triss is s-s-sorry!" Triss wailed, blowing her nose messily in the handkerchief held by Rolly.

"It's quite all right," Valeria said. "Please... I had no idea, Triss. I would love for you to tell me all about when I was a baby, when you were living with our family."

Triss nodded, bobbing her head back and forth vigorously.

Ms. King shook her head. "Abraham brought Triss with him when we married. I never considered—" She sighed.

"Triss is sorry," Triss mumbled, still choking back sobs. "Triss has embarrassed her Mistress and childrens..."

"Not at all, Triss." Ms. King smiled gently. "You may spend as much time with Valeria as you like, while she is visiting us."

"Thank you, Mistress." Triss wiped her eyes. "Triss must clean up first, and make sure Olina and Nina is not burning the pudding. Triss will speak to her Valeria later?"

This last was said in a pleading tone, and Valeria nodded. "Of course."

Triss disappeared with a pop, and Valeria sat back down in her chair, and wiped at her eye with a finger. "That was quite unexpected."

Alexandra watched the scene silently. She knew house-elves were like family – at least to the Kings. She had heard that not all pureblood families treated their elves so kindly.

"It must have been very difficult for her," Julia said. She smiled fondly at the other elves, who were now scurrying out of the room, carrying dirty dishes and muttering amongst themselves. "They would

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be heartbroken if they had to leave us, wouldn't they, Mother?"

"Yes, they would." Ms. King nodded.

"I can't imagine growing up without them," Julia said.

"It's not so bad," Alexandra said.

Julia flushed. "Oh, of course not! I didn't mean –"

"It's all right." Alexandra gave Julia a half-smile. "I would have loved having elves around, when I was little. My parents would have freaked, though."

"Freaked?" Julia giggled.

"I would like to hear more about growing up with Muggles," Valeria said. "And I'd like to hear more about growing up here, at Croatoa." She looked around the table, holding a fresh glass of wine in her hand. "We have so much in common, and so many years to catch up on."

Everyone else nodded. Alexandra looked at her two sisters, and thought about what Valeria had said. They did have much in common, and yet the three of them were very, very different as well. Her emotions had been in constant flux since arriving at Croatoa. Every time she remembered Maximilian – which was practically every time she looked at Julia or Ms. King – she felt a fresh pang of sorrow. But the easy conversation with her sisters made her feel something she never really felt at Charmbridge or in Larkin Mills – acceptance. They knew all about her – her father, her Muggle upbringing, and even her terrible journey to the Lands Below – and it didn't matter to them. It was like being with family.



They talked long into the evening. Valeria told them a little about her family – her older twin sisters, who were Artificers, and the three children their mother had had with her second husband. It sounded as if the family was quite close, and happy, and Valeria spoke fondly of her stepfather, whom she called 'Dad.' It made Alexandra feel almost jealous.

Alexandra was more interested in Artificing and Historicists. She asked casual questions, not wanting to sound *too* interested, but when she mentioned Time-Turners, Valeria gave her an odd look, and changed the subject.

Valeria and Julia asked her about her life in Larkin Mills. Alexandra had never thought living in Larkin Mills might be considered exciting or exotic, but even Valeria, who had some experience dealing with Muggles, was fascinated by the most mundane details: what Alexandra liked to watch on television; what her favorite Muggle foods were; whether she was allowed to drive an automobile, etc.

Eventually, Valeria, blaming the wine, retired for the night. Triss appeared instantly at her side, and followed her to her room. Deezie and Nina were waiting for Alexandra and Julia, when Ms. King told them it was about time for them to go to bed also.

"And don't stay up too late talking," she admonished the girls.

"No, Mother," Julia replied, winking at Alexandra.

"I saw that, Julia." Ms. King gave both of them a kiss on the cheek. "Good night. Do sleep. Deezie, Nina, nag them if they don't."

The house-elves took their mistress's orders seriously, so while Alexandra sat in Julia's room for a little while, they mostly talked about Charmbridge Academy and the Salem Witches' Institute, while Deezie and Nina came in every few minutes to "check" on them and give them disapproving looks.

They talked uncomfortably around the topic of Maximilian. They couldn't ignore him, didn't want to avoid mentioning him, but neither one of them were prepared to open fresh wells of grief just now.

Alexandra asked Julia if she had heard from their father.

"Once, during our first field trip," Julia answered quietly. "He never sets foot on Salem's school grounds, but while my history class was visiting a museum, an old man came up behind me, as if he

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were just looking at the exhibits, but I knew it was him.” She stared up at the ceiling. “We only talked for a few minutes. He asked me how Mother was doing, and if there was anything I wanted, and, well, I’m afraid I gave him a rather short response. What he did to those poor people – the Muggles, too! – was so dreadful, and I simply couldn’t pretend that things were the same.” She sighed.

Their conversation eventually became lighter. Julia still laughed, teased, and even giggled, but Alexandra didn’t hear her talking much about her friends at Salem. Julia asked Alexandra whether she had a boyfriend, and laughed at Alexandra’s disgusted demurral, but when Alexandra asked her the same question, Julia shrugged and simply said no, rather than bemoaning the absence of boys at Salem, as she would have a few months earlier.

Alexandra knew she could never be really happy as long as she was a walking reminder of Maximilian’s death, so she assumed Julia felt even worse. She gave her sister a hug good-night, after Deezie asked her for the fifth time whether she’d like her to draw a warm bath for her, and returned to her room, where she lay in bed for a long time, thinking about Valeria, downstairs, and whether the Historicist could get her a Time-Turner, and whether her ancestors’ ghosts in the woods down the hill from the mansion had answers for her about Maximilian’s fate. She had to get those answers in the few days she had remaining at Croatoa.

Chapter 14 — The Thanksgiving Blessing



The elves were busy all Thanksgiving Day, preparing a feast to dwarf what they'd served the previous night. While they were cooking, Ms. King summoned her daughter and guests, and told them that the wizarding families who lived on the island would be gathering to perform the Thanksgiving Blessing.

Julia made a face. "Do we have to go, Mother?"

"We always have, Julia. And we will not hide our faces from our neighbors."

As they all climbed into the Thestral-drawn carriage, with Mr. Hunter accompanying them, Valeria told Alexandra that the Blessing was much more common in Roanoke and the New England Territories, but even here, it was becoming something of a quaint tradition.

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“Even though Muggles aren't really under any threat of black magic or Indian attack anymore, it's a reminder that we did help them, once,” she said. “I think it's a shame the tradition is fading – more wizarding families should be reminded that we used to befriend Muggles.”

Alexandra sat next to Julia, who held her hand in both of hers. Alexandra didn't mind. She was thinking about Valeria's version of Thanksgiving history, and how they were taught in their American History of Magic class that the first Muggle colonists in the New World had only survived thanks to the witches and wizards secretly living amongst them.

There was a Muggle town on the southern tip of the island. Its inhabitants were mostly either fishermen or people catering to the tourists who came out to the island in the summer. There weren't many tourists now, so the town looked tiny and isolated as they drew up at the edge of the woods surrounding it. Most of the stores were closed for Thanksgiving, but there was a diner and a coffee shop still open. From the woods, the witches could see a few villagers walking up and down the main street, and children playing in yards.

Alexandra heard noises behind them, and saw other carriages coming through the woods. One was pulled by a pair of winged Granians, and one by a large bull with an indigo blue hide, but the rest were pulled by ordinary horses. There were also a few wizards walking on foot, and to their left, a family descended from the sky on brooms. Alexandra was surprised – it was still daylight out, and they were visible from the town.

“They can't see us,” Ms. King said, noticing Alexandra's surprise. “The Roanes and the Malevirges have already cast a Disillusionment Spell; the Muggles will see only shadows and leaves among the trees.”

“Ms. King,” said a wizard in long brown and red robes, with a pointy chin and thick black eyebrows beneath a receding hairline. He strode over to the four witches and the wizard in the carriage, and extended a hand to the King matriarch. “We were not sure you would be attending.”

“We have attended every year, Mr. Roane,” Ms. King said.

Mr. Roane nodded. He looked at the other occupants of the carriage with a polite expression, but not a particularly friendly one.

“You know Mr. Hunter and my daughter, of course,” Ms. King said. “And this is Alexandra Quick and Valeria White.”

Mr. Roane nodded again, slowly. “Daughters of Julia's father, yes?”

“Yes.” Ms. King glanced at Valeria and Alexandra. Valeria gave the other wizard a polite smile; Alexandra just returned his stare.

“Well, we will begin the Blessing shortly. We're pleased to see you, Ms. King. My deepest condolences for your recent loss.” He bowed slightly.

“Thank you,” Ms. King said.

As soon as Mr. Roane walked away to join another group of wizards, Julia muttered, “They're not pleased to see us. They were all hoping we'd stay home.”

“Which is precisely why we will not hide our faces,” her mother said.

Mr. Hunter said, “The Thorns have lived on this island as long as the Roanes and longer than most anyone else. You have as much right to be here as any of them.”

Ms. King stepped down from the front seat of the carriage, even as Mr. Hunter leaped down and ran around to help her. She didn't need the help, any more than did Valeria, who nonetheless allowed Mr. Hunter to give her a hand down, as did Julia, and finally, Alexandra.

There were about forty witches and wizards gathered at the tree line, including a few children and teenagers. Julia waved at a brother and sister, who waved back halfheartedly; they didn't come over to

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talk.

Mr. Roane began speaking:

“For almost five hundred years, we have protected the Muggles in this New World. Without their knowledge or thanks, they have been kept safe, from Indian sorcery, from fell beasts, from mistletoe wands and elf-stones and ghost sickness and black magic of all kinds. On this day, we celebrate Thanksgiving along with them, and renew our pledge to safeguard them in their ignorance.”

He went on in this vein for a while; Julia and the other young people looked politely bored. Alexandra, having never heard this speech before, found it confusing. Wizards *protected* Muggles? She glanced at Valeria, and wondered if the Historicist knew how much was truth and how much was a fairy tale.

Mr. Roane finally finished speaking, and nodded to the assembly. Everyone, including Valeria and Julia, held their wands high. Alexandra did the same, though she didn't know what she was supposed to do. She thought it was a good thing that the townspeople couldn't see them – the magical conclave would probably have appeared quite sinister to them. Everyone wore dark robes and pointed hats, and when the adults all stepped forward to raise their wands, it almost looked as if they were preparing to smite the little town.

“*Benedictus!*” chanted the wizards in front.

Everyone else repeated the word. Alexandra did, too. A warm glow radiated from the magical gathering, and for a moment, Alexandra thought she saw a shimmer over the town itself. None of the Muggles seemed to notice.

Then everyone lowered their wands. The gathering broke up into small groups, with neighbors greeting one another and shaking hands. Apparently, that was all there was to the ceremony. A few families strolled over, with fixed, polite expressions, to greet Ms. King and those with her. Alexandra nodded to each as she was introduced, imitating Julia with an equally polite but distant look. Alexandra paid little attention to the names – the Roanes, the Jameses, the Hallowells, and so on, until an elderly couple with no children approached Ms. King, after everyone else had gone through the motions and retreated.

The man looked very old indeed. He walked with a slight limp, and his face was almost ghostly white, as was what little hair he had, protruding from beneath his wizard's hat. His beady black eyes were recessed into a deeply creased and wrinkled face. He didn't look very friendly. Alexandra could easily imagine him exclaiming, “Bah! Humbug!”

His wife was holding his arm. She was also rather old, though not nearly as old as her husband. She looked as if she had been pretty, once. Now her face, too, was lined and weathered, but it was her eyes – harsh and disapproving – that detracted from her appearance the most.

“Ms. King,” said the wizard.

“Mr. Malevirge,” replied Ms. King.

“I understand you lost your son recently.”

“Yes.” Ms. King nodded.

“My grandson was killed aboard the Roanoke Underhill,” Mr. Malevirge said, in the same dry, conversational tone, as if he were discussing the weather. “Many sons and daughters died thanks to your son's father. Losing one child isn't nearly enough punishment for him. His family name should be expunged from the Confederation Census. All of his descendants should be removed from the rolls of the Elect. For your family to show yourselves so brazenly at an occasion such as this is an insult to decent wizarding society.”

Julia gasped. Alexandra felt rage welling up inside her – if Julia had not clutched her arm, and

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Valeria laid a hand on her other shoulder, she might have exploded. She could feel her sisters trembling with anger as well.

Mr. Hunter stepped forward, as if to interpose himself between Mr. Malevirge and Ms. King, but Ms. King faced the other wizard and replied in an even tone:

"I am sorry about your grandson, Mr. Malevirge. Obviously grief has robbed you of both civility and sense. Good day to you."

Mr. Malevirge's expression was filled with loathing; he glared at Ms. King and then at Abraham Thorn's daughters. Alexandra glared back at the hateful old man. Then his wife tugged at his arm, and they turned and walked away.

Julia could only sputter in fury. Alexandra looked at her, and saw that she was on the verge of tears. Ms. King took her daughter's hand, and said gently, "Let's go back to the house. I think dinner will almost be ready."

Ms. King sat in the back of the carriage as they rode away, with Mr. Hunter taking the reins. She put one arm around Julia and the other around Alexandra. Julia waited until the Muggle town and the gathering of wizards were out of sight behind them before she began crying. Her mother murmured in her ear, kissed her gently on the top of her head, and looked with concern at Alexandra.

"I'm sorry I exposed you to that," she said. "I underestimated how much anger there might be at your father now, misdirected at you." She sighed. "I only want all of you to be able to hold your heads up and not be forced into seclusion, but I shouldn't have made you pay the price for my stubborn pride."

"I'm okay," Alexandra said. "We shouldn't let people punish us for what our father did."

Julia nodded, wiping at her face. "Alexandra is right, Mother. I just – what Mr. Malevirge said –"

"We've heard it all our lives," Valeria said. "You're braver than I am, Ms. King. After everyone learned who my father was, I left the country because I couldn't bear it any more."

Ms. King shook her head. "It's not my place to judge you, Valeria. We've all had to cope with Abraham's legacy in our own way."

Alexandra felt bad for Julia, as they returned to the mansion, and also wondered what sorts of insults Valeria had had to grow up with. Her sisters sometimes seemed to pity her for growing up with Muggles; she wondered if perhaps she was the lucky one.

The house-elves sensed the depressing cloud hanging over them when they returned. It took a while to dispel the gloom, but the delicious smells from the kitchen, and the elves' earnest efforts to cheer them up, eventually lightened the mood. Valeria suggested they play a game of Neptune's Horses while waiting for dinner to be served. Alexandra liked games, especially wizarding games, so for a while, she forgot about Abraham Thorn and Mr. Malevirge, while she learned how to make the little animated horses jump on and off the enchanted deck of cards. The four witches played while Mr. Hunter stood outside on the veranda, smoking hand-rolled wizard-tobacco.

"Doesn't Mr. Hunter have a family to spend Thanksgiving with?" Alexandra asked.

"His brother's family lives in Hudson Territory," Ms. King said. "He visits them every few years."

"Mr. Hunter has been joining us for Thanksgiving for as long as I can remember," Julia said.

"What about Myrta?" Alexandra asked. She suddenly realized she hadn't seen Myrta Applegate at all since returning to Croatoa.

Ms. King said, "She did go home to her family for the holidays."

Alexandra nodded. The unsmiling assistant who also lived on the estate and helped Mr. Hunter with the winged horses was a Squib. Alexandra wondered briefly how Myrta's family treated her, and what it was like, being the only non-magical person in a family full of wizards. She supposed if it were bad, then Myrta wouldn't go home for Thanksgiving.

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Valeria won the second round of Neptune's Horses, and then Nina bounced into the sitting room, to announce, "Dinner is served!" with great enthusiasm.

The elves were all waiting in the dining room as the four witches and Mr. Hunter sat down to the table. An enormous turkey dominated the centerpiece – Alexandra was sure the elves had had to use magic to cook the thing, much less move it – but there was also fish and crab and clams, what seemed like a dozen different varieties of squash and pumpkin and sweet potatoes, corn in half a dozen colors, mountains of mashed potatoes, bowls full of steamed, buttered green beans and carrots and okra, roast chestnuts and acorns, cornbread, and endless pitchers of Butterbeer and pumpkin juice.

Despite her earlier mood, Alexandra was hungry – in fact, the sight of all the food made her stomach rumble – and she could hardly wait to dig in. But there was an uncomfortable pause, as Ms. King and Julia looked at one another, and then at the turkey in the center, waiting to be carved.

Ms. King asked quietly, "Mr. Hunter, would you please carve the turkey?"

He cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am."

Alexandra half-expected him to use his wand, but Mr. Hunter used a long carving knife to slice the turkey just like Archie did at home, and he did so expertly. Once their plates were full, everyone relaxed, and began eating.

The house-elves seemed determined to make sure everyone ate until they burst, or so it felt like to Alexandra, when she finally pushed herself away from the table, after having had just one more slice of witch-apple pie with hazelnut ice cream.

Mr. Hunter, who had eaten as much as anyone, rose when Ms. King did, and said gruffly, "Well, the horses need tending, Thanksgiving or no."

Alexandra thought it was a shame that he still had to work, but he really seemed more comfortable outside, cold as it was, than inside the house. The elves were already clearing away the table, and though Alexandra felt a twinge of guilt at all the work being left for them to do, she wanted to just collapse on her bed upstairs and fall into a coma.

Everyone was stuffed. They sat in the parlor and talked for a while, but even Ms. King looked a bit tired, and suggested a nap, followed by perhaps some parlor games and a very light dinner later in the evening. Everyone readily agreed.

Alexandra was still working out how she was going to pump Valeria for information about Time-Turners. She only had three more days before she would be returning to Charmbridge. She was tempted to go knock on Valeria's door, rather than go upstairs to her own room, but Julia was waiting expectantly, so she went upstairs with her, and agreed when Julia asked if she'd like to come to her room to rest and chat. Julia seemed a bit downcast again; had, in fact, never quite cheered up completely during dinner.

Julia's large canopied bed was easily big enough for two girls to stretch out on. Nina was already there, turning down the covers, and offering to draw a bath. Julia thanked the house-elf, told her she might take a bath later, and then dismissed her.

Alexandra lay side by side with her sister, while Julia patted her stomach. "I am going to return to Salem ten pounds heavier," she sighed.

"I doubt it," Alexandra said.

"Oh, I'm sure I won't stay slim like you, Alexandra." Julia raised a hand to her mouth, to cover a belch. Alexandra laughed a little – she didn't think Julia would allow herself to belch in front of anyone else.

"It's true," Julia continued. "Someday I'll have Mother's figure."

"Your mother is beautiful," Alexandra said. "So are you."

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Julia turned her head and smiled at her. "You're very sweet. And yes, Mother *is* beautiful."

She didn't say anything after that for a while, and Alexandra was beginning to nod off, when Julia whispered, "Max used to carve the turkey."

Alexandra's eyes popped open.

"Such a silly tradition – why does the 'man' of the house have to carve the turkey?" Julia murmured. "But as soon as he was old enough to handle the knife, Mr. Hunter turned that duty over to Max."

Alexandra swallowed. Hesitantly, she reached out and put her hand on Julia's. Julia took it and squeezed it.

"How have you been, honestly, Alexandra? You don't talk much about how you're feeling, in your letters."

Alexandra shrugged. "Like you said – it's hard, sometimes." She cleared her throat. "I miss Max, too. But I know it's a lot harder for you and your mother."

"Is it?" Julia rolled onto her side, facing Alexandra, still holding her hand. "Yes, I miss him terribly. But you went *through* it –"

Alexandra looked away. After a few moments, she asked, "Has the WJD interrogated you yet?"

"I was called to the Headmistress's office on the first day of school," Julia said. "To be warned that there might be... resentment towards me, because of what Father did. Of course the Headmistress was very understanding – she's always been very nice to me."

Alexandra's mouth twitched. She wondered what having a nice Dean in charge of Charmbridge would be like.

"Anyway," Julia went on, "it turned out there was a Special Inquisitor waiting to speak to me, too." She sighed. "I told him Father hasn't spoken to me since before the Roanoke Underhill crash." She paused, and squeezed Alexandra's hand again. "I didn't tell him about what you... *remember*," she whispered.

Alexandra nodded.

"And you?"

Alexandra grimaced, and then, slowly, told Julia the story of her encounter with Diana Grimm at Old Larkin Pond.

She was relieved that Julia didn't scold her, or tell her that she should have kept her temper and not defied the Special Inquisitor.

"Oh, Alex. And she destroyed your broom, too?"

"Yeah." That memory still filled Alexandra with bitter rage, but she didn't let it show.

"What did you tell your parents?" Julia asked.

"Nothing."

"Really? After your awful ordeal, you didn't mention being interrogated about it?"

"They don't know about any of that."

Alexandra realized that was a mistake, by Julia's shocked silence.

"What do you mean, they don't know about any of that?" Julia asked at last.

Alexandra didn't answer, and the silence stretched out between them, until Julia said, "You did tell them, didn't you, Alexandra? They know that something terrible happened to you, and that you – you lost your brother?"

Alexandra's throat felt very tight. She didn't want to talk about this. "They wouldn't understand. My mother doesn't want to hear about... our father, or the wizarding world at all, and my stepfather doesn't even know I'm a witch."

There was yet another long pause. When Julia spoke again, she sounded quite distraught.

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“Alexandra... that – that's simply not right. That cannot be. How can your mother not know about this?”

“She doesn't need to know.”

“Yes, she does! Alexandra, were you alone with this all summer?” Alexandra finally turned her head, to look at Julia's appalled face. “You never told me that in your letters! How could you keep that from your own mother? Who do you go to to cry? Sweet Merlin, if we had known, we would have ridden Granians all the way to Central Territory if need be!”

“You didn't have to. I didn't need to go anywhere to cry.” The entire conversation was making Alexandra intensely uncomfortable. “I'm not some weak little girl!”

Julia stared at her.

“I see,” she said, in a very quiet voice. “I must be a very weak little girl, indeed.”

“No!” Alexandra sat up. “I didn't mean it that way! I meant –”

“What did you mean?”

Alexandra looked down. That lump in her throat was making it hard to speak again.

“It's different for you,” she mumbled. “You – you lost –”

“My brother? So did you.”

“But you –”

“Do you think he was less your brother than mine? Do you miss him less because you didn't know him as long?”

“I don't know.” Alexandra just wanted this conversation to be over.

Then Julia was pulling her close, and Alexandra allowed her sister to put her arms around her and hold her. Julia couldn't see Alexandra's face, but Alexandra still forced down the lump in her throat and tried to drain her mind of everything. Her resolution that she would not cry like a weak little girl was very close to breaking – she could feel tears threatening, she could feel her shoulders trembling, just a little, and she *refused*.

“You silly, stubborn girl,” Julia said. “You are so much like Max.”

If Julia noticed Alexandra's internal struggle, she didn't say anything. She just kissed the top of Alexandra's head, and lay next to her, and Alexandra rested her head against her sister and closed her eyes.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

When they woke up, a couple of hours later, Alexandra felt in control of herself again. She and Julia stretched and yawned, and Deezie and Nina were both instantly at the side of the bed.

“Does Miss want a bath now?” asked Nina.

“Deezie can draw a warm bath for Miss Alexandra, too, snap-snap-snap!” Deezie said.

Alexandra and Julia looked at each other, and then Julia laughed quietly.

“A bath does sound quite nice right now,” she said.

Alexandra had to admit that she wouldn't mind soaking in a hot bath herself. As she got up, Julia caught her hand.

“This conversation isn't over,” she said softly.

“Okay,” Alexandra sighed. She was hoping that Julia would forget about it, or that she could somehow put her sister off the topic for the rest of the long weekend. But she doubted it.

Deezie was waiting in the large bathroom adjoining Alexandra's room. She had already filled the tub. “Deezie will wash Miss's hair for her if she likes –”

“No, thank you,” Alexandra said, politely but firmly. She raised a hand to her hair, which had grown out a bit since the summer, but still barely reached the nape of her neck. “I don't need any help washing it – it's really short.”

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“Yes, Deezie noticed that.” There was a hint of disapproval in the elf’s tone. “Deezie was mentioning this to Olina, and we could –”

“No, thank you.”

Alexandra made sure Deezie was quite clear on her desire to bathe *alone* – the house-elves could be quite intrusive at times – and sent her away, before taking her bath. Afterward, she dressed in the fresh clothes Deezie had laid out on her bed, and she and Julia went downstairs to join Ms. King and Valeria.

Julia still wore a concerned expression. Alexandra worried, the entire evening, that Julia was going to bring up the matter of talking to her parents about what had happened in the spring, as they paged through Ms. King’s photo albums.

It was obviously painful and bittersweet for the Kings to go through them, but Alexandra couldn’t get enough of looking at them. Maximilian was moving and *alive* in those wizarding photographs: Maximilian as a baby, being held by his father; six-year-old Maximilian chasing Julia with a glass snake; Julia at the start of sixth grade, about to go off to Salem for the first time, posing with Maximilian in her new school robes, while he proudly wore his BMI uniform. Alexandra stared at him as he raised his chin to strike a cocky pose for the camera, realizing that he was the same age in that picture as she was now.

Alexandra wondered if Ms. King ever shared memories with Julia in her Pensieve, as she had with Alexandra on her last visit. The elves took the photo albums, reverently, to restore them to their proper place, and then brought tea and cake to the four witches.

They finished the evening playing some more card games, and Valeria mentioned that she might go to New Roanoke on Saturday, to buy some presents for her sisters and do a little digging into local history. Alexandra wanted to ask about that – how did a Historicist ‘dig into history’? But she still hadn’t worked out the right approach, and she needed to catch Valeria alone if she were going to have an involved conversation on the topic.

They turned in for the night, exchanging hugs and good-night kisses all around. Julia gave Alexandra a much longer hug, outside her bedroom door.

“What do you think of Valeria?” she whispered.

Alexandra was surprised by the question. “She’s nice. I think being a Historicist must be pretty interesting. She doesn’t talk much about her job, though, and only a little bit about her family.”

Julia nodded. “I want to get to know her better. I hope we can become close.”

Alexandra nodded back. “Me, too.”

Julia took her hands. “We are close, aren’t we, Alexandra?”

Alexandra stared back at her. “Yes. Of course.”

“Then you trust me? You won’t hide things from me? Like how you’re feeling? You won’t fear being a ‘weak little girl’ around me?”

Alexandra didn’t know how to answer that.

“I don’t like to cry,” was all she could manage to say.

Julia studied her. Her brown eyes for a moment reminded Alexandra of Anna’s; Anna, who also gave her that look sometimes, worried and much too acute at sensing when Alexandra wasn’t being open with her.

“I can’t make you,” Julia said at last. “And I won’t force you to speak of things you don’t want to speak about, but please, Alexandra, trust me. I haven’t told Mother yet about what you told me, but I’m *worried* about you.”

“I do trust you,” Alexandra said. She swallowed. “I just don’t want to hurt you.” *I don’t want to get your hopes up – or convince you I’m crazy.* “But I’ll talk to you about Max... I mean, I’ll try. I just

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can't... right now.”

Julia nodded slowly. “All right, Alexandra. But don't worry about hurting me. We're sisters.” She gave Alexandra another kiss on the cheek, and then went down the hall to her room.

Alexandra lay in bed again that night, staring up at the ceiling and having a hard time sleeping. She thought she heard voices at one point, but when she opened her eyes, she heard only silence. Later, she thought someone was standing over her, but when she turned over, she was alone in her room. She even looked instinctively to where Charlie's cage would normally be hung. She regretted leaving her familiar at Charmbridge.

She was plagued by restlessness. Her sleep was disturbed repeatedly, and she wasn't even sure whether she'd actually woken up or dreamed about waking up. She rose at about three a.m. to use the bathroom. Just as she was about to climb back into her bed, she saw lights flashing outside.

For a moment, she thought of the lights on top of Archie's police cruiser – the flashing lights were red. But she didn't think there were any police cars on the island. She went to the window, and saw that the blinking red lights were in the trees, down at the bottom of the hill.

It wasn't the side of the hill facing the main road up to the mansion; it was the side facing the deep woods where the Thorn family crypt was located. Alexandra remembered the creatures she'd seen moving in those branches; *clabberts*, they were called. They had some sort of red nodule that glowed when strangers approached.

And there was a figure emerging from the woods, walking up the hill.

Alexandra wondered at first if it was one of the ghosts who haunted the woods. But the approaching figure was dark and solid-looking, and seemed to be walking like a normal person, not floating over the ground like a ghost.

As the stranger came closer, Alexandra saw that it was Valeria. She was wearing an outdoor robe beneath a heavy cloak, and walking boots.

Alexandra knew that with her room dark, Valeria couldn't see her even if she looked up, so she stood there and watched her half-sister approach, until the top of Valeria's head disappeared from view below her.

A moment later, she heard quiet footsteps on the veranda in front of the house. She ran to her bedroom door and cracked it open. Downstairs, she heard the front door open, and then quiet voices – Valeria, and one of the house-elves. Alexandra couldn't make out their words.

Then Valeria went to her own room, and after the door closed, it was quiet downstairs again.

Alexandra climbed back into bed, but it took even longer to fall asleep this time, as she pondered what Valeria was up to, and who she was meeting in the woods.

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Alexandra watched her older sister closely the next morning at breakfast, but Valeria didn't appear particularly tired. Nor did she look furtive or guilty, and when she caught Alexandra staring at her, she just raised an eyebrow and smiled.

“Is something wrong, Alexandra?” she asked.

“No.” Alexandra shook her head, and stifled a yawn of her own. “Guess I'm just tired.”

“You and Julia weren't up all night talking, were you?” Ms. King asked.

“No, Mother,” Julia said. She glanced at Alexandra.

All day, Alexandra watched Valeria, thinking about her late-night excursion to the woods. Had she visited the Thorn family crypt? Had she met their father there, as Maximilian once had? Or was she talking to the ghosts of their ancestors?

Was Valeria now doing their father's bidding? That was a disturbing thought. Alexandra didn't think

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her father had recruited any of his other children – or that Valeria would be interested in becoming part of the Thorn Circle. But she'd been surprised before.

Everyone went down to the meadow below the mansion, and Mr. Hunter brought out a trio of Granians for the sisters to ride. Alexandra had had her first riding lessons only a few months earlier, and though she remembered how to get into the saddle, she was annoyed that Mr. Hunter had to hold the reins for her while she steadied her mount, Halosydne. Julia slipped easily onto Misoo, her favorite, while Valeria, who had never ridden before, looked at the winged horse in front of her with obvious misgivings.

“Aethra's real gentle,” Mr. Hunter assured her.

Valeria didn't look convinced, but she climbed onto the horse, with the wizard's help, and Alexandra and Julia spent most of the afternoon riding around the meadow with their sister. Alexandra was anxious to take off, but Ms. King warned her that she wasn't ready to fly a Granian unaccompanied.

By the end of the day, Ms. King had taken Alexandra and Julia on a short flight over the ocean and around the northern tip of the island, while Mr. Hunter coaxed Aethra to glide with Valeria a few times up and down the hill.

Alexandra was thrilled at flying, though she knew she'd be sore the next day. She thought Halosydne was starting to like her.

As they returned to the mansion, Valeria looked happy enough, but she was limping a bit, and commented, “I do think I prefer a broom. But thank you for this experience.”

“Oh, Mother, can we go with Valeria to New Roanoke?” Julia asked.

Alexandra thought she saw Valeria's brow crease for a second, but Ms. King said, “Julia, it's rude to invite yourself along.”

“But Alexandra hasn't been to New Roanoke since... last time, and she hardly ever gets to go shopping in a wizarding town!”

Alexandra was about to object, but Valeria said, “I don't mind, Ms. King.” She looked up at the sky. “But I'm afraid the weather may not allow it.”

The sky had been turning gray and cloudy all afternoon, and as they returned to the house, the wind was picking up, and they could hear thunder rumbling in the distance.

According to the Wizard Wireless, a major storm was sweeping down the coast. It turned out that there were a lot of storm preparations necessary on a winged horse ranch, and Ms. King put on her all-weather cloak and informed the girls that she and several of the elves would be going outside to help Mr. Hunter. Julia, Alexandra, and Valeria promptly volunteered to help, though neither Alexandra nor Valeria had any idea of what was required.

The women joined Mr. Hunter by the huge hangar-like stable where the horses were kept, and he put them all to work securing equipment and hay, making sure doors were tightly closed, and clearing away things that might be blown about by the wind. He went into the stable, while Ms. King walked around outside, casting spells of some kind.

Valeria walked to the edge of the trees, and flicked her wand, bringing down a few dead and broken branches with Severing Charms. Alexandra watched her do this, and then her eyes were drawn upward by a sudden flurry of black wings. Startled crows surged out of the trees, cawing angrily. They circled about overhead, continuing to squawk and scold.

Alexandra stood there, watching them, until a particularly strong gust of wind scattered them. They screeched and cawed, regrouped, and then banked off to the west, flapping over the ocean towards the mainland, ahead of the gathering storm.

Once the stable and adjoining barn and sheds were secure, Mr. Hunter stayed with the horses, while

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Ms. King went to check on Myrta's little cottage. Deezie, Rolly, and Nina urged the younger witches to return to the house. Rain was beginning to fall, and the wind was whipping it into their faces.

As they walked back to the mansion, Valeria twirled her wand and said, "*Parapluvia*." A translucent golden shield appeared around them, like a magical umbrella, repelling the rain but not the wind.

"Oh, how wonderful!" Julia said. "I've never seen that spell! Will you teach it to us?"

"Perhaps later." Valeria smiled as Julia put an arm around her waist and grabbed Alexandra with her other arm to pull her along with them.

For the rest of the day, and into the evening, the storm gathered strength, and rain continued to pound against the house. The house-elves kept the fireplace roaring. Ms. King retired to her study, leaving the three half-sisters to talk amongst themselves. As Triss and Rolly and Deezie brought them coffee, tea, and cookies, Alexandra steered the conversation towards her American wizarding history class.

"I don't think they tell us what really happened in school," she said.

"Oh, Salem's history classes are very good," Julia said.

"Charmbridge is supposed to be one of the best schools in the Confederation," Alexandra said. "But all we hear in history class is how wonderful the Confederation is, and how lucky Muggles are that we're so tolerant and benevolent." She was watching Valeria, who smiled slightly.

"The history of the Confederation does tend to get glossed over a bit in school," Valeria said.

"But we go on historical field trips!" Julia protested. "They're even starting to use mixed texts at Salem – introducing the 'Muggle perspective' on history. It's very progressive!"

"How do the Old Colonials feel about that?" Alexandra asked.

Julia paused.

"Well, the Salem Traditionalists were concerned about the use of Muggle materials in school," she admitted. "But they're not anti-Muggle, strictly speaking."

"Strictly speaking," Alexandra repeated dryly.

Julia arched an eyebrow. "Some of my friends are Salem Traditionalists, Alex. They're not bad people. They don't trust Muggles, but it's not as if they're Death Eaters."

"Sorry," Alexandra muttered. "I just get hassled a lot at Charmbridge for being a Mudblood."

Valeria and Julia both turned red.

"Oh, Alexandra, I can't believe Charmbridge allows language like that!" Julia whispered. "If I ever heard anyone at Salem use that word, why, I'd tell them about my sister, and –" She flourished her wand, with an unusually fierce expression, then put arm around Alexandra.

Alexandra smiled, a little wryly. "Charmbridge doesn't allow language like that. That doesn't mean I don't hear it." And she wondered if Julia didn't hear it at Salem because she *wasn't* a Mudblood.

"Salem Traditionalists wouldn't use that word – very few of them are actually descended from pureblood families," Valeria said. "It's not true, what they say about wizards coming to the New World along with Muggles. The Muggles came first. Then, only wizards who didn't mind living with them – mostly half-bloods and Muggle-borns themselves. The old pureblood families came later, when they could establish all-wizarding communities of their own. But the Salem Traditionalists were among the first of the Old Colonials – the ones who colonized the New World with the early Muggle settlers."

"And after the way Muggles treated witches, or anyone they even thought was a witch – well, it's still a bit of a touchy subject in Salem," Julia said.

Alexandra nodded. She'd heard some of this in school – mostly the part about Muggles killing suspected witches. But she wasn't very interested in that.

"So what do you study in Europe?" she asked Valeria.

"I've been doing genealogical research, mostly," Valeria answered. "Tracing those wizarding families

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who emigrated to the New World. That's also a bit of a touchy subject. It was easy for a... well, someone who would have been called a 'Mudblood,' back in Europe, to come to America, establish himself in the New World, and then claim to be a pureblood. The Confederation was founded by people who did just that, including some of our oldest and most respected families." Valeria took a sip from her coffee.

"Like the Thorns?" Alexandra asked.

Julia raised her eyebrows at that. Valeria, on the other hand, gave Alexandra a shrewd, appraising look.

"Whatever made you suspect that, Alexandra?" she asked quietly. She glanced at Julia, who looked intrigued, rather than offended, and back at Alexandra. She nodded slowly. "Yes – the Thorns, and many other families among the Elect."

"Well," said Julia. "There's no such thing as 'pure blood,' anyway. And it's illegal to discriminate, so it's not supposed to matter, anymore." She looked at Alexandra, and squeezed her. "I wouldn't care if I found out that our family isn't really pureblood. Honestly, I wouldn't! I wish the Wizard Census would just stop recording blood status."

Alexandra smiled. "Now who sounds like a member of ASPEW?"

Julia laughed, and stuck out her tongue.

"So who are these Elect?" Alexandra asked, eyeing Valeria again. "Did you have to move to Europe to become a Historicist because you didn't want to make them angry, digging into their history? Or because you wouldn't be allowed to use a Time-Turner here?"

Julia looked curious and a little puzzled at Alexandra's interest, but Valeria lifted her coffee cup to her lips again, with a thoughtful expression. She set it down, and smiled and shook her head when Triss immediately hobbled over with a coffeepot, offering to refill it.

"Most Historicists don't actually handle Time-Turners, Alexandra. But yes, there are areas of historical interest that many in the Confederation – especially influential families like the Elect – would prefer not be looked at too closely. Especially by someone with a father as illustrious as ours."

Alexandra noted the hint of sarcasm, but she also noted that Valeria had a way of not quite answering her questions. Something she shared with their illustrious father. When Julia seemed to have had enough of talking about genealogies and history, and innocently reminded Valeria that she had promised to teach them her Umbrella Charm, Alexandra didn't argue. Pursuing the point would only make Valeria more suspicious, and possibly Julia, too.

Ms. King told them the worst of the storm had yet to pass over Croatoa, and the house-elves were appalled when the three of them went outside in the pouring rain. Julia shrieked and clung to Alexandra, as wind whipped her hair and robes, and soon their clothes were plastered to their bodies. Neither Julia nor Alexandra were able to produce Valeria's shimmering golden shield right away, but by the time Ms. King came to the front porch and called them inside, they could at least create small rain-repelling bubbles.

Julia's mother shook her head as the younger witches returned to the house, soaking wet and shivering with cold.

"Get upstairs and dry off," she said, kissing Julia on the cheek. "Before you catch a chill."

"I'm going to do the same, and I'm spent, so I believe I will be retiring for the evening," said Valeria.

"Good night," Julia said, and she embraced her older sister. "Thank you for teaching us that spell. Obviously, I need more practice."

"Yeah, thanks," Alexandra said. She hesitated, and gave Valeria a hug also.

"It's not as difficult as a Shield Charm, but it took me more than a day to learn it," Valeria said,

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returning the hugs.

“Brr!” Julia said, wrapping her arms around herself. “Nina...”

“Nina will have Miss Julia's bath ready,” said the elf, and she was gone with a pop.

“Deezie will ready Miss Alexandra's bath,” Deezie said, and disappeared an instant later.

“Go!” Ms. King said with amusement, waving a hand at the three girls. “Stop dripping on the carpet.”

As they went upstairs, Alexandra pointed her wand at herself, and said, “*Exaresco*.” Water turned to steam and rolled off of her, and Julia looked at her in surprise.

“I don't know that spell either!” she exclaimed. She pouted a little. “Perhaps I should be going to Charmbridge, too.”

“I didn't – a friend taught me this, outside of class,” Alexandra said.

“Oh.” Julia sighed. “I'm pretty sure Maximilian knew it, too.”

Alexandra looked down. Why hadn't she told Julia that Maximilian was the one who had taught it to her? Would Julia be jealous? Maximilian had taught Alexandra a lot of spells, things he'd never have wanted Julia to have to learn. It was easier to avoid going into that. As always, it was easier to avoid talking about Maximilian.

Drying Spell notwithstanding, she appreciated the hot bath even more that night. She and Julia sat up talking for a while after bathing, both wrapped in soft, fluffy robes. Nina was brushing and braiding Julia's hair, and Alexandra reluctantly allowed Deezie to brush hers, only because it seemed to make the elf so happy. With the two house-elves present, Alexandra didn't think Julia would press her about her family, or her feelings. They talked more about school, and their friends (Julia was particularly interested in hearing about Constance, Forbearance, and Innocence, as she had never actually met any Ozarkers), and a little about what they might do the next day if they were able to go to New Roanoke.

Alexandra was the first to yawn, and Deezie immediately declared that Miss was tired and should go to bed. Normally, Alexandra would have been annoyed, but this time, she agreed, with only token protests, before kissing Julia good-night and going off to her room.

Once in bed, and sure that Deezie was gone, she slipped out from under the covers, pulled a pair of pants and a shirt on over her pajamas, slipped her feet into her mud-repelling JROC boots, and grabbed her cloak and backpack. She sat at the desk in front of the bedroom window, and waited, resting her head on the folded-up cloak. She nodded off several times, despite the steady roll of thunder, and the lashing of rain against the window. But eventually, something caught her eye in the darkness.

Through the window and the sheets of rain, she saw a golden bubble of light bobbing up and down, like someone walking away from the house carrying a magical golden umbrella.

She stood up, rapidly tied her boot laces and fastened the cloak around herself, and looked around, just in case Deezie had decided to Apparate into her room to check on her. When there was no sign of the house-elf – she'd asked Deezie to please stay out of her room unless called, though she'd asked her so mildly, for fear of hurting the elf's feelings, that it had stopped short of being a command – she reached into her backpack, and took out Maximilian's Skyhook.

Then she pushed open the window. She grimaced at the wind that immediately whipped rain into her face – she was sure Deezie would have a fit.

At least I don't need to rely on doggerel verse this time, she thought, as she tossed the Skyhook out the window, and jerked on the rope. It caught on the empty air, and didn't budge when she pulled against it with all of her strength. Cautiously, she stepped onto the desk, then to the window sill, looked over her shoulder one more time, and then swung out into the rain.

It was cold and windy and wet, and she was immediately tossed and spun about as she dangled there

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in the air. Her plan to close the window from the outside immediately proved impossible; she was too far away from the window, and if she tried swinging towards it, she was afraid she'd just crash into it, or make a thump loud enough to alert the elves.

Can't do anything about that now. She slid down the rope to the ground, and then gave it a shake, the way Maximilian had taught her. The Skyhook came loose, and dropped to the ground at her feet. She coiled the rope and shoved it into the largest pocket in her cloak. She thought about trying to cast the Umbrella Charm, but she was already soaked after just minutes in the rain, and she didn't want to be seen.

Valeria was all the way down at the bottom of the hill now. Alexandra could see the glow of her Umbrella Charm disappearing into the trees, so she began running as fast as she dared down the slippery grass slope, determined to keep her sister in sight as she followed her into the woods.

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Alexandra had been here before. Last time, it had been Maximilian she'd followed into the woods. He'd been going to meet their father in the Thorn family crypt.

Only a couple of red lights blinked in the trees as Valeria passed beneath them – Alexandra guessed most of the clabberts had found somewhere to hide from the rain. By the time she reached the same spot, they had scattered. She saw no lights flashing down at her, but the rain was pouring so heavily that she could barely see the golden glow ahead of her through the trees. She was beginning to shiver – her cloak was waterproofed, but it didn't repel rain like an Umbrella Charm, and rain running down her neck had already soaked through her clothing. Her charmed boots kept her feet from sticking in the mud, but it was hard to keep up with someone she could barely see. The frequent flashes of lightning were of little help once they were into the woods. The only advantage she had was that Valeria couldn't hear or see her either.

Once off the path leading up to Croatoa, the woods became dense and overgrown, and passage was made that much worse by the weather. Alexandra wondered how Valeria was navigating them so easily. Perhaps she knew a spell to part brush before her. Alexandra wasn't so lucky – she almost lost sight of the golden light ahead of her, and then yelped as a branch she'd pushed out of the way snapped back and hit her in the face.

She stumbled away from the brambles, wiping at her face. That had stung. After blinking rainwater out of her eyes, she realized she could no longer see Valeria.

Cursing, she hurried her pace. She went around a large thicket, and then had to double back when she found her detour blocked by a deep but narrow ravine, which she almost stepped into. The other way around the thicket led down a short slope, at the bottom of which was a newly-formed stream. Alexandra walked along it until she could hike back uphill, where she again found herself facing a longer, wider ravine. She couldn't figure out how she had gotten here – it didn't look anything like the path to the Thorn family crypt, nor could she figure out which way Valeria had gone.

She thought she was being careful as she tried to work out where she'd gone wrong, but after another few minutes of stumbling around, she had to admit to herself that she'd gotten lost.

Stupid, stupid, stupid! She cursed herself, and once more wished that she hadn't left Charlie back at Charmbridge.

While she tried to reverse her course and find her way to somewhere recognizable, she continued berating herself. She'd left her Lost Traveler's Compass in her backpack; having been through these woods a couple of times, she hadn't thought she might get lost while following Valeria.

Lightning struck, only a dozen yards away. Startled, Alexandra dropped into a squat, almost falling over as she covered her ears. An instant later, a tree crashed to the ground, so close to her that its outermost branches shivered directly above her head.

The storm was showing no signs of weakening. She knew calling for help would do no good; the thunder and the rain would drown out any noise she made. There wasn't much point in trying to hide now, so she cast a Light Spell, as she stumbled to her feet. It made it easier to avoid tripping over roots and rocks, but she doubted anyone would see it.

The trees were becoming smaller and more stunted. She realized she must have completely bypassed the crypt, somehow, because the woods were beginning to look more like a marsh. When lightning flashed, she could see higher ground to her left, and what looked like more marshes to her right, so she began heading towards the rise on the left, and stepped into mud up to her knees.

This sucks, she thought, struggling to pull her boot free. If not for its Mud-Repelling Charm, she might have had to slip her foot out of the boot entirely. She was now utterly miserable – soaked through, shivering cold, lost, frustrated, and, though she wouldn't admit it yet, beginning to get just a little bit worried.

It's an island, she told herself. *How lost can you get?* She had to reach the ocean eventually, no matter which direction she went.

Bolstered by this thought, she almost didn't notice the tug at her ankle. When she looked down, she saw only some unusually bright green plants – certainly greener than one expected to find in November. She jerked her foot loose, and continued heading away from the marsh behind her. There were more plants in her path, and as she continued walking, they tangled around her feet some more. Her steps slowed at first, and then after a few more yards, she found herself being seriously impeded. Thinking that she might be getting caught in a tangle of vines, she pointed her wand at the ground, to shine a light on the vegetation – and saw dozens of small, hinged mouths lined with little teeth gaping at her.

She jumped with a startled yell, and more mouths snapped at her feet. Some were already attached to her boots. She stepped back, pulling away from them, and they came loose with a ripping sound. Everywhere she stepped, more toothy plants were snapping at her, sinking their teeth into her boots and her cloak. She curled her lip as she kept trying to back out of the sinister patch of plants, and then a much larger shape rose up at her – another large, hinged mouth, gaping wide enough to close around her head.

“Flagration!” she yelled, pointing her wand, and a jet of fire engulfed the plant and turned it into a withered black stem in an instant, but more mouths attached to thick ropy tendrils were popping up and snaking towards her, wide open and hungry. Alexandra frantically backpedaled away from them, throwing more Conflagration Spells, and then she felt both her feet sink into something soft and spongy. Abruptly, she was in mud past her knees, and when she struggled to find something solid to push against, she fell backwards with a squelch. The ground was sticky and viscous and sucked at her as she tried to right herself. She was in it up to her chest before she realized what it was.

Quicksand! Don't panic! Don't panic! she told herself, feeling herself very close to doing just that. She tried to hold her breath and not move.

The carnivorous plants lining the quicksand didn't seem able to reach her; they just bobbed there at the edge of the pit. When she didn't move, she didn't sink. But she was helpless, and had no idea how to get out.

What a stupid way to get yourself killed, she thought.

She began trying to think of magic that might save her, but for all the spells Maximilian had taught her, apparently neither he nor Charmbridge Academy had foreseen the need to escape from quicksand. She had no broom, even if she thought a Summoning Charm would summon one all the way from the house. She wished she could conjure furniture out of thin air, as she'd seen some teachers do – a ladder would be very handy right now. She was sure there was some spell that would turn quicksand solid. But spells she didn't know were useless to her.

Her cloak felt heavy around her, as if it were about to entangle her and drag her under. She began trying to shrug her way out of it, and felt something in one of the pockets.

The Skyhook!

Carefully, she slid her hand into the pocket, trying to move without sinking further into the quicksand, and withdrew the Skyhook.

She was in a terrible position to cast a line. She raised her arm up as high as she could, and began

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swinging the hook around, letting out more rope until it was spinning in a tight circle around her. Even that motion made her rock back and forth slightly, and she could feel herself slipping a little deeper into the quicksand.

She held her breath, and then changed the direction of her spin and hurled the hook straight up, as hard as she could using only the strength in her arm. The effort caused her to sink a few inches further into the quicksand, and for a moment she almost panicked, when she felt it slide past her neck. She



pulled on the rope, and gasped in relief when it held.

She finished shedding her cloak and thrust her wand under her shirt, and then began pulling herself hand over hand up the rope. It was hard, especially once she had pulled herself free up to her waist – the quicksand clung to her and tried to suck her back under, and she knew she had to move slowly and carefully, without kicking or struggling. She was shivering cold, her fingers were numb, and the rope was wet – it was slow, painful, and difficult. Several times she slipped back down the rope.

Eventually, she dragged herself up to the Skyhook – which had seemed much higher when she was pulling herself up the rope, but was in fact only about five feet above the surface of the pit. Her feet were still in the quicksand as she dangled there.

For a moment, she was grateful for all those cold mornings Ms. Shirtliffe had forced the JROC to run, crawl, jump, and climb ropes. But she didn't have any strength left. She didn't know how long she could hang there, dangling over a quicksand pit, surrounded by carnivorous plants. She thought about trying to curl her body to lift her legs up, and then swing her way to the edge of the pit, but that would only land her right into the midst of all those toothy plants.

She closed her eyes, willing herself not to panic and not to despair. It wasn't easy. And then a bright light shined in her face, and she heard a voice call, "Alexandra?"

She opened her eyes. Someone was out there in the marsh, shining a beam of light from a wand.

"Stars above!" exclaimed another voice, much closer. "However did you get yourself into this predicament, girl?"

Alexandra turned her head, and saw a witch wearing long, brocaded robes and a bonnet, much fancier than those Constance and Forbearance wore, standing on the quicksand as if it were solid earth. It took a moment, as Alexandra blinked and shook her head a little, to realize that she could see through her – the witch was a ghost. More ghostly figures were now drifting through the vegetation surrounding the quicksand pit, to line up at its edge and stare at her.

"Alexandra!" called Valeria, from the other side of the quicksand pit and the plant patch, trying to shout over the rain and the thunder.

"Watch out for the plants!" Alexandra yelled back, though her voice was so hoarse that she wasn't sure Valeria could hear her.

One of the ghosts went gliding back towards Valeria, then returned and floated out over the quicksand to stand in front of Alexandra. He became almost invisible when lightning flashed behind him. He was wearing a uniform and carrying a sword – Alexandra remembered him, from her previous visits to Croatoa, though she didn't know his name.

"Can you hold very tightly onto that rope for another minute?" he asked. "Do not let go, no matter what."

"Ok-kay," she stammered.

He nodded, and retreated across the pit. Alexandra wanted to ask what was going on, but then she heard Valeria shout, "*Accio Skyhook!*"

The Skyhook shot through the air. It pulled Alexandra with it, jerking her feet out of the quicksand and then dragging her along the wet, muddy ground, right through the carnivorous plants. She yelled and kicked as they snapped at her. Some of them clamped onto her arms and legs, then were torn free of their stalks and dragged along with her. She came to an abrupt halt at Valeria's feet, still holding onto the rope. She looked up, to see her sister standing there staring down at her, holding the Skyhook in one hand and her wand in the other. Above her head, her golden Umbrella Charm was warding off the pounding rain.

"Merlin and Circe!" Valeria said. "What are you doing out here?"

"W-what are y-you d-doing out here?" Alexandra replied. Her teeth chattered. She let go of the rope, groaning with relief.

Valeria knelt and helped her to her feet. Several toothy plants were clinging to Alexandra; she felt so numb, she thought perhaps she just couldn't feel whether or not they'd actually drawn blood, and so was a little startled when Valeria simply pulled them off of her and threw them on the ground.

"What were you thinking, Alexandra?" Valeria asked. "Don't you know these woods are dangerous?"

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"You went alone," Alexandra said. "And I've been here b-before." She saw that ghosts were gathering all around them, watching the two witches with curiosity and disapproval.

"I had a guide," Valeria said. "Our Great-Great-Uncle Joshua."

The uniformed ghost bowed slightly and tipped his wide-brimmed hat. "Joshua Norwood Thorn," he said, in a soft voice. "We met before, Alexandra." He looked younger than the other ghosts – he appeared to have died when he was barely Valeria's age.

"I r-remember," Alexandra mumbled. "Where's our great-great-great-?"

"Pacifying the Red savages," Joshua Thorn said.

"I'll go tell him that his descendants are safe and returning to the crypt," said one of the female ghosts, with incongruous cheer. She was elderly, like most of the ghosts, but she was barefoot and bareheaded, with her ghostly gray hair spilling down over her shoulders, which were covered only in a nightgown. None of the other ghosts seemed scandalized by this, nor by the conspicuous bloody wound in the center of her chest.

"Thank you, Hecuba," Joshua said, and the ghost in the nightgown flew off into the night.

Valeria shook her head. "You tried to follow me, didn't you?"

"Yes." Alexandra didn't see any point in lying. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. Valeria put an arm around her.

"It's a good thing one of the Indians spotted you," Valeria said. "You're a very foolish girl!"

"An Indian ghost told you where I was?"

"They were watching you," her Great-Great-Uncle Joshua said. "They told us a living girl had strayed into their territory. Speaking of which, we must leave now – we're breaching the treaty by being in their territory ourselves."

"Is that why they didn't warn me I was about to walk into a patch of man-eating plants?" Alexandra muttered, as they began walking.

Valeria chuckled. "Giant flytraps aren't really very dangerous, unless you panic and let them herd you into quicksand or a ravine." But then her humor vanished. "Why were you following me, Alexandra?"

"I... thought you were going to the Thorn family crypt."

"I was. That doesn't answer my question."

"Why were you going there?"

Valeria turned her head to look at her. "I think you should be answering my questions right now, Alexandra."

They began treading up a soggy hill, and Valeria had to let go of Alexandra to keep her footing; Alexandra, despite her recent ordeal, was more nimble and in better shape than Valeria, and she held a hand out a couple of times to help her sister up the slope.

"Do be careful, my dears," said another ghost, this one wearing traditional wizard robes and sporting an enormous handlebar mustache and a Faustian beard.

"I'm fine, Great-Great-Grandfather," Valeria replied. "Thank you for your concern." She smiled at the ghost, then turned her attention back to Alexandra. "Well?" she demanded.

"I thought you were meeting with our father," Alexandra said.

Valeria stared at her, and didn't say anything for a few minutes, as they reached the top of the hill. There was a dense thicket of trees blocking their way, but the ghosts led them through, finding spaces between the trees that corporeal hikers could navigate. Soon, a familiar-looking stone edifice rose before them.

Alexandra didn't understand how she'd gotten so lost – she'd been within shouting distance of the

Thorn family crypt all along.

Shouting distance, if anyone could hear me, she thought, as lightning flashed overhead and thunder roared across the island. She was still soaked to the skin, despite Valeria's spell keeping the worst of the downpour off of them. They walked to the front of the crypt, and then Valeria turned to face her, as half a dozen ghosts gathered around them.

"Why would you think I was meeting Father here?" Valeria asked. She shook her head. "I haven't spoken to him since before the Roanoke Underhill crash."

"Maximilian met Abraham here," Joshua Thorn said quietly. Both witches turned to look at the ghost, whose disapproving gaze was fixed on Alexandra. "She followed him into the woods, much as she followed you. Though she wasn't following him in a thunderstorm."

Valeria pursed her lips. "You shouldn't have done that."

They entered the crypt. Valeria dispelled her Umbrella Charm, and then cast a Light Spell. Alexandra lit her own wand to add to Valeria's light, and looked around, now shivering not just from the cold.

There it was, on a flat gray stone that was newer than the rest, set in a niche close to the entrance: *In Memoriam*. The words inscribed by Ms. King above the name of her son: Maximilian Alexander Thorn.

Valeria stepped behind her, and laid a hand on her shoulder. They stood there silently for a few moments, as several other ghosts drifted in, and then Valeria said, "Let's see if we can warm you up a little. Triss?"

With a pop, the elderly house-elf appeared, standing on the floor of the crypt holding a silver tray with hot coffee, a glass of warm milk, freshly-baked donuts, bacon, and sliced apple wedges. The delicious aroma was completely out of place here, but Alexandra's mouth began to water. Triss was trembling in fear and kept her eyes firmly fixed on the floor.

"It's all right, Triss," Valeria said gently. "Our ancestors have kindly given permission for us to seek refuge here."

"You don't m-m-mind us e-eating h-here?" Alexandra asked. Her teeth were still chattering, as she stood there in soaking wet clothes, caked with mud.

She remembered that one of the things Simon Grayson had complained about in his book was the thoughtless way in which the living enjoyed food in the presence of ghosts, who could no longer do so. At the time, she'd thought Grayson was being a little ridiculous, but the incorporeal witches and wizards were gazing at the tray full of food with longing, and Alexandra thought that coming into their 'home' to eat did seem a little inconsiderate.

"Under the circumstances," said the older ghost whom Valeria had called Great-Great-Grandfather, "we are prepared to make allowances."

"Speaking of which," Valeria said, "did you bring some clean clothes for Alexandra, Triss?"

"Yes, Miss Valeria," Triss mumbled. She seemed to be trying not to look anywhere near the ghosts, as she set the tray down atop a stone sarcophagus, and Alexandra saw that the elf had been holding a change of clothes – *her* clothes – neatly folded under the tray.

The only thing Alexandra wanted more than that coffee and a donut was warm clothing. The prospect of changing in front of her dead ancestors, however, kept her from reaching for the latter.

"Jared," said one of the witches in a bonnet and robes, "I do believe we should allow your great-great-granddaughter some privacy."

The ghost with the handlebar mustache and pointed beard nodded. "Very well, Leola." He nodded to the other ghosts, and they began drifting back out of the crypt. "Please cover yourself quickly – you know how Grandfather feels about his descendants using our crypt for their own convenience."

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"We are sorry," Valeria said.

"Yeah, s-sorry," muttered Alexandra. She was already taking a cup of coffee from the tray, and slurped it eagerly, despite the fact that it was hot enough to burn her tongue. Her stomach growled as the aroma of bacon and donuts reached her nostrils; she was very hungry, she realized.

"Thank you so much, Triss," Valeria said. The house-elf relaxed a tiny bit after the ghosts were gone, but still looked tense and anxious. Her expression when she gazed up at Valeria, however, was one of adoration.

"It is Triss's pleasure to serve Miss," the house-elf said.

Valeria smiled, a little uncomfortably. "You may return to the house, now. Don't worry about us – we'll be back before you left."

"Yes, Miss Valeria," Triss said. Valeria took the house-elf's hands in hers and squeezed them gently. Triss looked as if she might collapse in a puddle of tears right there. Then she disappeared with a pop.

"I'm very uncomfortable with house-elf servants," Valeria said.

Alexandra nodded. She was now shivering so much that she was hardly paying attention to what Valeria said. Her sister turned away as Alexandra peeled off her clothes, letting them hit the stone floor of the crypt with a wet slap. Triss had brought a warm, fluffy towel, some underclothes, a nightgown, and a thick robe. Alexandra wiped the rain and mud off of herself as best she could, and then changed into the clean clothes. It was still miserably cold in the crypt, but Valeria took a jar out of her robes and conjured a blue fireball in it. She set it next to Alexandra, where it radiated a bit of heat; Alexandra held her hands over it and shivered.

"Well," Valeria said. "I don't appreciate your spying on me, Alexandra, nor your following me, not least because you nearly got yourself killed. If Deezie hadn't checked on you and found your window left open –"

"So Deezie already knows I'm gone?" Alexandra groaned. "She'll tell Julia and her mother for sure."

"No. I talked the elves into letting me bring you back."

"Wait a minute." As the fire and the coffee began to warm Alexandra's body, she began thinking about what had just happened. "I was right behind you! I wasn't lost in the woods that long! How did you go all the way back to the house and find me missing and then go looking for me?" She looked down at the food Triss had brought them. "Why are we sitting here? Why don't we go back to the house? Wait – how did Triss know to bring food and clothes?"

A crack of lightning lit up the entrance of the crypt, and something large and heavy fell with a crash, just outside. Valeria didn't look startled at all.

"You are too clever for your own good," Valeria said. "And much too curious. We'll go back to the house shortly, after we straighten out a few things." She took a deep breath. "Can you keep a secret, Alexandra?"

Alexandra swallowed the rest of her donut, and set down her coffee cup, very slowly.

"I've kept lots of secrets," she said.

Valeria regarded Alexandra thoughtfully. "Yes, I imagine you have." She looked towards the entrance to the crypt. "I didn't come here to meet Father. I came here to meet our Great-Great-Great-Grandfather Absalom."

"I've met him. Why would you have to meet our ancestors' ghosts in secret?"

"Because I don't want the Bureau of Historical Oversight to know what I'm researching, or how. And I'd rather not distress Julia or her mother – I'm not sure how they'd feel about my being here."

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. "So you're lecturing me, when you've been up to something yourself!" Valeria narrowed her eyes in return, but the corners of her mouth turned up a bit.

"I did want to see you and Julia, and Ms. King," she said. "Truly, I did. But I had an ulterior motive in coming to Croatoa. We planned this trip, you see, since the Meteorologimancy Department predicted this storm –"

"We?"

"The *Academie de Magie*, where I work."

Alexandra's face showed her confusion.

"My job is to study history, Alexandra. Especially history that's hard to uncover by reading old letters and censuses. There are some very interesting stories hidden in the founding of the Confederation, and Absalom Thorn played a key role in some of them."

Alexandra picked up the coffee cup again, and let it warm her hands a bit, before she sipped from it.

"You came to Croatoa so you could ask Absalom Thorn about history?"

"Absalom and some of our other ancestors. But I also came to observe history." Valeria had been watching Alexandra carefully, and when Alexandra didn't say anything immediately, she got up from where she'd been sitting, on a stone shelf running along the inner wall of the crypt, and moved to sit next to the younger girl.

"You need to keep this a secret, Alexandra," she said. "I'm only showing it to you because, thanks to your misadventure in the woods, I need to... fix things, to avoid letting anyone else know. But this is something that could get me into a great deal of trouble."

"I won't say anything," Alexandra said, very seriously.

Valeria opened her hand, to reveal a very fine, gold pocket watch, with several extra dials.

"What is it?" Alexandra asked.

Valeria smiled slightly. "I think you already know."

Alexandra nodded slowly, staring at the pocket watch.

"A Time-Turner," she whispered.

Chapter 16 — The Time-Turner

“So, right now, there's another you out there walking around in the woods, turning back time?” Alexandra asked.

She had wolfed down the rest of the bacon, and now she was much more alert as she held the cup of warm milk in her hands. It was still cold in the crypt, despite Valeria's jar of blue flames, so she drank the milk and tried not to shiver, while lightning continued to flash outside and the rain kept coming down in torrents.

“Not another me,” Valeria said. “It *is* me. I returned to Croatoa just before dawn, and Triss told me that you'd followed me into the woods.” Valeria shook her head, as she took the next-to-last donut and broke it in half.

Even as she had been following Valeria into the woods, Valeria had been following *her* – Alexandra's brow wrinkled, as she tried to work out the logic. “So if you used the Time-Turner to go back in time to a little after I left, so you could find me, why didn't you just go back to right after you left, so you could catch me following you and prevent me from going in the first place?” The nuances of time travel were still confusing, but all the reading she'd done about Time-Turners was finally proving useful.

Valeria swallowed a bite of her donut. “I was hoping I'd be able to find you quickly and get you back to the house without you realizing what was going on. I didn't want you to know I had a Time-Turner. But if you had just seen me walking into the woods, and then I caught you going out the door –” Valeria smiled ruefully. “I remembered you asking about Time-Turners earlier. I think you'd have figured it out.”

Alexandra smiled and nodded. “So you were going to try to catch me in the woods.”

“Yes.” Valeria sighed. “But unfortunately, I didn't know exactly where you would be at exactly what time, and I had to err on the side of caution, to avoid any chance of meeting myself. So you'd already managed to get yourself lost and wander into the marsh by the time I caught up to you.”

“Why is it so bad to meet yourself?” Alexandra thought meeting herself would be pretty weird, but it also sounded rather cool.

Valeria, however, shook her head gravely. “It's the most important rule of time travel. You cannot change what has already happened – that's the first law of temporal magic. Any meeting with yourself would change your own past. Only bad things can happen when you force yourself into an impossibility.”

“Why can't you change the past?”

“Because it's impossible.”

“*Why* is it impossible? That doesn't make any sense!”

“Spend years and years studying it, and learn what's happened when people have tried.” Valeria considered the uneaten half of her donut, and set it down with an unhappy sigh. “You're just going to have to take my word for it.”

Alexandra folded her arms. “Why did you keep the Time-Turner a secret?”

“Besides the fact that I have two curious younger sisters?” Valeria gave her a bemused look, but her tone was serious. “Time-Turners are very strictly regulated. I'm breaking Confederation law by smuggling one into the country. If the Auror Authority or the Bureau of Historical Oversight found out, they'd confiscate it, which would be highly embarrassing for the *Academie*, and as for me, well, I'm sure they wouldn't be at all happy about a daughter of Abraham Thorn digging into Confederation history with a Time-Turner.”

“What is it you're trying to find out about that's so secret?”

Valeria lowered her voice. “The Deathly Regiment.”

She seemed about to say more, but then another voice interrupted: “Speak no more of this, Valeria.”

Alexandra turned, to see Absalom Thorn drifting through the entrance to their refuge. He was the oldest ghost who haunted the Thorn family crypt, and he looked exactly as he had last time, the epitome of an Old Colonial wizard, in long, heavy robes, a pointed, wide-brimmed wizard's hat, and a beard that reached down to his chest. His grandson and great-grandson, Jared and Joshua Thorn, accompanied him.

“The circumstances of my death are inappropriate to discuss with Abraham's youngest daughter, who is already troublesome enough.” Absalom Thorn looked at Alexandra disapprovingly.

“Or with any of his daughters, for all that you've been willing to tell me, Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather,” Valeria said.

“I have shown you the places you wished to see. I have told you the dates.”

“But none of the details.” Valeria opened her mouth, glanced at Alexandra, and closed it. “You're right. I beg your pardon.”

Alexandra said, “You joined the Deathly Regiment?” She remembered the phrase from old wizarding obituaries, and she was annoyed that Valeria and Absalom Thorn had decided she was too young to hear about it.

To her surprise, the Thorn patriarch's expression became even grimmer than before, and he sounded angry as he replied, “No, I died fighting the Deathly Regiment. And that *will* be enough, great-granddaughter of my great-grandson.”

He sounded rather like her father when he spoke like that. Alexandra didn't like it, but after bristling for a moment, she forced herself to speak in something approximating a respectful tone of voice. “Can you tell me where Maximilian is now, Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather?”

Valeria looked startled, as did the Thorn ghosts. Before Absalom Thorn could reply, Alexandra said, “I know you told the Special Inquisitors that he passed beyond. But I thought...” A wistful note crept into her voice. “I thought maybe you might not tell them if he were here...”

Her great-great-great-great-grandfather drifted over to where she was standing, and gazed down at her.

“We told the Inquisitors the truth,” he said, in as gentle a tone as she'd ever heard from the old ghost. “Maximilian is not here; he is nowhere to be found in this world. Of all my descendants, Alexandra, only a bare few have joined me in refusing to pass on.”

Alexandra felt a crushing sense of disappointment. After standing there for a few moments, she turned to Valeria, who was watching her silently.

“Now what?” Alexandra asked.

“Now,” Valeria said, putting an arm around her, “I am going to take you back to the house. And then I am going to take us both back in time, to just after you went out the window to follow me. I'll talk to the house-elves and prevent them from having conniptions, and I'll ask Deezie to draw you a nice hot bath, which you will take, and then you will go to bed. And we'll both get a good night's sleep despite having already been up half the night and you nearly drowning in quicksand. And *if* you cooperate, and promise to keep your mouth shut, then possibly tomorrow I'll tell you more about Time-Turners, and being a Historicist.”

Alexandra shivered in anticipation at the thought of a hot bath. And though she didn't want to admit it, she was now very tired, and she couldn't think of anything else to say either to Valeria or to her ghostly ancestors. So she nodded.

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“Good.” Valeria squeezed her shoulders. She turned to the ghosts. “I hope I can trust in your discretion also, my forefathers?”

“We never tell the Inquisitors anything they don't already know,” said Joshua Thorn.

“Nor will we disturb Thalia or Julia with tales of your inquiries,” Absalom Thorn said. “Have a care, Valeria. You tread dangerous paths, with or without that... device.” He pointed disdainfully at the Time-Turner in Valeria's hand.

“I'm just seeking to uncover the truth of history,” Valeria said. She looked at Alexandra. “Ready? I'm too tired to do any more hiking, so I'm going to Apparate us both back to the house. Have you ever ridden Side-Along?”

Alexandra shook her head. “No, but I've traveled by Portkey.”

“This won't be as bad as that,” Valeria said. “Unless I'm so tired that I splinch us.”

Alexandra wasn't sure whether Valeria was joking, but she barely remembered to stop holding her breath, before Valeria thrust the Time-Turner into her pocket and gripped her wand. In another instant, they were both squeezed into a dark tunnel that seemed to twist them in half for a moment, and then Alexandra was standing with Valeria in the living room of the King mansion. The large grandfather clock said that it was almost four in the morning, and Deezie and Triss were both standing there, waiting expectantly.

“Miss Alexandra!” Deezie squeaked. “Oh, Miss Alexandra should not have gone out into the nasty wet rain like that, and following Miss Valeria...” She shook her head, looking very distressed, but Valeria held up a finger to her lips.

“Shh,” she said. “Let's not wake up Ms. King.”

Deezie clapped her hands over her mouth. Triss just nodded.

“As you can see, everything has turned out all right,” Valeria whispered. “I told you it would, didn't I?”

The two house-elves both nodded.

“I would never ask you to lie to your mistress,” Valeria continued. “But no one has been harmed – we just went on a little adventure, and now we're back safe and sound.”

“Yes,” Triss said, a little dubiously.

“Of course you'll tell her if she should happen to ask if anything happened last night,” Valeria said soothingly. “But there's no need for you to bring it up, is there?”

Alexandra watched the two elves carefully, worried that a twitch or a grimace might indicate that they were on the verge of punishing themselves, for contemplating disobedience against their mistress. But after considering Valeria's plea, Triss and Deezie both shook their heads.

“We supposes Miss Valeria is free to come and go as she pleases,” Triss whispered. She turned to regard Alexandra, with her wide eyes narrowing a bit. “But Miss Alexandra is too young for such 'adventures'...”

Valeria said, “But she was with me.”

After another moment, the elves nodded.

“We wasn't asked to tell Mistress everything her guests do or when they comes and goes,” Triss said.

“But we isn't liking it very much,” Deezie moaned, pulling on her ears a little.

“Alexandra promises she's going to behave herself and stay in bed like she's supposed to. Don't you, Alexandra?”

Valeria nudged her, and Alexandra cleared her throat. “Yeah.”

“And you can go check on her right now, since she's already there,” Valeria said.

“Yes, Miss Valeria.” Deezie nodded, and then disappeared with a pop.

“Thank you so much, Triss,” Valeria said, and leaned forward to give Triss a kiss on the top of her broad, domed head. Triss wrung her hands together, almost tucked her face into her shoulder, and did something Alexandra had never seen an elf do before – she blushed a deep red.

Alexandra looked upstairs. At this moment, *she* was up there, sleeping in her bed – even as she stood here now. And if she understood Valeria correctly, Valeria herself was simultaneously standing next to her, sleeping in her own bed in the room down the hall, *and* still outside in the woods, trying to pry information out of Absalom Thorn. It was all quite confusing, but she pushed that out of her mind as Valeria stood up and took the Time-Turner out of her pocket.

“Hold onto me, Alexandra,” Valeria said.

Alexandra obediently wrapped her fingers around Valeria's arm, but her eyes were fixed on the Time-Turner. She watched very carefully as Valeria pushed a tiny latch with her thumbnail, then pulled on one of the dials, which extended a fraction of an inch from the rim of the pocket watch with a little click. Valeria then began gently turning the dial between her thumb and forefinger – and Alexandra *felt* something, though she wasn't sure precisely what.

Triss disappeared in the blink of an eye, and the lamps went dim, but otherwise all Alexandra could see was a slight blur wherever she looked, until she glanced at the grandfather clock, and saw its hands spinning backwards at great speed. Then she looked back at the Time-Turner again. Valeria gave the dial several more turns, and stopped. Everything settled into focus again, and they were alone in a darkened living room. The grandfather clock said it was half past midnight – not long after she had opened her bedroom window and jumped out, swinging on the Skyhook.

“Now,” Valeria said, “we have to Apparate into your room; otherwise I have to explain the situation to the portraits in the hallway, and I'm not sure they'll be as cooperative as the house-elves.”

“You really thought this out,” Alexandra murmured.

“Historicists have to. It's vital that we know exactly where and when we are at all times – literally.” Valeria took Alexandra's arm.

This time, the Side-Along Apparition trip was a brief squeeze, and then Alexandra was standing in her bedroom, in front of a horrified Deezie, who looked as if she were just about to go running out of the room screaming. A crack of thunder reverberated loudly throughout the house, but especially through the open window. Rain had already begun to soak the desk in front of it.

“Miss Alexandra!” Deezie exclaimed. “Miss Valeria! What –?”

“Shh,” Valeria said, putting a finger to her lips. “Let's not wake Julia.”

“But-but-but-” the house-elf sputtered, and then Valeria shook her head.

“Deezie, I think Alexandra would appreciate it very much if you would draw her a hot bath. And then, if you would be so kind as to meet me downstairs? I will explain everything to you and Triss and the other house-elves, I promise, and I'll put your mind at ease. Will you do that for me, please?”

Deezie stared at the two witches, and then bobbed her head up and down.

Valeria pointed her wand at the open window, and it closed with a sharp bang that made her wince.

“Ooh, Miss Alexandra is shivering!” Deezie moaned. “Deezie will make a bath for her, snap-snap-snap!” She ran into the bathroom, and Alexandra heard water pouring into the tub.

Valeria turned to her. “I want your word, Alexandra – on your witch's honor, you'll stay here and go to bed after taking your bath. No more running around or causing trouble, and keep quiet about this. We'll talk tomorrow.”

Though she was consumed with curiosity, and other thoughts, she was also dead tired. Alexandra nodded. “On my witch's honor,” she said. “Unless there's a fire or something. I mean, I'd have to leave my room th –”

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Valeria snorted, and patted Alexandra's cheek. "This isn't a magical oath, Alexandra. I'm trusting you to keep the spirit of your word, not the letter." She yawned, and then closed her eyes, concentrated briefly, and vanished.

It was more difficult than usual for Alexandra to get Deezie to leave her alone before she took her bath. She almost fell asleep soaking in the hot water. When she got out, she found her pajamas hanging on the door for her, freshly laundered, and the covers of her bed were turned down. Alexandra slipped into bed, and lay there, listening to the storm that was still thundering outside. She glanced at the clock – it was just a little after one a.m., but she felt as if she'd been up all night.

She *had* been up all night. And right now, she was still out there, getting lost in the woods, even as she lay safely back in bed.

Valeria's wrong, she thought. She saved me by going back in time.

She couldn't work out all the implications in her head, but she held onto that thought as she drifted off to sleep.



The next morning, Alexandra thought all of the house-elves were watching her and Valeria more closely than usual. Valeria greeted everyone cheerfully at breakfast, as if nothing had happened the previous night, and only raised her eyebrows briefly at Alexandra. Alexandra nodded back at her, and then they were caught up in discussing the proposed trip to New Roanoke. The worst of the storm had passed, but it was still raining quite heavily, with occasional flashes of lightning.

"I don't like crossing the ocean during a thunderstorm," Ms. King said.

"But the carriage is charmed against lightning!" Julia said. "And Valeria knows a marvelous rain-repelling spell!"

"Why can't we just Apparate there?" Alexandra asked. "I mean, me and Julia could Side-Along with you and Ms. King."

"Mother doesn't Apparate," Julia murmured.

"It's true." Ms. King sipped her coffee. "They didn't teach Apparition when I attended Salem, and after I graduated, I just never found reason to learn."

"In any case, we can't Apparate across that much open water," Valeria said.

Ms. King nodded. "It's one of the reasons I stay here at Croatoa – it's more difficult for Aurors and Inquisitors to drop in on us unexpectedly." She sighed. "It's really not the best weather for shopping, Julia."

"It's wonderful weather for enjoying hot chocolate and croissants at Astoria's," Julia said. She looked at her mother, and asked, more gently, "Have you left the island at all since May, other than to pick us up, Mother?"

Alexandra didn't think Julia would win, but to her surprise, Ms. King relented. "There are some things I've been putting off," she said. "Now that you are my only surviving child, Julia, I need to make some changes in my will and certain trusts. We'll need to visit the CBNW for that."

Julia nodded, and became much more somber until they actually left the house, an hour later.

Mr. Hunter was grumbling about the weather as well, looking up at the sky as he brought the Thestral and the carriage around to the front of the house.

"The carriage is charmed against lightning, but not wind and waves," he pointed out. "If it gets too stormy, you'll be stuck in town."

"We'll be fine, Samuel," Ms. King said.

"The storm will be gone by the afternoon," Valeria said.

Alexandra glanced at Valeria, thinking about the previous night, and then climbed into the back seat

next to Julia.

Valeria extended her golden Umbrella Charm to cover the entire carriage, but the wind was still cold and bitter, especially once they reached the beach and began trotting across the waves, so Alexandra and Julia huddled together beneath their heavy robes and cloaks, talking about what stores they would visit.

Julia insisted that Alexandra was not 'dressing her age.' Alexandra was willing to let Julia drag her to robe and Body Charm shops, and she was even willing to pretend to enjoy it, if it would make Julia happy, but inwardly, she chafed; not so much because she didn't share Julia's enthusiasm for feminine frills, but because she really wanted to talk to Valeria, and she didn't see how she was going to get an opportunity to do so.

New Roanoke didn't look as picturesque as on their last visit, mainly because it was drenched in gray sheets of rain. Lamps and magical lights glowed invitingly from the storefronts lining the wizarding town's main street, but only a few witches and wizards were out and about; most were using some sort of rain-repelling charm like Valeria's, though a few carried plain old umbrellas.

Ms. King, with some reluctance, allowed Julia and Alexandra to set off on their own to explore robe shops and book stores. Valeria informed them that she had some shopping of her own to do, and everyone agreed to meet at Astoria's at noon.

They spent a great deal of time at Glinda's Good Witch Apparel, where they had bought robes for the Spring Cotillion, months earlier. Alexandra was pleased that the Muggle-born proprietor, Glinda Parker, remembered them, and did not seem fazed by having two daughters of Abraham Thorn in her shop.

"I need something for the Salem-Plymouth Yule Ball," Julia informed Ms. Parker. She looked expectantly at Alexandra. "Surely you have balls at Charmbridge, too?"

"A winter ball, which I'm not going to," Alexandra said. "And if I were, I could use the same formal robe I wore to the Cotillion."

"Nonsense! You must have grown three inches since then!"

"Not even."

Alexandra had no desire to try on robes again, nor did she have the money to purchase them, but Julia pushed her to try on a few outfits with her, and Alexandra relented, to make her sister happy. Only Julia bought something, though – an elaborate periwinkle blue robe with wide, sweeping sleeves and a modest, high-necked collar.

"I didn't only want to go shopping," Julia told her, as they emerged from Glinda's into the rain, both trying to put Umbrella Charms over themselves as they walked across the street. "New Roanoke's magibotanical gardens are famous, and there's the Aerodrome, and a theater, and the Tobacco Guild..." She sighed as thunder rumbled overhead, and the rain, which had tapered off to a drizzle, became another downpour. "But I suppose we'll have to see all that some other day."

The one shop Alexandra did enjoy browsing was Boxley's Books, which was smaller than the one in Chicago, but had a local interest section. Alexandra picked up a book about the Blacksburg Magery Institute, and another book titled *The Ghosts of Roanoke*. Purchasing the two books used up the last of her spending money.

Julia and Alexandra arrived at Astoria's just after noon, shaking the cold and the rain off as they entered the lovely cafe, which had a large glass bay overlooking the beach. Ms. King and Valeria were already sitting there, looking out across the choppy gray water.

Alexandra had hot chocolate with a chocolate croissant. She had never tasted anything so delicious; she could see why even on a rainy day like this, Astoria's was crowded. She only realized belatedly, as

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she looked around, that the other patrons were staring at the four witches sitting together by the window, but hastily averted their eyes whenever Alexandra or her sisters looked in their direction.

"Never mind them," Ms. King said softly. Alexandra studied Julia's face; she looked composed and indifferent. Valeria sighed as she drank her coffee.

As they finished their food, Ms. King laid her hand on Julia's. "I need to take Julia to the bank. There are certain matters that must be taken care of."

Julia looked down, and Ms. King squeezed her hand, then looked at Alexandra and Valeria. "I don't mean to exclude you, my dears, but this will not be a cheerful errand, and it will also be quite tedious. There's no reason to drag you along. Would it be a terrible imposition if I suggested that you two stay here, or perhaps visit some other stores, while Julia and I attend to this business?"

"Not at all, Ms. King," Valeria replied.

"I don't mind, if Julia doesn't," Alexandra said, watching her other sister.

Julia looked up and smiled at her. "Of course I don't mind." She leaned over and gave Alexandra a kiss on the cheek. "Mother is right – it will be terribly boring. I wish I didn't have to go myself."

Dour looks and mutters followed them as they made their way to the front of the cafe. Alexandra tried to imitate Ms. King and Julia's erect, heads-held-high postures.

"I have a little more shopping to do," Valeria said. "And then perhaps Alexandra and I will just take a walk on the beach, if that's all right." She held her wand up as they stepped outside, and said, "*Paraplivia*," summoning a golden shield against the rain. She winked at Alexandra. "I think my Umbrella Charm will keep the rain off of us. Shall we meet back at this corner?"

"Very well," Ms. King said. "Don't take a very long walk – we'll try not to be too long."

Alexandra and Valeria watched the Kings ride off in the carriage, and then Valeria took Alexandra by the arm.

"Someone needs a new cloak," she said, nodding at Alexandra's wet outer robe.

Alexandra didn't say anything, as Valeria walked with her into yet another clothing store, this one selling more utilitarian robes and cloaks and hats, but as she began trying on rainproof cloaks, she said, "I spent all the money I had on books."

"This is a gift from me," Valeria said.

Alexandra found a cloak she liked – a dark red one. An old witch with a weathered, humorless face and a plain, black robe that matched her eyes accepted Valeria's payment with the thinnest of polite smiles. She looked at Alexandra's jeans and sneakers, visible beneath the hem of her robes, with evident disapproval. The proprietor's hair was covered with a black shawl, and Alexandra suspected she didn't approve of Valeria's floral-patterned robe, makeup charms, or uncovered hair any more than she approved of Alexandra's Muggle wear.

As they left the store, Valeria slipped something into the pocket of Alexandra's new cloak. It was heavy and made a slight bulge.

"I thought you should have that back," Valeria whispered in her ear, as Alexandra slipped her hand into the cloak pocket and found the Skyhook. "But no more sneaking out of your room at night – agreed?"

Alexandra nodded. "When are you going to tell me what you promised to tell me about?"

"One more stop," Valeria said.

Alexandra rolled her eyes as they proceeded into the Magic Box, which seemed to be a wizarding luggage store. There were trunks, bags, backpacks, and even larger boxes, labeled as shipping containers. Valeria snorted at a sign announcing a clearance sale on Six-Lock Boxes, and then proceeded to buy one of the most expensive trunks in the store. It looked like a perfectly ordinary

traveling trunk, but the saleswitch told Valeria it had a 'Muggle-proof magic compartment,' and when Alexandra looked over Valeria's shoulder into the trunk, she saw a vast compartment within, the size of a walk-in closet. It was a much larger version of Maximilian's backpack, she realized, and she wondered just what Valeria was planning to take with her that required that much space.

"I'll be back to pick this up in a few minutes," she said to the saleswitch.

They walked out of the store, and Valeria cast her Umbrella Charm again. The rain was still coming down, but the wind was not quite as heavy as before. In her new cloak, Alexandra was a bit warmer, and with the Umbrella Charm keeping the rain off, it wasn't unpleasant to walk down the street.

"So," Valeria said. "You want to know about being a Historicist."

"I want to know about Time-Turners," Alexandra said. "How long did you have to study history before you got to use one?"

Valeria chuckled. "It took me years. They don't just hand out Time-Turners to everyone who wants to watch history as it happened." She looked up and down the street before they crossed, heading east. "There are so many rules to learn. And, frankly, being an American, and the daughter of Abraham Thorn, it took even longer before the *Academie* was willing to let me do this."

"Aren't you worried that you'll get interrogated by a Special Inquisitor while you're here, and that they might take away your Time-Turner?"

"I do get interrogated," Valeria sighed. "They always know when I visit home, and I wouldn't be surprised if someone is waiting to talk to me when I go to the airport, as well. And yes, if the Aurors decided to search my trunk, they could find where I've hidden the Time-Turner, but they should believe me when I tell them the magic compartment is where I put potions and books and other things I want to hide from the Muggle inspectors."

"What exactly are you doing? What's the big secret?"

Valeria didn't answer immediately. They walked past the large domed building that Alexandra knew housed the Aerodrome, where they raced winged horses and hippogriffs and other creatures. Several more carriages and one automobile went past. The automobile was an olive green jalopy with dark tinted windows that looked like something Alexandra thought Al Capone would ride in. Valeria pursed her lips and fell silent, until it glided around the corner and out of sight.

"I'm researching our family history," Valeria said, as they reached the end of the street and began walking down a path taking them to the beach.

"You need a Time-Turner to do that?"

Valeria smiled. "You'd be surprised how stubbornly some of our ancestors will defend our family secrets, even after death."

"Why would the Academy of Magic in Europe care about our family?"

"As I told you, Absalom Thorn was an important figure in early Confederation history."

"I've never heard of him in any of my history classes."

"You also never heard about our father, did you?"

Alexandra frowned. "Our great-great-great-great-grandfather was an enemy of the Confederation, too?"

"You sound like Governor-General Hucksteen."

Alexandra eyed her sister suspiciously. "Are you sure you aren't working for our father, too?" She felt a flash of anger. "Is *everyone* keeping secrets from me?"

"Calm down." Valeria was looking around alertly while Alexandra pulled her cloak tighter around herself.

Between the pouring rain and the crashing of the surf, nearly every other sound around them was

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drowned out, as they set foot on the packed, wet sand. They were practically the only ones in sight now. Sailboats like those that could be found on any Muggle beach were planted in the sand, high on the beach, as if they had been buried there by giant children. Alexandra had seen them plow through sand the way they skimmed across the water.

"I've never lied to you, Alexandra," Valeria said, as they continued to walk down the beach. "I am certainly not working for our father. I've spoken to him perhaps three times in the past five years. I want nothing to do with his 'circle,' especially after what he did to the Roanoke Underhill."

"So what did Absalom Thorn do that isn't in history books?"

Valeria slipped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close as they continued walking. They were now heading towards one of the piers that extended out into the water. It looked small and frail against some of the waves crashing against it, but it didn't buckle or give way at all – Alexandra suspected that, like the Invisible Bridge at Charmbridge, it had charms to reinforce it and protect it from the elements.

Valeria spoke softly into her ear. "Do you know why I went out into the storm last night, to do my research?"

Alexandra shook her head.

"Because it's almost impossible to scry through a storm."

They walked on, while Alexandra thought about that, and then Valeria spoke again.

"The original families who emigrated to the New World and formed what became the Confederation – the Elect, as they're called – have a lot of dirty little secrets. Infidelities, indiscretions with Muggles, Squib children, homosexuality, incest... and that's without even going into the more serious issues, like denominational warfare, piracy, Dark Arts... It's all quite operatic, and worthy of a few books that would scandalize Old Colonial society even today." She chuckled. "Absalom Thorn, for example – he was quite the randy old goat. He claims all of his children were legitimate, but there's an eighty-year gap between the births of his oldest and youngest sons... you do the math."

"So he probably had children with more than one woman?" Alexandra snorted. "Sounds familiar."

"Yes, the apple didn't fall far from the family tree, as far as our father's reputation with the witches goes. We come from a long line of Thorns who were known for having children suspiciously late in life. At least Father had the decency to marry the mothers of his children."

"Most of them." Alexandra stared out at the waves, as they reached the pier.

Valeria glanced at her. "Yes... I'm sorry, Alexandra. I didn't mean to discount your mother."

Alexandra shrugged. "I don't suppose you could use your Time-Turner to investigate that? You know, something that actually matters?"

Valeria shook her head at Alexandra's bitter tone. "Even if I could, I wouldn't. Historicists aren't voyeurs. The things I'm researching, including our illustrious ancestors, do matter, Alexandra. Not just to us personally. And I'll be perfectly honest – some things I'm simply not going to tell you, because some of those secrets are *dangerous*."

"I've heard that before, too," Alexandra muttered.

"No doubt." Valeria smiled a little sadly at her. They had ascended the steps up to the pier, and were now standing on it, where it was anchored to a rocky stretch of shoreline. No boats were docked to it at the moment. The remnants of last night's storm were still sending pounding waves against the shore, and splashing right over the pier where it projected out over the water. Alexandra could see some of the sea spray being deflected off of Valeria's Umbrella Charm, just like the rain.

"It won't work, you know," Valeria said softly.

Alexandra turned to look at her. "What won't work?"

"What you're thinking." Valeria shook her head, with a sympathetic expression. She spoke even

more softly. "You can't save him."

Alexandra's eyes narrowed, while her heart hammered. Words of anger and denial rose to her lips, but Valeria shook her head again. "Do you really think no one has ever tried to use a Time-Turner to prevent someone's death, Alexandra? Honestly, do you think *I* wouldn't save Maximilian, if it were possible?"

"Why isn't it possible?" Alexandra snapped. "You went back in time to save *me* last night!"

"But I didn't change what had already happened. If you had drowned, rather than extracting yourself from the quicksand pit, I couldn't have gone back before that happened to save you."

"But if you stopped me from falling into the quicksand in the first place –"

"You *did* fall into the quicksand. It happened. Therefore, I couldn't change that."

"That makes no sense! If you hadn't gone back, maybe I would have dangled there until I fell in and drowned. So you changed the past –"

"I wish I could explain the laws of causality in a few easy steps, Alexandra, but I told you, I've spent years studying this. Greater wizards than me have tried and failed to do what you want to do. *It doesn't work.*"

"Just because something hasn't been done before doesn't mean it can't be done!" Alexandra grated back.

Valeria closed her eyes, and sighed. "I can see you're going to be very stubborn about this. I'm not surprised." She opened them again, and met Alexandra's hot, indignant stare unflinchingly.

"I'll tell you what," Valeria said. "You spend as many years as I have studying temporal magic. And then, after you know what it is you're talking about, maybe you will find a way to do the impossible."

"Don't make fun of me!" Alexandra said angrily.

"I'm not." Valeria clasped Alexandra's hands. "I wouldn't be at all surprised if you're a more talented witch than me. Perhaps you take after our father in that respect – maybe you will accomplish things no one else has done before. But even Father didn't become a powerful wizard just by dint of wanting it badly enough." She shook her head. "I wish you success – I truly do. But you're going to have to spend years working at it." She smiled slightly, and squeezed Alexandra's hands. "I'm sorry, Alexandra, but no one is going to just hand a Time-Turner to a thirteen-year-old."

Alexandra's angry expression didn't change – stubbornly, she tried to think of a way around what Valeria was telling her, some argument she could use to convince the Historicist.

She should at least let me try! she thought bitterly.

"Look." Valeria pointed, and Alexandra, annoyed, turned to see where she was pointing. Down the beach, she saw a Thestral trotting across the sand, pulling a carriage behind it. It was difficult to make the passengers out, in the rain, but Alexandra recognized the carriage easily enough. She was pretty sure she could see Julia and her mother in the front seat. And in the back –

Her mouth fell open. Two more figures were sitting there, beneath a golden glow.

"That's – us!" Alexandra exclaimed. "But, they're – we're – leaving without us..." Her voice trailed off in confusion, as the Thestral and carriage moved parallel to the pier, directly into and over the water.

"Now, hold onto me," Valeria said. She pulled the Time-Turner out of one of her pockets. Alexandra watched very carefully, only raising her eyes briefly to note how the rain and the waves had turned into a blur around them – and where, between eyeblinks, she could pick out individual waves that were moving *backward*. But then she focused again on the dials Valeria was turning, and the way the hands moved counterclockwise across the face of the watch.

When Valeria stopped it again, it was ten minutes earlier than it had been.

Valeria pointed again. "You never looked up, when we first approached the pier."

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Alexandra followed the direction of her finger, and gasped, as she saw a couple of figures, very far down the beach, treading across the sand in their direction, beneath a golden Umbrella Charm.

"Let's go," Valeria said, dropping the Time-Turner back into her pocket. She clasped Alexandra's hand, and with a brief wrench, they Apparated.

They were standing back on the corner where they had agreed to meet Ms. King and Julia, and down the street, Alexandra saw the Thestral-drawn carriage coming towards them.

"Once I saw us in the carriage," Valeria said, "I knew this would work – that it *had* worked."

Alexandra just stood there, her mind awlirl.

"I planned out what I was going to do from the moment we left Astoria's, and I had to pay very close attention to where and when we were at all times. Little tricks like that are relatively easy. Imagine trying to go back hours, or days. Months or years? All but impossible."

"How do you observe history, then?" Alexandra asked.

"That's more complicated. There are ways to observe the past without actually entering it yourself." Valeria smiled at her. "And I can't explain to you in a few minutes what took me years to learn."

Alexandra watched silently, as the Kings' carriage pulled up.

"We'll ask Ms. King if we can take a quick detour to pick up my trunk," Valeria said. She leaned over and whispered in Alexandra's ear. "Not a word about this to either of them – promise?"

Alexandra nodded.

Ten minutes later, Alexandra and Valeria were sitting together in the back seat, with Valeria's new wizarding trunk strapped to the carriage behind them, as they headed across the beach. Julia and Ms. King both looked rather somber, and Alexandra didn't mind when Julia stayed in the front seat, leaning against her mother.

She was much more preoccupied with what Valeria had told her and shown her. She looked down the beach, as the Thestral spread its wings and the wheels of the carriage began crashing through the surf, and then were magically buoyed above the water. The pier was a thin, blurry line, but through the rain, she could see two people standing there, surrounded by a golden glow, and she shivered, just before the figures disappeared.

The Time-Turner



Chapter 17 — A Tightly-Wound Plan

Alexandra was surprised and a little suspicious when Ms. King took Valeria into her study that evening. She hoped that the house-elves hadn't told on them, or that Valeria wasn't going to tell Ms. King about the previous night's adventure. Julia noticed her distracted state, and asked her (for at least the fourth time that day) if something was wrong. Alexandra smiled and shook her head, and went back to trying to collect a complete set of Abraxians in their game of Neptune's Horses.

She was even more apprehensive when Ms. King and Valeria exited the study just before dinner, with Triss following them.

Whatever the two women had spoken about, it had put all of the house-elves in a very somber mood when they brought dinner to them that night. Julia seemed to sense the tension and became quiet as well. Alexandra was sure that Ms. King was going to bring up her nocturnal activities, but as Gun-Gun, Rolly, and Nina began to clear away the dishes, Ms. King smiled and waved them off. Then she clapped her hands together.

"Deezie, Olina, Triss, please join us," she said aloud, and the other three house-elves scampered into the room... more of a rapid shuffle, in Triss's case.

Alexandra glanced at Julia, who looked as puzzled as her.

"Girls," Ms. King said, "tonight is a special occasion."

Triss was now standing alone in front of the humans, with her head bowed. The other five house-elves had formed a semi-circle behind her, and their eyes were wide as they wrung their hands together. Alexandra wondered if Triss were being punished. Had she gotten the house-elf into trouble? But she had never heard Ms. King so much as raise her voice with the elves, and their mistress's expression now was a little sad, but certainly not angry.

Ms. King said, "We all know that six house-elves are far too many for a house this size – especially when only I am living here for most of the year. You're all a great help to Samuel and Myrta, but I also know that though your loyalty is as boundless as my affection for you, you aren't really happy when you have so little to do." She held up a hand, as all six elves began to protest.

They quieted instantly, as she continued. "I have considered giving you to other, more needful families, but I've always been concerned that you wouldn't be treated as well as I would want. And the status of those house-elves who are... released, is often no better. But for Triss, at least, I have found someone at last who I know will treat you well, and whom you will be happy to serve."

Alexandra and Julia exchanged looks, as they realized what was happening.

Triss finally raised her head. Her eyes were brimming with tears, but the elderly elf nodded, and then looked at Valeria.

Valeria cleared her throat. "You understand that this is temporary. I know how you feel about being freed –" She sighed as all the elves winced. "But my family is completely opposed to house-elf servitude. I will happily accept your services, Triss, but I will be putting money aside for you each week, until next I speak to my father. And when I do –"

"Triss knows," the elf mumbled. "But her Valeria has promised Triss may stay with her, even after Master has made her..." She swallowed. "A free elf?"

"Of course. I swear it." Valeria knelt in front of the house-elf, and gave her a hug. Triss began bawling, and the other five elves followed suit.

"Oh, Mother," said Julia.

"Triss will be leaving with Valeria," Ms. King said. "I wish I could send Deezie and Nina with you

A Tightly-Wound Plan

and Julia when you return to school, Alexandra, but neither Salem nor Charmbridge allow personal house-elves.”

Alexandra wasn't sure what she thought about having a house-elf servant, but something else occurred to her. “Valeria, aren't you flying back to Europe on an airplane?”

Valeria nodded. “Yes.” She smiled as she realized what Alexandra was thinking. “And you're right, I can't exactly have Triss sit next to me on the plane.”

“Oh, Triss is very worried about her Valeria riding one of those Muggle contraptions!” Triss moaned, putting her head in her hands.

Valeria patted the elf on the shoulder. “But you'll be riding it, too, Triss.”

This only made Triss moan louder.

“They're as safe as Apparition, trust me,” Valeria said.

“Triss would much rather take her Valeria herself where she wishes to go,” the house-elf whimpered.

Valeria chuckled. “Even elves can't Apparate across the ocean. You know that.”

“If she's not going to sit next to you, where is she going to sit?” Alexandra asked. “In the luggage compartment?”

“Actually, yes.” Valeria laughed at Alexandra's shocked expression. “Oh, don't worry, I wouldn't just stuff her into a suitcase. Why do you think I bought that large wizarding trunk? It has quite enough space to be a comfortable traveling compartment for an elf.”

Triss shook her head. “Is much too expensive, Miss! Triss can fit in a suitcase. Surely this airplane only takes a few days to fly across the ocean?”

Valeria laughed again, and squeezed the house-elf. “Don't be ridiculous!”

While Valeria explained airplane travel to a fascinated Julia and an appalled Triss, Alexandra glanced at the other house-elves. For what should be a happy occasion, they all seemed overcome with emotion, tearful and apprehensive. She assumed Triss had already agreed to this, but it still seemed cruel. Yet wasn't freedom for house-elves a good thing? Especially if meant working for someone they truly loved?

But she was also thinking about what Ms. King and Valeria had said. Maximilian had told her that three of the house-elves had come with Abraham Thorn when he married Thalia King. They remained at Croatoa and continued to serve Ms. King and her children because he had ordered them to. And apparently, only he could free them.

Did he order them to obey Ms. King and her children, or Ms. King and his children? she wondered.

It was an important distinction. Because she had an idea that wouldn't go away.

She was distracted for the rest of the evening, as a plan formed in her head.

It wasn't a very nice plan. It would, in fact, be a horrible betrayal of everyone in the room. She looked at her sisters, and Ms. King, who had been so kind and generous to her. Could she really go through with this?

Then she remembered what she had told her father. She would do *anything* to bring back Max. She'd been willing to offer herself as a sacrifice in her brother's place, or do anything else her father asked of her. She'd even said she'd do Dark Arts, if that was what it took.

She'd already taken Maximilian away from them – how could she make things worse by trying to bring him back? And, she told herself, they'd only hate her if she failed.

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“Deezie, is your, umm, master, Ms. King, or my father?” Alexandra asked that night.

Deezie was in her room, packing her things, though Alexandra hadn't brought that much and could easily have shoved it all into her pack herself. But it made the elf so happy to do things for her, and

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since she wanted the opportunity to talk to her, she sat cross-legged on her bed while Deezie performed amazing feats of organization, folding clothes into such tight, perfectly square bundles that Alexandra was sure she must be using magic. Now, the house-elf looked up at her, eyes blinking.

"Deezie is Master Thorn's house-elf," Deezie replied, in her piping voice. "But he has told Deezie she is to stay with Mistress and serve her, and Deezie is very happy to do this."

Alexandra nodded, and licked her lips. The next question was very important.

"Did he just tell you to obey Ms. King, or his children, too?"

Deezie looked puzzled. "Does Miss want Deezie to do something?" She set down a shirt she had folded to the size of a handkerchief, and bounded over to the bedside. "Tell Deezie what Miss wants, and Deezie will do it, snap-snap-snap!"

Alexandra cleared her throat, and lowered her voice. "What if... I asked you to do something that Ms. King wouldn't want you to do?"

Deezie's eyes became wide. "Is Miss Alexandra going to get in trouble again?" She shook her head. "Oh, please don't go outside into the nasty woods again –"

"I'm not," Alexandra said quickly. She frowned, and closed her eyes. This was going to be difficult.

"Do you remember when Max and I came back from the woods, when I visited over Easter?" she asked.

Deezie's eyes went wider still. She nodded. "Of course Deezie remembers."

"Max told you and Rolly not to tell his mother. What would you have done if Ms. King had found out that you saw us come in, and ordered you to tell her what happened?"

Deezie was becoming agitated, as Alexandra could tell by the way the elf began wringing her hands together. "Deezie does not like Miss's questions," she moaned. "Deezie thinks Miss is thinking about trouble."

Alexandra frowned. This wasn't helping. She'd read about house-elf servitude last year, but the books in the Charmbridge library hadn't answered all of her questions.

It had been enough for her to figure out how to summon one of Charmbridge's elves, though. She wasn't sure if she could duplicate that feat, and she didn't want to compel the house-elves. She didn't want to do any of the things she was thinking about, but she forced herself to remember her vow.

"I'm not thinking about trouble," she said. "I just – want to understand house-elves better." That was almost the truth, which didn't make her feel any better about lying to Deezie, making up a story to wring information out of her. "You know there are a lot of people who think you should be... you know. Not servants. I know you like serving families who take good care of you, but wouldn't you rather do it of your own free will?"

Deezie's face scrunched up in thought, but she still looked troubled. "We would choose to serve our families anyway," she said. "So why does we need 'free will'?" She spoke the last two words almost contemptuously.

Alexandra sighed. "What if your master doesn't treat you well? Don't house-elves ever want to be freed from someone who treats them badly?"

Deezie winced at the word 'free' again, but shook her head. "Deezie doesn't know about such things. Deezie has never been treated badly. Deezie doesn't talk to other house-elves who has such masters."

Alexandra looked away, thinking about Quimley, the scarred former house-elf who had chosen to stay in the Lands Below rather than serve wizards.

"So," she said, "if I ordered you to do something you didn't want to do... something really bad – don't worry, I'm not going to!" she added quickly, as Deezie's eyes went wide. "You'd still do it? I mean, wouldn't you rather be able to tell me 'no'?"

A Tightly-Wound Plan

House-elves didn't seem to deal well with 'what if?' questions. Deezie scratched her hairless head and made a small keening sound, and then, at last, said, "Good house-elves does what they is told. Deezie would never tell Miss Alexandra 'no.'" She looked up at Alexandra with a pleading expression. "But she begs Miss Alexandra, please don't ask Deezie to do something bad!"

"I won't," Alexandra promised, with a smile.

And as Deezie, with great relief, resumed packing her things, Alexandra asked, conversationally, "So, how far can house-elves Apparate?"

Deezie looked up at her again, blinking. "Miss is asking very strange questions."

"Just curious. I guess you can't Apparate with me all the way back to Charmbridge, right, or I wouldn't have to take a Portkey?"

"Deezie does not know where Charmbridge is. And Deezie has never taken anyone with her when she Apparates."

Alexandra bit her lip. "But, how about when Valeria is visiting her family in New England? If Triss comes with her, could she Apparate all the way back here from New England?"

"Deezie is sorry, Miss. Deezie has never been to New England." Then her eyes brightened. "But Triss has! Triss lived with Master Thorn and Miss Valeria's family, before he married Mistress King. And Deezie remembers, Master Thorn once sent Triss from Croatoa to take presents to Miss Valeria and her sisters!" Then her ears drooped a little. "When Triss returned, she said Master Thorn's other wife told her not to ever come back. Triss was so sad."

Alexandra smiled triumphantly, for a moment, as one more part of her plan clicked into place, and then wiped the smile from her face and nodded seriously. "Well, now Triss will get to stay with Valeria again, so she must be happy."

Deezie nodded. "But she will miss us, too, and Mistress, and Miss Julia. Deezie hopes Miss Valeria will visit Croatoa again with Triss."

"I do, too," Alexandra said.

She didn't sleep much that night, as she went over and over her plan in her head. She tossed and turned, as doubt and uncertainty and guilt gnawed at her. She was making so many assumptions, hoping things would work out the way she wanted, and if she failed –

No! she told herself. I can't fail. I won't fail.

And if she did fail, it wouldn't matter what happened to her. She had spent months thinking about little else except how to save Max. If it all proved fruitless in the end, then her brother would still be dead, it would still be her fault, and if Ms. King and her sisters hated her, she'd deserve it.

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Alexandra was sure that her intentions must be written on her face the next day, but no one noticed the way she furtively avoided eye contact with Valeria, nor could anyone hear the hammering of her heart as she watched Valeria open her wizarding trunk and let Triss climb inside, with pillows, blankets, a lamp, and plenty of food.

It wasn't watching everyone say good-bye to Triss that made her pulse race, though – it was the little box Valeria handed the house-elf, along with a purse, some books, a small box of potions, and a wand care kit.

"Are you comfortable, Triss?" Valeria asked, looking down into the cavernous space within the trunk.

"Yes, Miss Valeria," Triss replied.

"Good-bye, Triss," Julia said, wiping a tear from her eye and turning to Valeria. "Oh, you will bring her with you when you visit again?"

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“Of course.” Valeria smiled, and then she put the false bottom in place, sealing off the magical compartment where Triss was hiding, and the container became, to Muggle eyes, an ordinary traveling trunk.

It was cold but sunny, in the aftermath of the storm. Ms. King and Alexandra and her sisters all rode in the carriage for one more trip across the sound. This time they did not head towards New Roanoke, but into the woods north of the town. Their first stop was the Blacksburg Wizardrail station. Valeria was taking the train north, so they dropped her off first.

While porter-elves removed her trunk from the carriage and took it into the station, Valeria embraced Ms. King, thanking her profusely for her hospitality, and then turned to her sisters.

“It's been so good to get to know you both,” she said. “And please believe me that I'm very sorry I've never visited before. I'll try to return more frequently, and hopefully Lucy and Dru will come along next time, as well.”

“Oh, we would so like that!” Julia said, hugging Valeria, and then it was Alexandra's turn.

Valeria held her arms open, and Alexandra stepped into her embrace, feeling like a traitor. She couldn't quite get her arms around her sister's soft, plump waist, but Valeria squeezed her with surprising strength.

“I meant what I said, if you really want to learn the things I've learned,” she whispered. “And I will stay in touch. We'll continue to exchange owls, yes? And I'll try to get to a computer more often, when you're home for the summer.”

Alexandra nodded.

“But you need to let go,” Valeria whispered, much more softly in her ear. “I know it's hard, but you need to accept what can't be changed.”

And she stepped back, and patted Alexandra's cheek.

“So your plane takes off at a quarter to midnight, right?” Alexandra asked.

Valeria nodded. “I'm surprised that you've never been on an airplane.” She smiled at Alexandra. “Perhaps someday you'll fly to Europe to visit me.”

Then, with one more wave to all of them, she turned and walked into the Wizardrail station.

Julia sat in the back of the carriage with Alexandra, as they continued down the road to the Portkey station. Julia began talking about the Plymouth-Salem Yule Ball, which was apparently an intermural event, and one of the only opportunities girls at the Salem Witches' Institute had all year to socialize with boys.

“I want you to promise me, Alexandra, that you will attend Charmbridge's Winter Ball. You need to do something that's fun! And don't tell me no boy will ask you – we both know you won't let a little thing like that stop you, if you actually intend to go.”

Alexandra sighed, but all of her resistance crumbled in the face of Julia's earnest pleading, and her desire to do one thing to make her sister happy, so she nodded. “All right.”

Julia laughed, almost the way she used to laugh before Maximilian died, and kissed Alexandra on the cheek. “Cool!” she said, and giggled. Alexandra smiled.

At the Portkey station, while Ms. King went to the ticket booth to pay the fares for both of them, Alexandra looked around.

It was a small building. The booths were inside, looking much like porta-potties. Uniformed porters – wizards, not elves – would carry the Portkey to the desired destination into one of the booths on a pillow. It wasn't the Portkey booths that concerned her now, though. It was the restrooms – which were actually outside. The Portkey building was very old, and had apparently been built back in the days of outhouses.

A Tightly-Wound Plan

When Ms. King returned to tell Alexandra and Julia that their Portkeys were being brought out, Alexandra said, “I have to go to the bathroom.” She smiled abashedly. “I think I'd rather go *before* taking the Portkey.”

Julia giggled. Ms. King smiled. “That's probably wise. Go ahead, dear. We'll wait right here.”

Alexandra nodded, and turned and walked outside.

Her heart beat faster and faster as she walked to the outhouses – side by side, one with a sign labeled 'Witches' and one labeled 'Wizards' – and then past them.

She looked over her shoulder. An elderly couple was walking into the Portkey station, but no one else was visible. She broke into a run as she crossed the road, and then she was dashing into the trees opposite the Portkey station. Her feet sank into sodden piles of leaves wherever she stepped, and there were fallen branches everywhere, knocked to the ground by the weekend storm. It was damp and dark, and as soon as she crouched behind one of the trees, she was almost certain that she was invisible from across the road.

And now, everything depended on whether her assumptions were correct – if her plan was going to work, she'd know before she even began.

She sat there for what seemed like forever, with her eyes constantly darting between the watch she'd taken out of her pocket and the front of the Portkey station, noting the time and feeling every minute passing as if it were a year.

And then someone stepped out of the tree line, about twenty yards from where she crouched.

It was a girl with short black hair, wearing a brand new, dark red cloak. She dashed across the road, ran to the outhouses, and slowed to a walk. And just before walking into the Portkey station, she turned around and looked directly at where Alexandra was hiding.

The other Alexandra smiled and raised her hand to her temple, throwing a salute to her counterpart hiding in the trees, and then she went inside.

Alexandra couldn't breathe. Her knees almost gave way beneath her. She wanted to weep. She was excited, exhilarated, and almost disbelieving, but she'd just seen the evidence with her own eyes.

It's going to work! she thought. *It's going to work!*



After several hours, Alexandra was feeling less exhilarated. It was cold and wet in the woods, and as the sun went down, it became even colder. She was dressed in heavy robes beneath her cloak, but it wasn't one of the magical ones with a built-in Warming Charm, and she was afraid to light a fire for fear it might be seen. She considered moving deeper into the woods, but remembered her experience getting lost on the island. She also considered hiking to Blacksburg, which was only a couple of miles away, but thought there was too great a possibility of being seen by someone, or possibly being delayed.

But I already know I won't be, she told herself. *I saw myself returning!* Didn't that mean that no matter what she did now, she'd be stepping out of the woods shortly after she entered them, hours before?

But her returning at the right time depended on what she did now. It could only have happened if she made no mistakes before then – she shook her head, rubbing her hands together to keep them warm. It was as Valeria had said: cause and effect was complicated. Maybe she could step in front of a train right now, and her future self would still walk back into the Portkey station to go to Chicago, but it didn't seem like a smart thing to test.

So she stayed in the woods, waiting for hour after tedious hour, walking around in circles to keep warm.

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Carriages, horses, and an occasional wizard automobile went up and down the road. Alexandra had watched as Ms. King rode off in her Thestral-drawn carriage, hours earlier. Unhurried, unbothered, obviously having just seen both Alexandra and Julia off to their respective schools.

Not long after sundown, the Portkey station closed. Eventually the lights went out, and Alexandra saw several of the employees taking off on brooms, and the old wizard who carried Portkeys around on pillows rode off in a cart pulled by a blue ox. It became utterly dark on that stretch of road, and Alexandra heard owls and other creatures in the woods around her.

It was so cold and miserable in the woods, she decided to take a chance, and emerged to walk across the road to the now-dark Portkey station. She looked around, and saw no one.

I wonder what guards the Portkeys? she thought, looking at the darkened windows. Were they put in a vault, or guarded by some fierce beast, or curses? No matter – she had no intention of going inside. She sat on one of the benches outside, and decided to take a further risk by pulling a book from her backpack, and lighting her wand.

She kept the illuminated tip of her wand covered by her cloak, just in case someone came by, and tried reading a little more of *The Master of Death*. She didn't get very far, though. She was shivering, and fatigued, and she kept nodding off.

She awoke with a start after realizing that she must have napped for hours. When she checked her watch, though, it had only been forty minutes. It was now eleven-thirty at night.

Valeria's plane wouldn't have taken off yet. Alexandra had never flown, but she knew baggage had to get loaded onto the airplane, which meant Valeria's trunk was now almost certainly not with her. Alexandra yawned, and decided it was close enough.

She rose to her feet, and grimaced at how shaky she felt. The cold had sapped strength and energy from her body. Next time, she needed a better way of keeping herself warm.

She held her wand and took a deep breath. She knew this was going to work – it had to – yet she still felt uncertainty at what she was about to do. Not just as to whether the bits of binding and summoning magic she'd learned the previous year, when trying to learn more about house-elves, would have the desired effect, but whether she wasn't about to do something unforgivable.

It doesn't matter, she reminded herself firmly. *They'll only hate me if I fail.*

There weren't many insects out, by late November, but the hoots and cries of night birds died down for a moment as Alexandra spoke aloud:

*“By spells that bind your kind to mine,
by compact made in ancient times,
by my name, given when I was born,
Triss, answer Alexandra Thorn!”*

There was a pink flash of light, almost blinding in the darkness. Alexandra looked down, to see a dazed house-elf at her feet. Triss almost fell over, before Alexandra caught her.

“Miss Alexandra!” Triss practically shrieked. “Where is Triss? What – how –? What has happened to Miss Valeria?”

“Valeria's fine,” Alexandra told her. She felt a stab in her heart, knowing that she was only about to add to the elf's distress. She knelt in front of her.

“Triss, I need you to do something for me,” she said in a low voice.

Triss's eyes were almost all that were visible in the sliver of moonlight – wide and gleaming, shocked. She stammered: “How did Miss Alexandra –?”

“Stop,” Alexandra said, and her voice was a command. Triss stopped talking.

“Can you Apparate back to where you were, in Valeria's trunk, and then return here again? Are you

able to do that?"

Triss stammered again, and then nodded. "Y – yes, b-b-but –"

"Listen to me," Alexandra interrupted her, forcing herself to say what she had to say. "I need you to return, and bring me the box that Valeria gave you – the little brown one with the silver lock that was the first thing she handed you when you stepped into the trunk. Do it, now."

Triss goggled at her, but there was no mistaking the tone of Alexandra's voice. She wasn't asking or pleading with the house-elf; she was ordering. She was Abraham Thorn's daughter.

Triss gulped, and disappeared with a pop.

Alexandra waited. Her heartbeat measured the passing moments. Was it possible that she had somehow miscalculated? No, it was not possible – she knew what she had seen. There was no other explanation but that she had been – would be – successful. And yet she realized she had been holding her breath, when Triss reappeared. This time, Alexandra had to catch the elf with both arms, as Triss all but collapsed.

She took the box from the elf's hands, and looked down at the poor, shivering creature.

"Triss," she said gently, "I'm really, really sorry. I know this is terrible, what I'm doing."

Triss stood up, on wobbly legs, and stared at her, then whimpered, "Triss does not understand."

"I know," Alexandra whispered. She laid a hand on the elf's tiny shoulder. "There's only one more thing you need to do. Return to Valeria. Go back to the trunk, and then tell Valeria what happened, as soon as she's able to let you out. And tell her –" Alexandra swallowed. "Never mind. She'll know what I did, and why." She squeezed Triss's shoulder gently. "If I succeed, you'll forgive me, Triss. Even Valeria won't be angry at me, if this works. Now go."

She gave the command before Triss could ask more questions. Triss stared, and then disappeared again with another pop.

Alexandra stood up, and no longer worried about being seen, held her wand over the box. It was locked, and Valeria no doubt had the key. It took longer than she expected to unlock the box – all of her facility with Unlocking Charms nearly proved useless, and she was on the verge of trying to use force to open it, when she finally succeeded in causing the tiny, surprisingly stubborn silver lock to pop open. And there, inside, lay the Time-Turner.

Alexandra took it out and opened it. The face of the gold pocket watch had two sets of hands. Both currently pointed to the same time: eleven-thirty-seven and fourteen seconds. There were tiny dials that could manipulate those hands, and Alexandra guessed one of them would also change the date that was displayed in a little engraved gold counter beneath the glass face of the watch, under the hands.

She had watched, very carefully, when Valeria had turned back time. For such powerful magic, it was surprisingly simple. She only hoped it would be that simple when she needed to go back months, rather than hours.

In her haste, she almost started turning the dials right where she stood, in front of the Portkey station, and then mentally kicked herself. She couldn't just appear out of nowhere, back where she'd started!

She walked back across the road, and into the trees where she had seen herself emerging, back when it was still early afternoon.

Here goes, she thought, and she took the same dial she had seen Valeria turn between her thumb and forefinger, and very gently, began to twist it.

The sound of owls disappeared, to be replaced with a low rustling roar as the night smudged around her. The moon plummeted out of the sky. The sun leapt above the horizon. Gray blurs shot up and down the road, almost too fast to be seen. Alexandra sucked in a breath as she saw that she'd caused the hour hand to leap backwards far faster than she'd intended. She almost fumbled with the dial, but

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continued moving it, more slowly, trying to make sure she didn't go past where she wanted. She knew the precise time at which she needed to stop.

At one-twelve p.m., she stood in the woods with the sun shining down on her, and held the Time-Turner in her trembling hands. She looked across the road. Ms. King's carriage and Thestral were still sitting in front of the Portkey station. A young wizard with a knee-length coat, an absurdly wide belt around it, and a tall conical hat, was walking out the door. She waited for him to step onto a broom and fly away, and then she put the Time-Turner back into its box, closed it, and put it in her backpack.

She stepped out of the woods and ran towards the outhouses across the road. She slowed when she reached them, and then, just before continuing into the station, she turned and looked at where she had been crouching, all those hours ago.

She was sitting right there, right now, watching herself, she thought. She raised her hand and threw herself a salute.

It's going to work, she thought. This is how I knew it was going to work.

Ms. King and Julia were still waiting for her inside.

"Why, Alexandra, you're shivering," Ms. King said. She frowned at Alexandra's damp cloak.

"I dropped my cloak on the ground," Alexandra said. "Stupid." She was struggling to maintain alertness – she had greatly underestimated what sitting alone in the dark for over ten hours would do to her.

"Tsk." Ms. King shook her head, then gave her a hug, enfolding her in her warm embrace. "It was wonderful to have you here again. You know you're welcome to visit again any time."

"Perhaps over New Year's?" Julia suggested. "Or next Easter?"

"Perhaps." Ms. King released Alexandra, after giving her a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you so much, again, Ms. King," Alexandra said. "And... I hope next time I see you, things will be... better."

Ms. King smiled at her, though her eyes were distant for a moment. "Yes," she murmured. "I hope so, too."

Julia was next. She put her hands on Alexandra's shoulders.

"Well, I suppose this is good-bye for now. But keep writing." She looked meaningfully into her younger sister's eyes. "And what we talked about before," she whispered. "You *will* tell your parents?"

Alexandra nodded. She didn't really intend to – but after today, she wouldn't have to. There would be nothing to tell them.

Then Julia was hugging her. "Take care, dear Alexandra. We'll see each other again soon."

"Yes," Alexandra said hoarsely. And then, as Julia pulled away, Alexandra mumbled, "I... I really... you mean a lot – I mean, I really care about..." She stumbled over her words.

Julia blinked at her. There were tears in her eyes. She hugged Alexandra again, more fiercely than before, and didn't let go of her until Ms. King finally cleared her throat.

"I love you, too, Alexandra," Julia whispered in her ear. "And so did Max."

Alexandra turned away, a little too quickly, once Julia released her a second time. She only turned around again when she was in front of the Portkey booth. She waved to Julia and Ms. King with one hand, while rubbing her eyes with the other. She was tired, she told herself. That's why they felt watery.

The porter, the one who would be riding home in a cart pulled by a blue ox, set a pillow with an old radio on it on the shelf in the booth. He held the door open for Alexandra as she stepped inside, and then closed it behind her.

It would be almost eleven hours before they'd learn about her theft. Maybe longer, if Valeria didn't find out what she'd done until after she arrived in Europe.

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By then she'd have fixed things. With Maximilian alive, not dead, they would surely forgive her for anything else she'd done. And telling herself this, she smiled, as she laid a hand on the Portkey and was yanked through space to her destination.



Chapter 18 — Things Change

Alexandra knew she shouldn't have been surprised when she found Diana Grimm waiting for her as she stepped out of the Portkey booth, but she was momentarily caught off-guard.

"Again?" she sighed, trying to appear unconcerned. "Every time I visit my relatives?"

The Chicago Wizardrail station was being decorated for Christmas – Alexandra could see miniature sleds and reindeer flying around overhead, and a Christmas jingle was playing over the Wizard Wireless Address system. The decor contrasted sharply with Ms. Grimm's formal black and red robes – she looked like a traditional witch.

"We won't be long, unless you insist on being troublesome again." The Special Inquisitor's tone was flat, and there was no trace of friendliness in her expression.

"All right," Alexandra said. "Are we going to that office again in the back of the station?"

She was very tired, and hoping that she could just get through the interview without betraying her nervousness. All it would take was one slip-up, or for Ms. Grimm to search her, and it would all be over. It couldn't just end like this. She desperately tried to calm her mind and use her rudimentary Occlumency training, and it took every bit of her energy.

She became alarmed when Ms. Grimm took out her wand, but the Inquisitor just said, "*Muffliato*," and then tucked it back under her outer robe, then laid a hand on Alexandra's shoulder to steer her towards the exit.

"The Charmbridge bus is already waiting for you. I'm not going to try to make you late. Just answer my questions and *don't lie to me*, Alexandra. I'm not in the mood."

Alexandra got the feeling that Ms. Grimm was trying to get this over with quickly. She doubted it was for her benefit – obviously the Special Inquisitor had other things on her mind. So much the better for her.

"I won't lie," she said. And making every effort to sound meek and apologetic, she added, "I'm sorry about last time. I was just... angry."

Perhaps her fatigue made her sound more convincing. Ms. Grimm looked down at her, arching an eyebrow, and then smiled.

"I do understand, Alexandra," she said. "But you must learn to manage your feelings."

Alexandra nodded, and Ms. Grimm went on. "It sounds as if visiting your sisters has been beneficial."

"It was." *Of course she'd know that Valeria was there, too*, she thought.

"I imagine you talked about a lot of things. Your father, your brother, Valeria's work for the Academy of Magic..."

Alexandra felt herself tense. *Calm, calm, calm*. She nodded. "All of that, yeah." She looked up at the other witch. "Our father didn't contact us. Not once, all weekend. I haven't heard from him at all since the last time. Not even a phone call or an owl."

"That storm that blew over Roanoke would have been excellent cover for him to visit."

Except you'd expect him to do that. "Maybe, but he didn't. I think he knows none of us want to talk to him. We all think what he did was terrible."

"And you're certain he didn't contact Julia or Valeria, either?"

"If he did, they didn't tell me about it." Alexandra then repeated what Julia had told her, about meeting her father in disguise at a museum, and Valeria claiming to have spoken to him only three times in five years. It was easy to just tell the truth; she was too tired to dissemble.

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They reached the entrance of the Wizardrail station, and Alexandra could indeed see the Charmbridge bus sitting in front, wedged between an enormous three-wheeled tractor with race car exhaust pipes, and something that looked like a pink hearse with mirrored glass. As she watched, Angus MacAvoy walked up to the bus and boarded it.

"Is there anything else you'd like to share with me, Alexandra?" Ms. Grimm looked down at her with a knowing smile, as if she already knew all of her secrets. Her fingers had not loosened their grip on her shoulder. "As I told you, these meetings can be quick and painless if you're forthcoming... and unpleasant for all involved if you remain stubborn and rebellious."

"I'm not being stubborn and rebellious," Alexandra said. "I don't have anything else to tell you. I'm not keeping anything secret. You already know everything."

Ms. Grimm studied her, while Alexandra kept her face passive, and concentrated on her Occlumency – *Calm, calm, calm!* She knew she wasn't good enough to actually block Legilimency. She just had to be convincing enough that the Special Inquisitor wouldn't decide to use it. She hoped. She hadn't lied until now. She was so close! The Charmbridge bus sat there, only yards away, offering safety and the last leg of her journey back to Charmbridge Academy and the chance to make things right. It would be so unfair to be stopped now!

"Well," Ms. Grimm said at last. "I think 'everything' might be an exaggeration."

She let go of Alexandra's shoulder, and curled her fingers to tilt the girl's chin up towards her.

"You look exhausted, child. It must have been a long weekend for you."

Alexandra didn't say anything.

Ms. Grimm dropped her hand. "You'd better get on the bus, so you can return to school and get some sleep. Until next time, Alexandra."

Alexandra nodded. "Yeah. Later."

She knew she sounded sullen, but she *was* exhausted. Ms. Grimm just watched her as she walked to the bus, fighting every step of the way not to hurry her pace. Then Mrs. Speaks was greeting her, and Alexandra was on board – she barely paid attention to anyone else, grunted when Torvald said hello, and collapsed into a booth by herself.

She slumped in her seat, and was already beginning to nod off when someone cleared her throat and slid into the opposite seat. Alexandra opened her eyes, and found herself staring at Darla across the table.

"Long weekend?" Darla asked.

"Get lost," Alexandra said.

Darla's mouth turned up in a pert frown. "You don't have to be nasty."

"What do you want?" Alexandra snapped.

Darla's forehead wrinkled. Her cat, which she was holding on her lap, meowed as she stroked it.

"We don't have to be enemies, you know," Darla said quietly.

Alexandra stared at her, as Mrs. Speaks told the last student aboard the bus to sit down, and the engine rumbled to life.

"Maybe we didn't have to be enemies after the first time you tried to kill me," Alexandra said, in a low voice, once the bus began moving. "But after the second time, yeah, we do."

"What do you mean, the second time?" Darla asked.

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. "You know what I mean!" She leaned forward, and her voice was a hiss. "In the cavern, where you and John tried to stop me and Max! What were you going to do if you'd won?"

Darla blinked at her slowly. The hand that was caressing her familiar stopped moving.

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"You stole my obol," she said.

There weren't that many students on the bus – just those who'd gone home over Thanksgiving weekend – but they were chattering and playing games and making enough noise that the deadly silence surrounding Alexandra and Darla went unnoticed. The two girls stared at each other for several long moments.

Then Alexandra's lip curled into a sneer. "What are you going to do, tell Ms. Grimm?"

Darla continued staring at her, as her expression hardened – but there was something else in her expression, too, that made Alexandra uneasy. It was almost as if Alexandra had answered a question for her.

The other girl rose to her feet, still holding her black cat in her arms, and looked down her nose at Alexandra.

"You think you know so much," she said. "But you don't know anything!"

With a haughty toss of her head, she turned and flounced across the aisle to another booth by herself.

Alexandra eyed her warily, but Darla just took out a book and began reading it, after settling her familiar back onto her lap. After a while, Alexandra's eyelids grew heavy, and she curled up on her seat and fell asleep.



"Wake up, Troublesome!" someone yelled at her, and several other students snickered. Alexandra sat up, blinking and rubbing her eyes. It took a moment to orient herself. Then she remembered where she was, and where she was going. The other students were lining up at the front of the bus to disembark.

She grabbed her backpack frantically, and thrust her hand inside, almost up to her shoulder, reaching around in the magically-expanded space within until her fingers closed on the wooden box holding the Time-Turner.

With a sigh of relief, she withdrew her arm and shouldered the pack. She ignored the other students. Nothing mattered now, except getting back to Charmbridge. She barely paid attention at all as she crossed the Invisible Bridge, and didn't speak to anyone as she trudged along the path through the woods. When they reached the entrance to Charmbridge Academy, she hurried up the steps and down the corridor to Delta Delta Kappa Tau Hall.

"Don't run, Miss Quick!" admonished the hall monitor, but she ignored him.

Calm down, don't act like you're up to something, she thought, before opening the door.

Anna looked up from her desk, where she was writing a letter, and smiled. "Hi!"

"Hi." Alexandra unslung her backpack, just before Anna got up to give her a hug.

"How was Roanoke?" Anna asked.

"It was nice – well, the weather sucked, but seeing my sisters was nice."

"Sisters?" Anna raised her eyebrows.

"Valeria was there, too," Alexandra said, but before she could go on, a noisy squawk interrupted them both.

"I don't think Charlie was very happy about being left behind," Anna said.

Alexandra walked over to the metal cage hanging over her desk. Anna had left the door open, just like Alexandra did, but Charlie was sitting inside on a perch and making no effort to come out.

"Hi, Charlie," she said. "I really missed you."

Charlie made a rude sound.

"Don't be angry. I couldn't take you with me." She reached inside, but Charlie pecked angrily at her hand, and Alexandra flinched and withdrew it.

"Don't be like that," she said. "I didn't have a choice. You wouldn't have liked going by Portkey

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anyway. And it was miserable outside – you wouldn't have been able to fly around –”

Charlie answered with a foul word. Anna's eyes widened.

Alexandra snapped, “If you're going to be like that, then you can just sit in there and sulk!” She swung the door closed and latched it. Charlie squawked angrily, but fell silent as Alexandra checked on Nigel, and then sat down to tell Anna about her visit. All the while, though, the raven's beady black eyes tracked her around the room resentfully.

It would have upset her more, and she would have tried to assuage her familiar, except that she knew she was about to change everything. She was going to go back in time, and maybe then this moment would never even happen.

She couldn't help feeling guilty as she talked to Anna, though. She couldn't tell her about the Time-Turner. She knew what Anna would say.

She wondered if her friend suspected something, though. Anna often did.

Alexandra was antsy, impatient to do what she had dreamed of doing for so long, now that the means was literally within her grasp. She couldn't simply run down to the basement without checking on her friends and her familiars, but she was ever-mindful of the passing of time. She knew she still had hours before her theft would be discovered, but she worried that something might go wrong – that Diana Grimm might somehow appear here at Charmbridge, demanding the stolen Time-Turner.

She slipped it out of her backpack and into her pocket when Anna wasn't looking, and went down to dinner with her hand constantly brushing against her thigh, to reassure herself that it was still there. David and the Pritchards ate dinner with her in the cafeteria, and she repeated the edited tale of her Thanksgiving visit to Croatoa, and her sister the Historicist.

“So time travel is real?” David asked. His brow wrinkled in thought. “I don't see how it's possible. I mean, suppose you go back in time and kill your own grandfather –”

“Why would anyone do such a thing?” Constance asked, appalled.

“It's just an example,” David said. “If you killed your own grandfather before your father was born –”

“That's an awful notion!”

David was flustered. “I'm not saying anyone *would* do that! You're missing the point!”

Anna said, “Anyway, you can't change the past, even with a Time-Turner. Everyone knows that.” She was looking at Alexandra, who didn't say anything.

David's speculations about changing the past echoed what Alexandra had spent many months pondering. She knew he was wrong about time travel being impossible; notwithstanding his logic, time travel was real. Therefore, just because everyone 'knew' something was impossible didn't make it so. And that's why Anna was wrong, too.

She had to be. Alexandra was going to prove it.

She had four hours left when they returned to their room. Back in Roanoke, she knew, she was still sitting alone in the dark, and for a moment, she shivered in empathy with her other self. Anna asked if she planned to study, and Alexandra shook her head.

“I'm going to go say hi to Bran and Poe,” she said. “And then I think I'm going to go to bed. I'm pretty tired.”

Anna nodded, and Alexandra noted that her friend looked a bit melancholy. She should do something to cheer Anna up, she thought. They really hadn't done much together lately.

After I do this, she thought. After I do this, everything will be better.

She walked over to Charlie's cage and opened it.

“I really did miss you,” she said softly. “And I am sorry I didn't bring you along.”

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Charlie eyed her, and made an obnoxious crackling sound, followed by, “Jerk!”

“Fine, I’ll wait until you get over it.” Alexandra smiled. “When you’re done being angry at me, I’ll make it up to you.”

The raven squawked and tilted its head to regard her as she turned away. Anna and Charlie both watched her silently as she walked out the door, utterly intent on her mission, almost trembling with anticipation.

She wasn’t actually planning to go to the library to see Bran and Poe, so she was surprised to find Bran waiting for her just outside her door. He was wearing a squished cap made of yarn, and an unraveling yarn sweater in a completely non-matching color; more items salvaged from the school’s Lost and Found.

“Miss Alex has been naughty,” Bran said, shaking his head in disappointment. “Bran knows Miss has something she isn’t supposed to have!”

Alexandra gulped. “W-what?”

The library elf squinted at her. “We has to go looking for library bookses that is not returned when they is due. Miss Dearborn checked out a book last month that is overdue. Poe went to collect it from her, and she said she returned it. She was most vexed.” Bran folded his arms and tapped his tiny foot expectantly.

“Oh.” Alexandra flushed, as relief flooded through her. “Umm, yeah, *The Master of Death*.”

“Why does Miss Alex have a book she did not check out? We thought Miss Alex knows library rules.”

“I’m sorry. I meant to return it – it’s in my room, hold on.” Flustered, she darted back into her room, as a bemused Anna watched her retrieve the book from her backpack and walk back outside to give it to the elf.

Bran sighed and shook his head. “We would hate to have to suspend Miss Alex’s library privileges.”

“I’m really sorry. It won’t happen again.” *In a little while, it won’t ever have happened.*

Bran’s expression softened. “If Miss Alex has not finished reading it, Bran can hold it for her. But Miss must check out bookses properly.”

“Yes, you’re right.” Alexandra nodded rapidly. “I’m sorry.”

She tried to hide her annoyance and impatience as Bran walked with her all the way down the hallway and downstairs. She noted that the hall monitor, who usually stopped any boy who tried to enter Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, apparently didn’t count boy-elves.

She made idle conversation by telling Bran about her trip to Roanoke, but her mind was elsewhere. At the bottom of the stairs, the library elf admonished her one more time, while promising to hold *The Master of Death* for her in the library, and then disappeared with a pop.

She wondered briefly why Bran hadn’t just Apparated from upstairs, but with the elf gone, she hurried towards the stairs to the basement, wanting to avoid any further delays.

Talking to her friends had already felt too much like saying good-bye. It wasn’t as if she were going anywhere. When she was done, things would just be – different. Maximilian would be alive. They would never have gone to the Lands Below. Maybe the entire past six months would never have happened – or it would have happened differently.

She descended the stairs to the basement, retracing the steps she had taken six months before. The main basement corridor that ran past the wide steps usually taken by students and staff coming downstairs was lit, as usual, by lamps along the walls. She looked towards the custodian’s office, and saw a light under the door.

She saw no one else in either direction, so she padded down the corridor away from the stairs, and

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around the corner. A little further down was the door that she and Maximilian had passed through – the same door that she had found open a couple of months ago, before discovering Ms. Gale's fatal tumble down the stairs.

Except that now the door was gone, and the doorway was bricked up. Alexandra stared at it, then shook her head. It didn't matter – she was going back in time, to before Dean Grimm had gotten around to sealing off the sub-basements. She took the Time-Turner out of her pocket.

She understood David's point about the Grandfather Paradox well enough. She had never come across anything that explained such paradoxes, but wasn't going to the past a paradox in itself? And Valeria had proven that the past *could* be changed.

Alexandra had, of course, spent a great deal of time thinking about *how* to change the past. Obviously, she needed to prevent herself and Maximilian from going to the Lands Below. When she first conceived of getting her hands on Valeria's Time-Turner, she had thought she might go right back to her first visit to Croatoa. All she had to do was tell herself, or Max, or Ms. King, what was going to happen.

But she knew how stubborn Maximilian was, and she didn't trust her father at all. Having been warned that their journey to the Lands Below would result in Maximilian's death, Alexandra suspected that Maximilian and Abraham Thorn would have made alternate plans – plans that wouldn't include her.

No, she had to make sure that she and Max were prevented from ever going through that gate. And that meant stopping them before their journey began.

She was going to make sure she and Maximilian never went down those stairs.

She took a deep breath, while holding the Time-Turner in both hands. She touched the dials.

One-hundred eighty-four days and three hours...

That was when she heard a noise. Movement in the shadows at the far end of the corridor caught her eye. She looked up.

"Who's there?" she called out.

The lamps didn't cast any light that far down the corridor. She grabbed her wand and pointed it. "*Lumos!*"

She caught a glimpse of another figure raising an arm, as if to mirror her, and then a voice said, "*Stupefy!*"

A red flash of light threw her against the wall. She was unconscious before she hit the ground.

“Give me that!” Alexandra lunged for it. The other woman was tall and hefty, and easily stopped her with one hand.

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"You Stunned me!" Alexandra shouted.

"What are you talking about?" the custodian demanded. "And what in Medb's fair kingdom are you doing with a Time-Turner?"

"Give it to me!" Alexandra screamed. "It's mine!" She struggled against the large woman's grip, but Ms. Fletcher pinned her against the wall with one thick arm.

"Calm down or I *will* stun you with the back of my hand!" the custodian said. "You're Alexandra Quick, aren't you? The Dean wanted to be told immediately if any students were caught down here after hours. Why do I have a feeling she's not going to be surprised that it's you?"

"Let me go!" Alexandra's voice was demanding at first, and then she began struggling again, with increasing desperation, trying to grab for the Time-Turner that was so close and yet so impossibly out of reach. "Please – please let me have it, just for one second!" she begged. "I just need it for one second! I'm not going to hurt anyone! I swear I didn't do anything! You need to give it to me! Please!"

Ms. Fletcher just stared at her, amazed.

Behind her, a voice said, "Miss Quick, you sound positively hysterical."

The custodian turned. Dean Grimm was standing there, regarding Alexandra with an expression of pity and disdain. The three elves with Ms. Fletcher immediately stepped away from her.

Alexandra sagged. Fighting was futile. Pleading was futile. Ms. Fletcher still held the front of her robe, but Alexandra was no longer struggling, and the custodian loosened her grip a little.

Ms. Fletcher said, "I have no idea what's going on, Dean Grimm, but I found little Miss Quick here unconscious on the floor, and *this* lying next to her." She handed the Time-Turner to the Dean, who looked at it and then at Alexandra.

"Where did you get this?" she asked.

Alexandra stared at the floor, not saying anything.

She had failed. It had been her one chance, and she'd failed.

"Answer me, Miss Quick!" the Dean snapped.

Alexandra shook her head, still not looking at either of the adults. What could they do to her now? It didn't matter.

Ms. Grimm took a deep breath, and Alexandra half-expected to be cursed in the next instant, but instead, the Dean told Ms. Fletcher, "I'll send Ms. Shirtliffe and Miss Gambola down here – I want you and the elves to comb the basements for any other wandering students. Including the lower basements."

The elves shuddered – Alexandra knew they didn't like going into the lower basements.

"I've spent most of the evening down there," Ms. Fletcher said. "Found *two* Boggarts, but no sign of students, or that damned spook."

"Language, Ms. Fletcher, please." Ms. Grimm's gaze was fixed on Alexandra. "Look again. For students, not for this 'spook' of yours."

"There's a ghost down here, Dean Grimm, I'm certain of it –"

"All well and good if you find it, but ghosts aren't my concern right now." Ms. Grimm held out her hand, and said, "*Accio wand*." Alexandra's wand flew into the Dean's hand from where it was lying on the floor.

"Come with me," Ms. Grimm said.

Alexandra didn't have the heart to resist or argue. She followed Dean Grimm up the stairs. They passed Ms. Shirtliffe on the way down. Alexandra didn't even look at her. She didn't care what anyone said to her now, and she didn't care if other students saw her and the Dean. None of the whispers and the rumors mattered now. She didn't look up when she passed below the portrait of Miss Marmsley, and she didn't even glance at the portraits of Charmbridge's past deans on the wall of Ms. Grimm's office,

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when the Dean opened her door and ushered Alexandra inside.

Alexandra stood there, eyes fixed somewhere vaguely in the direction of the floor, as Ms. Grimm used the Prior Incantato spell to examine the last few spells cast from Alexandra's wand, and then laid it on her desk. Finally, the Dean said, "Sit."

Alexandra took a seat, still not looking up.

"And here I was hoping you might actually be making an effort to stay out of trouble. I should have known better."

When Alexandra didn't respond, the Dean's voice became sharper. "Look at me when I speak to you, Miss Quick."

Alexandra raised her eyes to meet the Dean's hard stare.

"Just how many chances do you think you get, Alexandra?" Ms. Grimm asked. "How many times do you think you can break the rules, and even bring the attention of the Wizard Justice Department to this school, before you're expelled?"

At any other time, even Alexandra's nerve would have faltered beneath the Dean's implacable gaze, but at that moment, she felt such a sense of despair that she was truly was beyond caring.

"Well, since Darla is still here, I think I still get at least one murder attempt, don't I?"

The portraits behind Ms. Grimm all became very still. Alexandra felt a chill, and stared at Ms. Grimm, expecting some sort of retaliation, but the Dean's eyes remained fixed on hers, and her hands remained motionless on her desk.

"Go ahead and expel me," Alexandra said bitterly. "I don't care."

Ms. Grimm continued staring at her. That was even more unnerving than a tongue-lashing or a curse. She just kept staring at her, until even in her grief and apathy, Alexandra couldn't look at her any longer and dropped her gaze.

"I believe you," Ms. Grimm said. "I believe that you don't care, right at this moment. You're a foolish, short-sighted child, and your plan to save your brother failed, and so you're feeling so terribly sorry for yourself that being expelled probably seems inconsequential."

Alexandra looked up sharply at Ms. Grimm's mention of her brother, but didn't interrupt as the Dean went on. "Of course, eventually you would care, but by then it would be too late. When you realize how much protection you've enjoyed here, and how little you'd have back in the Muggle world, attending a wizarding day school to learn basic wand-work *if you're lucky*, it would be too late."

Alexandra closed her eyes. "It doesn't matter."

"Really? The best way to honor your brother's memory is to throw away your own life?"

Alexandra's eyes popped open. "Don't use my brother against me!"

"Then stop using him as an excuse. He's dead, Alexandra. I am very sorry about that, but he's dead and you can't bring him back, not even with a stolen Time-Turner." Ms. Grimm held up the Time-Turner. "I'm going to hazard a guess – you somehow obtained this from your sister, the Historicist?"

"How do you know about Valeria?"

Ms. Grimm smiled thinly. "Does she know that you took it from her?"

Alexandra glanced at the clock on the wall. "Not yet," she mumbled.

Ms. Grimm shook her head. "You foolish, foolish child. You very, very clever and foolish child." She leaned back in her seat.

"You could let me try," Alexandra whispered, not looking at the Dean. "What does it matter if you're so sure I can't change the past? You could let me try."

Ms. Grimm was silent for several long moments. Then she said, in an unusually gentle tone of voice, "No, Alexandra, I cannot. Don't you realize how fortunate you are to have escaped unharmed from your

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attempt to meddle with time? If I let you try again, you *would* fail, again – and it might well be fatal next time.”

She opened a desk drawer, and dropped the Time-Turner into it. “I have to report an unregistered Time-Turner – by tomorrow morning, at the very latest. My sister will probably be the one to come and collect it. I'm sure she'll have plenty to say to you, so I won't bother trying to convince you of the futility of your plan. It isn't as if you're going to hear it.”

Alexandra stared at her feet.

“We all have to cope with loss, Alexandra. You've had to do so at a younger age than most. I'm making allowances for that, but at some point, you're going to have to decide to get on with your life, accept that some things cannot be changed, and stop wallowing in self-pity.”

She held up Alexandra's wand, as if thinking about something, and then extended it. “Go back to your room, Miss Quick. Expect to be summoned back here tomorrow morning.”

Alexandra rose slowly, and took her wand from the Dean.

“You just got off of probation,” Ms. Grimm sighed. “I'll have to put you back on probation, and you've earned evening and weekend detentions again until the winter break.”

Alexandra nodded dully. She was about to go, when she remembered how she'd been found by Ms. Fletcher.

“Someone Stunned me,” she said. “Someone was down there in the basement with me.”

Ms. Grimm's eyebrows drew together. “Ms. Fletcher said she found you unconscious.”

“I saw someone. I heard her cast a Stunner Spell.”

“Her?”

Alexandra frowned. “I'm pretty sure it was a her. No, I am sure – and I know who it was. It was Darla.”

“Miss Dearborn's wand is still locked in Dean Cervantes's office.”

“Maybe she has another wand.”

“Miss Quick...” Ms. Grimm folded her hands and regarded Alexandra coldly. “Disciplinary matters concerning other students are not your business, but I can assure you that Miss Dearborn is not more clever than myself or Dean Cervantes.”

“Someone Stunned me!”

“Then hopefully Ms. Shirliffe, Miss Gambola, and Ms. Fletcher will find the culprit. But you will leave any investigations to us.” She cut off Alexandra's protests. “Go back to your room, Miss Quick. Now.”

Alexandra closed her mouth, and thrust her wand into her pocket. She stalked out of the Dean's office, ignored Miss Marmsley's disapproving stare, and it was only when she got halfway down the main hallway that the full weight of what had happened, and the realization that she had failed, hit her again, and she had to stop and lean against a wall, taking deep breaths to calm herself. There were still a few students walking around; they looked at her warily, but no one said anything.

She got to her room, and collapsed onto her bed. She pressed her face against her pillow, until Anna came over and sat down next to her.

“Alex?”

Alexandra didn't answer at first. She felt Anna's hand on her shoulder, and she rolled over, to show her friend that she wasn't crying.

“Are you all right?” Anna asked.

Alexandra closed her eyes, and took a deep breath. She knew she was going to have to explain eventually.

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"I tried to use a Time-Turner," she said. "I stole a Time-Turner from my sister, and I tried to use it to go back and – and someone ambushed me, and Ms. Fletcher found me, and Dean Grimm has my Time-Turner and it's not even that it didn't work, Anna! I didn't even get a chance to try!" She opened her eyes, to find Anna staring at her, with a shocked expression on her face.

"I was going to do it, Anna," she said hoarsely. "I was going to go back and stop me and Max from going to the Lands Below. I was – I was..." She choked down her grief and her bitter disappointment.

"Troublesome," Charlie clacked, from the cage. The raven sounded as disapproving as Anna looked. Anna shook her head slowly. "You stole a Time-Turner from your sister?"

Alexandra nodded. "I guess she's going to be pretty angry at me."

"You think?" Anna was looking at her very oddly. "I suppose you're in trouble again." Her voice was flat.

"Nothing unusual, for me." Alexandra shrugged.

"I guess not." Anna looked at her a moment longer, and then got up. "We'd probably better go to bed."

Alexandra noticed Anna's stiff expression, as they both prepared for bed, and before turning out the lights, she said, "Maybe I should have told you, Anna. I'm sorry. I just thought, if it worked, everything would be different anyway, and if it didn't –"

"Then it would be like every other time you've done something like this?"

Alexandra was surprised at the bitterness in her friend's tone.

"Anna –"

"It's all right, Alex. I know, you wanted to save Max. Good night." Anna clapped her hands, and the lights went out, leaving Alexandra lying in her bed, staring up at the ceiling, thinking about Max, and the mysterious intruder who had Stunned her, and Anna's angry reaction.

I really screwed up, she thought, but all she could think about was the fact that she'd failed. That's what she dreamed about that night – Maximilian, plummeting into a pool of darkness, while staring at her accusingly. She could hear his voice, and Julia's, and Ms. King's, all of them saying, "You failed!" over and over.



Anna was still cold and distant the next morning. Alexandra tried to apologize a couple more times, and each time, Anna just shook her head and told her to forget about it.

Alexandra followed her unhappily downstairs, only to find, as Ms. Grimm had warned her, that she was being called to the office before breakfast.

Both of the Grimm sisters were waiting in the Dean's office. When Alexandra entered, Lilith Grimm was holding Galen in her lap, while Diana Grimm paced the office, staring down the portraits. The Special Inquisitor turned to face Alexandra, and gestured at a chair. The Dean frowned slightly, but didn't object, so Alexandra sat down.

"Well," Diana Grimm said. "I'd like to thank you, Miss Quick, for turning in an illegally smuggled Time-Turner. Very responsible of you."

Alexandra scowled. "Is that supposed to be funny?"

"Not at all." Ms. Grimm's expression wasn't at all humorous. "But you can thank my sister that I'm allowing her to handle your stunt as a school disciplinary matter." She held up the Time-Turner, clutched in her hand. "The situation for your sister, Valeria, is much more serious."

Alexandra sat up straighter in her chair. "Is she all right?"

"Oh, I'm sure she is. Her plane was across the Atlantic before Lilith called me this morning." Diana glanced at her sister, who gazed back at her evenly. "The Trace Office now has her on their special

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watch list, should she ever reenter the country – she'll have to be thoroughly searched and interrogated every time she enters and leaves, assuming she's not simply detained indefinitely.”

She looked at the Time-Turner again. “This is an impressive piece of work – I'm not sure we even have Time-Turners like this. Our Artificers will certainly want to take it apart and study it. We may eventually return it, after we've made Academy officials answer some hard questions, and extracted a pound of flesh from their Ministry.”

“Is this really necessary, Diana?” The Dean's long, thin fingers were scratching the top of Galen's head, but her voice was not nearly so relaxed. She looked irritated.

“You're right,” the Dean's twin said. “Valeria White's fate is not my concern. I only care about what she was up to while she was here. You're going to tell me everything about her visit, Alexandra, everything she told you about Time-Turners and what she was researching, and every single thing you did from the moment you got your own hands on this Time-Turner.”

The Special Inquisitor strode across the room in two steps, until she was towering over Alexandra. “I'm allowing my sister to sit in, as a favor – I'm under no obligation to allow her to witness your interrogation, and if you resist me or lie to me, even a tiny little bit, I'll haul you all the way back to Chicago, and you won't leave the Territorial Headquarters building until we've gone over your every waking moment since you returned from the Lands Below.”

Alexandra's eyes darted to the other Ms. Grimm, sitting behind her desk. The Dean met Alexandra's gaze coolly and just nodded her head, ever so slightly.

It was painful, and more than once she wanted to scream at Diana Grimm, or shut up and force the Special Inquisitor to carry out her threat. What did it matter, now? But the guilt that had begun gnawing at her last night after Anna's shocked, disappointed reaction, and which was now chewing her up inside, had finally penetrated her gloom and sense of failure, making her feel all the worse. She told Ms. Grimm everything. She didn't think there was anything she could say now that would make it worse for Valeria or herself.

The entire time, the Special Inquisitor stared at her with such intensity that sometimes it almost felt like a physical pressure – Alexandra wasn't sure whether it was a subtle use of Legilimency, or just a psychological trick, but either way, it made her even less inclined to hide anything. What was the point?

She kept her attention on Diana Grimm, mostly, but now and then she glanced at the Dean, who listened quietly, occasionally raising an eyebrow.

When she was done, she slumped in her chair, and glowered sullenly at the Special Inquisitor.

Diana Grimm turned to her sister. “Have you determined who this mysterious 'shadowy person' was who Stunned her in the basement?”

Alexandra bit her tongue – she didn't miss Ms. Grimm's skeptical tone. Lilith Grimm merely shook her head. “We have, of course, questioned Miss Dearborn. She had no wand, and she couldn't have been down there – she was in the library at the time Miss Quick was descending into the basement.”

“Do let me know if you learn more.” Diana Grimm turned back to Alexandra. “Whoever it was, if indeed there was someone down there, did you a favor. Your plan would never have worked – and worse, you'd have had to relive the next six months concurrently with yourself. I'm not sure what happens in situations like that, but from what little I know of time travel, you'd likely have disappeared completely.”

“What do you mean, concurrently with myself?” Alexandra asked.

“When you went back eleven hours in Blacksburg, how long did it take for you to return to the time that you'd left?” Ms. Grimm asked.

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Alexandra frowned. "Eleven hours."

"Exactly. Time-Turners can only send you back in time – there is no way to jump forward again. If you'd gone back to May, you'd have been stuck there – you'd have had to relive the next six months."

Alexandra's frown deepened. She hadn't thought of that. She hadn't cared. And it wouldn't have mattered – if she could save Max, she didn't care if she had to live six months over again. Though doing so concurrently with herself – that did sound confusing.

"But, Valeria –" She stopped.

"Valeria what?" Ms. Grimm demanded.

Alexandra hesitated. "How could she observe history, if going back years or centuries means being stuck there?"

"My understanding is that Historicists create a viewing area that they send back in time – or perhaps they send an image of themselves back in time, an observer of sorts who's not actually present." Ms. Grimm shrugged. "I don't know exactly how temporal magic works, only that wizards who go too far back in time are never heard from again, not even in history." She gave Alexandra an unpleasant smile. "You really should ask your sister about that. It is her area of expertise. Of course, that didn't make any difference to you before, did it?"

Alexandra winced.

"Is that all, Diana?" her sister asked. "Would you like to talk to Miss Dearborn? Or perhaps there's someone else you'd like to interrogate? As long as you're here."

The Grimms stared at one another, and neither of them looked exactly sisterly. Alexandra thought Galen must be feeling the tension, too – the cat meowed and began twisting about in the Dean's lap; Ms. Grimm released her familiar, and Galen leapt to the floor and slunk under the desk.

"No, I need to get this Time-Turner back to headquarters, and then brief my office. I'll let you get back to running your school and managing your students, Lilith."

Diana Grimm strode out of the office, without another glance at Alexandra, who remained seated in her chair. Galen peered at her balefully from beneath the Dean's desk.

The Dean turned her head slowly to fix Alexandra with an equally baleful look.

"Is all that stuff she said true?" Alexandra asked. "Is Valeria – is she going to be in trouble?"

"I imagine her superiors will be quite displeased with her," Ms. Grimm said. "They entrusted her with a Time-Turner, and she allowed her little sister to steal it and cause a humiliating international incident. All witches and wizards from the *Academie de Magie* who come to North America will be subjected to extreme scrutiny, now. Your sister might not even find it safe to leave Europe."

Alexandra looked down.

"Did you think about that before you did what you did?" the Dean asked.

"I did – a little," Alexandra admitted, in a very quiet voice.

"But you chose to do it anyway."

Alexandra nodded.

"Well, you'll have to ask your sister directly. I suggest writing a letter of apology, sooner rather than later. And be prepared to accept whatever response you get, including no response at all. There are some things for which an apology is completely inadequate."

Alexandra looked down again, and when the Dean didn't say anything else, she rose slowly from her seat, assuming she was dismissed.

"Alexandra."

Alexandra looked up.

"You aren't the first witch to lose a loved one, nor the first to pursue whatever means you can find to

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bring him back. You need to stop this. Stop trying to change things. It will only bring you to more grief.”

Alexandra started to turn away, and the Dean's voice rose sharply. “Manners, Miss Quick?”

Alexandra paused, and clenched her teeth. “Yes, ma'am,” she gritted.

“Better. You may go.”

Alexandra's day didn't get any better after that. No one knew the details of what had happened the previous night, but everyone knew that Alexandra Quick had gotten in trouble and that a Special Inquisitor had come to the school again.

Anna spoke to her only about classwork. The Pritchards, with whom Alexandra had not yet shared the full story, nonetheless knew that she'd done something reckless and irresponsible again, and told her so.

They also told her that she obviously needed to apologize to Anna. Alexandra agreed, but she wasn't sure that Anna wanted to hear an apology, and she wasn't even entirely sure where her apology should start. She was still struggling with disappointment and failure, and she knew that while Anna's feelings might have been hurt, it was Valeria – and Ms. King, and Julia, and Triss – whom she'd really betrayed.

She sat at her desk after class the next day – Ms. Shirtliffe had, of course, told her she was out of the Dueling Club – trying to write a letter of apology to Valeria, while explaining herself. Nothing she tried to say sounded adequate. In her mind, her cause had been just, but she knew it would never excuse what she'd done. And writing letters to the Kings was going to be at least as hard.

Anna came into the room. Alexandra turned, and started to speak to her, and Anna said, “Darla's cat is missing.”

Alexandra started. “What?”

“Her cat is missing. She's very upset.”

“Darla's cat is missing,” Alexandra repeated slowly.

Anna's lips turned downward in a small frown. “I know you don't like her, but I think we should help try to find her cat. I mean, you saved Angelique's jarvey –”

“Yeah. You're right.” Alexandra got up. She glanced at Charlie – who, like Anna, was still behaving stand-offishly towards her – and Nigel, before heading out the door.

Several girls were walking up and down Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall, knocking on doors and checking stairwells. Upstairs, Alexandra heard Innocence calling: “*Tshaa! Tshaa!* Kitty-kitty-kitty-kitty!”

Angelique was standing with a tearful Darla outside their door, trying to comfort her.

“I sent David outside to look for him,” Angelique said.

“How could Mr. Whiskers have gotten outside?” Darla asked, distraught. “Our window wasn't open!”

“Well... he can't search up here on the girls' floor,” Angelique said, a bit lamely.

“Maybe you should have sent him downstairs,” Alexandra said. Both girls looked up as she approached. “Maybe Mr. Whiskers is down in the basements.”

Darla turned a little pale. “Why would he be down there?”

“I don't know. Why were you down there?” Alexandra demanded.

Angelique and Anna were both looking nervous now, but not as nervous as Darla.

“What are you talking about?” Darla asked.

“You were down there last night! I know you were, just like you've been sneaking around down there all semester –”

“What?” Darla glared at her. “I heard you were the one caught in the basement last night!”

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"Alex," Anna said, but Alexandra stepped up until she was nose-to-nose with Darla. Innocence had just descended the stairs from the floor above, and stopped in her tracks, mouth open.

"I don't even know what happened last night, but I know you blamed me for something, *again*," Darla said. "Dean Grimm *had our room searched!*" She flushed indignantly, and next to her, Angelique nodded, giving Alexandra a dirty look.

Alexandra said, "Yes, you're perfectly innocent, I'm sure."

"It's *my* cat missing!" Darla cried. "What are you implying?"

"I don't know," Alexandra said, flushed with anger and not sure exactly what she did think Darla was up to. She just knew the girl was up to something. "It's just funny how pets have a habit of going missing around you."

Angelique's eyes went wide. So did Innocence's. Alexandra could hear Anna suck in a breath. Darla's mouth dropped open. Her immediate reaction was shock and fear, but this was quickly replaced by a look of outrage. Her eyes narrowed, and her voice dropped until it was as low as Alexandra's.

"And it's funny how people have a habit of dying around you!" Darla said.

Anna wasn't the only one who gasped out loud at that. Angelique's eyes looked as if they might pop out of her head, and Innocence and all the other girls watching the confrontation stood frozen in place.

Alexandra saw only red for a moment, and then she drew her wand and advanced on the other girl. Darla backed away from her until she bumped into a wall, and could retreat no further. She gulped as Alexandra pressed the point of her wand against her throat.

"Go ahead!" Darla squealed. "Curse me! Show everyone what a wicked sorceress you are against a girl who doesn't even have a wand!"

"Don't call me a sorceress again," Alexandra snarled, and Darla whimpered as the tip of Alexandra's wand glowed brightly.

Alexandra leaned closer. "Max saved you last time. You know your wand didn't do you any good. Don't ever speak to me again. Don't mention my brother. Stay out of my way. Or I'll hang you upside down by your ankles again, and next time there will be no one to stop me from cursing you until your own parents won't recognize you."

Darla's eyes were squeezed shut. Alexandra glowered at her, and then looked around, to see everyone else, including Anna, staring at her in horror.

She clenched her teeth, and thrust her wand into her pocket. While Darla stood there trembling, Alexandra spun on her heel and stalked away, back down the corridor to her room.

Innocence looked as if she thought Alexandra had gone insane. But it was Anna's shocked, dismayed expression that bothered her the most.

Even Charlie was eyeing her warily as she sat down slowly on her bed. She looked up when Anna entered the room after her.

"Anna," she said. "I know I'm right about Darla."

Anna stared at her.

Alexandra started to speak again, but she was cut off when Anna took a deep breath and said, "What was that stuff about hanging Darla upside down, and Max saving her?"

Alexandra paused. "I know I shouldn't have said those things –"

"Were you talking about when you and Max fought her and John, down in the basements?"

Alexandra's brow wrinkled. "Yes. I was –"

"I thought you didn't *remember* that fight."

Alexandra paused. Realization and guilt flashed across her face. Anna twitched, and then her eyes filled with a look of hurt and betrayal.

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"You've known," Anna whispered. "You've known all this time. You remembered everything and you kept telling me you didn't –"

"I couldn't!"

"Why, because I might tell someone?" Anna laughed. "I've never betrayed you, Alexandra! Never! I've kept all your secrets! I trusted you and I thought you knew you could trust me, but you never really have, have you?"

"That's not true –"

"It is true!" Anna shouted. Alexandra shut up, startled, as her quiet, timid roommate turned angry.

"How many times have you actually told me what you were doing? And how many times have you lied to me? You just tried to go back in time with a Time-Turner, and... and... who knows what might have happened if you hadn't been stopped, but did you think about how it might have affected *us*? Did you even think of telling me? Of course not! Why should you care what I think? And obviously I'd go running straight to the Dean –"

"I didn't think that –"

"You don't trust me!" Anna cried. Tears ran down her face. Alexandra stood up, to reach for her friend, but Anna backed away from her with a furious look. "You won't even trust me with how you're really feeling! You've hardly talked about Max at all – we all know you've been keeping all these feelings inside, and I just thought, sooner or later you'll be ready to talk about it, but I guess you just don't need anyone else, do you? You don't even notice your friends trying to help you! And you know what? You're not the only one with problems, Alex!"

Alexandra was in utter shock as Anna continued to rage at her. "Do you have any idea how worried Constance and Forbearance have been about Innocence? And when was the last time you asked about my father?"

"Your father..."

"Yeah, you know, my father in prison? Gosh, I wonder if a Time-Turner could help with that?" Anna laughed again, bitterly.

"Anna," Alexandra said. "I'm sorry."

"I know you're sorry, Alex." Anna's expression turned almost pitying. "You're always sorry. Until the next time."

She made a choking sound, and wiped at her eyes, and then turned and fled the room, leaving Alexandra alone with her familiars.

She sank back onto her bed, and then lay down, covering her face with her hands.

She heard a fluttering sound, and then Charlie emitted a scolding cackle, followed by, "Troublesome!"

"Do you hate me, too, now, Charlie?" Alexandra felt too miserable to even look up.

The raven's wings fluttered again, this time against her head. She uncovered her eyes, just enough to see Charlie standing on her pillow, gazing down at her with beady bird eyes.

"Sorry," Charlie croaked.

Alexandra reached for the raven, and stroked its glossy black feathers with her fingertips.

"I am," she whispered.

Chapter 19 — A Long, Cold December



December came cold and dark. The skies were frequently overcast, but rarely produced more than a few flurries of snow. The frosty air outside, however, didn't chill Alexandra nearly as much as Anna's coldness.

After their initial argument, Anna never showed any anger. She simply refused to talk about anything other than schoolwork or chores.

"It's all right, Alex," she said, when Alexandra tried yet again to apologize and explain herself. "You don't need to apologize."

Constance and Forbearance, when they heard about the quarrel, tut-tutted and sighed with disapproval.

A Long, Cold December

“So are you going to shun me now, too?” Alexandra asked.

Forbearance gave her a reproachful look. “Alexandra Quick, you ornery knarl, we'uns already swore we wouldn't.”

“But it's high time you gave more care 'bout your friends,” Constance said.

Alexandra looked down. “What do I do about Anna? I said I was sorry.”

Forbearance shook her head. “You're always sorry, Alex. We know you are. But when you hurt someone bad enough, sorry's just a word.”

“So what do I do?”

“We'uns can't solve Anna for you,” Forbearance said. “If you want her forgiveness, you're gonna have to earn it, not just ask for it.”

Alexandra didn't think that was very helpful, but she nodded.

Constance's expression softened. “Anyhow, I oughter not throw stones. Innocence still hain't really forgiven me, and we'uns still can't get her to mind us.”

Alexandra sent letters to Julia, Ms. King, and Valeria, with a note to Triss attached to the latter. She wasn't sure which she feared more: the responses, or receiving no responses at all.

Her first reply came from Julia:

“Dear Alexandra,

I understand why you did what you did. It was foolish and wrong, and you should have known better. I wish you had talked to me about it – we're sisters, dear Alexandra, and you shouldn't have felt like you had to hide such things from me. No doubt you feared I would have disapproved and tried to talk you out of your plan, and of course I would have, but I would have understood!

Who else could understand your feelings better than I do? Yet you couldn't share them with me. That makes me very sad.

I'm sure you feel terrible, and I don't want to make you feel worse. Rest assured, you are still close in my heart, but I cannot pretend that I'm not upset and disappointed.

The one you hurt the most, however, is Valeria. I hope she won't suffer too much for your actions, and I hope she will find it in her heart to forgive you.

Now and always, your sister,

Julia”

Ms. King's response came two days later. Julia's mother was just as disappointed in her, and more unsparing. She wasn't cruel, but when Alexandra finished reading her letter, she felt even lower than she had after her quarrel with Anna. Thalia King had stern words about how Alexandra had violated her hospitality and hurt Valeria. Alexandra didn't expect any more invitations to Croatoa in the future.

No reply came from Valeria.

She felt the chill in JROC, too. Ms. Shirliffe scowled at her disapprovingly, and Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland was angry at her for being kicked out of the Dueling Club. In class, everyone but David and the Pritchards distanced themselves from her. Alexandra's threats had made Darla more sympathetic to her peers. Darla was no longer the sorceress who'd been kicked out of school last year for practicing Dark Arts; now she was the girl who had been attacked by Abraham Thorn's crazy daughter when her familiar went missing. Some kids even suggested that Alexandra was responsible for the cat's disappearance.

Detention was almost a relief. Alexandra was once again assigned to lead Clockworks in chores around the school. At least Clockworks didn't whisper behind her back or give her funny looks.

She cared even less about the year-end SPAWNs than usual. She studied for them mostly because Anna did, and Anna was at least willing to continue studying with her; it made Alexandra feel as if

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there was still a door open there, to restore their friendship, though she was unsure how.

But deep down, she knew what the problem was. Anna knew that she wasn't *really* sorry. Perhaps using a Time-Turner had been foolish. Perhaps finding a way to bring back Maximilian really would take her a long, long time. But she hadn't given up.

Anna found her reading *The Master of Death* one day after class, when she was supposed to be writing an essay for American Wizarding History, and just stared at her for a moment, with a blank expression, before going to her desk to write a letter.



Alexandra wasn't particularly looking forward to the winter break. She missed Larkin Mills a little, but she saw only a long, cold winter stretching ahead of her. She didn't expect this Christmas to be very cheery, and she had little to look forward to when she returned.

She tried not to be weighted down by gloom, and held her head up as she walked through the woods with the other students taking the Charmbridge bus home.

Anna, for the first time, was not walking with her, but with Tomo Matsuzaka. By now many students had heard about the unrest in the California Territories; the Governors were wavering between trying to placate the angry New Colonials (including the sizable Chinese and Japanese communities) and threatening to use the WODAMND Act against the restive protesters.

Alexandra felt a pang in her heart as she watched Anna conferring with Tomo, without looking back.

Next to her, Constance and Forbearance were fussing over Innocence, who had donned appropriate Ozarker attire for her return home, but was arguing over whether or not she would consent to sit with her sisters and the Rashes on the bus.

"Do you want Ma an' Pa to learn how you been carryin' on?" Constance demanded.

"I hain't been carryin' on, an' they won't find out nothin' you don't tell 'em nohow!" Innocence glared over her shoulder at the Rashes, who were walking with Larry and his Old Colonial friends. "If'n Benjamin an' Mordecai speaks foul 'bout us," she said loudly, "I *will* tell the whole holler how they got sorted by the daughter of Ab—"

Constance clamped a hand over Innocence's mouth.

Alexandra gave the younger girl a sour look. "Boy, I get scarier every time you repeat that story, don't I?"

She still sympathized with Innocence, but she didn't particularly like being used as a bogey monster. Forbearance took Alexandra's hands, just before they boarded the bus.

"Alexandra, we'uns know you still hain't back to right," she said.

"Anna'll come 'round," Constance said. "But you got to open your heart more to your friends."

"I'm trying." Alexandra smiled halfheartedly as Constance, and then Forbearance, gave her a hug.

"Try harder," Forbearance whispered in her ear, and then Benjamin was yelling at them:

"Would you'uns stop standin' athwart everyone else with your female foolishness?"

Constance gave him a scathing look, while keeping her hand over Innocence's mouth again.

Alexandra, as close to erupting as Innocence, bit her tongue when Forbearance made eye contact with her and shook her head.

Simmering, she boarded the bus, leaving the Pritchards to climb aboard after her, still exchanging words with the Rashes.

Alexandra sat alone at first – David and Angelique sat together in another booth, holding hands across the table and talking nonsense. Alexandra saw Darla pass them by and make a disgusted face before sitting with Lydia and Janet.

In Chicago, both Angelique and Darla got off at the Wizardrail station, and David, after spending so

long saying good-bye to Angelique that Mrs. Speaks finally had to snap at them, crossed the aisle to Alexandra's booth.

"Mind company?" he asked.

"If you can wipe that goofy look off your face," she said.

He snorted and sat down. "Don't hate."

She rolled her eyes, and then cleared her throat as Anna and Tomo walked past, from the rear of the bus.

"Anna," she said.

Anna paused and looked at her.

"Have a happy Christmas," Alexandra said.

Anna nodded slightly. "You, too," she mumbled, with the same self-conscious look as Alexandra. They both knew neither of them were really going to have a happy Christmas. "Bye, David."

Tomo gave Alexandra a nervous little nod, and the two girls walked on.

"You two still fighting?" David asked.

"We're not fighting."

"Why can't you ever just admit you screwed up?"

"I have admitted it!" Alexandra snapped.

"Okay." David eyed her skeptically as he leaned back in his seat.

"Look, I don't need any more of this. Sit somewhere else if you're going to lecture me about what a screw-up I am."

"Keep it up, Alex – you trying to drive all your friends away?"

Alexandra scowled at him.

"Big fat jerk!" squawked Charlie.

Alexandra wasn't sure if the raven was referring to her or to David, but he snickered, and she smiled, involuntarily.

"I don't want to talk about this," she said. "Do you want to play wizard chess or what?"

"Okay." He nodded, and until they reached Detroit, they didn't speak much, as their chess pieces decimated each other on the board.

When it was time for David to disembark, he said, "You can call me if you want to, all right?"

She nodded. "Thanks."

As David carried his bag and Malcolm's cage to the front exit, Innocence – who had been cajoled into sitting with the other Ozarkers after all – said, "Bye, David! Merry Christmas! We'uns'll miss you, 'specially – ow! Connie!"

Innocence didn't give Alexandra such a cheery farewell when she disembarked in Larkin Mills. Constance and Forbearance said good-bye and merry Christmas, quite deliberately, as the Rash twins looked on, stone-faced, but Innocence only mumbled something when Constance nudged her in the side with an elbow.

Her mother was waiting for her in front of the house. Claudia looked at Alexandra for a moment, taking in the robe she was still wearing, hanging open and loose over her Muggle clothes, and her familiars' cages. She had no other luggage but the backpack on her shoulders.

"Welcome back," her mother said.

"Thanks," Alexandra replied.

Then Claudia gave her a hug, followed by a kiss on the cheek.

"You hardly wrote at all," she said.

"Sorry."

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"I did miss you, you know." And when Alexandra gave her a skeptical look, Claudia smiled and took Charlie's cage from her. "So did Archie."

Alexandra's expression became even more skeptical at that. She allowed her mother to carry Charlie's cage. As they walked inside, Charlie said, "Miss you terrible."

Claudia stared at the bird, and her mouth twitched a little.

"You, not so much," she said.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Alexandra had brought several more books about ghosts and the afterlife home with her, and she spent most of the week before Christmas reading them. She finished *The Master of Death* first; it ended with the wizard who styled himself that finally meeting and challenging Death to a duel.

Alexandra was expecting a grand finale; instead, it resulted in a conversation that went on for five more chapters.

Death allowed the wizard to speak to his deceased mother and brother, as well as an imaginary son who'd never been born, and then told him that he could choose immortality, one of his loved ones, or a duel.

In the end, the 'Master of Death' walked away with none of those things, and Alexandra almost threw the book across the room in disgust. There was supposed to be a lesson in wisdom in there, somewhere – she understood that much. The wizard in the story had accepted Death's proper role.

Alexandra thought the story was a stupid cop-out, and she doubted any real wizard in that situation would just walk away from immortality, or the chance to bring back a loved one.

When she was not reading, she went to the mall to shop for her friends. She took particular care trying to find something for Anna – how could she express regret, friendship, and her desire to be forgiven with a gift? She had similar problems searching for something to give Julia. Ultimately, the gifts themselves were just Muggle toys and books and magazines she thought the wizard-raised girls would enjoy (she carefully selected some celebrity magazines with cute but modestly-clothed boys for Constance and Forbearance), and wrote long letters to accompany them.

Usually, her parents worked even over the Christmas holidays. To her surprise, Claudia had the entire week off, which resulted in Alexandra spending more time than she was used to with her mother. Archie was scheduled to work Christmas Eve, but had Christmas Day off, and during one of his other days off that week, all three of them went to the movies.

Alexandra hadn't gone to the cinema once the previous summer; it had been nearly a year since the last time she'd seen a movie, and longer than that since her entire family had done anything like that together. She felt strange – unsettled, conflicted, and a little warm inside, as they went home.

She went up to her room that night, after receiving a kiss good-night from her mother and a hug from Archie – another rarity – wondering why things felt so different. Her eyes fell on her books, sitting by Nigel's cage. A ghost flickered back and forth on the cover of one, beckoning her to open it.

She knew she shouldn't keep things like that out in plain sight, though Claudia and Archie didn't really go into her room. As she slid it into a desk drawer, she felt a surge of anger and guilt.

It was too easy, she thought, to just let go. Worrying about Christmas presents, letting herself be entertained by movies – next she'd be like Angelique, or Julia, mooning over boys and forgetting what she'd sworn to do.

It was frustration, she decided, at having to start over. Now that she knew time travel wasn't the way to go, she was back at the beginning, with perhaps years and years of study ahead of her, and no one to help her. She just couldn't let herself be distracted.

She went to sleep that night holding the picture cube Max had given her last Christmas. Her brother

smiled at her, standing proudly next to Martin and Beatrice in their BMI uniforms.

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Brian knocked on their door the next day. Alexandra's mother opened it, and invited him in before Alexandra could say anything.

"It's nice to see you again, Brian," Claudia said. She looked at Alexandra.

"Thanks, Mrs. Green." Brian had his hands shoved into his pockets. He was wearing a parka and a snow cap – it was actually too cold outside to snow, so his face was turning red now that he was indoors. He looked at Alexandra nervously.

"Umm, my parents and some of the others have organized a caroling group for the neighborhood kids this Christmas Eve," he said. "We thought... maybe Alexandra would like to come."

"No thanks," Alexandra said.

"Alex!" Claudia chided. "Why don't you go? It will be fun."

"He's only inviting me because he has to."

"Alex!" Her mother looked angry now.

"I don't care about Christmas carols or hanging out with a bunch of kids who think I'm a freak." Alexandra watched Brian wince as she said that.

"Fine," Brian mumbled. "If you change your mind, we're meeting on the corner of Sweetmaple and West Lake Avenue at six o'clock on Christmas Eve." He turned around and opened the door before Claudia could open it for him, and trudged out.

"What's wrong with you, Alexandra?" Claudia put her hands on her hips. "Do you not want to have friends here?"

"I've never had friends here, Mom!" Alexandra said angrily. "Didn't you ever notice that? Except for Brian. And I don't need him! I don't need friends –" She stopped herself. "I don't need friends here."

Claudia stared at her. Alexandra folded her arms and looked down, avoiding her mother's gaze.

"I thought I'd do some baking tomorrow," her mother said at last. "Would you like to help?"

"Baking?" Alexandra asked, in disbelief.

"Is that something you don't need to do, now?" Claudia's face looked a little strained. "Do you just... magic your food?"

Alexandra shook her head. "No. You can't make food with magic. Gamp's Law..." She stopped. "Sure. We can... bake."

The next day was Christmas Eve.

Alexandra's mother had never been much of a homemaker, and most of Alexandra's meals growing up had come from cans, boxes, and frozen packages, but Claudia could cook when it suited her. Alexandra had never taken an interest in kitchen skills, and felt a bit like a little girl as she followed her mother's directions in mixing batter and kneading dough. She even wore an apron, at her mother's urging – she was indignant at first, but she had to admit that it served a purpose, once she was covered in flour.

It was in that same flour-covered apron that she answered the door that evening, and found Brian, Bonnie, and half the neighborhood kids standing on their doorstep. Brian stared at her in amazement. Bonnie grinned, and Alexandra heard a few snickers, and then they broke into a chorus of 'Good King Wenceslas.'

Alexandra stood there, turning red, as her mother came up behind her and the two of them listened to the neighborhood carolers sing.

When they were done, Brian asked, "You sure you don't want to join us?"

Alexandra hesitated – for just a moment, she was tempted. These were the faces of the same kids

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who had taunted her for years, who feared her and whispered about her, but on that Christmas Eve, as snow began drifting down, they looked like a happy bunch of children inviting her to join their revels.

Her heart hardened. She couldn't allow herself to bend and soften. She couldn't forget what she was, and what she was meant to do. Even as her mother nudged her, she shook her head.

"We're in the middle of... making cookies." Her voice trailed off as she turned redder. She could almost hear the whispers: "*Alexandra Quick baking cookies!*" She would rather have given them more reasons to call her a witch.

"I can finish the cookies without you," Claudia said, but Alexandra shook her head more firmly.

For a moment, she thought Brian looked disappointed. Then she walked away from the door, back into the kitchen.

Her mother was quiet for a long time after the carolers had gone. Alexandra could feel the tension, and resolutely pulled trays out of the oven, refusing to say anything.

Finally, her mother said, "What's wrong with you, Alexandra?"

It didn't sound like an accusation this time. She actually sounded concerned.

Alexandra sighed. "I'm fine."

Claudia stood there, looking worried and indecisive and fearful.

It was the fear that convinced Alexandra to keep her mouth shut. And it wasn't as if she needed to talk about anything from the wizarding world with her mother. But for a moment, she so badly wanted to, it was painful. Months of biting her tongue, keeping things to herself, and telling herself that she was fine bubbled up inside, threatening to overwhelm her –

That was when they heard a noise from the fireplace.

"What?" Claudia's head jerked around, and Alexandra followed her from the kitchen to the living room.

They heard a roaring sound and felt a gust of air suddenly blowing out of the fireplace, as if something was about to come out of it, and for a moment, Alexandra had a ridiculous image in her head of Santa Claus descending down their chimney. Even as she thought that, she reached for her wand. The last time something magical had come out of their fireplace, it had burned down their house.

"Mom," she said, and she grabbed her mother's hand, and then great billowing clouds of greenish smoke belched forth, blinding them.



Claudia screamed and grabbed Alexandra. Alexandra tried to struggle free, so that she could point

her wand, and then abruptly, the smoke parted, and she saw two figures standing in their living room, coughing.

"Well," gasped a familiar voice. "Obviously this floo hasn't been used in a long time."

"If I'm not mistaken, it's never been used," said another familiar voice.

Alexandra gaped as Ms. King stepped forward, holding her own wand. "Hello, Alexandra. And you must be Mrs. Green." She smiled. "If you'll give me just a moment, I can clean all this Floo Powder up." She waved her wand, and the smoke began retreating back into the fireplace as if sucked through a straw; the powdery green soot lifted off of the furniture and the carpet and the people, and in moments, there were hardly any traces of it remaining.

Julia was standing next to her mother. She smiled and held her hands out. "Merry Christmas!"

Alexandra stood there, stunned, as Julia embraced her.

"Please forgive the unannounced visit," Ms. King said. "We only just were able to get this connection approved, and for a while I didn't think it would be allowed at all." She held out a hand to Alexandra's mother. "I am Thalia King. This is my daughter, Julia – Alexandra's sister."

"Sister?" Claudia's face had gone white.

Ms. King squeezed her hand. "Apparently Alexandra never told you that. I wish I could say that this surprises me." She looked at the two girls. Julia had draped an arm around Alexandra's shoulders; Alexandra was still standing there in shock.

"Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Green," Julia said.

"I –" Claudia stared at her. "You're Abraham's daughter, too?"

"Yes, ma'am." Julia nodded.

"Alexandra, perhaps you could show Julia around?" Ms. King said. She released Claudia's hand and turned to look at her. "Your mother and I need to have a long talk."

That snapped Alexandra out of her daze. "Talk? Wait. No!"

"Oh, show me your room, Alexandra!" Julia said. "And then maybe we can go outside? I've never really walked around in a Muggle neighborhood, except on the island, and field trips to Salem –"

Alexandra pulled away from her. "Ms. King... no. Please. You can't –"

"Yes, Alexandra." Ms. King gave Alexandra a severe look, and then one almost as severe to her mother. "Don't worry, we'll be fine."

"B-But –" Alexandra stammered.

Ms. King held up a hand, and Julia tugged her gently towards the stairs. "There's no use arguing," she whispered. "Mother's mind is made up, and I agree with her – it's for your own good, Alex."

"No!" Alexandra tried to pull away again, but Julia wouldn't let her.

"Shh," Julia said. "Your room is upstairs, yes? Come on... it will be all right." She gave Alexandra a kiss on the cheek, continuing to coax her upstairs, and Alexandra stared at her mother, who looked as stunned as she was, until they reached the stairs. With a groan, she allowed Julia to lead her upstairs.

They entered her bedroom, which was barely larger than Julia's bathroom back in Croatoa. Julia looked around curiously, and flipped the light switch several times.

"Pretty bird!" Charlie greeted her.

Julia laughed and walked over to the raven's cage. "Hello, Charlie." She pursed her lips and made kissing noises, which the raven imitated.

Alexandra sat down on her bed, and studied her hands. After a moment, the other girl joined her, putting an arm around her.

"You didn't write again," Julia said gently. "We'd been exchanging letters almost every week, before."

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"I thought..." Alexandra swallowed.

"You thought what?" Julia cupped Alexandra's face in her hands. "That because you did something horrible and foolish that we'd never speak to you again?"

"Something like that."

Julia let out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm sorry," Alexandra whispered.

"I know." Julia kept looking at her.

"Your mother must be really angry at me."

Julia nodded. "She was. But after I told her how you've been refusing to talk to anyone about Max's death, she was concerned for you."

"She can't tell my mother!" Alexandra said, though she knew it was too late. "My mother won't understand. She doesn't want to know –"

"Maybe that's what you think, but Mother says she needs to know, and she's going to."

Alexandra slumped, and Julia wrapped her arms around her.

"There, there, it's all right," Julia murmured, patting her on the back. "You're such a proud, stubborn girl."

They sat together for quite a while, talking – not so much about Maximilian, or Alexandra's failed attempt to save him, but about school, and Muggles, and Christmas at Croatoa.

Alexandra asked if they'd used the 'Floo Network' to travel all the way from Roanoke to Larkin Mills. Julia laughed and shook her head.

"Most Floos don't even work between cities," she said. "We had to Portkey to Chicago, and get a special connection from there to your house. And it was quite a bumpy ride, I don't mind telling you!"

"Must have been really expensive," Alexandra muttered.

"Shush!" Julia swatted her hand.

When Alexandra took Julia downstairs, their mothers were still talking in the living room. Alexandra dreaded what Ms. King would tell her mother, but Julia distracted her by asking to see the telephone, and the refrigerator, and the microwave oven and blender and computer, and then she wanted to go outside, so they walked up and down the street, with their feet crunching in the newly-fallen snow, while Julia commented on the cars and street lamps and houses. They saw the carolers down the street, and Julia wanted to meet them. She was puzzled and disappointed when Alexandra refused and insisted they go back inside.

They were shivering when they returned to the house, and found Ms. King and Mrs. Green drinking hot cider. Claudia's hands were shaking a little.

Alexandra sat down next to her, while Julia sat next to her mother.

"Mom?" Alexandra asked hesitantly. Her mother gave her a wan smile, and brushed snow-dampened hair away from Alexandra's ear.

"We had a nice, long chat," Ms. King said to Alexandra. "You have been holding far too much inside, my dear. You're too young to carry so much on your shoulders by yourself."

Alexandra looked down.

"Well," Ms. King continued. "We have imposed on your hospitality long enough, Mrs. Green."

"You can't stay longer?" Alexandra's voice sounded small in her own ears.

Ms. King smiled gently. "I'm afraid not. And you need to spend some time with your family this Christmas – although I want you to always remember that you are part of our family as well."

The Kings rose to their feet, and Alexandra and Claudia stood as well.

"Thank you, Ms. King," Claudia said. "For... visiting."

Ms. King gave the other woman an indecipherable look for a moment, and then clasped her hands around Claudia's, enfolding her hands and her cup.

"I know this was difficult for you," she said. "But I think we both can agree that it was necessary."

Claudia nodded. "Yes," she said, almost inaudibly.

Ms. King looked at Alexandra and sighed. "You foolish girl," she murmured, and leaned over to kiss the top of her head.

"Do you think Valeria will ever forgive me?" Alexandra mumbled.

"Yes, I think so." Ms. King stepped away from her. "Eventually."

Julia embraced her next. "Merry Christmas, Alex." She kissed her cheek, and Alexandra kissed her back.

"Write!" Julia whispered. "Don't make us come visit you again."

Alexandra smiled slightly. "I kind of liked you visiting me."

Julia raised an eyebrow. "Well, maybe we shall, if you don't visit us again first." She patted Alexandra's cheek, and then stood next to her mother again.

Ms. King took a metal canister out of her robes, poured some powder out of it into Julia's hands, and then shook some into the fireplace.

"Chicago Wizardrail Station!" she said, and stepped into the fireplace. Even though she was much too tall to fit, she abruptly disappeared in a flash of green and yellow flames.

Julia smiled and winked at Alexandra and her mother. She tossed the powder in her hands into the fireplace, and repeated: "Chicago Wizardrail Station!" Then, blowing a kiss, she stepped into the cloud of smoke, and disappeared as well.

Alexandra and her mother stood there, staring silently at the fireplace, for a long time. Then Claudia wrapped her arms around herself and shivered.

"Is it safe to light a fire there, now?" she asked.

Alexandra nodded. "Yeah. I think so."

Claudia put logs in the hearth and spent a few minutes getting a fire going with matches.

"I suppose you could start a fire with magic if you wanted to," Claudia said, sitting back down on the couch and brushing her hands off.

Alexandra looked at her, surprised.

"I'm not allowed to use magic while I'm at home," she said. "I'd get a... warning, from the Trace Office."

Claudia nodded slowly.

"Is that why you never wanted to talk about it?" Alexandra asked quietly. "You're afraid of magic?"

"No."

"I don't understand," Alexandra said. "Why do you hate magic so much?" She licked her lips. "Why do you hate my father so much?"

Her mother looked directly at her. "Let's talk about you, Alexandra."

Alexandra frowned.

Claudia closed her eyes. "It was wrong of me to tell you not to talk about your world. I never thought --" She sighed. "You should have been able to talk to me about Maximilian."

Alexandra folded her arms and huddled in on herself, suddenly no longer feeling talkative.

"It's all right to grieve, Alex," her mother said softly, putting her arms around her. "And it's all right to talk about it."

"I --" Alexandra's breath caught in her throat, and she squeezed her eyes shut very, very tightly, as her mother held her. "I don't want to," she whispered. "Please, don't make me."

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“Ms. King says it wasn't your fault.”

“Ms. King wasn't there.”

Claudia rubbed her daughter's back, and breathed deeply. “I don't know what to do, Alexandra. I can't make you talk about it.”

Alexandra didn't say anything. She closed her eyes. She felt acutely uncomfortable, and she was trying to use Occlumency in ways Maximilian had never intended – to hide her feelings behind a mask of calm. It only worked because her mother couldn't see her face, but gradually, she relaxed, and allowed her mother to continue holding her as she drifted off to sleep.

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Alexandra woke up on the couch Christmas morning, snuggled up against her mother.

There was a blanket laid over them; that meant that Archie had found them like that when he'd returned home, long after midnight. Alexandra sat up, annoyed and embarrassed. She was almost fourteen – far too old to be falling asleep in her mother's arms like a little girl.

Her mother stirred and yawned and stretched, by which time Alexandra had risen, and was poking at the ashes in the fireplace with the iron poker. The fire had gone out. She couldn't help leaning forward to stick her head into the fireplace, looking around. She knew she wouldn't find anything but the floor leading up the chimney; no magical portals or secret tunnels. But she found herself wishing that she could just step into the fireplace and be transported somewhere else.

“I'll wake up Archie and make breakfast,” her mother said. She got up, and ran a hand through Alexandra's hair.

“You're not going to tell him anything, are you?” Alexandra asked.

Claudia paused. “You don't really think he's completely oblivious, do you?”

Alexandra frowned.

Claudia sighed. “You can't keep secrets forever.”

“Neither can you,” Alexandra replied.

Claudia gave her a long look, then nodded, before shuffling off to the master bedroom.

Alexandra still refused to cry. But it meant more to her than she would ever admit that her mother knew the truth, now. At least a little bit of it.

It was an uneventful, but surprisingly pleasant, Christmas morning.

Her parents gave her a used laptop computer. Alexandra knew she would appreciate it a great deal, come summer – she didn't bother trying to explain to them that she wouldn't be able to use it at school.

David had sent a perfectly innocuous gift – an official hoodie from his father's football team. From the Pritchards, she received a basket of hand-made soap (*magical* soap, according to the enclosed card).

Anna sent only a card with season's greetings, along with some pictures of San Francisco's Chinatown.

The best gift of all came later that night, when her mother surprised her by knocking on her bedroom door.

“Santa left you one more present,” her mother said. “But I wasn't sure how to explain this to Archie, so I kept it out of sight.”

“Santa?” Alexandra rolled her eyes.

“Well – it did actually come down the chimney.” Claudia's face twitched, as she pulled something from behind her back and handed to Alexandra.

“No way,” Alexandra breathed, taking the broom.

“Ms. King told me to give it you on Christmas Day,” Claudia said. She eyed the broom suspiciously. “So, that thing actually... flies?”

A Long, Cold December

“Yes.” Alexandra nodded. She wanted to demonstrate it then and there, and hated that she couldn't. She sucked in a breath when she saw the model name and number engraved on the handle.

It was a brand new Twister.

“I assume you won't be flying it around here?” her mother muttered.

“No. Not allowed.” Alexandra was still admiring the feel of the broomstick in her hands – she could feel it twitching, ready to launch into the air even without her sitting on it.

“Well... Merry Christmas, Alexandra.” Her mother turned away, and Alexandra looked up from the broom.

“Thanks, Mom,” she said softly.

“That was from the Kings, not me.”

“I didn't mean the broom.”

Claudia hesitated, then gave her a kiss on the cheek. “You're still keeping a lot to yourself.”

“So are you.” Alexandra gazed back at her steadily. There was still so much unsaid between them – how had her mother met her father? Why did she want nothing to do with him now? All the questions that had gone unanswered for her entire childhood.

Claudia looked uncomfortable. “I'm working on it,” she murmured.

“Me, too.”

And that was where things stood a week later, when Alexandra brought her things downstairs to leave once more for Charmbridge Academy. It was the day after New Year's.

Alexandra and her mother had talked a little more. For Alexandra, it was a major step to admit that she grieved.

She had not admitted to her mother that she was still unwilling to accept that Maximilian was gone forever. She had not talked about her failed plan to go back in time – from what she understood, Ms. King had explained in vague terms that Alexandra had been 'suffering from misdirected anger and engaging in inappropriate behavior' because of her grief over her brother's death, but she had not tried explaining Time-Turners and family ghosts to Claudia.

Claudia and Archie were both there to see her off. Charlie and Nigel's cages were sitting by the door, and Archie was eyeing Alexandra's new broom, (which was longer than her Valkyrie had been, and couldn't quite fit inside her magical backpack), when a knock came at the door.

Claudia and Alexandra looked at one another. The bus shouldn't have arrived yet, and Mrs. Speaks never came to the door.

When Claudia opened it, a familiar woman with long, black hair was standing there, wearing a dark coat over a pants suit.

“Dean Grimm!” Claudia exclaimed.

“Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Green.” Ms. Grimm smiled. “Happy New Year's.” She looked over Claudia's shoulder at Alexandra. “Alexandra and I have some things to discuss, so I've notified the Academy that I will be bringing her there myself, directly.”

“Really?” Claudia stammered.

“That's quite a drive, isn't it?” Archie said.

“Oh, it's no trouble at all. Are you ready to go, Miss Quick?”

Alexandra stared at the woman, whose smile looked ominously like a warning.

“Yes, Ms. Grimm.”

Since Ms. Grimm hadn't corrected her parents, she didn't either. But it wasn't the Dean of Charmbridge Academy who had come to personally take her back to school. It was her sister, Diana.

Chapter 20 — The Winter Ball



“You Confunded them, didn't you?”

It was the first thing Alexandra said, as they drove away from Larkin Mills. The Special Inquisitor's car was a perfectly ordinary-looking vehicle, not at all like her sister's silver town car with the falcon hood ornament, nor any of the more fantastic vehicles Alexandra had seen on the Automagicka.

Charlie and Nigel were sitting in their cages in the back seat, along with Alexandra's backpack and broom. She had loaded her things into Ms. Grimm's car and said good-bye to her parents, and then sat wordlessly in the front passenger's seat for the first few miles, until they reached the Interstate.

Ms. Grimm said, “Nothing permanent. I promise you, it didn't harm them at all.”

“Neither does Obliviation, right?”

The Winter Ball

Ms. Grimm cast her eyes sideways as she drove. “You have a problem with the International Statute of Secrecy, Alexandra?”

Alexandra looked out the window. “Are you really taking me to Charmbridge?”

“Of course I am. Where else would I be taking you?”

“Oh, I don't know – Eerie Island, maybe, or Mount Diablo?”

“Mount Diablo is in California.” Ms. Grimm turned off the Interstate, and they went through the troll-booths that guarded the entrance to the Automagicka. Ms. Grimm tossed a gold coin to a large troll with purple skin, and barely slowed down long enough for it to drag a chain out of the way of the car.

“I know where Mount Diablo is,” Alexandra said, as they began speeding along the Automagicka. “You told me Anna's father is there.”

“Yes.” The Special Inquisitor glanced at her again. “On suspicion of collaborating with the Dark Convention – specifically, he's been accused of being a member of the Thorn Circle.”

Alexandra snorted. “That's ridiculous! Anna's father doesn't even know my father!”

“How do you know that, Alexandra?”

Alexandra opened her mouth, and paused. “There's no way Mr. Chu is a member of the Thorn Circle. He's running for Congress!”

“As your father did, once.”

“He almost pulled Anna out of school to keep her from being around me!”

“Perhaps now he wants to dissociate himself from his former co-conspirators.”

Alexandra shook her head, but Ms. Grimm went on: “Of course you and Anna believe Mr. Chu is innocent, but they wouldn't have arrested him without cause.”

“You told me the WODAMND Act lets you arrest anyone you think *might* be a Dark wizard. All you have to do is suspect them.”

Ms. Grimm smiled. They drove silently for a while, while Alexandra thought about Anna's father. Was it actually possible that he was a member of the Thorn Circle? She only knew one person who would know for sure.

After a while, she turned her head to look at the other witch. “Why did you come to pick me up? If I knew anything about the Thorn Circle, especially if I could prove that Anna's father isn't one of them, I'd have told you.”

“I have no doubt about the latter.” Ms. Grimm smiled thinly. “But there are things you haven't been telling me, Alexandra.”

Alexandra tensed. “What?”

“You've been lying, Alexandra.” Ms. Grimm's voice was very soft, but it carried a note of menace. “Pretending all these months that your memories of the Lands Below were gone, when they weren't.”

Alexandra's first impulse was to deny it, to hide her thoughts behind a wall of Occlumency (for all the good that would do her), and then she simply let out a breath and unclenched her fists.

“Who told you?” she asked.

“That doesn't matter. You must have known I'd find out eventually. You knew you'd have to tell me the truth sooner or later, so you've been holding onto that secret out of sheer obstinacy.” She glanced at Alexandra. “Surely it wasn't out of loyalty to your father?”

Alexandra remained silent.

“Eventually,” Ms. Grimm said, “my sister and I will not be able to protect you any more.”

“Protect me?” Alexandra couldn't hide her surprise.

“Do you really think after all your escapades, all your lying, that you'd still be on your way back to

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Charmbridge if she and I weren't doing our best to keep you out of the hands of the Juvenile Magical Offenses Division?"

Ms. Grimm let Alexandra think about that for quite a long time. They were zooming along the Automagicka, and Alexandra was distracted a little by some of the odder vehicles, with their strange bodies and seemingly random wheel configurations, but eventually she looked back at the woman next to her.

"Why?" she asked. "If I'm so troublesome?"

"Troublesome!" squawked Charlie, from the back seat.

"A trial and a pain." Ms. Grimm's mouth made a straight line, but for a moment, Alexandra thought she was suppressing a smile. "I think it more likely that you'll eventually lead me to your father if you're allowed to remain free, but not everyone in the Wizard Justice Department agrees. As for why Lilith has taken such a special interest in you, you'd have to ask her that. It's certainly not as a favor to me."

Alexandra watched a bright red car shoot past; it seemed to be floating a few feet off the ground, wheelless.

"You wanted me to help you," Ms. Grimm said. "I obtained information for you about Mr. Chu."

"It wasn't a lot of help."

Ms. Grimm's knuckles tensed on the wheel. Beneath her calm demeanor, the Special Inquisitor was growing angry.

Alexandra tried to collect her thoughts. It was hard to respond rationally when all she felt herself was anger and resentment. She was so tired of trying to outwit adults.

Why did the Grimm sisters care about her? She'd never asked for special treatment. She hadn't asked for anything that had happened to her since entering the wizarding world. She wanted to tell Ms. Grimm to leave her alone. She didn't want to be here in the car with her, being grilled about things she didn't want to talk about –

"I saw my brother die," she said. Her voice was so low, it was almost a whisper. "I lied to you because I didn't want to talk about it. You don't care what happened to us. You just want to catch my father. And all my father cared about was getting what he wanted – he took my memories to keep you from catching him, and only gave them back after he thought it wouldn't matter. You two are like... arch-rivals, like a cat and a mouse, and I'm the cheese."

She wasn't even sure if that made sense. She had to stare out the window to avoid looking at Ms. Grimm. But when the Special Inquisitor spoke again, she sounded almost kindly: "That may be the most honest thing you've ever said to me, Alexandra."

Alexandra shrugged, and continued staring out the window.

"Unfortunately," Ms. Grimm continued, "I don't have the luxury of being concerned about your feelings. If you want to dwell on grief and loss, however, I'd ask you to consider all the people who lost loved ones on the Roanoke Underhill."

"I know. I met some of them," Alexandra muttered.

"I need to know everything, now, Alexandra. I need to know how you and Maximilian traveled to the Lands Below, and what you brought back to your father."

Alexandra closed her eyes. Ms. Grimm was right – she had known she'd have to tell the tale eventually. She had already told Julia. For all she knew, the Office of Special Inquisitions had extracted the truth from her sister, and Ms. Grimm was just checking her version against what she already knew.

Having unburdened herself – somewhat – with her mother made it easier to repeat the story now. Alexandra began with Darla's obol, and continued talking as Ms. Grimm drove along the Automagicka.

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By the time she finished, with her return to Charmbridge Academy and her father's theft of her memories, they were entering Chicago.

"Julia and Ms. King aren't going to be in trouble, are they?" Alexandra asked.

"For not telling us that you'd been given your memories back?" Ms. Grimm frowned. "I don't think so."

But I'll bet it will come up, Alexandra thought.

She wasn't worried that the Kings would be intimidated by threats, but it was just another bit of misery she'd brought upon them.

Ms. Grimm's car exited the Automagicka, and soon she parked in front of Grobnowski's Old World Deli. As they got out, Alexandra had difficulty carrying her pack, her familiars' cages, and her broom. Ms. Grimm took Nigel's cage and the broom from her, and eyed the latter.

"This is a fine broom," she said, as they walked inside. "Take good care of it, Alexandra."

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Ms. Grimm left her at the Chicago Wizardrail station, telling her that the Charmbridge bus would be along in just under two hours.

"Until next time, Alexandra."

Alexandra watched the Special Inquisitor go, and then looked down at Charlie, who was very unhappy about being confined to a cage, and Nigel, who was also twisting about, disturbed by all the movement.

"Quit fussing," she said to her two familiars, as she took a seat on a bench, and watched all the witches and wizards go by. Most of them ignored her. A few gave her suspicious looks – ravens and snakes were not popular familiars. Alexandra supposed she should be grateful that her picture hadn't been published with any of those stories about Abraham Thorn's daughters.

An old woman with a bulbous nose, a face dented with warts and moles, and reddish eyes shambled past, and gave Alexandra a long, appraising look. Alexandra suppressed a shiver, and stared back at the woman, who smiled hideously at her, displaying jagged, discolored teeth.

"You have a touch of wickedness in you," the old woman said. "I can tell."

"Who asked you?" Alexandra snapped.

She knew she was being rude – she didn't care. But the old woman didn't look offended. Her smile broadened, and she leaned closer, until Alexandra could smell her breath. Surprisingly, it was not foul, as she would have expected; on the contrary, it was sweet and pleasant. It brought to mind apple cider and fresh-baked cookies.

She was barely paying attention as the old crone murmured, "Wicked children come to me for things their mommies and daddies won't give them. What is it you want that you didn't get for Christmas, dearie?"

Her voice was so kindly, Alexandra mumbled spontaneously, "I want my brother back."

Then she blinked rapidly, and came to her senses. Her eyes focused, and she glared at the old woman, who took a step back. Alexandra rose to her feet and drew her wand.

"You wouldn't hurt old Hilda, would you?" croaked the old woman, holding up dry, gnarled hands. "What do you want? An Amulet of Resurrection? The Book of the Dead? Elixir of Life? I can get those for you..."

"What's going on here?" said a man in a Wizardrail Auror's uniform. He had his wand out as well, as he approached the couple. He pointed at Alexandra. "You, girl, put your wand away!"

Alexandra complied. The Auror looked at the old woman. "Hilda, if I see you around here again, HAGGIS won't be able to help you."

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Hilda glowered at the Auror, but bowed her head in acquiescence. Just before turning away, she looked up at Alexandra from beneath thick, bristly brows, and winked.

The Auror turned to her. "Hasn't anyone ever told you not to talk to hags?"

Alexandra shrugged. The Auror shook his head, and stalked off, following Hilda's departure from the station, as Alexandra sat back down.

She knew an old woman hanging around train stations was unlikely to be able to obtain anything like an 'Amulet of Resurrection.' Still, for a moment, she had wanted to believe...

Over the Wizard Wireless Address system, a voice announced the arrival of the Delta Blue Blazer from New Orleans. Alexandra watched the passengers who disembarked shortly thereafter, and sure enough, Angelique appeared, carrying Honey in her Silenced cage, with a porter-elf dragging her bags along behind her.

Angelique saw Alexandra, gave her a halfhearted wave, and then suddenly became very interested in the animated Regimental recruitment posters lining one wall of the station.

More Charmbridge students appeared, one by one and two by two, until by the time the bus arrived, there was quite a crowd of them – all giving Alexandra a wide berth.

She found the Pritchards already on the bus with the Rashes. They greeted her, despite the Rashes' scowls, so Alexandra supposed the Ozarker boys hadn't told the Pritchards' Ma and Pa about their continuing to socialize with 'unrespectable' sorts.

Alexandra saw William sitting towards the back of the bus with some other younger students; he waved to her, while holding his toad in his other hand. She gave him a small smile as she waved back, and noticed how the other sixth graders stared at the Muggle-born boy.

Alexandra didn't see any sign of Anna. She found David sitting across a table from his roommate, Dylan Weitzner.

"Happy New Year, Alex," David said.

"S'up, Alex," said Dylan, who was slouched in the booth, wearing dark glasses and a baseball cap turned backwards. Under his robe – which he'd left open, as many Muggle-borns did until they reached Charmbridge and had to cover up their Muggle clothing – he wore an overly large t-shirt and baggy pants. He made some weird gesture with his hand.

Alexandra nodded, frowning a little, as she sat down next to him.

"Man, knock that off," David said, rolling his eyes. "If anyone's gonna start a hip-hop club at Charmbridge, it ain't gonna be some white boy from Cleveland."

Dylan sat up. "Oh, like you're keepin' it real with your homies, Mr. Went-to-a-fancy-private-school who lives in the one part of Detroit that doesn't suck."

Alexandra wasn't sure if the boys were joking around or having a fight, but they fell silent when Angelique stood over their table and cleared her throat.

David grinned fatuously.

"Lique!" exclaimed Dylan, spreading his hands. "Whaddup?"

"Man, I swear I'm gonna –" David shook his head and cut himself off. He patted the seat next to him, and Angelique slid into it, with a disdainful look at Dylan.

"Not sitting with Darla?" David asked.

"She's not returning until tomorrow," Angelique said.

David tried to hide his pleased expression. "You never called."

She sighed, and took out a shiny new cell phone. "I tried. I read the instructions, and I kept my wand away from it. And I had my Uncle Maurice helping me."

"Uncle Maurice?" David said. "I thought you had to hide Muggle toys from your family."

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“Uncle Maurice was the black sheep of the family. He liked Muggles.” Angelique let out an embarrassed giggle. “Actually, the rumor is that he really, really liked Muggles. Apparently liking the wrong Muggle woman is how he wound up dead.”

“Dead?” Dylan and David both stared at her.

“He’s my favorite family ghost.”

The other kids at the table all exchanged glances.

“Do you think maybe having a ghost hovering around the phone is why it wouldn’t work?” David suggested.

Angelique sighed, and glared at the gadget. “Honestly, David, why do Muggles make their computer-chippy-things so difficult to use?” She dropped it back into the pocket of her robe and smiled at him. “So, did the robes I sent you fit?”

David shifted and looked uncomfortable. “Uh, yeah – my mom said they just need to be taken in an inch or so...”

“Oh, good, we can find someone to do that before the Winter Ball.”

David gulped. “You want me to wear them to the Winter Ball?”

“Well, of course! You didn’t think formal robes like that are for everyday wear, did you?” She patted his cheek. “I want you to look *wizardly* next to me!”

“Wizardly,” David repeated, with a weak smile.

Alexandra covered her mouth. David caught her look, and glared at her.

“Are you going?” he asked.

Her smile faded. She started to say, “No,” and then remembered her promise to Julia. Julia had reminded her of it, before leaving on Christmas Eve.

“Umm, maybe,” she mumbled.

“Really?” Angelique arched an eyebrow. “With who?”

Alexandra knew what the other girl was thinking – who would ask Alexandra Quick to the ball?

She shrugged. “I haven’t asked anyone yet.”

“You’re supposed to *be* asked,” Angelique said.

Alexandra turned to Dylan, who was slouched against the window, listening to the conversation with amusement.

“Do you have a date to the ball?” she asked.

His eyebrows rose above the tops of his sunglasses. “What?”

“Do you have a date?” she repeated slowly, as if speaking to a three-year-old.

His smirk vanished. “Uh, no...”

“Do you want to go?”

Dylan’s mouth fell half-open. He sat up, glanced at David, who was now the one hiding a smirk, and back at Alexandra.

“Yeah,” he said. “Sure.”

Charlie made a coughing sound, matching David and Angelique’s amused expressions.

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Alexandra hid her worry all the way back to Charmbridge. When they got off at the Invisible Bridge, she waited for the seventh graders to disembark, but she didn’t see Tomo either. At the Wizardrail station, she’d seen that the train from California was still not running. It traveled under the Rocky Mountains – and thus, through the Lands Below.

She asked Ms. Speaks if she was using a Time-Turner to collect students from around the country again. The bus driver shook her head.

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"The Department of Magical Transportation has started issuing Wartime Alternative Route Plans," she informed Alexandra. "I've been picking up more students from other Territories at Muggle train stations and airports."

Sure enough, after making the hike across the bridge and through the woods to Charmbridge Academy, she found Anna had already arrived and unpacked her things.

"Hi," Alexandra said, immensely glad to see her, and simultaneously remembering the coldness between them before the Christmas break.

"Hi." Anna gave Alexandra a small smile, but didn't cross the room to hug her, so Alexandra set Nigel's cage on her desk and unlatched Charlie's, while hiding her disappointment.

"Did you take a Muggle train to Chicago?" she asked.

Anna nodded. "It took a long time. I rode with Xaoming and Tammy, and Daniel Lucas and Harley Fortescue and a few others... Daniel and Tammy did most of the talking to Muggles. I envy the Muggle-borns, though, and Tomo... they took an airplane. I would have, but my mother was worried about me flying on an airplane by myself for the first time..." Her voice trailed off, as Alexandra listened to her ramble on, without looking at her.

"How's your father?" Alexandra asked softly.

Anna swallowed. "He's still in prison. They wouldn't let us see him. They blame him for the unrest and the Chinese and New Colonials calling for the Governor's recall, even though it's only happening *because* they put him in prison." She continued rearranging books on her desk, even though she'd been doing this since Alexandra had entered the room. "What about your father?" she asked, without looking up.

"Still haven't heard from him. Still don't want to." Alexandra hesitated, then walked over to her roommate. "I missed you," she said.

Anna still wouldn't look at her. "I missed you, too," she mumbled.

"I want us to be friends again."

Anna looked up. Her eyes were wet.

"I do, too," she whispered. "But..."

"You're right. I've lied to you. I've hidden things from you. Not just from you – from everyone. I've hurt a lot of people, including my own sister." Alexandra closed her eyes. "I'm not good at talking about... stuff, Anna. To anyone. I couldn't even tell Julia what I was up to, and I still – I still have trouble talking to her about Max. I only just admitted to my own mother that I met my half-brother last year, and that he d-died."

She opened her eyes again. Anna was staring at her. Charlie, who had fluttered to the window sill, was also watching her, attentive and silent.

"You've been closer to me than a sister," Alexandra said. "Maybe I don't know how to have a sister... or a best friend. But I promise, I'll listen to you. And I...I'll try to stop hiding things from you –"

"Try?" Anna asked.

"I will. I'll stop hiding things from you." Alexandra took a deep breath. "I trust you, Anna. I will trust you from now on."

Anna just stood there for a moment. Then, to Alexandra's horror, she burst into tears.

"Anna!" Alexandra put her arms around her, and Anna shook with sobs.

"I'm sorry," Anna said at last. Her face was red and tear-streaked. "I've been crying a lot lately." Alexandra nodded.

"Are you done trying to bring back Max?" Anna asked softly.

Alexandra didn't answer immediately.

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"No," she said at last. She stepped back, and cleared her throat. "It was stupid for me to try to use a Time-Turner without really understanding them. I get that. And I know everyone says you can't bring back the dead. But I know there's magic out there that they don't teach us about."

"Dark magic," Anna said.

"I swore I wouldn't give up." Alexandra's determined expression faltered a little at the look Anna gave her. "But I won't hide what I'm doing from you anymore. And I'll listen to you." She smiled ruefully. "I can't promise I'll always take your advice, Anna. But you are usually right."

Anna started crying again. Embarrassed, Alexandra put her arms around her again.

"Does this mean we're still friends?" she asked.

Anna nodded.

"Good," Alexandra said. "Because I don't want to go to the Winter Ball without you."

"The Winter Ball?" Anna rubbed her eyes.

"Yeah. I promised Julia I'd go."

Anna stared at her, wide-eyed. "You want to go with me? Not a boy?"

Alexandra laughed. "I'm going with Dylan Weitzner. I asked him on the bus."

"Oh." Anna kept staring at her.

"So, I guess we have to find you a date."

"You really make me crazy sometimes," Anna said.

Alexandra grinned at her. For a moment, that tight knot that had been constricting around her heart for the last eight months loosened a little.

Late that night, she thought some more about what Ms. Grimm had told her, and about Anna's plight.

It wasn't her fault that Anna's father was in prison – it wasn't even really her father's fault. But she realized, as she lay in bed and thought about how preoccupied she had been with Time-Turners and ghosts and the Lands Beyond for the past five months, that she really hadn't thought about what she could do to help Anna – and there *was* something she could do.

Or rather, there was something she could make her father do.

Quietly, she slipped out of bed, and went to her desk, where she took out a quill and a piece of parchment, and by the light of her wand, which she cupped beneath one hand to keep from waking up Anna, she wrote a very short note:

"Dear Father,

I want to talk to you.

Alexandra"

She rolled it up, very carefully, and then looked at Charlie. Charlie seemed to be asleep, but croaked her name when she walked over and reached her hand into the bird's cage.

She wiggled her fingers, silently coaxing Charlie out of the cage, and after a moment, her familiar stepped onto her wrist. The raven's talons dug into her skin, but she didn't wince as she withdrew her arm, and then began slowly, carefully, tying the rolled up piece of parchment to Charlie's leg.

"Charlie's a raven!" Charlie exclaimed.

Alexandra jerked her head around – Anna stirred for a moment, and then lay still.

"Shh," Alexandra whispered. "Yes, I know you're not an owl."

She finished tying the note to Charlie's leg, and then cradled the bird in her arms. She spoke very softly, as if she were asking a favor, not giving a command.

"Ravens are wise birds," she murmured in Charlie's ear. "I don't think an owl would be able to find my father – but I'll bet you can."

Or, she thought, her father would let Charlie find him.

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"I want you find my father, Charlie," she whispered.

Charlie made a disgruntled sound, and Anna mumbled something. Alexandra held her breath, but didn't scold.

After a moment, Anna was silent again.

"Please, Charlie," Alexandra whispered. She kissed the top of Charlie's head, as she walked towards the window. "I need you to do this." She stroked the bird, and kissed it again. "If you can't find him, then just come back. But I wouldn't ask anyone else to do this, and I wouldn't ask you to deliver a message to anyone else."

The raven cocked its head, regarding her with one unblinking black eye, then another. Alexandra had always thought that those eyes harbored more intelligence than anyone knew.

She cracked the window open, and then held Charlie out before her.

"Fly, fly!" Charlie said, and took off, flapping out the window and into the cold winter night.

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Alexandra had the same classes as in the fall semester, since her forced participation in JROC meant that once again she had no choice of electives.

On their first day back, Mr. Grue berated them for half an hour. Almost half the class (Alexandra included) had botched their Alchemy term projects. The teacher announced that they would have to prepare a potion by the end of every week, with no class time allocated for preparation. In class, they would spend the entire semester learning essential elements and compounds.

"At the end of this semester," Mr. Grue said, "those of you who pass will have the option of continuing with General Alchemy in ninth grade, or branching into an elective." He glowered at Alexandra. "*If* you pass."

Alexandra had done better in Mr. Newton's class, but the Charms teacher promised that their second semester would also be harder, as they were going to study locks, seals, and wards.

"You all know Locking Charms by now – though most of you neglect to use them." Mr. Newton flicked his wand at a large, old-fashioned padlock sitting on his desk, and it leaped into the air and made a clacking sound as it locked itself before falling back to his desk. "And many of you probably learned *Alohomora* as soon as you got your wands." He pointed his own wand as he said the word '*Alohomora*,' and the padlock popped open and skittered a few inches across his desk. "This semester, you will begin learning more complex Charms, beginning with Colloportus. We will touch upon wards and seals, which are the foundations of many complex enchantments. If you are hoping to learn how to get past Age Lines and magically sealed doorways, however, I assure you, that is well beyond any of your capabilities."

Alexandra sat back in her seat, and regarded Mr. Newton with a thoughtful expression. Charms class might actually be worth paying attention to this semester.

Colonel Shirliffe told the JROC, during their first drill of the new year, that there would be an extra practice that week for them to rehearse ballroom drills and courtesies.

Alexandra attended, with misgivings. She was relieved when Ms. Shirliffe assigned the couples instead of letting the mages pick their partners. She was less relieved when the teacher paired her off with Theo Panos.

Theo was no more pleased. He managed to step on her foot every time they practiced entering and exiting the floor.

"If you step on my foot one more time, I'm going to glue your feet to the ground," she hissed at him.

"Do it. Then I won't have to see your ugly face at the ball," Theo said. "I can't believe someone actually asked you!"

The Winter Ball

She glared at him, but he was right – with Ms. Shirtliffe watching, she didn't dare jinx him. She had already asked about rejoining the Dueling Club; Ms. Shirtliffe had all but laughed in her face.

Anna remained completely unenthusiastic about finding a date.

"I think I'll just skip the Winter Ball," she said. "I mean, we're going to have a lot of work this semester –"

"It's this weekend, Anna. C'mon, don't bail on me."

Anna looked pained.

"Aren't there any boys you like?" Alexandra asked.

"No," Anna said firmly. "I mean, not like that."

"I don't like Dylan either. I mean, not like that. I only asked him because he was there."

David and Dylan were not very enthusiastic about helping her find a date for Anna.

"Just ask one of your friends to ask her," she said to them at breakfast, the following morning, while Anna was getting tea and pumpkin juice. "I'm sure they don't all have dates."

David asked, "Does she even want to go to the ball?"

"Of course she does," Alexandra assured them.

They gave her skeptical looks, as Anna returned to their table.

Constance and Forbearance were excited and envious when they found out that Alexandra was going to the ball.

"What are you gonna wear?" asked Forbearance.

"Somethin' purdy, I hope," said Constance.

"I'm wearing my dress uniform," Alexandra said. "Are you going?"

They sighed and shook their heads. "Hain't no one gonna ask us, Alex."

"Why not? Are Ozarkers not allowed to dance?"

"Course we are!" Constance looked annoyed. "There's plenty dancin' back home!"

"But we'uns hain't never been old enough to be asked a'fore," Forbearance said.

"So ask someone!"

Forbearance's eyes widened, and Constance turned pink.

"That might work for you, Alex," Forbearance said, "but we couldn't never ask no boy brazen like that."

By Wednesday evening, David and Dylan had yet to talk any of their friends into asking out Anna. Most eighth grade boys either weren't going to the ball, or already had dates.

"Thanks a lot," she said to them. "You've been a great help."

"Any time," David replied, matching her sarcasm.

The two boys walked away, and Alexandra returned to her room with a scowl, trying to think of who else she could bully or cajole into taking Anna to the ball – maybe shy, awkward Thomas Klaus?

Anna was in her room with Jingwei. The great horned owl dominated much of her desk, and hooted at Alexandra as she entered.

"I saw Charlie fluttering around outside," Anna said, feeding Jingwei an owl treat. "Probably won't come in until Jingwei leaves." Jingwei hooted again.

"That's all right." Alexandra eyed the owl, who somehow managed to look amused.

"You can also stop trying to fix me up for the Winter Ball," Anna said. "It's embarrassing."

"But I don't want to go without you."

"I asked Miss Marmsley – you're not actually required to have a date to attend the ball. The Winter Ball isn't like the Sweetheart's Dance – everyone's expected to dance with different partners."

"You're going to go by yourself?"

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Anna shrugged. “Carol is doing the same thing, because Sonja also nagged her until she agreed to go. Maybe we'll just hang around together.” She looked at Alexandra. “And don't go bullying any boys into asking me to dance, okay?”

Alexandra frowned. “All right. You will dance if someone asks you, won't you?”

“Sure.” Anna patted Jingwei's feathered head. “That's enough treats. Time to go to the aviary. And stop trying to scare poor Charlie.”

Jingwei hooted disdainfully, and took off. Cold air blew in through the open window, and Alexandra and Anna shivered until Charlie finally soared in through it, several minutes later.

Alexandra slammed the window shut, and dug out her own collection of owl treats for the raven. She was very disappointed to find no note attached to Charlie's leg.

“Didn't you bring me a reply?” she asked.

“Alexandra,” Charlie said, in a slightly deeper and more masculine voice than usual.

Anna raised an eyebrow. Alexandra glanced at her, and back at the bird.

“Is that it?” she demanded.

Charlie squawked, and pecked at her hand. Reluctantly, she opened it and let the raven have the treats.

“My father,” Alexandra said quietly.

Anna's eyebrows rose further.

“I told him I want to talk to him,” Alexandra said.

Anna's face twitched. She looked very upset, and Alexandra shook her head. “I have to ask him some things. Don't worry – this isn't part of some new secret mission.”

Anna nodded slowly. “You'll tell me if he actually replies to you?”

Alexandra looked at her, wondering how much would be safe to tell her, and how much she had to, to keep her promise.

“Yes,” she replied. “Of course.”

She wasn't sure why her father hadn't sent a reply with Charlie – maybe he feared the raven might be intercepted. Or maybe he just didn't want to talk to her. After all, she had pretty much told him off the last time they'd spoken.

She thought it was more likely, though, that he would contact her in his own time, in his own way.

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“You look great,” Anna said, as Alexandra fastened her wand pin, straightened her cloak, and checked herself in the mirror.

This was the first time she had worn her formal JROC uniform since Maximilian's funeral. She stared at her reflection for a long time, until the mirror confirmed Anna's opinion: “You look fine, dear.”

Alexandra smiled, and turned to Anna, who was wearing a fancy red robe with a yellow floral design. She had also tied her hair up in a bun – the first time Alexandra had ever seen Anna wearing her hair any other way but long and straight.

“You look nice, too.”

Anna blushed a little.

“Well, I guess I'd better find my date,” Alexandra said, rolling her eyes. “C'mon.” She walked out, and Anna followed her.

David and Dylan were waiting downstairs. David looked uncomfortable in his long black and silver formal robes, though Alexandra had to admit they looked quite splendid on him. Dylan was tugging at the collar of a rather ill-fitting bright red robe. He looked a little disappointed when he saw Alexandra.

The Winter Ball

"I thought you'd be wearing a dress," he said. "I mean, a formal robe."

She gave him a sour look. "Sorry, I don't do dresses. JROC witches are allowed to wear their dress uniforms to the ball."

She had worn a formal robe to the Roanoke Cotillion. She didn't think she'd do that again.

Next to Dylan, David breathed, "Whoa."

Everyone turned around, to see Angelique and Darla descending the stairs. Angelique was wearing a deep green and gold robe that flattered her figure in a way that immediately drew the eyes even of older boys. Darla was wearing pink and silver; she glittered like a Christmas ornament, and wore her hair in haughty curls piled high on top of her head.

Angelique sashayed over to David, who looked bedazzled. Alexandra rolled her eyes, and told Dylan, "Let's line up."

He offered his arm. Hesitantly, she took it.

Anna and Carol followed them. She and Dylan fell in line behind Sonja Rackham and Ebenezer Smith. She saw Darla stride over to Stuart Cortlandt. The ninth grade boy smiled at her and kissed her hand, looking dashing and awkward at the same time.

Couples were congregating and pairing up outside the Charmbridge auditorium, which had been converted to a ballroom for the event.

The procession into the ballroom reminded Alexandra a little of the entrance to the Roanoke Spring Cotillion, except that there was no announcer calling the names of each person who entered, only a gauntlet of teachers. Colonel Shirtliffe wore her full dress uniform; Alexandra almost gagged when she saw she was escorted by Mr. Grue, in a dark robe and cloak that looked only slightly more dressy than what he wore every day in class. Ms. Fletcher was resplendent in her green robes and colorful, brightly-dyed cloak. The head custodian was standing next to a rather dour, uncomfortable-looking Mr. Newton. Dean Cervantes watched everyone with his arms folded across his chest; next to him was a severe, dark-haired woman Alexandra didn't recognize; presumably Mrs. Cervantes.

The school's magic band played as the students filed in and filled the dance floor. Dylan slipped an arm around Alexandra's waist, and then proceeded to step on her feet worse than Theo had. She could only take a few minutes of this before pushing him away and telling him she wanted to get something to drink.

"Fine," he said. "Hey, look – Ebenezer isn't even dancing with Sonja. I'm gonna ask her."

"Have fun," she said.

At the refreshments table, one Clockwork was ladling pumpkin juice and Fizzy Pop into cups, while another walked back and forth from the kitchen, carrying trays of snacks. Alexandra sipped some Fizzy Pop and watched the dancing – she was perfectly content to stand on the sidelines, since Julia wasn't there to nag her into finding more dance partners.

Thus, she was the first to see Constance and Forbearance enter the ballroom after almost everyone else – each on the arm of one of the Rash twins.

The Pritchards were wearing their fanciest, most colorful dresses, with brightly colored hoop skirts and lacy bonnets. The Rashers wore stiff, uncomfortable-looking woolen suits. Alexandra wasn't the only one staring at them as the Ozarker boys led the girls onto the dance floor.

"Why aren't you dancing, Troublesome?"

Alexandra sighed and turned around to face Torvald. He looked a little more presentable than usual, dressed in a formal jacket and vest beneath a black cloak, in Old Colonial style. He seemed to have spent some time trying to fix the blemishes on his face, too, though it was still pockmarked, and there was an angry red band of acne along one side of his nose.

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“Go bother someone else,” she said. “I thought you brought Karina?”

“I did.” He gestured. “She’s dancing with one of your JROC buddies right now.” He held out an arm. “Are you and what’s-his-name exclusive?”

“Dylan? Heck, no! We’re not anything.” Without thinking about it, she took Torvald’s arm, and allowed him to drag her back onto the dance floor.

Torvald wasn’t a great dancer, but he managed not to step on her feet. She noticed his eyes were on the Pritchards, though.

“I didn’t think Ozarkers were allowed to dance,” he said.

“Of course they are. They dance plenty back home.”

“Excellent.” He grinned. “I think I’ll ask Constance to dance next. Or Forbearance. Either one – I can’t tell them apart.”

Alexandra rolled her eyes. “You’ll have to get past their ‘chaperones.’”

“Oh, I can take either Benjamin or Mordecai. I mean, if you can...” He winked at her.

“I beat you, remember?”

“You got me by surprise.”

“Want a rematch?”

“Not tonight.” He leaned towards her, as the dance ended. “How about a kiss?”

Alexandra made a face, and held her hand out against his chest, stopping him cold.

He sighed. “No harm trying.”

“Wanna bet?” She wrinkled her nose. “I’d seriously recommend you not try that with Constance or Forbearance.”

Torvald grinned at her, bowed with a flourish, and headed off in the direction of the Ozarkers. Alexandra wanted to watch, but caught sight of Anna, sitting by herself against one wall. She walked over to her roommate.

“Have you danced at all?” Alexandra asked.

“A couple of times.” Anna shrugged, and looked at Alexandra. “I only came because you wanted me to.”

“Sorry,” Alexandra said, feeling guilty as she sat down next to Anna. “I really did hope you’d have fun.”

“Like you are?”

Now Alexandra shrugged. “I came because Julia asked me to.” She leaned against the wall and sighed. “Anyway, the only ones who will dance with me are Muggle-borns who don’t care who my father is, or jerks like Torvald.”

Anna looked at her, and seemed on the verge of saying something, when someone spoke Alexandra’s name.

They both turned their heads, and Alexandra immediately rose from her seat, at the sight of Larry Albo looming over them.

She expected him to sneer or threaten her or something, and her fingers were twitching, eager to snatch her wand, when he extended his hand towards her.

“Dance with me,” he said.

Alexandra stared at him. Anna’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped open.

Larry continued standing there, with his hand extended. Alexandra’s eyes darted around. Over his shoulder, she could see Wade dancing with some tenth grade girl; he was looking in their direction, with an expression of astonishment that matched Anna’s. Alexandra couldn’t see where Adela was.

“Very funny,” Alexandra said. “Now get lost.”

The Winter Ball

Dean Price was only a few yards away, and Alexandra could see Ms. Shirtliffe, across the room, with her eyes already on them. Surely even Larry wouldn't be stupid enough to start a fight with her here?

He dropped his hand, and stepped closer to her. Alexandra would have backed away from him, if not for the fact that half the school was watching, and she didn't want to appear afraid.

He leaned close. Alexandra was on the verge of drawing her wand then and there, when he whispered in her ear, "I have a message from your father."

She gasped, in shock and outrage. "What?"

"I have a message from your father," he repeated, still whispering.

Behind her, Anna remained tense, and seemed to be trying to decide whether to say something, or run for help, or just sit where she was.

Alexandra shook her head slowly. "I swear, Larry, I don't care if I get expelled, if you don't get away from me right now, I'll –"

"Your father said to tell you, you sent your raven with a message for him. You wrote a note that said you want to talk to him," Larry whispered.

Alexandra was stunned into silence. How could Larry possibly know that?

He stepped back and held his hand out again. "Dance with me."

Alexandra looked over her shoulder at a speechless Anna. She could feel dozens of pairs of eyes on them as she took Larry's hand, and allowed him to lead her onto the dance floor. The band was playing a slow, wheezing number, the sort that had many couples clinging to one another as tightly as the adult chaperones would let them get away with. Larry put his hands on her waist; Alexandra felt flushed as she laid her hands on his shoulders, gritting her teeth all the while. Then he leaned close, without pressing himself too closely against her, and she was struck with a sudden suspicion.

"Is this... is this you?" she whispered. "Father?"

Her father could be using Polyjuice Potion again, she realized. She wondered what he'd done with the real Larry.

But Larry just stared down at her, then said, "Your father said to tell you that I won't remember this conversation afterwards. Also, no one else can hear us."

Her eyes widened. "What did he do to you?"

Over his shoulder, Alexandra saw that Adela had returned from the lavatory, and was staring at them with an appalled expression on her face.

He leaned closer, until his lips were almost brushing her ear. She gasped, and fought an impulse to push him away.

"Your father said to tell you to meet him in the woods, where you did last time, on the night of the next new moon."

Alexandra was so disoriented that the dance was almost over before she realized that Larry had stopped talking. She looked up at him. He was still staring at her. When the music ended, he turned around and walked away, without another word.

She could see her friends and Larry's friends alike staring at them. Larry walked over to Adela, who grabbed him and began hissing something in his ear, gesturing violently in Alexandra's direction. He glanced over at her. His lip curled; his expression was now one of disgust.

Alexandra had no idea what Larry would remember now. She wondered what his explanation to Adela would be, but she didn't think asking him would be a good idea.

He'll probably accuse me of using a spell on him, she thought. She walked back to Anna, who was still staring at her in astonishment.

"Not right now," she whispered.

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She looked around at the other students – some were still looking at her or Larry, but most were paying more attention to whomever they were dancing with, and Ms. Shirtliffe's eyes were no longer fixed on her.

She waited until Dylan finally returned to check on her. She'd watched him asking one girl after another to dance, and mostly being turned down. She had to give him credit for persistence.

"I'm tired," she said. "I'm going back to my room. You can stay."

"Okay." He shuffled, and seemed to feel as if something more was called for.

"Don't even think about trying to give me a good-night kiss," she said.

He grimaced. "No. Just... well, did you have a good time?"

"If you're worried about 'abandoning' me, forget about it."

"Okay." Dylan looked relieved. "Umm, thanks for agreeing to go with me."

"Agreeing to...?" She stared at him, and snorted. "Yeah. No problem."

Alexandra and Anna weren't the only students trickling out of the ballroom by now. Some would stay late into the night, but Carol, Sonja, and Ebenezer followed them out. Once Ebenezer left them, at the stairs to the girls' dorms, Sonja complained all the way back to their suite about what a terrible dancer he was, and how he'd hovered over her so she was hardly able to dance with anyone else.

Alexandra tuned her out. She was thinking about her father's message, and his choice of medium.

She had been telling the truth – she was tired. But the last thing she did, after saying good-night to Anna and before turning in, was to look up the date of the next new moon in her almanac. It was February 14 – Valentine's Day.

Chapter 21 — Sweethearts and Traitors



Anna didn't ask any questions the next morning, but her silence felt like an accusation. Alexandra waited until after they'd both showered and dressed, debating whether to keep her father's message a secret.

I will trust you from now on, she thought, and she proceeded to tell Anna about her conversation with Larry.

"My father must have bewitched him, somehow," Alexandra said. "But how could he have even gotten to Larry?"

Anna asked, "Do you think Larry will accuse you of putting a love potion in his drink?"

Alexandra made a face.

"It's a clever way to send a message, though, if you don't trust owls," Anna said.

CHAPTER 21

“Or ravens.” Alexandra looked at Charlie, who had been reluctant to go out again since returning from the last errand. “Why couldn’t he just send a note back with you?”

Charlie made a clacking sound, puffed up a bit, and then went back to sleep, head buried under one wing.

“So, why do you want to talk to him, anyway?” Anna asked.

Alexandra paused, before turning away from Charlie’s cage. This was the one thing she wasn’t telling Anna – not yet. She didn’t want to get her friend’s hopes up.

“I have some things to ask him. There are things we need to talk about. About... Max.”

Anna was quiet, before she nodded, accepting the explanation. “Pretty risky, if you get caught.” To Alexandra’s relief, Anna didn’t lecture her.

At breakfast, Larry and Adela were sitting at their usual table in the cafeteria. When Alexandra and Anna passed by, Larry’s friends snickered and muttered under their breaths. Anna tensed, but Alexandra was relieved that it was merely the usual taunting instead of shouted accusations.

The Rashes were also sitting with the Old Colonials, and didn’t look nearly as amused. Surprisingly, they barely noticed Alexandra and didn’t give her their usual dirty looks. Instead, their attention was fixed on Constance and Forbearance, who were sitting with the other eighth graders.

When Alexandra and Anna joined them, they found David and Dylan sitting across the table from the Pritchards, looking quite pleased with themselves.

“What’s up?” Alexandra asked.

“We jacked the Rashes’ dates,” Dylan said.

Forbearance set her spoon down, looking offended. “Beg your pardon?”

David said, “We danced with Constance and Forbearance last night.”

“You’uns asked an’ we’uns said yes – we wasn’t... ‘jacked!’” Constance sounded even more offended.

“Sorry.” David looked at Constance apologetically.

Dylan was still snickering. “Man, you should’ve seen the looks on their faces.”

Forbearance shook her head. “If we’d knowed you was askin’ just to spite Benjamin and Mordecai and not ‘cause you wanted to dance with us...”

“I didn’t – I mean, I did want to dance with you –” David was stammering now.

“What about Angelique?” Alexandra asked.

“Oh, well, she was dancing with Stuart Cortlandt –” David’s face darkened. “I mean, what, I’m supposed to stand against the wall while some other dude is dancing with my girl?”

Alexandra looked down the table, where Angelique was sitting with Darla and the other girls. Angelique glanced at David and rolled her eyes.

“So you only danced with me to nip at Angelique?” Constance said.

“No!” David was becoming increasingly flustered. “C’mon – everyone was dancing with different people!” He said that rather loudly, and Angelique turned her head and rolled her eyes again.

Alexandra was beginning to tune the conversation out – it was exactly the sort of inane drama that made her not want to get involved with boys or dances at all. Then David asked, “Hey Alex, what was that about with you and Larry?”

She turned her attention back to him, and found everyone staring at her.

Annoyed by David’s transparent change of subject, she sipped her orange juice slowly, then said, “Isn’t it obvious? I charmed him.”

She turned around, to look at the tenth graders’ table. Larry and Adela both caught her looking at them, and began glowering. Alexandra deliberately fixed her eyes on Larry, and slowly winked. She saw his mouth drop open, while Adela’s face twisted in fury. Then she turned back around to smile at

her appalled friends.

Alexandra soon regretted that taunt, when she learned that rumors were spreading through the school that she really had bewitched Larry. She didn't know whether Larry believed them, or if he had made any accusations against her, but she was summoned to Dean Cervantes's office that week.

The dean of the eighth grade studied her, as she stood before him. It was a drill day, and she was in her JROC uniform.

"You know, I served in the Texarcana Regiment for a few years." The dean drummed his fingers, and looked at his wall, where a framed case displaying several Regimental Officer Corps medals hung. "I was commissioned as a Mage-Lieutenant immediately, of course, because of my family background. I didn't have to bother with the JROC as a student." He turned in his chair to regard Alexandra. "But the JROC has been an avenue for many young witches and wizards to advance without the benefit of being born into a pureblood family."

Alexandra could think of no response to that. She stood silently at attention, with a puzzled frown.

Dean Cervantes steepled his fingers together. "Certain rumors have reached my ears," he said. "Rumors that you may have used a Bewitching Charm or a Love Potion on Mr. Albo at the Winter Ball."

Alexandra's face colored. "Excuse me? Did he say I did that?"

"Word gets around, Miss Quick. Don't worry about who told me. I am simply asking you: is it true?"

"No! Sir." Alexandra clenched her fists.

"You realize that using any variety of Confunding, Bewitching, or Memory Charm or potion on another student is a serious breach of the Charmbridge Academy Code of Conduct," Dean Cervantes said.

"You've got to be kidding!" Alexandra blurted out.

The dean stared at her.

"I hate Larry Albo! And he hates me! He'd accuse me of using Unforgivables if he thought it would get me expelled! Sir."

Cervantes leaned back in his chair. "I find it odd that two students who hate each other so much would dance together."

"So you believe stupid rumors that I somehow charmed Larry?" It was easy to become indignant, but Alexandra worried that her face might reveal something else. Larry *had* been charmed – just not by her. "He's probably going around telling all his friends how he danced with a Mudblood as a joke."

"Language, Miss Quick." Dean Cervantes pursed his lips. "If his intentions were less than honorable, why did you accept?"

Alexandra flushed. What was she supposed to say to that? "I didn't want to make a scene."

She knew how lame that sounded. Cervantes raised his eyebrows with a dubious expression.

She took out her wand and tossed it on his desk. "If you think I charmed Larry, go ahead and check my wand like you do Darla's!"

He frowned at her, without moving, and eyed her wand.

"Pick up your wand, and mind your temper, young lady," he said at last. "It's necessary for me to inquire about such things. And I doubt you'd offer me your wand if you had in fact used it to charm him."

She retrieved her wand and thrust it back into its sheath. "I didn't do anything to Larry, sir."

"Very well." She wasn't sure whether the dean believed her, but he waved a hand. "Stay out of trouble, Miss Quick. Dismissed."

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CHAPTER 21

With neither detention nor the Dueling Club to occupy her (Ms. Shirtliffe told her she'd *consider* allowing Alexandra to rejoin next year), Alexandra had more free time than she'd had since the start of the school year. She spent much of it in the library, continuing to read what she could find about ghosts, the afterlife, resurrection, and Dark Arts.

The latter subject, of course, was not one covered in any of the books available to eighth graders. But Alexandra was compiling a list of titles – books listed as references that she couldn't find in the library, or which were marked as *Restricted* in the Card Catalog. Necromancy, immortality, souls, spirits – like the Lands Beyond, they were alluded to, and Alexandra could see from the school's course catalog that some of these subjects were touched upon in advanced classes, but no books available to her actually spelled out the principles behind them, let alone provided any magical instruction.

If Anna was suspicious about Alexandra's unusual enthusiasm for Charms homework, she didn't say anything. Opening a door that had been sealed with a Colloportus spell was, according to Mr. Newton, at least two grade levels above them. Alexandra could open doors she'd sealed herself about half the time, now, and occasionally she could open a door that Anna had sealed. She credited all the time she'd spent learning Unlocking Charms in sixth grade.

When she wasn't doing classwork, or what she thought of as her own 'independent study,' she resumed playing games with her friends in the recreation room. It was becoming harder to stay focused entirely on her most important goal. Accepting that it would probably take years was beginning to feel like an admission of defeat – maybe her dream of bringing back her brother would fade, in time, until eventually it would become some silly idea she'd had as a child. As much as she resisted the idea, and periodically threw herself into long hours in the library poring over books about the spectral nature of ghosts, and Other Places in fact and legend, her time in class and with her friends was starting to feel more 'real' again; her time spent trying to contrive methods by which she could bring Max back from the Lands Beyond felt like daydreaming.

Anna had been even more miserable since returning from the winter break. She could hardly stand to talk about her stay with her mother and her grandparents; Alexandra gathered that her grandparents treated her and her mother both like unwanted guests. She heard Anna crying in the bathroom many evenings.

By now, news that Geming Chu was in prison, and the source of much of the unrest in California, had reached Charmbridge Academy. The election in North California which was supposed to take place on the same weekend as Valentine's Day and the Chinese New Year had been postponed.

Alexandra tried to get her roommate to join her in the rec room more often. Constance and Forbearance were usually obliging, but David was always too busy, either with Quidditch and ASPEW, or spending time with Angelique.

As January turned to February, the weather stayed cold but dry, so by the week before Valentine's Day, the snow around Charmbridge Academy had mostly melted. Alexandra was glad, since tracks in the snow would be one less thing she'd have to worry about when she snuck out that night. Her preparation for the possibility of an early February snowstorm was paying off in class, at least; for her final project in Transfiguration, she had decided on a Reversible Transformation turning boots to snowshoes. Mr. Hobbes warned her that this was too advanced for her, but he was pleased by her progress.

Everyone was talking about the Sweetheart's Dance. Unlike the Winter Ball, it was open to all grades, and Alexandra overheard William being teased in JROC after he admitted that Innocence had made him ask her to the dance.

Alexandra would have been quite thoroughly fed up with hearing about Valentine's Day, if not for

the fact that with most of the school at the dance, or sneaking out afterwards, it would provide her with ample opportunity to slip out herself.

She wasn't the only one with no plans to attend the dance, however. Constance and Forbearance were adamant that they had no intention of going with Benjamin and Mordecai.

"We'uns hain't sweet on them," Constance said one evening, as they played Knaves and Wands. "We don't even prefer 'em much." She laid a card on the table.

Alexandra tapped the card. "Knave," she said.

"You wish!" said a muffled voice from beneath it.

Alexandra laid a card next to it. "You went to the Winter Ball with them."

Forbearance frowned. "A formal ball is different. Hain't koosy like a Sweetheart's Dance." She tapped Constance's card. "Wand."

"Lucky guess," the card retorted.

"Knave," she said, tapping Alexandra's card.

"*Thhhpppt!*" The card gave her a raspberry.

"Anyhow, we had to drop hints like lead wands a'fore them boys took us to the ball," Forbearance continued, adding a card to the table. "Twas the least they could do. Hain't no one else we could attend with."

"I don't know about that." Alexandra watched as Anna quietly tapped the wand card and then missed an obvious guess with the next one. Anna usually won games that relied on memory. She slid a new card onto the table indifferently.

Constance and Forbearance looked at Anna and sighed.

"Are you'uns goin'?" Forbearance asked.

"No," Alexandra and Anna said together, shaking their heads.

"Just as well." Constance shrugged. "We'uns can have a fine a time right here, without no boys."

"I just wish we could persuade Innocence to join us," Forbearance said.

"Can you believe that girl got detention again?" Constance slapped a card down. The card protested with a startled yelp.

Alexandra wondered if they knew that their sister was going to the Sweetheart's Dance, but she certainly wasn't going to tattle on Innocence, or poor William.



There was no snowfall before that weekend. The ground was hard and cold around the school, but only a few patches of snow remained, in deep shadows and far back in the woods. Alexandra prepared for her night's outing, with a worried Anna looking on.

"Are you sure you should do this?" Anna asked, for perhaps the fifth time.

"No, I'm not," Alexandra replied, with a note of exasperation. When Anna flinched, Alexandra's expression softened, and she clasped her roommate's hands.

"It will be all right," she said. "My father wouldn't come meet me like this if he wasn't sure it was safe. I mean, he's been avoiding Aurors and Inquisitors and Dark Wizards for years – I'm sure he's taken precautions I don't even know about."

"You sound like you trust him now," Anna mumbled.

Alexandra frowned. "I don't. Except when it comes to outsmarting Diana Grimm."

The thought occurred to her that her father might not care so much if *she* were caught – but it was a risk she was willing to take.

I'm doing it for you, she thought, looking at her anxious friend. Anna seemed more nervous than usual. *You probably think I'm just up to something dangerous again.*

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All year, she had been thinking only of herself. Tonight, she was doing something for Anna.

Alexandra waited until almost eight o'clock, when the Sweetheart's Dance would be well underway, before she left her room. Beneath the cloak that Valeria had bought for her, she was dressed in the nicest clothes she had, so that if she were stopped by a teacher, she could say that she was on her way to the dance.

"Curfew is still in effect, Miss Quick," the Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall monitor reminded her as she passed beneath him. "Back by ten p.m."

"I know," she said. She suspected a lot of kids would be getting warnings for curfew violations tonight.

She could hear the music from the auditorium where the dance was being held. It wasn't the school's magic band playing this time; it was a wrock band from Chicago. The music was lively, and Alexandra could see occasional flashing lights and sparkles drifting down the hall. Couples also entered and left the dance area; some just took strolls down Charmbridge's many hallways, hand in hand, with the rules against Public Displays of Affection being enforced less zealously than usual. With so many amorous teens wandering around, though, the teachers on chaperone duty were kept quite busy. Dean Black was standing in the main hallway, and Alexandra passed Vice Dean Ellis as she walked away from the auditorium, towards the nearest exit.

He glanced at her as he continued walking. "Where are you going, Miss Quick?"

"Bathroom," she replied.

"Back to the auditorium when you're done," he said. "Only seniors are allowed outside after hours."

"I know, sir." She watched as he disappeared around a corner. He looked like he was in a hurry; probably summoned by one of the Hall Monitors to intercept some teenagers up to no good. She kept going, turning right where the Vice Dean had turned left. By now she knew where most of the exits from the school were; being in the Mors Mortis Society the previous year had given her lots of practice sneaking in and out.

The night air was bitingly cold when she slipped outside near the stables. She pulled her cloak around herself, and did not light her wand. Charmbridge Academy shed plenty of light near the walls of the building, but it became darker and darker as she proceeded across a riding track and a barren brown field towards the woods. There was only a sliver of moonlight, and most of the stars were hidden by clouds. No doubt her father had chosen the night of the new moon for that reason.

She reached the edge of the Quidditch field, and waited. Out in the woods, it was mostly quiet, aside from an occasional owl hooting. She could still hear music from inside, faintly. Then she heard wings flapping.

"Charlie!" she whispered. She had told Anna to give her about ten minutes before opening the window to let Charlie out.

The raven cawed and landed on her shoulder.

"Let's go find my father," she said, petting her familiar.

She walked on across the Quidditch field. She still hadn't lit her wand, not wanting to be seen from the academy. Looking over her shoulder, here and there she could see glowing circles of wandlight where other students, old enough to be allowed outside, were taking walks on the lawn.

A dark shape loomed ahead of her, barely visible. It was the bleachers behind the Quidditch field, with the woods only a few dozen yards further on. Charlie squawked a warning before she smelled smoke, and saw a small, orange glow hovering in the darkness ahead of her.

"Who's there?" she called out, drawing her wand.

"Merlin's balls!" someone cursed, and there was movement as a shadow rose in front of her. The

orange light also rose, to her eye level. “Quick?”

The last word was spoken with such venom that Alexandra instinctively raised her wand.

Charlie cawed and took off from her shoulder. She said, “*Lumos*,” and the light from her wand shined fully in Larry’s face.

He winced, and held one hand in front of his face, while the other held a rolled cigarette. “Put that out, you little idiot! You want us both to get caught?”

“You’re not supposed to be out here,” she said.

“No, really?”

She kept her wand pointed at him. He eyed the glowing end of the wand, and held both his hands out; one empty, the other holding only a cigarette. “What – are you going to hex me? Go ahead – it’s the only way you’ll ever beat me, Quick!”

Her arm trembled, as she thought about all the curses she could throw at him. He just stood there, and then brought his cigarette to his lips and inhaled, with a contemptuous expression. He exhaled at length, blowing a cloud of smoke at her.

She wrinkled her nose and fanned the smoke away with her free hand. After a moment, she half-lowered her wand, and turned so that her cloak was blocking its light from anyone who might be watching from the direction of the school. “What are you doing out here?” she snapped. “Shouldn’t you be at the dance with Adela?”

“Mind your own business and broom, you little goblin!”

She wasn’t sure what to do – she didn’t dare turn her back on him and let him see her walking into the woods.

“What are *you* doing out here?” he asked. “Planning some Dark Arts ritual in the woods? Little sorceress.”

“If you really think that, shouldn’t you be afraid?”

Larry laughed. “Your brother was scary. Not you.” He spat on the ground. “Go ahead, show me how dangerous you are. *Crucio* me like he did.”

Alexandra clenched her teeth in anger. Larry laughed again. “Yeah – you’re no sorceress. Just a troublesome little Mudblood brat.”

Alexandra heard Charlie flapping around, and then the ominous sound of more wings flapping. Larry had an owl, Alexandra remembered. “Charlie, come back!”

Larry was making no move to leave. Alexandra stood there, frustrated. “What is your problem with ‘Mudbloods,’ anyway?” she demanded. “Why do you hate us so much?”

Larry took a long draw on his cigarette again, and shrugged. “Wade’s father is a half-blood. And I’m pretty sure one of my great-uncles had a bamboo wand. I don’t really hate Mudbloods.” His lip curled. “Just you.”

Alexandra simmered angrily. Half a dozen nasty curses came to mind, the least violent of which involved giving Larry a pink beard with lice. But he was just standing there, making no move to defend himself.

“Why me?” she asked, through gritted teeth. Maybe she would just have to Body-Bind him. That would be fitting, and he could hardly tell on her.

“Are you serious? Your father is the Enemy of the Confederation! Do you think any other Dark Wizard’s bastard half-blood child would be allowed to strut around Charmbridge like she belongs here?”

“It’s not my fault who my father is!”

“Yeah, and you’re not at all like him. The ‘girl who came back’ – the girl who gets away with

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everything! Ms. Shirliffe's little pet!"

"Pet? What are you talking about?" Her voice rose angrily. "Ms. Shirliffe is always on my case!"

"She and the Dean are always giving you another chance, even after all the crap you pull. Anyone else would have been expelled by now." Larry threw his cigarette on the ground and stomped it out, leaving his face completely shadowed. "I was as good as you when I joined the Dueling Club in eighth grade! Better! Ms. Shirliffe never said a word to me. No special treatment, no telling me how much potential I have –"

"You think Ms. Shirliffe likes me? You think I get special treatment?" Alexandra was so angry, she had almost forgotten her reason for being out here.

Larry laughed. "Merlin, you think you can get away with anything!"

"What about Darla? She's done way worse stuff than me!"

"Yeah, well, that's the way the Confederation works, no matter how many 'Muggle Awareness Months' and lessons on Cultural diversity and blood status equality they shove down our throats." His voice became lower, and in the scant amount of light shed by her wand, his eyes seemed solid black, beneath his pale, gleaming forehead. "The Elect are the ones who really run the Confederation, and we always will. And you should have broomed when you had the chance." He drew his wand, so fast that she barely had time to raise her own. "Now –"

"Now you're going to put your wand away," said a deep voice.

Larry froze, as Alexandra turned and saw her father standing behind her. He was a tall shadow wrapped in a long, black cloak. Light from Alexandra's wand cast shadows from below across his rugged, bearded countenance, making him look even more ominous standing there in the darkness.

Charlie came flapping down and landed on her shoulder.

Abraham Thorn continued staring at Larry, until he lowered his wand.

"You should go inside now, young man," Alexandra's father said. "And you should also stop smoking."

Larry stared at the two of them, and then he turned and ran back across the field towards the academy. Only after he was halfway across the field did an owl screech and flutter down after him. With a mocking caw, a larger, darker shape descended in the opposite direction. Hagar spread her wings and glided towards Abraham Thorn.

Alexandra turned to him. "Are you crazy? He's going to tell everyone he just saw you here! With me!"

"Probably." Her father nodded. "But since the Aurors know already, his seeing me is moot."

"What?" She gasped, and then he reached out and gently took hold of her upper arm.

Hagar settled on his shoulder, and he said, "One moment, my dear – we're going to Apparate." And with a wrenching sensation, she felt herself pulled along with him.

A moment later, they were standing somewhere else. Near the top of a mountain, looking out over a large, dark, forested valley. Distantly, she could see lights from a highway and a city.

Charlie squawked and almost tumbled off her shoulder. Hagar's talons seemed dug into Abraham Thorn's shoulder; the larger raven fluttered and shook her head rapidly back and forth.

Alexandra stared at her father.

"You wanted to talk to me," he said. His voice was gentle now. "I feared you would never speak to me again."

She took a deep breath, trying to silence all the emotions and the torrent of questions she wanted to ask him, the flood of accusations she wanted to hurl at him. "My friend, Anna – she's my roommate at Charmbridge. She's my best friend. Her father has been imprisoned, because the WJD thinks he's a

member of the Thorn Circle.”

Her father said, “I know who your roommate is, and I am aware of Mr. Chu's dilemma.”

“Is he?” she asked. “A member of the Thorn Circle?”

He was silent for several moments. Then he said, “No.”

“I want you to help get him out of prison. I don't mean by breaking him out. I mean by convincing the WJD that he's not a Dark Wizard.”

“Really?” Her father folded his arms. “Shall I just drop by the Governor's office and tell him that Mr. Chu is innocent?”

“Don't mock me,” she said, feeling small and childish, as she often did in her father's presence.

“I am not mocking you, Alexandra. But surely you know that my word alone will not suffice.”

“You're a great wizard – I'm sure there's some way you can do it. Write a Mortal Contract swearing that Mr. Chu has never been part of the Thorn Circle. Or... offer to turn yourself in, if they set him free. Something. Think of a way.” She took a deep breath. “You owe me a boon.”

She felt her father's gaze upon her, long and thoughtful, and she stood there in the night air, shivering. Charlie huddled against her; she could feel the raven's feathers brushing against her ear.

“I suspected,” he said, “that you would ask me something of the sort.”

She waited.

“When you were a baby,” he went on, “I held you in my arms as I cast the Fidelius Charm. And then I whispered in your ear the names of every member of the Thorn Circle. That secret I entrusted to you. It is that secret that has kept the Office of Special Inquisitions from being able to find any of us, for they cannot even discover who my closest companions were.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “Give that information to the Inquisitors, and they will have that which they so badly want from you. And more importantly, Diana Grimm will believe that you have truly turned against me. You will no longer be so important. Freedom for Mr. Chu, and a measure of freedom for you as well.”

“How can I possibly remember something you whispered in my ear as a baby?” she asked. “What are you going to do, write down a list for me? Ms. Grimm will never believe that!”

“You are correct.” He nodded, then removed his hand from her shoulder, reached into his cloak, and produced a small glass vial. He held up his wand in his other hand. “But the memory itself – taken directly from you – that she will believe.”

Alexandra eyed her father's wand. “You can retrieve that memory from my head?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“And... you'd do that? Even though it will mean giving up all of your friends?”

He smiled grimly. “It was almost fourteen years ago, and the Fidelius Charm has served its purpose. Soon, we will not be hiding at all. I'm not saying there won't be a cost... but I will grant you your boon.” He fixed his eyes on hers. “Are you ready?”

She swallowed, and nodded.

“This won't hurt,” he said gently, and he touched the tip of his wand to her temple.

It was a strange sensation, but not painful. She couldn't even see the memory being drawn out of her. For a moment, her vision was cloudy, and the world was too large, too noisy, and too bright – she was aware of something large looming over her, and she was frightened, but she was being held and it was soft and warm all around her, even as the large, looming presence whispered in her ear...

She blinked, and in the darkness, her father was holding a small vial that glowed with silvery light. He handed it to her. She took it, staring at the liquid essence of her own memories.

“You have your boon,” her father said.

Charlie made a trilling sound, as she shifted her shoulders to tuck the vial into a safe place in one of

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the pockets of her cloak.

“Will this really work?” she asked. Now that she had gotten what she wanted, she found herself having doubts. What if her schemes once again were doomed to end in disappointment?

“They can still claim Mr. Chu is collaborating with the Dark Convention – just not with me.”

Abraham Thorn looked off across the forest. “But it was never him they were really after, and they did not anticipate the political cost of persecuting him.” He turned back towards her. “I heard about your Time-Turner scheme.” Alexandra couldn't read his expression in the darkness. “Do you think I wouldn't have done something similar, if it were possible to undo the past like that, Alexandra?”

“I don't know what you would have done,” she said bitterly. “At least I tried to do something.”

He paused. When he spoke again, he sounded sad. “I miss Maximilian terribly. I never planned to lose a child, my dear. I would do anything if I could bring him back.”

“Really?” She fixed him with her most determined glare, though she could barely see his eyes. “I've heard there are Dark Arts that can call back the dead. Supposedly there's something called a Resurrection Stone, and –”

“Fairy tales, Alexandra. The Dark Arts you speak of, whatever they might call would not be anything you want brought back. Please, you must abandon this foolishness. Maximilian is gone – you will only bring more grief upon yourself if you persist.”

“What about what you're doing? How much more grief are you going to bring? How many more people need to die?”

Hagar made a soft croaking sound. Charlie clacked nervously in response. Her father was silent for a long while, as the wind blew and, very far away, Alexandra heard something that sounded like a horn, possibly from a truck on the highway.

“I hope there comes a time when I can justify myself to you,” he said. “But for now, you will have to judge me as others do.”

She shook her head. “You're really good at not answering my questions.”

“And you are quite adept at trying my patience.” He sounded more weary than angry. “There are reasons, Alexandra. I know you have little reason to trust me –”

“You're right, I don't!” she snapped.

There was a cold silence after that. Even Hagar and Charlie were quiet.

“In time, perhaps,” her father said at last. His voice was a little less warm. He reached a hand out. “I should return you to Charmbridge now.”

“How am I going to explain my father showing up to talk to me? I thought the point of meeting me in the woods under a new moon was to keep it *secret*. I mean, you might as well have just sent me an owl. Or a Howler, for that matter.”

“I wanted to confirm something.” He took her hand. “There will be Aurors waiting when we return. You must tell Diana Grimm that you knew they would find out about your meeting with me; you told no one because you believed, correctly, that you could trust no one, and you hoped they would just do their jobs. It will not be your fault that they will fail. But the memory I have extracted from you, that will satisfy them. Convince them that you have turned against me, Alexandra.”

“Wait!” Alexandra's mind was spinning. “How can the Aurors already know you're here?”

But they were already Apparating, and Alexandra's questions were cut off by the jerk through space. She was still stammering when they arrived on the lawn of Charmbridge Academy.

There were dark shapes in the air, and someone shouted: “There!”

“*Protego Totalus!*” her father said, and a glowing sphere appeared around the two of them, just before lances of light flashed down from the sky, bouncing off the shield and blasting holes in the lawn.

“Until next time, my dear,” he said, and leaned in to kiss her cheek. Then he disappeared with a flash and a crackle of electricity that threw Alexandra against the inside of the sphere. Charlie cawed, and she could smell burning ozone. Then she was surrounded by wizards descending out of the sky on brooms, yelling and pounding against the sphere with Blasting Spells, casting Anti-Disapparition Jinxes, and shouting at her, while she stood helplessly within, confused and shaken.



Aurors were prowling around outside, but Abraham Thorn was gone and they had no way of pursuing him. Alexandra had been left alone with Charlie in an empty classroom, at first, until Diana Grimm arrived.

The Special Inquisitor had been skeptical when Alexandra told her her story – until she gave her the vial with her memory, and told her about the boon she had made her father swear.

Now, it was almost two hours later, and Alexandra was as tired as she was confused and annoyed. But Ms. Grimm finally seemed satisfied that she had extracted all the information she could from Abraham Thorn's daughter.

“I want to thank you, Alexandra, for making the right decision,” she said. “It can't have been easy, turning against your father. But you really should have contacted me directly – we might have caught him, with your full cooperation.”

“Unless he's been spying on me, too, and knew I'd turned traitor,” Alexandra said. That might even have been true – her father seemed uncannily aware of what was going on at Charmbridge.

Saying it like that – *turned traitor* – left a sour taste in her mouth. She *didn't* feel loyal to her father. She didn't like anything he did, or trust his intentions. But it still made her feel a little slimy, letting Ms. Grimm believe that she'd try to lure him into a trap. Was it only her imagination that the other Aurors were looking at her with just as much hostility as ever?

No one likes a traitor – even when she's on your side, she thought.

“Does everyone have to know about this?” she asked.

It had been bad enough when everyone thought she was a sorceress. Would they think any better of her when they thought she'd betrayed her own father?

Ms. Grimm shook her head. “Everyone will know that you were visited by your father, and that we tried, unsuccessfully, to catch him. What you choose to tell your friends is up to you.” She looked at the vial that she held between her fingers. “We must act quickly, now. Having given this to you, he will warn his allies. But just knowing who they were will help us untangle his conspiracy, revealing secrets going back years.”

The Special Inquisitor looked pleased, eager to be on her way, but Alexandra asked, “What about Mr. Chu?”

Ms. Grimm's expression shifted. She shrugged; her face became hard to read. “The Governor of North California is the only one with the authority to order his release. However, I will let him know that we have cleared Geming Chu.” She shook the vial slightly.

“And my cooperation? Does that count for anything?”

Ms. Grimm gave her a long look, before answering. “Yes. Yes, it does. And given the political pressure the Governor is already under – I think Mr. Chu will be released soon. I cannot promise you that, but he should be.”

Alexandra nodded. It wasn't an entirely satisfactory answer, but it was the best she could do. She felt a tiny bit of relief.

The relief curdled in her stomach as she walked back to her room. Her steps became heavy, until her feet were almost dragging on the floor as she passed beneath the warlock hanging over the entrance to

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her hall.

"It's past curfew, Miss Quick," the portrait said.

Charlie, who was still sitting on her shoulder, squawked. Alexandra didn't look up. "I think I have a pass," she said, and kept walking.

She stopped in front of her door, and stared at it, until Charlie squawked again, and she heard a sound down the hallway. She looked, and saw a door quickly close.

"Been talking about me?" she shouted. "Heard about my father yet?"

Her voice echoed up and down the hallway, but no one replied. All the doors remained tightly shut.

She opened the door to her room. Anna was sitting with her back to Alexandra. A candle and some incense were sitting on the corner of her desk, just beneath the photographs of her parents.

She didn't turn around as Alexandra entered and closed the door behind her.

"Have you heard what happened?" Alexandra asked.

Anna hesitated, then said, "No."

Alexandra raised her hands to her shoulder and lifted Charlie into the cage hanging by her bed.

"You wouldn't have, because you were sitting here all night, right?"

Anna didn't say anything.

"There were Aurors waiting for us," Alexandra said. "They didn't catch my father, of course. He was expecting them. He got away."

Anna didn't move, but her neck twitched a little.

"We talked, first, though." Alexandra moved slowly across the room, towards her roommate. Charlie was very, very quiet, watching the two girls. "I got what I wanted from him."

Anna moved her head very slightly, just enough to see Alexandra out of the corner of her eye. "What was that?" she whispered.

"The identities of everyone in the Thorn Circle. Proof that your father isn't a collaborator. Diana Grimm said she thinks it will be enough to free him."

Anna turned around, to stare at Alexandra. Her eyes were wet with tears.

Alexandra moved closer still, until she was standing over her roommate.

"I don't understand how the Aurors knew he was coming, though, as quickly as they did. I mean, it was like they were waiting already. Someone had to tell them."

Anna began trembling.

"Why, Anna?" Alexandra asked. Her voice was close to breaking. She felt her own eyes burning. Of everything she had endured in the past year, only Maximilian's death had hurt this much.

Anna made a choking sound, and opened her hand, revealing a stiff yellow card imprinted with the seal of the Office of Special Inquisitions. It fell to her desk, and she covered her face with her hands.

Chapter 22 — A Deal with Darla



"I'm sorry!" Anna cried. "I'm so sorry!"

Alexandra's lips moved, but she couldn't form words. She felt like she'd been kicked in the stomach. She was filled with outrage, betrayal, fury, and most of all, sadness.

Anna doubled over and began sobbing.

"Kill me!" she wailed. "Oh, I wish you would just kill me!"

Charlie made soft cooing noises. Slowly, Alexandra's fists unclenched.

"Stop it," she said quietly. "I'm not going to kill you." She turned away, and shrugged off her cloak.

"I'm so sorry!" Anna said again. "I hate myself! I know you hate me, but I hate myself more!"

"Stop it!" Alexandra said, raising her voice this time. Anna sniffled and fell silent. Alexandra turned to look at her roommate. "So how long have you been... informing on me?"

Anna looked up. Her eyes were huge and pleading. "Only this once!" She gulped and bowed her head again at Alexandra's cold, hard stare.

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When she spoke again, she was practically mumbling into her lap. “They tried to trick me this summer, after my father was arrested. Said I could help keep you out of trouble, and maybe help my father, if I just told them what you were up to.” She made a hoarse sound, like an attempt at a laugh. “But I never told them anything! Then, during the winter break, an Inquisitor came to my grandparents’ house and scared them and intimidated my mother, and threatened me...” She choked. “And I was so angry at you, I felt like you had already betrayed me – oh, Alex, I didn’t want to, but I was scared!” She gulped down air and buried her face in her hands.

Alexandra shook her head. “You never told me any of that.”

Anna shuddered, and didn’t answer.

“We should go to bed,” Alexandra said. Betrayal and hurt were giving way to numbness. She didn’t feel able to discuss this right now, and Anna was too frightened and miserable to say anything else. Alexandra crawled into bed after undressing, and curled up under her blanket, listening to Anna sniffle piteously.

Anna was curled up in a ball under her own blankets when Alexandra woke early the next morning. She didn’t know if her roommate was awake or not as she put on her exercise clothes. By now, Anna usually slept through it when Alexandra rose early for JROC exercise, but usually she stirred and muttered a bit – this morning, she was suspiciously still and quiet.

Alexandra stared at the lump under the blankets for a moment, and then quietly left their room to go to morning exercises.

Outside, in the cold air, some of the other JROC students looked surprised to see her. William stared at her and licked his lips, as if he wanted to say something, and then Theo said, “I heard you got arrested.”

“You heard wrong.” Alexandra met their gazes with a flat stare of her own that deflected any further questions.

Colonel Shirtliffe came striding out, and glared at the students shivering beneath a dark February sky, with only a pale glow yet visible on the eastern horizon. Alexandra was sure that Ms. Shirtliffe knew everything that had happened last night, but the teacher’s gaze swept across her and the other students indifferently, and then she said, “I see a lot of wands standing around talking, Mage-Sergeant Major!”

“Fall in!” Eric Strangeland yelled, and he led them on wind-sprints to the woods and back, with Shirtliffe sending brooms to chase after them and make them duck out of the way or run faster when they lagged. They did this all morning, and when they went back inside, everyone was too tired and out of breath to do anything but stagger back to their rooms to shower.

Anna was gone when Alexandra returned to her room. She walked to breakfast alone.

A hush fell over the cafeteria when Alexandra entered. News of her father’s battle with a team of Aurors the night before had already circulated the school, no doubt with many dramatic embellishments as to her own role. She glanced at Larry’s table; he was glowering at her, along with all of his friends.

Before she could say anything, Innocence brushed past her. The younger girl looked disconsolate, and didn’t even glance in her direction. On her heels were Constance and Forbearance.

“Mornin’, Alexandra,” Constance said, as she hurried past.

“Beg pardon,” Forbearance said, following her sister.

William was trailing after them, but he shuffled to a halt in front of Alexandra, looking past her at the retreating Ozarkers.

“What’s going on?” Alexandra asked, nonplussed.

William looked down. "Innocence's toad disappeared last night, while we were at the Sweetheart's Dance."

"Misery?" Alexandra said. "Again?"

William nodded. "But we couldn't find her this time. And, you know, with all the commotion and everything..." He sighed. "There's no sign of her." He opened one of the pockets in his JROC jacket and peeked inside. Alexandra heard a croak. "She's pretty upset."

Alexandra looked over at the eighth graders' table. Darla was there with Angelique, and Sonja and Carol and Janet and Lydia. No Anna. "I guess she would be," she said.

"I wasn't much help," William mumbled. "It's not like we were really allowed to go looking, last night --"

"I'm sure she doesn't blame you," Alexandra said. "Keep a close eye on Anthony." She walked over to the breakfast line. There was an awkward silence. Alexandra ignored the stares, and kept watching the entrance, but Anna did not appear.

There was another pause in conversation when Alexandra sat down with the other girls, and then they resumed talking, after a few nods and mumbled greetings. Some of the other girls had also noted the Pritchards' departure, and were discussing the missing familiar.

"Well, at least it was just a toad," said Lydia.

Sonja agreed, then looked taken aback when her roommate glared at her.

"I suppose Wocky is *just* a rat," Carol said.

Alexandra's gaze wandered down the table, past Lydia and Sonja, to where Darla and Angelique were sitting.

There was no reason to think Darla had anything to do with Misery's disappearance, but Alexandra found herself staring at the other girl, until Darla looked up and noticed. Angelique looked back and forth between them nervously. Darla and Alexandra stared at one another a moment longer, and then they both turned their attention back to their breakfasts.

Anna didn't come to Charms class. She was also absent from their second and third period classes. Mr. Grue stared at Alexandra more balefully than usual, but Alexandra doubted it was because he was wondering where Anna was.

"She wasn't feeling well this morning," Alexandra said to Constance and Forbearance after they left Alchemy class. "I'll go see if she's in the infirmary."

She didn't think Anna would be there, but she was glad when the twins apologetically told her that they'd promised to help Innocence look for Misery some more during lunch. She went to the infirmary alone, but Mrs. Murphy hadn't seen Anna.

Anna never cut class, so Alexandra didn't know where she might hide. She tried the most obvious place she could think of, and on the third floor of the library, in a study nook hidden far in the back of the Ancient Wizarding History section, she found Anna hunched over a desk, her head buried in her arms.

Alexandra asked, "What were you planning to do, hide here all day?"

Anna jumped, and stared at her with eyes that were still red and swollen. She swallowed, but didn't say anything.

Alexandra sat down next to her. Anna watched her silently, trembling a little.

"I would have told you," Alexandra said. "If I'd been contacted by my father earlier... if I'd known anything that could help your father. We could have played them... let the WJD think you were spying on me, while I gave you information."

"I'm sorry," Anna whispered. "You can do anything you want to me. I won't tell."

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Alexandra rolled her eyes. “Right, cursing you will make me feel better.”

Anna winced. “You must hate me.”

“Stop it!” Alexandra snapped. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself!” Those words echoed in her ears, and she put a hand over her face. Anna didn't move or say a word.

“I guess I can't blame you,” Alexandra said. “For not trusting me.”

“I did trust you,” Anna said. Her voice was tiny, as if it hurt her to speak. “I just...” Fresh tears rolled down her cheeks. “The Inquisitor said if my father were convicted of collaborating with the Dark Convention, they'd assume my mother was involved, too, even though she's just a Muggle.” Her voice began to break apart. “*He said they'd Obliviate her!* He said they'd take me away from her and I'd never see her again! He said she wouldn't even remember she had a daughter!”

Alexandra removed her hand from her face, and stared at Anna. “They said that?”

Anna nodded, and looked down. “I would never have given you up. But I thought you were back to keeping secrets and you were going to get in trouble and my m-mother...” Her voice trailed off as she squeezed her eyes shut.

“They threatened to take your mother away,” Alexandra said.

Anna bowed her head, and her shoulders began to shake.

Alexandra closed her eyes. Then she leaned over slowly, and put her arms around Anna.

“It's all right,” she said, and Anna burst into tears.

Alexandra held her, and waited until Anna had cried herself out, rocking slowly back and forth.

“I don't blame you for being angry,” Anna whispered. “I know you can't trust me any more. If you hate me, it's okay.”

“I don't hate you. I'm not angry – not anymore.”

That last part wasn't really true – but it wasn't Anna she was angry at.

Anna shivered, and Alexandra continued to hold her until she finally lifted her face. It was a mess – red and streaked with tears, and more miserable than Alexandra had ever seen anyone look.

“Come on,” Alexandra said. “You're going to get in trouble if you cut any more classes.”

Anna sniffed, and Alexandra stood up and took Anna's hand. She led her downstairs, keeping an arm around the other girl's shoulders until they entered the girls' bathroom, where Alexandra watched as Anna wiped at her eyes and cleaned her face.

“Lunch is almost over,” Anna mumbled.

“Tell Constance and Forbearance you weren't feeling well,” Alexandra said. “I'll see you after sixth period.” Their schedules were different for the rest of the day – Alexandra had Principles of Magic next, while Anna was in the more advanced Magical Theory class with the Pritchards.

“I'm sorry,” Anna repeated. She still looked pale and apprehensive.

“Me, too.” Alexandra shook her head and gave Anna a small, forced smile.

Anna trembled. “Do you really think they'll let my father go?”

“If they don't,” Alexandra said, “then I'll find a way to make them.”

It was an empty promise. How could Alexandra possibly make a Governor do anything? But Anna stared at her with wonder and hope, despite her tears and her shame. As if she believed that Alexandra could do anything she said.

“Later,” Alexandra said softly. “We'll talk more later.”

Anna swallowed and nodded. She still looked small and frail as she left the bathroom, while Alexandra remained.

She was leaning over a sink when she heard someone else enter. She stood up quickly, ostensibly straightening her robe and running a hand over her hair, while she looked in the mirror to see who it

was – there were girls who would hex her in the restrooms if she let herself be caught unawares.

She froze when she saw that it was Darla.

“Your brother was more careful,” the other girl said.

For a moment, Alexandra was speechless. Darla looked nervous, and Alexandra wondered if she'd imagined her speaking. She turned around slowly.

“He always cast that Muffliato spell of his,” Darla said. “I never knew what the two of you were talking about.”

Alexandra stared at her, then took one step towards her, then another.

“I know what you've been trying to do,” Darla said. Her eyes became a little wider, and she shrank back against the wall as Alexandra advanced on her, but she didn't stop talking, though her voice rose to a higher pitch. “I know you know about the Lands Below!”

Alexandra grabbed the front of Darla's lacy blue and white robes while she raised her other hand in a fist. “You must have a death wish!”

Darla closed her eyes. “Go ahead! Hit me! That's just what a savage little Muggle would do, isn't it? Do you think threatening me will bring your brother back?”

Alexandra stood there in amazement, with her fist still clenched. “*What is your problem?* Are you trying to see if you can get me expelled?”

“No!”

“*What do you want?*” Alexandra shouted.

“Stop shouting!” Darla opened one eye and took a nervous breath. She lowered her voice to a whisper so faint that Alexandra had to lean towards her, as she said, “I know how you can bring back Maximilian.”

Alexandra stared at her in disbelief.

“Do you think you're being *funny*?” she growled. “Do you think I'm *stupid*?”

She reached for her wand, but Darla said, “If you think I'm joking, then you *are* stupid! Was the Mors Mortis Society a joke? Was getting an obol a joke? You think you're so smart – do you know anything about where the dead go? Do you know anything about necromancy? Or the Deathly Regiment?”

She glanced down at Alexandra's hand, still poised over her wand. “Look at you,” she said. “You want to hex me because that's all you know how to do. I know I couldn't beat you in a duel even if I had a wand, but at least I know how to find out things. You're great at magic as long as it doesn't involve too much thinking.”

Alexandra's eyes narrowed. “Why would I want to listen to you? Even if you do know something I don't, why would you tell me about it? What makes anything I do your business?”

Darla relaxed slightly. “Do you really want to have this conversation here?”

Alexandra was about to retort that she didn't want to have any conversation with Darla, when another girl entered the restroom. She was older, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, and she looked at the two eighth graders curiously, then almost took a step back when she recognized Alexandra.

“What's going on?” she asked warily.

“Nothing,” Alexandra said. She pushed past the other girl and marched out. Darla followed.

“Will you meet me here in the library tomorrow night?” Darla whispered.

Alexandra looked over her shoulder at the other girl. She knew she should refuse – but she nodded slowly. “All right.” She lowered her voice. “But if you're messing with me –”

“I'm not.” Darla gave her a tense smile. “Tomorrow night, then.”

She looked relieved to be walking away. Alexandra's eyes followed Darla as she retreated out of the

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library, and then she trailed after her to their fourth period class.

She didn't mention her conversation with Darla to Anna.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

There was nothing the next day in the *Chicago Wizard Times* about an incident at Charmbridge Academy; no mention of Abraham Thorn visiting the school. The front page story was about Wartime Alternative Route Plans: the Department of Magical Transportation was trying to persuade the wizarding public to take classes in Navigating Muggle Transit. Gringotts was renovating all of their American branches for 'added security.' There were also articles about arrests in Louisiana, Texarcana, and Hudson, and continuing turmoil in North and South California. The Majokai were debating a revote over their status as a Culture; some Chinese wizards were threatening to form a Culture of their own. Alexandra tossed the paper aside – Anna's father was barely mentioned.

Darla remained cool in class, paying Alexandra no more attention than usual. Alexandra watched her as she tried to cast a Colloportus Charm in Mr. Newton's class. Most of the class could now seal a doorway, though Mr. Newton was able to open the door with a tap of his wand. Darla's collared wand only succeeded in making it jam a little; Mr. Newton pulled it open without even using magic.

Anna continued to accompany Alexandra from class to class as she usually did, but with such a dejected, guilty countenance that Alexandra was afraid her friend might burst into tears at any moment. She hoped Mr. Chu was released soon – she didn't think either of them could take any more guilt or worry.

She didn't bother changing out of her JROC uniform that afternoon; rather than having to make excuses to Anna, she simply avoided returning to her room and headed straight to the library.

Darla found her there, far back in the Wizarding Philosophy and Magical Law section. Alexandra closed the heavy *Illustrated Guide to the Afterlife According to Muggles Through the Ages*, and waved a hand to banish the smell of brimstone. She regarded Darla with an impassive stare as the other girl sat down.

“Do you know how to cast that spell your brother did?” Darla asked.

Alexandra snorted. “Paranoid much?”

Darla held up a small vial. “We all learned how to make aural amplifying drops last semester, remember?”

Alexandra's eyes widened. “You little sneak! How long have you been spying on me?”

Darla looked back at her evenly. She twitched when Alexandra drew her wand, but didn't say anything.

Alexandra hesitated, just long enough to make Darla start to fidget, and then said, “*Muffliato*.” She slid her wand back into its sheath and glared at the other girl. “This had better be good. If you're just trying to prank the Mudblood, or trick me into getting in trouble...”

“Oh, for Merlin's sake, Alexandra! Some people would say I'm a Mudblood. Even though technically I'm a pureblood, I have a Muggle grandmother.” Darla sighed. “I'm sorry I called you that last year.”

“How about using *Crucio* on me? Are you sorry for that?”

The other girl looked away. “If I hadn't, what do you think John would have done?” As Alexandra opened her mouth, Darla said, “Do you want to threaten me some more, or do you want to hear what I have to say?”

Alexandra folded her arms, and leaned back slowly in her chair. “Fine,” she said in a mocking voice. “Tell me about necromancy and bringing back my brother.”

Don't believe a word she says, she told herself. I just want to find out what she thinks she's up to.

“It's not like what you're thinking,” Darla said. “There are no spells to raise the dead. Wizards have

been trying to do that forever.”

Alexandra gestured at the shelves around them. “These books could tell me that.”

Darla nodded. “But you won't find a lot of things in the library. Not even in the Restricted Collections. They keep the really powerful and crazy stuff away from us.”

“You mean Dark Arts.”

“Not just Dark Arts.” Darla fidgeted with her sleeve. “You read *The Master of Death*, didn't you? Innocence told me you took it from her.”

“Yeah. It was boring and ridiculous.”

Darla shook her head. “You're so simple, sometimes. Didn't you read the part about wizards who challenged Death and lost? Souls trapped with Death for all eternity? Most wizards, when they die they... move on. No one really knows where they go. A few stay here as ghosts. But those who go into the Lands Beyond...” Darla lowered her voice. “I overheard my father and my uncle talking about your brother. They said he joined the Deathly Regiment.” She was studying Alexandra very intently. “That means he didn't just die and move on. I think he's still there, in the Lands Beyond.”

Alexandra tried to hide her surprise. She didn't understand how this involved the Dearborns at all, or how they could have known anything about Maximilian.

She forced down most of the questions she had, and instead asked, “Why do you care about what happened to my brother?”

Darla gave her a very long, very thoughtful look, as if she, too, were trying to decide how much to reveal.

“My sister died,” she said at last.

Alexandra stared at her. Darla looked back at her with a flat expression.

“You never said anything,” Alexandra said. “No one told me —”

“Like you went around telling everyone about your brother?” Darla's face was unnaturally still. “I didn't want to talk about it. I didn't even tell Angelique, at first.”

Alexandra thought about that. Darla sat unmoving in her seat. An older student wearing a feathered green cloak – Alexandra had no idea what Culture he came from – walked down the aisle near their table, perusing books in the Magical Law section. He glanced at the two girls, and smiled. His smile faded when neither of them smiled back, and he grabbed a book and retreated.

“What happened?” Alexandra asked, as if they hadn't been interrupted.

“Hilary was in the Mors Mortis Society before she graduated. My parents didn't know, of course, until too late. Just like they didn't know about me. Last year —” Darla swallowed. “She tried to do something, with necromancy. I don't know what, exactly. But it went badly... and she went to the Lands Beyond.”

Alexandra felt a rush of disbelief, anger, sympathy, and – shamefully, but burning foremost in her mind – curiosity.

“I wanted to bring her back,” Darla said. “That's why I paid John to get an obol for me. That's why I stayed in the Mors Mortis Society.”

“That's why you've been prowling around in the basements cursing people?” Alexandra's voice rose sharply. “*You killed Ms. Gale!*”

“I did not!” Darla turned pale. “I swear, Alexandra, I wasn't down there! Even if I was, how could I have cursed anyone? Mr. Cervantes takes my wand every day after sixth period!”

“You have another one. Don't tell me you're not rich enough to buy an extra wand.”

“Minors can't buy wands without their parents' approval, no matter how rich they are.” Darla's tone became patronizing. “Do you really think my parents are going to buy me a second wand so I can get

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into more trouble? And even if I did have another one, do you think Dean Grimm hasn't thought of that?" She frowned. "Every time something happens – even when it's *you* responsible – they search my room again. I think Angelique is regretting being my roommate."

Alexandra bit back a sharp retort. She glared at Darla. "What about Innocence's toad, and your cat?"

"I don't know what happened to Misery! Or Mr. Whiskers!" Darla wiped away a tear. "You should know by now that there are a lot of people up to no good around here. And some kids are sure there's an evil spirit haunting Charmbridge – so is Ms. Fletcher. Maybe a poltergeist."

"A poltergeist?"

"Usually they're just annoying, and very noisy, but sometimes they're cunning and murderous."

"Wouldn't they have found a poltergeist by now?"

"You'd think."

Alexandra stared at Darla. She didn't want to believe her. If Darla wasn't responsible for anything that had happened, then who was? "Someone Stunned me in the basement."

"It wasn't me!"

Alexandra drummed her fingers on the table. "What do you want?"

Darla took a deep breath. "The same thing you do."

"You want to bring back your sister?" Alexandra regarded the other girl, trying to read something in her expression. "You just told me that's impossible."

"No, I didn't." Darla leaned forward, and there was something about her gaze, the intensity and seriousness of it, that made Alexandra lean forward, too, without realizing she was doing it. "I said there are no spells to raise the dead."

"I tried using a Time-Turner. Even if someone hadn't Stunned me –" She paused. Darla was listening attentively, but if she was hiding anything, she was hiding it very well. "– it wouldn't have worked. At least, that's what everyone says." She did not add that she wasn't fully prepared to accept this yet – but she doubted that Darla had a Time-Turner of her own.

Darla shook her head. "I wasn't thinking of Time-Turners." Her eyes were still fixed on Alexandra's. "Those who've joined the Deathly Regiment can be returned... by Death."

Alexandra opened her mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

Darla waited.

"Death," Alexandra said.

Darla nodded.

"You mean, an actual Death. Like, Death is a real person. A skeleton in a robe who goes around collecting dead souls."

Darla's brow creased. "Not a person, and I don't know if the skeleton in a robe part is true. But... yes. There are Powers that aren't human, and maybe they're not even living beings like us, but they exist."

"They haven't mentioned these 'Powers' in any of our classes."

"Nobody talks about Powers anymore – it's unfashionable, pre-modern. They're from the days before we even used wands. Most people think they're just old myths, nowadays. Everyone thinks *The Master of Death* is supposed to be a metaphor, you know? Or is that allegory?" Darla frowned. "But it's real. At least, some wizards still think Powers are real."

"So they're, what, gods?"

Darla made a face. "Maybe that's what Muggles would call them. They're just magical beings. But they're very powerful."

"And Death can return dead people to life." Alexandra did not want to admit that despite her skepticism, she was drawn in by Darla's tale, wanting to hear more... wanting to believe.

“Not just anyone. Only if they went to the Lands Beyond. Someone who just dies normally, I don't think that's the same.”

Alexandra stared at Darla some more. Was this just a big prank? Darla might think Alexandra was an ignorant Mudblood, but why would she make up a story like this?

“So,” Alexandra said. “Let's say all this is true and I believed you. How do you find Death and get him to return someone from the Lands Beyond? What am I supposed to do, challenge Death to a duel?”

Darla seemed unfazed by Alexandra's skepticism. “Well, that's what some wizards have tried to do. You read *The Master of Death*.”

“Yeah. Everyone loses.” She couldn't even beat Larry Albo in a duel – how was she supposed to defeat Death? She gave Darla a contemptuous look. “Don't tell me that was your plan?”

“Of course not. I'm not stupid.” Darla looked annoyed. “I read other books. There are lots of stories... wizards have gone to the Lands Beyond on quests to bring back their loved ones –”

“Nobody returns from the Lands Beyond.”

“If you believed that,” Darla said, very slowly, “you'd have given up, wouldn't you?”

Alexandra closed her mouth again, and waited.

“Supposedly, Death will sometimes let you return,” Darla said. “And sometimes, bring someone back. But there's a cost.”

“A cost.”

Darla nodded. Her hands had been sitting in her lap, out of Alexandra's sight. Now she set one hand on the table and turned it over, revealing what she held there.

Alexandra stared at the tarnished, silver coin, and sucked in a breath.

“An obol.” She lifted her eyes from the coin to Darla's face. “How did you get another one?”

“That doesn't matter.” Darla's eyes were cold and distant for a moment, then she focused on Alexandra again, as her fingers closed around the obol. “You used my other obol to go to the Lands Below. That's never where I intended to go.”

“You were going to go to the Lands Beyond? You mean, you were going to walk into that black void where those... *jibay* come from – *Are you crazy?*”

“Other wizards have done it, Alexandra.” There was a look of fierce determination burning in her eyes – a look that Alexandra recognized. “But you need an obol. And a guide.”

“A guide?”

“A spirit guide. Or, you can summon Death. But I think you have to be really powerful to do that.”

“So I guess '*Accio Death*' didn't work?” Alexandra was beginning to wonder if Darla had lost her mind.

“Don't make fun of me!” Darla held up the hand clenching the obol. “Do you think it was easy for me to get another one of these after you stole my first one?”

For a moment, Alexandra felt a twinge of guilt. Then she remembered everything else that had happened the previous year. Her expression hardened. “You still haven't told me what you want from me.”

“I want you to tell me what happened in the Lands Below,” Darla said. “I want to know exactly how Maximilian died. I want to know everything.”

As mingled fury and disbelief caused blood to rush to Alexandra's face, Darla pulled something else from beneath her robes – a small, thick, black book.

“I'll give you this,” she said. She pushed it across the table.

Alexandra's eyes fell on the cover: *Deathly Conjures and Power-ful Workes for the Wizard Who Desireth to Speake Across That Threshold (Known by Some as the Lands Beyond), Whereby One May*

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Command Spirites and Seek Even That Most Deathly Power.

It looked very old. She opened it, and saw diagrams, formulas, and text written in a dense, handwritten script. There were headings at the top of each page: “*On Seeking the Spirit of One Known to the Wizard In Life*”; “*On Calling A Proper Ghost With Regarde for Domaines and Circumstances*”; “*On Spirites Not Favorably Inclined to the Wizard, Which Requireth Warnings and Precautions.*”

She turned another page, and found herself staring into a pitch black void, yawning at her from the page. For a moment she heard whispers and felt the hairs on the back of her neck stir, before Darla reached across the table and shut the book.

“Don't stare at that page too long. It's kind of creepy.” Darla pulled the book back, with Alexandra's fingers clinging momentarily to it before she relinquished it. “It gave me nightmares.”

“Where did you get that?” Alexandra asked.

“Some things you can get that you're not supposed to, when you're rich.” Darla's smug expression faltered. “But it doesn't do me much good, without a wand.” She looked at Alexandra, who was still looking at the book.

“I know you're better than me,” Darla said, and Alexandra's eyes snapped back to her.

“Even if I had my wand, you would still probably have a better chance than me,” Darla said, as if it pained her to admit this. “So I'll give you the book. And if you think you can do it, if you find a way to go the Lands Beyond, and treat with Death...” She opened a trembling hand, to reveal the obol again. “I'll give you this to take with you.”

Alexandra stared at the obol. “You'd let me do that, to save my brother?”

“If you can do it, you have to promise...” A tear rolled down Darla's cheek. “You have to promise you'll teach me everything you learn, and then help me do the same thing for my sister.”

Alexandra stared at Darla.

“And you have to tell me what happened,” Darla went on, “because I know that Maximilian joined the Deathly Regiment, but I don't know *how*. There's only so much I could learn from a book. A lot of it doesn't make sense. Plus, I can't test anything without a wand.”

“I don't see how what happened in the Lands Below will help you.”

“Because you already know what is and isn't important, right?” Darla looked at her haughtily. “I'm just asking you to exchange information. You discovered something in the Lands Below... you know something about the Lands Beyond that I don't.” Her voice softened. “I know you don't want to talk about it – I'm sure it was terrible. But I told you about my sister. And...” She shrugged. “You could just tell Ms. Grimm about my book, and my obol. Then I'll be expelled, and almost certainly have my wand broken. You can finally get your revenge. If that will make you feel better, go ahead.”

She met Alexandra's gaze with an almost eerie calm. All the fear she had shown earlier whenever Alexandra stared her down seemed to have vanished.

Alexandra held out her hand. “Give me the book.”

Darla placed the black book back into her hand.

Alexandra took it, and flipped through a few of its pages again. *Banishments of Leaste Severity. Banishments of Great Severity. Deathly Spirites*. She knew this was a book of the sort she might find only in the Restricted Reserves, and possibly not even there. She looked back up at Darla, who was waiting quietly.

She set the book down.

“Where do you want me start?” she asked.

“From the moment you knocked me and John unconscious.” Darla leaned forward. “I want to know everything.”



It took over two hours, with Darla constantly asking questions. She sounded as skeptical as Alexandra did at times, but every time Alexandra glared at her, she bowed her head and mumbled, “Sorry.”

Maximilian's sacrifice – his Most Terrible Gift – was the hardest part. Alexandra spoke in a flat, emotionless voice, looking through Darla at some distant point behind her, as she related the tale of how Maximilian had fallen through the portal to the Lands Beyond.

She told about her escape from the Generous Ones in a rush, all the way until she returned to Charmbridge, passing through the lair of the Underwater Panthers and encountering her father deep in the basement, in the same cavern from which they had left.

“He took the locket from me,” Alexandra said. “And he took my memories from me, temporarily. I really didn't remember what had happened, at first. They thought he'd Obliviated me, but he'd just stored them, like in a Pensieve, and he had them returned to me later.”

Alexandra leaned back, feeling drained. “I told Dean Grimm's sister, the Special Inquisitor, all of this on the night of the Sweetheart's Dance. The WJD knows everything now. So if you go telling people, it won't matter.”

“I'm not going to tell anyone. Why do you think I would?” Darla frowned. “So I guess you left the bone flute and that other stuff the Generous Ones gave you behind?”

Alexandra hesitated. “Yeah. I only escaped with my broom and the locket. And Charlie.”

“Too bad,” Darla murmured. “They might be useful.”

Alexandra shrugged. “Maybe.”

“We could work together,” Darla said. “You can cast spells right now, and I can't.” She lightly tapped the knuckles of her fist still clenching the obol against the table. “But I can get things.”

“Where do you get them from?” Alexandra asked.

Darla's eyes took on that cold, far-away expression again. “Does it matter?”

Alexandra sat there for a long time, thinking.

“Thanks for the book,” she said at last, rising to her feet.

Darla's face twitched. Her smugness vanished, and her voice became plaintive. “But you'll tell me, won't you? If you find a way...” Tears gleamed in her eyes again. “I just want my sister back. You promised –”

“Yes.” Alexandra nodded. “If I bring back my brother, I'll tell you how I did it. And if I need the obol, I'll tell you.”

“I am sorry,” Darla murmured, looking away. “About your brother.”

Alexandra paused, as she lifted her backpack off the floor by her chair and set it on the table.

“I'm sorry about your sister,” she said. “I wish I'd known.”

Darla looked back at her, and nodded slowly. She watched as Alexandra dropped *Deathly Conjures* into the magical pack and then shouldered it.

“You'll get in trouble if anyone sees that book, you know,” Darla said.

Alexandra nodded. “I assume you managed to keep it and the obol hidden when your room was searched.”

“Of course.”

“And Angelique doesn't know about any of this?”

“She knows about Hilary. I made her promise not to speak about it. But she doesn't know about the book, or the obol, or the other stuff.” Darla looked back at her evenly. “And Anna?”

“Anna...” Alexandra was suddenly as uncomfortable as she had been when talking about

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Maximilian. "Don't worry about her."

Darla nodded.

Alexandra didn't know quite what else to say. She and Darla weren't friends now. She didn't trust her enough to think of her as an ally.

"See you later," she said.

"Good luck," Darla said softly, and watched her walk away.

Chapter 23 — Deathly Conjures

Alexandra didn't mention the book to Anna, nor her conversation with Darla.

This bothered her for the next week. She read from *Deathly Conjures* only when she was alone, ducking into empty classrooms, hidden alcoves, or secluded corners of the library. But hiding this from Anna made her feel like they were back to the way they had been before.

She wasn't sure where they were now.

While Alexandra pondered her earlier promise, Anna continued to listen to the news every day, with a mixture of hope and dread.

On Monday morning, a week and a day after the Sweetheart's Dance, there was a notice on the eighth grade bulletin board summoning Anna to the Dean's office.

"I'm sure you're not in trouble," Alexandra said, as Anna turned pale.

Anna's hands went to her mouth. "What if—?" She swallowed. "What if something has happened to my father, or my mother...?"

Constance and Forbearance both placed their hands on Anna's shoulders.

"It hain't nothin' like that," Constance said softly.

"Can't be," Forbearance said.

Alexandra wanted to shout at them: *Don't tell her it can't be bad news when it can!* But she didn't. She just put an arm around Anna's shoulders.

Anna asked, in a very small voice, "Will you go with me, Alex?"

"Of course." Alexandra looked at the Pritchards, and gestured for them to follow. They nodded.

The four of them made their uncertain way to the administrative offices, and Anna was practically shaking by the time they stood in front of the portrait of Miss Marmsley, with Constance and Forbearance lingering back in the hallway.

The secretary looked down at them. "Only Miss Chu was summoned, Miss Quick." Then she paused. "Wait here."

She rose from the painted desk where she sat, and stepped out of her portrait. A moment later, she stepped back into her frame.

"Dean Grimm says you may both go on in," she said.

They glanced back at Constance and Forbearance, who smiled reassuringly, and then Alexandra took Anna's hand, and the two of them walked down the hall to the Dean's office. Anna surprised Alexandra by reaching for the doorknob and opening it herself. They entered and found Ms. Grimm sitting behind her desk, wearing a long-sleeved blouse.

"Miss Chu." The Dean's eyes fell on Alexandra for a moment, then went back to Anna. She pulled a slip of parchment to the center of her desk before her. "My sister just informed me that your father has been released from the Mount Diablo prison."

Anna gasped, and then swayed a little on her feet, until Alexandra squeezed her hand.

"Is it really true?" Anna asked breathlessly.

"I do not believe my sister is either misinformed or lying to me," Ms. Grimm said, with a slight edge in her voice. But Anna didn't seem to notice; she turned to Alexandra, wrapped her arms around her, and began crying.

Relieved and embarrassed, Alexandra held her friend and patted her on the back.

"Thank you, ma'am," she said to Ms. Grimm.

The Dean nodded. "The Governor of North California will be formally announcing Mr. Chu's release

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shortly, framed in an appropriate political context, no doubt, but I thought Miss Chu would want to know immediately.”

“Thank you,” Anna mumbled, almost inaudibly.

“I confess there is one small matter that I have put off dealing with, as it seemed moot while Mr. Chu was incarcerated,” Ms. Grimm said.

Anna sniffled, and looked at the Dean, puzzled.

“Your father sent a letter to me in July,” Ms. Grimm said, “informing me that you were either to be assigned a new roommate, or you would not be returning to Charmbridge. But since you did, in fact, arrive at Charmbridge, and I received no further demands, I thought it best to... let the matter lie.

However, I'm afraid I cannot ignore it now – he is entitled to withdraw you if I do not comply with his request.”

Anna blinked quickly, wiped her eyes, and looked at Alexandra, who looked back at her impassively but for a small smile.

“If you have to change roommates...” Alexandra said softly.

Anna said, “I don't want to change roommates!” She looked down. “Unless you do.”

Alexandra felt her eyes blur for a moment. “No. But your father –”

Anna shook her head vehemently, and turned to the Dean.

“Please don't move me or Alexandra, ma'am.” She took a deep breath. “If my father doesn't like it, he'll just have to come get me.”

Alexandra felt another wave of emotion that she forced away before it showed on her face, while Ms. Grimm raised one eyebrow, and then allowed a slight smile.

“He can send for you, of course.” She pushed away the parchment on her desk. “But so be it. Should I receive any inquiries from him, I will inform him that I will not be allowing any room reassignments at this point in the school year.”

Anna nodded, with her eyes on the floor in front of the Dean's desk.

“I assume he will be in touch with you directly soon,” Ms. Grimm said, “if he doesn't come here personally. But you might wish to send him an owl first.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Anna said in a small voice. She seemed to have spent her courage for the moment.

“Well, I'm sure this is a great relief to you, Miss Chu, and that you will now better be able to concentrate on your studies. You may go, both of you.”

“Yes, ma'am,” Alexandra and Anna answered together. They walked out of the Dean's office, past Miss Marmsley's portrait, and out into the hallway, where Constance and Forbearance were waiting. The Ozarkers let out joyous exclamations and embraced Anna when she told them the news, and the four of them went to breakfast in such a happy mood that Alexandra actually smiled at the Rash twins when they gave the girls puzzled looks.

In their room that night, Anna wrote a letter to her father, constantly talking to both Alexandra and Jingwei, who was sitting on her desk waiting for Anna to finish writing.

“I do want to see him,” Anna said. “And my mother.” She looked at the two photographs still hanging on the wall above her desk. “Maybe he'd let me come home for a week... but he'll probably insist I don't interrupt my studies, even after this.”

Alexandra nodded.

“But I've been so worried about him! And I miss them both so much!” Anna sniffled, and wiped at her eyes.

“I'm sure your grades won't suffer if you go home for a few days,” Alexandra said.

“But what if my father does say I can't be your roommate anymore!” Anna stared at her letter

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anxiously. “He told me I have to stay away from you!”

“It’ll be okay, Anna –”

“He can’t make me leave! He just can’t!”

I’m pretty sure he can, Alexandra thought, but she patted Anna on the shoulder. “It will be all right. And if getting a new roommate will make him happy –”

“No!” Anna shook her head. “I won’t let him do that. I’m not going to pretend we’re not friends.” She swallowed, and her voice trembled. “I won’t betray you again.”

Alexandra stared at her, as Anna hastily rolled up her letter and tied it to Jingwei’s leg. “They’ll be back in San Francisco, now,” she told her owl, “so don’t go to my grandparents’ house.”

Jingwei hooted, and stretching her great wings, took off.

“My mother says my grandmother tried to hit Jingwei with a broom,” Anna said, watching the owl soar off into the night.

“I’m sure she’ll be happy she’s not going back there, then.”

Anna turned, to find Alexandra still staring at her.

“I need to show you something,” Alexandra said. “It’s probably nothing. I mean, it’s just an old book, probably a bunch of BS.”

Anna looked confused.

Alexandra reached into her backpack, and pulled out the black book Darla had given her.

Anna’s expression became wary. “This is about Max, isn’t it?” she said softly.

Alexandra nodded.

“And I suppose if I tell you that this book is bad news and you should throw it away...?”

Alexandra looked down at the book. “I’m trusting you, Anna.”

Anna swallowed, then said, “Let me see it.”

They spent that evening poring over *Deathly Conjures*, with Anna growing increasingly perturbed.

“This stuff is way over my head – and yours, too,” she said. “But this is necromancy, Alexandra! It’s Dark Arts!”

“There’s nothing here about cursing people.” At least, they had yet to find any curses that were called that. But there were many pages devoted to the calling, commanding, and banishing of spirits, and – in the section that most interested Alexandra and frightened Anna – *‘Treating with Deathly Powers.’* The page full of whispering darkness was there. Alexandra flipped past it quickly.

“This is the kind of book that could get you expelled,” Anna said.

“Then I guess I’ll have to hope nobody else finds out about it.”

Anna flinched and looked down. Alexandra put a hand on her shoulder, and said, more gently, “I’m not going to do anything Dark, Anna.”

“What you want to do, even if it’s possible – there’s no way that isn’t Dark magic.” Anna stared at the black book. “You still haven’t told me where you got it.”

“Please don’t ask me.”

Anna didn’t like that answer, but she was unwilling to force the issue. “What are you going to do with it?”

“I’m going to study it and hope I learn something.”

Anna’s worried expression was a familiar one.

“I won’t do anything without telling you,” Alexandra said. “Does that make you feel better?”

“A little.” Anna looked down. “I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t tell me anything.”

Alexandra sighed. “I’m not still angry at you, Anna.”

“I know.”

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"I'm trying not to keep secrets..."

"I know." Anna looked as if she might start to cry. "I don't deserve to be trusted."

"Stop." Alexandra set down the book, and put her arms around her friend. "Not again. We've both screwed up a lot, okay?"

Anna nodded. She seemed willing to keep standing there with Alexandra holding her, but Alexandra let her go and said, "Let's go eat."

Before going to the cafeteria, she carefully put the book back in her backpack.



Anna didn't like seeing the black book, so Alexandra continued seeking out quiet corners of the school where she could read uninterrupted. Sometimes she risked reading it in class, tucking it inside a larger book. In the library, she found other old books from the same time period, and ancient dictionaries to help her with the archaic words and spellings. She spent every spare moment she could find poring over it, to the detriment of her schoolwork.

Occasionally, she saw Darla watching her, but Alexandra didn't think Darla would be any help – what could she do, without a wand? And anyway, Alexandra was clearly better than her – if Darla had thought she might accomplish anything with the book, she wouldn't have given it away.

Deathly Conjures was dry and opaque, but the author was refreshingly unopinionated. Alexandra had read other old wizarding books and found that most wizards were like Simon Grayson – they couldn't just explain anything, they had to rant and go off on tangents about Mohammedan mages or goblins or Crumple-Horned Snorkacks. "Hermes Trismegistus" (this was the name printed on *Deathly Conjures'* title page, but Alexandra already knew that that was a pseudonym many wizards had used since medieval times) just wrote about ghosts and death. It was fascinating. Also very difficult to read. Alexandra wished she had a modern English translation.

The magic was explained with charts, symbols, references to other books which the author assumed the reader would be familiar with, and equally obscure terms. Where wands and incantations were mentioned at all, it was left to the reader to infer exactly what words and gestures were to be used in the rituals described. Alexandra wasn't sure whether that was because the author assumed the reader would know, or whether it meant she had to make up her own. It was clear that none of these spells were the sort of standardized, repeatable charms they were taught in class. There was a lot of talk of 'working one's Will' and doing things 'by that magic which is Yours.'

There were two things the book was very clear on: wizards could summon ghosts, and a wizard with sufficient Will could go Through the Veil, but only if the Way were Shown and He be Guided by an Uncoerced Spirit, unless he Bound Most Thoroughly One Unwilling, and to Return was Uncertain But that he had Been Released By Death. (After an hour of squinting at the archaic inked letters each night, Alexandra's eyes began to blur and she began to Think In Capitals with Many Unclear Turns of Phrase Causing her Head to Ache.)

Alexandra could tell that Anna was biting her tongue, but she didn't say anything about Alexandra's renewed obsession.

Anna received a letter from her father two days after his release, assuring her that he was unharmed and that he had taken Anna's mother back to their home in Little Wuyi, and that it was his wish that she continue her studies until he saw her over the spring break.

"The spring break!" Anna exclaimed. "I get to go home for the spring break!" Alexandra smiled as Anna practically bounced out of the room.

Mr. Chu said nothing about Alexandra in that letter, but Jingwei returned several days after that. Anna was much more nervous opening this letter. She read it while holding her breath.

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When she looked up at Alexandra, she seemed a little bit relieved. “He said we'll talk about it over the break.”

“It meaning me?” Alexandra asked.

Anna nodded.

“Sounds like he wants to tell you in person that you have to stop being friends with me.” Alexandra knew that Anna would have a much harder time arguing with her father face-to-face.

Anna bit her lip. “You trust Constance and Forbearance not to stop being your friend, don't you?”

Alexandra nodded. “Yes.” She didn't add that it would be more difficult for Anna to remain her friend from two thousand miles away, if her father pulled her out of school.

“If he were just going to tell me I can't return to Charmbridge...” Anna's eyes misted up a little. “I don't think he'll do that.”

“If he does, we'll still have owls – and email.”

A poor substitute for being roommates. They both knew that. But Anna smiled uncertainly and nodded.

The release of Geming Chu from Mount Diablo quieted some of the unrest in the California Territories, but Anna's father was no sooner out of prison than he resumed his campaign for the Wizards' Congress, now with the added cachet of having been a 'political prisoner.' The Governor of North California had announced a new date for the election: the week after Charmbridge's spring break.

Anna began following his campaign quite closely, listening to the Confederation News Network in the rec room and borrowing Alexandra's copies of the *Chicago Wizard Times*.

“Even the Majokai would vote for him now, I think,” Anna said. “If Majokai voted.”

The end of February brought more news besides the resurgence of Mr. Chu's campaign. Some Territories were using the WODAMND Act to deal more harshly with suspected Dark Wizards. There were arrests; ranging from teenagers to government bureaucrats and even a Regimental officer, all accused of practicing Dark Arts or collaborating with the Dark Convention.

Alexandra wondered how many of them had been her father's friends, and how many more were political troublemakers like Mr. Chu. While she was not fully engaged with the politics going on in the outside world, it seemed to her that the Wizard Justice Department wasn't doing a very good job of assuring the public that they were winning the War on Dark Arts.

She felt the repercussions at Charmbridge, too. The hexing and harassment she'd experienced all year intensified. This ranged from petty pranks, like sticking her books to her desk with a Glue Charm, to being hexed in the back in hallways. When she narrowly avoided getting Bubotuber Pus in the face after opening her JROC locker, Ms. Shirliffe drilled the entire JROC to exhaustion for the next week, citing various misbehavior and acts of vandalism, though everyone knew what the real reason was.

When Alexandra complained about being included in the collective punishment, Ms. Shirliffe asked her, “Would you prefer that I punish everyone except you?”

Alexandra frowned, imagining herself standing at ease off to the side while everyone else did broom and wand drills. “No, ma'am.”

“Be careful, Quick. I'm afraid your father hasn't done you any favors.”

“No, ma'am. He never has.” Alexandra saluted, and endured the week's grueling training without further complaint.

She was beginning to feel like the entire school was out to get her. It did nothing to improve her attitude. She avoided getting into any more fights mostly by keeping to herself when she wasn't with her friends – and as she spent more and more time sequestered in the library or secluded corners of the academy with her black book, her friends saw her less often in the rec room.

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While *Deathly Conjures* had been almost incomprehensible at first, Alexandra was beginning to decipher the language of the pseudonymous H.T. The more she read, the more she was able to understand, even while deeper meanings continued to elude her. Darla had circled a few passages and scribbled notes on pages; Alexandra saw that the other girl had been most interested in the section on Treating with the Most Deathly Power. There was an entire page on 'ghost coins,' which H.T. explained was a vulgar term because they were actually 'Tokens of Life' and of no use to ghosts.

'Obols for this?' Darla had written in the margin.

'Only with a Deathly conveyance to travel and a Deathly spirit to guide you may you embark upon your Katabasis and return,' wrote the author of the black book. According to Bran and Poe, no one returned from the Lands Beyond. But H.T. said there were Beings who traveled the Road Between Life and Death like Spirits... Alexandra sighed and leaned forward, resting her forehead on the table in front of her. She had a headache again.

How did she find a beast or spirit that could guide her? Charlie had found the way across the Lands Below, bringing her back the bone flute from the Generous Ones. Could the raven lead her through the Lands Beyond as well? And what about a spirit? Did she treat with one, or command it? Commanding ghosts had to be wrong – there was a reason why necromancy was a Dark Art.

But what if she needed a ghost? What if Maximilian *was* a ghost? She thought once more about the ghost in the basement – the one that Ms. Fletcher thought was still down there.

Since Ms. Gale's death (which they were still calling an 'accident'), they had resumed using the basement for approved activities, but there were more portraits and Colloportus spells keeping students out of the basement after school hours. Alexandra needed an excuse to be down in the basement again.

She needed to be assigned detention.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

"Will you come to the rec room next Monday?" Anna asked her, several weeks later.

They were studying for a Potions test. Outside of meals and study periods, Alexandra had been spending little time with her friends, even Anna. She hid a grimace. She felt guilty, but she was so close to being ready to attempting a summoning. There was only so much she could learn just by studying the black book. Pretty soon, she was going to have to actually try to *do* something.

"I don't know," she mumbled. "We have Mrs. Middle's midterm that week..."

"That's not what you're studying."

Alexandra looked up, as Anna sighed. "I know you can't let go of this," Anna said, "but you're back to your old habits – avoiding your friends, spending all your time planning something in secret..."

"It's not secret," Alexandra said quietly. "You know what I'm trying to do."

Anna regarded her solemnly. "Are you planning to do it Monday?"

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "No, of course not."

"You do realize Monday is your birthday?"

Alexandra blinked in surprise. She had been so immersed in deciphering archaic spell formulas and deathly wizarding mythology, she had hardly been paying attention to the date.

"You're barely passing half your classes, but you're studying this old book so much that you almost forgot your own birthday," Anna said. "Alex, it's not... healthy, what you're doing."

"Don't start that again, Anna." Alexandra looked at Anna, and felt guilty. Anna was even more loathe to question her now than before; she knew her friend had to be seriously concerned to raise the issue again. "I'm doing my homework –"

Anna coughed. She hadn't exactly done any of Alexandra's homework for her, but she'd done enough work checking and correcting it that she might as well have, for some of her assignments.

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“– and I'll be there Monday, for my birthday party.” Alexandra smiled at Anna. “Thanks.”

Anna smiled weakly. “I know you think I worry too much.”

“I'm not actually doing any necromancy, Anna.”

Not yet.

Alexandra tried to spend more time with Anna and her other friends over the next week. Even as she put in extra hours in the library writing Alchemy essays and practicing Revealing Charms with Anna in their room, Alexandra was contemplating the week of spring break. Anna would be gone, along with many other students, which meant fewer students in detention and fewer people around to note her comings and goings.

On March 22nd, the morning of Alexandra's birthday, she received two owls.

The first was from Julia. It contained a birthday card with engraved lettering on the front. When Alexandra opened it, it began singing “Happy Birthday” in a loud soprano voice. Alexandra gave Anna an embarrassed look, grateful that she hadn't waited until she reached the cafeteria to read it.

Enclosed with the card were pictures of Alexandra and Maximilian at the previous year's Roanoke Spring Cotillion. Alexandra stared at the photographs; she hadn't even realized that anyone had captured her on camera, but there she was, in her yellow robe that had left her shoulders and ankles bare, dancing with a Muggle-born boy from a local day school. And there was Maximilian, dressed handsomely in his formal BMI uniform. Even in the wizard photograph, Alexandra could see the BMI stormcrow on his jacket rippling and flexing its talons.

Julia had also enclosed a gift certificate for a Bath and Body Charms shop. Her sister's letter was a little more cheerful than her last one, but when Julia admitted that she was experiencing 'some rude people' at the Salem Witches' Institute, Alexandra knew that meant that Julia was being harassed, too.

Alexandra sighed. *She's probably hiding how bad it is.*

Julia ended her letter with the news that Beatrice and Martin would be graduating from the Blacksburg Magery Institute in June, and that they had invited both Julia and Alexandra to attend. Ms. King was once again willing to pay for a Portkey trip for Alexandra, and had suggested Alexandra stay at Croatoa for the first part of the summer.

“Only, however, if your mother agrees – and Mother was very clear that she intends to speak to your mother personally beforehand. You will be quite proud of me, Alexandra – I have been taking Muggle Studies this semester so that I can learn how to use a telephone!”

Alexandra wasn't sure what she thought about being forgiven and invited back to Croatoa. Would she have anything to show for all of her efforts this year, other than more trouble she'd brought upon herself and the Kings?

“You look pretty,” said Anna, who was looking at the pictures on Alexandra's desk.

“Julia made me wear a dress.” She gave her smiling friend a mock glare.

“It's a formal robe,” Anna said, cheek twitching.

The second owl that arrived that morning was from her mother. Not directly from her mother, Alexandra knew – her mother sent mail addressed to Charmbridge Academy, and somehow the Owl Post picked it up.

She expected money – her usual birthday present – and was surprised to find that the birthday card her mother had sent also contained a photograph.

Alexandra looked at it, and then sat there, staring.

It wasn't a wizard photograph. It was a Polaroid picture, on thick paper, the kind that came out of one of those old non-digital cameras. It was so old that it had started to yellow, but Alexandra still recognized the smiling man standing in front of what looked very much like a Muggle brick home. It

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was her father.

In this Muggle photograph, Abraham Thorn had shorter hair without the gray streaks Alexandra was used to seeing. His beard and mustache were still there, but they were much shorter, and his face was less wrinkled. He was wearing robes and a dark, heavy cloak, which made him look all the more incongruous standing on a concrete driveway. He was smiling at the camera, but his smile was frozen, so Alexandra couldn't even guess what he was feeling.

It was like a mysterious little time capsule. There was no date on the photograph. Alexandra looked at the letter accompanying it.

"This is the only photograph I have of your father," Claudia had written. *"I'm sorry I never showed it to you before. I think you deserve to have it."*

Along with that was an American Express gift card. Alexandra smiled. She didn't really mind that her parents sent her money for a birthday present, and having a credit card that she could use at any store she liked made her feel very grown up.

She glanced at Anna, who was still waiting to go down to breakfast. "Sorry."

Anna shook her head, with a small smile, and let Alexandra put away the letters and gifts.

Downstairs, Alexandra was unsurprised to find Dean Grimm standing in front of the cafeteria during one of her periodic walks through the hallways. It made for a quieter morning than usual, as the normal loud chatter of students was quelled by her presence; all most students dared to say was, "Good morning, Ms. Grimm," as they passed by.

She's holding her cat again, Alexandra thought. And as she nodded silently to the Dean, Ms. Grimm said, "Happy birthday, Miss Quick. Fourteen already – my goodness."

Alexandra stopped. Anna stopped with her. Anna used to tremble in the Dean's presence; now she merely looked down and bit her lip nervously.

"Do you remember everyone's birthday?" Alexandra asked. And added a hasty, "Ma'am," when the Dean's eyes narrowed.

"Yes, I do," Ms. Grimm replied. "With the help of Miss Marmsley."

Alexandra eyed Galen, who as usual was lolling comfortably in the Dean's arms with one eye open as Ms. Grimm scratched behind the cat's ears.

"Don't block the corridor, Miss Quick." Ms. Grimm nodded to her, and Alexandra mumbled an inaudible good-bye and continued on into the cafeteria.

Alexandra's party was like her previous birthdays at Charmbridge – more fuss than she was used to, even if it was a very small gathering. Constance and Forbearance had once again enticed the elves to prepare a Jubilation Cake – Alexandra knew better than to try to blow out the candles this time.

She was touched by the attention. The presence of her friends warmed her heart, and for a little while, she forgot about the black book. But now and then, she would look at the couch where Maximilian had sat with Beatrice and Martin the previous year.

Why was it so easy to forget that Max was dead? It seemed as if it were becoming easier as time went by. And she was so tired of trying to figure out how to do magic she barely understood to accomplish something everyone said was impossible. She imagined how happy Anna would be if she threw away the black book. It would be nice to have all of her friends happy with her for once. Julia and Ms. King had forgiven her once – would they forgive her again, if she kept trying and failing to bring back Maximilian?

She returned to her room that night with Anna, still smiling and feigning lightheartedness. She had had a good time. But it only made her feel more guilty. Letting herself have a good time and forget her promise would make it easier to let go. That's what Simon Grayson had been warning her about, she

realized – if she let go and accepted that Maximilian was dead, pretty soon she'd have forgotten him and moved on, and Death would have won.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Alexandra saw Anna off at the entrance to Charmbridge Academy the following week. Anna was excited, anxious, and sad, all at once. She couldn't wait to get back to California to see her parents, but the idea of accompanying her father on the campaign trail terrified her. Traditionalists might value pure blood, but Mr. Chu apparently thought some wizard voters in North California wanted to see him with his Muggle wife and half-blood daughter.

"You'll be all right by yourself, won't you?" Anna asked.

"No, I'm sure I'll forget to eat or something without you around to remind me." Alexandra smiled at her. "I'll be fine."

"You'll stay out of trouble, right?"

"Sure."

Anna gave her a skeptical look.

"I just lost my temper," Alexandra said. "And Mr. Grue *does* have bad breath. Everyone hates it when he leans close to criticize you."

Anna shook her head. "You had to mouth off to him just in time to get detention over the spring break."

Alexandra shrugged. "What else would I be doing, anyway? Maybe I'll play cards with Constance and Forbearance, but other than that..."

Anna's expression was knowing and a little suspicious. They hadn't talked about the black book lately, but Anna knew Alexandra was still spending much of her free time studying death (neither of them used the term 'necromancy').

Fortunately, Anna believed Alexandra's outburst in Mr. Grue's class had been just another example of her temper and reckless attitude, not a carefully planned act of defiance.

"Have a good trip." Alexandra gave Anna a hug. "I can't believe you're going to fly in an airplane before me."

Anna laughed nervously. "I can't believe my father allowed it. But that train ride took forever." She released Alexandra and picked up her bag. She had already sent Jingwei ahead, deciding the owl would be better off flying back to San Francisco on her own. "I hope planes are as safe as Tomo says they are."

"Airplane crashes are pretty rare, I think." Alexandra winced inwardly when Anna blanched, and smiled reassuringly. "I mean, I hardly ever hear about big ones crashing, it's usually the little ones –" Anna kept turning whiter, and Alexandra decided she wasn't helping. "You'll be fine. Tell me what it's like."

Anna nodded, and then turned to trod off in the direction the other departing students were heading, through the woods towards the Invisible Bridge. Alexandra saw Tomo, who joined Anna as they walked along the path through the trees. William was going home, too – he waved at her, and Alexandra sighed and waved back.

She spent that morning playing cards with the Pritchards. The rec room was unusually crowded – there were always quite a few students who stayed at school over vacation, like Alexandra and the Pritchards – but this year there were more. With most cross-country Wizardrails still not running, not everyone was willing to adapt to Muggle methods of transportation. She was surprised when Angelique joined them. She guessed that with David and Darla both having gone home over the break, Angelique was lonely.

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That afternoon, however, she reported to Ms. Fletcher's office in the basement. To her relief, she seemed to be the only one serving detention over the break. Her relief was short-lived when the custodian told her, "Mr. Grue and Ms. Shirtliffe must love you, Quick."

"Excuse me?" Alexandra was immediately wary.

"They both asked me to see to it that you're not standing around giving orders to Clockworks for your detention." The large witch smiled. "Come with me."

Alexandra followed her, upstairs and outside and around the building, to the stables.

Charmbridge Academy kept a handful of horses, both winged and mundane. There was an Equestrian Club, and the older JROC students sometimes practiced riding the winged variety. There was also a winged goat pen; the care and taming of the creatures was part of Mr. Fledgefield's advanced Magical Animal Husbandry class.

Charmbridge's stables were indoors, next to the gymnasium, but Alexandra assumed it was another trick of magic to fit the enormous, hangar-like space inside the academy building. The ceiling was high overhead, high enough for even Granians to take short indoor flights. Unlike the Kings' stable at Croatoa, though, the winged horses were kept in pens – albeit very spacious ones – when not allowed out for riding or grazing.

Ms. Fletcher led Alexandra to these pens, tossed her long, bright, rainbow scarf over a shoulder, and handed her a shovel.

"Spring cleaning," she said cheerfully. "Guess what you get to shovel?"

"Don't Clockworks usually do this?" Alexandra asked.

"Yes, but I have plenty of other things for them to do."

This had not been Alexandra's plan. She had expected to be cleaning and sweeping in the basement, or at least taking Clockworks to and from there. She took the shovel and looked at it with dismay.

"Don't make faces. A little horseshit never hurt anyone," Ms. Fletcher said. And while Alexandra stood there blinking at the shovel, the waiting piles of manure, and the custodian's casual profanity, Ms. Fletcher chuckled and walked away.

Alexandra started with the winged goats' pen, enclosed in a floor-to-ceiling fence, and discovered that the creatures were ornery and territorial. They also seemed to think her jeans and jacket would be tasty.

"Stop it!" she shouted at one, kicking it away from her pants cuff, before she felt a nibble on the back of her neck, followed by a tug. She spun around, and nearly swung the shovel at the goat that was hovering behind her with bits of her collar in its teeth.

"That's it!" she snarled, and pulled out her wand.

One of the goats butted her from behind with a loud "*Baaaah!*", knocking her sprawling into the dirt. She rolled over and pointed her wand.

"*Petrificus Totalus!*" she yelled, and the goat was frozen in place, crouching to make another run at her. Unfortunately, this provoked the other goats, and soon she was being knocked around the pen as she cast the Body-Bind Curse on one animal after another. By the time they were all petrified in place, Alexandra was covered with filth and bruises. She was muttering other curses under her breath as she shoveled out the pen. It was nearly evening when she was finished.

Exhausted and sore, she wandered between the horse stalls, pausing in front of a Granian who whickered softly. Alexandra reached out and patted the winged horse's head. Granians she could deal with.

"I'll take care of you tomorrow," she said, and took a look in the final stall.

She paused when she saw the skeletal black creature inside.

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"I didn't even know we had Thestrals at Charmbridge," she said softly.

She held out a hand and whistled softly, and the Thestral, which was drinking from its trough, trotted over, as amiable as any other equine, and allowed Alexandra to rub its scaly black nose. It seemed glad of the attention.

Alexandra noticed that it was dripping red from its snout, and realized that the trough it was drinking from was filled with blood. She grimaced. She knew Thestrals ate flesh, but they were harmless to humans.

"It's no wonder some people think you're bad omens, though," she said. "Between your diet and the way you only appear to people who've seen death..." Her voice trailed off. The Thestral nudged her hand, and then turned and trotted back to the trough to lap at the red liquid.

"*Only with a Deathly conveyance to travel and a Deathly spirit to guide you may you embark upon your Katabasis and return,*" Alexandra murmured. Could Thestrals see Death themselves? Was it a Thestral she needed for her journey?



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“What's that, Quick?” asked Ms. Fletcher. Alexandra spun around, to find the custodian staring at her. Fletcher looked over the gate into the Thestral's pen. “Ah, you found Skuld.” She did not seem surprised or concerned that Alexandra could see the Thestral. She was more interested in Alexandra's state of disarray. She looked her up and down. “Would this be why all the goats are paralyzed?”

“Those things are mean!”

Ms. Fletcher chuckled. “They'll be a lot meaner if you ever have to deal with them again. Trust me, they'll remember what you did to them.” She took the shovel from Alexandra. “You do realize this is an enchanted shovel, right? If you tell it to, it will shovel for you.”

Alexandra looked at the shovel, feeling her fingers clenching as if around a large, thick neck. “You didn't mention that.”

“Should've asked. Ah well, calluses build character. See you tomorrow, Quick.” She turned and walked off, whistling a tune, with Alexandra simmering behind her.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Alexandra spent the rest of the week in the library, when she wasn't at meals or detention. She read everything she could find about Thestrals. No one knew exactly why it was that they were invisible to anyone who hadn't witnessed death, but they had long been considered highly magical creatures with a connection to the spirit world. They were known to be one of the few animals that were not spooked by ghosts. A few ghosts had even learned to ride them; it was apparently quite tricky, given a ghost's limited ability to hold reins and sit in a saddle.

She was starting to put together some of the other ideas she had learned from the black book. She wanted to call the ghost in the basement to her, and she had assumed that the basement would be the best place to do it. However, according to what she'd read about ghosts, they weren't necessarily bound to a single place. There were a variety of ways to call them, some more compelling than others, but no single charm that would work universally.

She'd known she'd have to improvise. She'd been counting on proximity, but Thestrals were said to have a connection to death, and she remembered Sue Fox summoning a jibay with a blood offering (which reflected a variety of myths she'd read), and... Maximilian had a connection to Thestrals, too. They would be familiar creatures to him.

It's not Maximilian! she told herself.

But what if it is? a smaller voice asked.

She spent the week planning, jotting down elements of spellwork and ritual, while also making sure to visit Skuld each day in the stable. The kitchen-elves were quite cooperative about providing Alexandra with bits of meat to take to the Thestral. She had spent time trying to think up a plausible explanation to give them, and then told them the truth, which to her surprise, sufficed.

“Witches is often asking us for apples and melon rinds to take to the horsies,” said Mr. Remy, whose perpetual scowl Alexandra now found less off-putting. He squinted at her. “Not so many wants to feed a Thestral.” He shook his head, and handed her a mess of bloody scraps wrapped in butcher paper, holding his huge, bloody knife in the other hand. Alexandra smiled and thanked him.

She had no idea if what she was planning to do would work, but she did know that sneaking into the stables would be easier than sneaking into the basement.

Anna and the other students would be returning on Sunday, so Alexandra planned her ritual for Saturday night.

She took a nap after detention that evening, with a bowl full of fresh, bloody organ meat sitting on her desk. She had to cover it up to keep Charlie from pecking at it. When she woke up, at midnight, she gave Charlie some owl treats, and then threw on her cloak and picked up the bowl.

Deathly Conjures

Charlie cawed as Alexandra opened the window. “Fly, fly!”

“Ssh!” she said. She listened, but there was no sound from Sonja and Carol’s room. She shook her head at Charlie. “Quiet.” She pulled her Twister out from under her bed, and climbed with it onto her desk. From there, she squatted on top of the broom and ducked her head to glide out the window, waited for Charlie to hop out onto the sill, and then she pulled the window closed from the outside.

It took her only moments to descend to the ground, with Charlie following her. The first few days of April had been chilly, but there hadn’t been any rain, so it was dry and cold that night, and the grass was soft underfoot. Looking up, she could see lights here and there, where younger students were staying up past lights-out or older students were still studying or talking in their rooms. She hugged the base of the wall so she wouldn’t be seen by anyone who happened to be looking outside.

Almost too easy, she thought, as she walked around Charmbridge Academy to one of the stable doors.

This was the part where she might get caught. The door was locked from the outside, of course, but usually the staff was worried about students sneaking out; who would break *in* to the academy out here? Especially through the stables?

As she hoped, the door was not sealed with a Colloportus spell. It was locked, but it took her only seconds to magically Unlock it. With her heart beating excitedly, she stepped into the dark stables.

The winged goats at the far end began making loud noises. The cacophony of baahing and bleating and butting their heads against their pen began disturbing the horses as well. Alexandra gritted her teeth, and stalked over to the goat pen.

“You’re smelly, ugly, and stupid,” she said. “Bleat all you want.” And she pointed her wand and said, “*Silencio!*” until every goat was bleating silently. With a snort, she went back to the horse stalls. Some of the horses were moving about restlessly, but Alexandra’s voice soothed them. Charlie didn’t seem to like being surrounded by them, and stayed on Alexandra’s shoulder, occasionally flapping restlessly.

Alexandra walked to the farthest stall, and whispered, “Hello, Skuld,” as she opened the door.

In the darkness, the Thestral was nearly invisible even to her, but she heard it snort and then make its ungainly way over to her. She held out the bowl full of liver and kidneys and intestines, and Skuld dipped her nose into it like a normal horse accepting an apple. The chomping and slurping sounds made Alexandra grimace a bit, but when Skuld was done, Alexandra rubbed the creature’s nose and said, “Now, all you have to do is stand here.”

She walked into the stall and stood in front of the trough full of blood.

“Stay on my shoulder, Charlie,” she commanded. Though Charlie was not always the most obedient familiar, there were times when the raven heeded her voice. This was one of those times.

It’s not necromancy, Alexandra thought. The offering of flesh to the Thestral, the raven on her shoulder, the trough full of blood, the ritual in the dead of night – it might *look* like Dark magic, but it was all perfectly harmless.

Still, she really hoped she didn’t get caught. She hoped even more that she wasn’t about to feel stupid.

Alexandra knew now why all the teachers at Charmbridge Academy disparaged ‘doggerel verse.’ It wasn’t as precise and predictable as spells cast with standard incantations and standard wand gestures. When you started improvising magic, you usually accomplished nothing, and sometimes accomplished something you neither intended nor wanted. But none of the really powerful magic she’d read about was performed with a swish and a flick and a few words of Latin. The greatest wizards of the ages improvised. Abraham Thorn, she was quite certain, had not accomplished what he had by relying on standard books of spells.

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You're not Abraham Thorn, said a little voice in her head that sounded suspiciously like Anna. She could not resist replying: *No? And why can't I be as good as him? Or better?*

She knew what Anna would say to that, too. Anna, ever the sensible one. She wouldn't understand what Alexandra was trying to do now. Anna was wisdom and compassion – Alexandra was wit and passion. In her own wiser moments, Alexandra knew that she needed Anna as much as Anna needed her. But this wasn't one of her wiser moments. She'd been studying and planning for this moment for months, even if she hadn't always known exactly what it was she was going to try to do. But now she did.

And Anna needed not to be here – physically, or in Alexandra's head. She banished the nagging voice, and raised her wand to speak the words she had prepared herself:

*"Restless souls who aren't at peace,
where you wander without release,
to the Lands Beyond you're driven,
because you haven't been forgiven.
Now I'm opening the gate
you passed through when you met your fate;
I command you, through the veil,
to answer my summons without fail!"*

She knew she wasn't much of a poet. She'd spent days just trying to get her spell to rhyme with the meaning she wanted to convey. This kind of magic wasn't about the words you used so much as the force you put into them. You had to *mean* it.

At first, nothing happened, and she gritted her teeth in frustration. Maybe she hadn't been demanding enough. Maybe 'demanding' was not the right attitude to take.

Or maybe you're just not as great a witch as you thought you were, said the voice in her head, less kindly.

Then Charlie flapped and cawed, and Skuld sniffed the air curiously.

Alexandra pointed her wand, ready to banish any hostile spirits that might manifest. But the apparition that appeared in the middle of the stall was glowing softly, a luminescent silvery-gray – a ghost, then, a true wizard ghost. Which meant it was harmless.

She knew it was someone familiar before she recognized the face, and for one instant, she felt a pang of hope intermingled with grief that was so sharp and painful, her knees almost buckled.

Then she saw who it was.

Tall, handsome, and friendly-looking even in death, his once-blue eyes still seemed to possess a little of their twinkle as he smiled gently at her.

"Hello, Starshine," he said.

It was the ghost of Benedict Journey.

Chapter 24 — The Lands Beyond



Alexandra's throat had gone dry, but after several moments, her voice returned – along with her anger.

“Shouldn't you be in hell?” she asked.

The former custodian's smiling expression wavered, and his eyes lost a bit of their twinkle.

“Now, I understand you being angry,” he said. “I don't blame you for being bitter.”

She almost laughed, but the sound that came out was more of a choking gasp. “Bitter? *Bitter?* You tried to kill me!”

He nodded. “Yes,” he said quietly. “And I feel terrible about that. I never *wanted* to hurt you, Starshine, I hope you understand that. I wish things could have been different –”

“Different how? You mean you not ending up dead?” Alexandra glared at the ghost, and realized that

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her eyes were filling with tears. She was angry – furious – and disappointed. She'd been hoping to see her brother again, and instead, she was confronted with the man who had tried to murder her.

Journey regarded her now with a sad, solemn expression. He was dressed in the same clothes he'd died in – a headband around his forehead, a once-colorful shirt beneath a long, leather jacket, Muggle-style jeans, and heavy boots. His long hair was still tied back in a ponytail, and he looked every bit the gentle, aging Radicalist who had been so easy-going and friendly towards her... until he'd turned out to be a treacherous former member of the Thorn Circle.

Alexandra saw that besides being ghostly and translucent, there was one other change in the dead wizard's appearance: a large, dark bloodstain covered his chest. She could just barely see a small hole at its center, directly over his heart.

"I hope that hurts!" she hissed, gesturing at the wound and then wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. She sniffed, and felt angry that her wrath was being undermined by weaker emotions.

Journey looked sadder. "It doesn't do you any good to hold on to that kind of hatred, Starshine."

"Don't lecture me, and *don't call me Starshine!*" she yelled at him, startling the horses in the nearby stalls. Charlie flapped and cawed, and Skuld flapped her leathery wings, disturbed by the commotion.

Alexandra lowered her voice. "My name isn't Starshine. You don't get to call me cute nicknames. My name is Alexandra – Alexandra Quick."

Journey nodded. "All right. Alexandra. What do you want from me?"

Alexandra took a deep breath. She was confused. What did she want from Ben Journey? "You're the ghost who's been lurking around in the basements."

"Yes." He nodded.

"Why didn't Ms. Fletcher or the ghost hunters find you?"

He chuckled. "I already knew Charmbridge and the grounds like the back of my hand before I died; there are places I could hide even if I wasn't a ghost. Your father always said the average WJD flunky isn't too bright, and he's right."

"You ghost-struck Benjamin Rash! And killed Ms. Gale!"

He shook his head. "I didn't do a thing to them, Starsh – Alexandra, I swear to you. I heard the noise but got there too late to see what happened, both times. Then I vanished when you showed up." He looked uncomfortable. "I didn't want you to see me."

"I don't believe you. It's not like you haven't lied and tried to kill people before."

The ghost sighed, which made an odd sound, like a breeze moaning through the trees. "Ghost sickness' is just another old witches' tale they use to scare people and justify regulating the posthumous. And even if I could harm the living, why would I want to hurt that boy, or poor Ms. Gale?"

Alexandra maintained a tight grip on her wand, ready to cast a Banishing Spell. "I don't know. But that doesn't mean I believe you."

He folded his arms. "All right. I don't know how to make you believe me, Alexandra. So what now?" His expression became kindly again. "Were you just hoping to see your brother? Is that what all this was about?"

Alexandra sucked in a breath. "Is he... is he here? Or – wherever you went?"

Journey shook his head. "Not as far as I know. I'm sorry, but really, it's better that way. You wouldn't want your brother coming back as a ghost."

"Why not? You decided to."

"That depends on what you mean by 'decided,'" he said slowly. "But this isn't how I want to spend the rest of eternity."

"I'll bet it's better than where you really belong."

The Lands Beyond

He sighed again. "Being a ghost is as much punishment as anything you're imagining."

"I doubt it. I've got a great imagination."

He shook his head. "You don't forgive easily, do you?"

"*You tried to kill me!*" She lowered her voice again when the horses began whinnying and circling about in their stalls. "Why should I forgive you? What does it matter to you, anyway? You're dead."

Journey's expression was pained, regretful and conflicted, as he stared past her, looking at the Thestral, before he turned his attention back to her.

"Death isn't the end," he said quietly. "Not for everyone. I'm trapped on Earth now, but I know why, which makes me lucky compared to some ghosts. It means there's the possibility that I can move on someday. If I can find the courage, and... maybe if I can earn redemption."

"Redemption?" Alexandra frowned. "How do you do that?" She studied him, and her expression became incredulous. "What, you need me to forgive you or something?"

"It's not that simple, Starshine." Journey gave her a small, wistful smile. "I'm afraid you don't have the power to control my fate – no human being does. That's beyond the power of any magic. But... I think your forgiveness would help."

Alexandra's expression hardened. The anger returned to her voice. "When I first came to Charmbridge Academy, I didn't know anything about my father or the Thorn Circle. I didn't know anything! You were one of the only adults who was nice to me. I liked you. I trusted you. I thought you were my friend!" She glared at the ghost. "And all that time, you were trying to kill me!" She pointed at his chest. "You would have killed me, if you hadn't died first because of my father's enchantment."

Journey's ghostly form grew grayer and more insubstantial, as the glow emanating from him waned.

"What I tried to do was terrible," he said. "I was trying to save my own skin. That's why I'm here now, I suppose. I feared death too much."

He fell silent. Charlie fluttered and made nervous clicking sounds. Skuld shuffled over and bumped Alexandra with her nose, as if hoping for more bloody treats. Alexandra patted the Thestral, and glanced at Charlie, who was watching everything alertly.

"What do you know about Death?" she asked.

Journey seemed confused by the question. "Is that why you're summoning ghosts? To get answers about the afterlife? Those of us who stay here don't *know* what's on the other side, Alexandra. That's why we stayed here."

"What about *Death*-Death? With a capital 'D'? The Most Deathly Power."

Now it was Journey who looked incredulous. "What are you up to, Starshine?"

Alexandra leaned against the broad head of the Thestral, still patting its leathery snout. "I want to go to the Lands Beyond. I want to meet Death." She turned to face him. "And if you want my forgiveness, you'll help me. And *stop calling me Starshine!*"

Ben Journey stared at her. "No one living can go to the Lands Beyond and return."

Alexandra gritted her teeth. She should have known he'd say that. What was she going to do if even a ghost couldn't help her?

"Unless –" he said, and stopped.

"Unless what?" she said quickly.

He scratched his ghostly beard. "There are... stories. Fairy tales, legends that a few crazy warlocks believe –"

"About going to the Lands Beyond to treat with Death, or challenge him to a duel?"

Journey's eyebrows rose. "You've been studying things like that?"

"I've been reading a lot. Is it true? Can you do that?"

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"I don't know, Alexandra!" For the first time, Journey sounded irked, but he immediately adjusted his tone. "I know that if a living soul passes through a doorway to the Lands Beyond – going through the Veil, some call it – it's the same as death. Except –" His voice trailed off again.

"Except what?" Alexandra was aware that she sounded too eager, but she couldn't help herself.

"Except that *if* the Deathly Power, or Death, exists – which I'm not saying it does, because I haven't actually met any such being – it would have the power to allow you to return, assuming you haven't actually died."

"Actually died... so if you go through the Veil..." She gulped. "Someone can go through the Veil and not actually die?" Now her heart was racing again, and she was hanging on the ghost's every word, as the mad, desperate hope that had waxed and waned in her all these months, nurtured by snippets of occult lore and legends and rumors of mad Dark Arts rituals, and crushed by sense and reason, flared anew.

He sighed, making an even more mournful sound than before. "Are you thinking of that cave under the school where the Mors Mortis Society used to perform their little rituals?"

"You know about it?"

"Of course I know about it. That's a portal through the Veil, Alexandra, and if you go through it, you'll surely die."

He seemed to be leaving something unsaid, and Alexandra waited, until she couldn't stand it anymore. "Unless?"

Journey looked at her, and she was infuriated by the way he was obviously deciding whether or not to withhold from her the very information she was seeking. She wasn't sure whether he thought it was leverage he could use against her, or if he was just another adult determined to keep her from attempting the impossible because it was dangerous, but she was ready to explode at him, or point her wand and threaten to Banish him.

But he spoke before she did. "I learned a lot while I was in your father's circle, and a little more afterwards. But being a ghost doesn't automatically give us all the knowledge there is to know about Death and the Lands Beyond." He looked around, as if fearing to be overheard, but it was still just the horses and Charlie and the two of them. "Through the Veil is death. If you just walk through, you'll die. But there are said to be ways to keep your body and soul intact on the other side. It requires some awfully difficult spells, or magical items of great power.

"Now this is important, Alexandra – some folks believe in such things because it's been proven possible *in theory*. If you know enough advanced transcendental magic theory you can write out the equations and do the Arithmancy and prove it works. But all that means is that you can go to the Lands Beyond as a living soul. You still can't come back. No wizard who's ever tried it, even the most powerful, has ever returned. Unless you believe fairy tales."

Alexandra struggled to contain her excitement. "Because you'd need Death to send you back."

"I guess that would be one way." Journey shrugged. "I've heard of warlocks going to the Lands Beyond, planning to challenge Death, or offer some kind of payment, or Merlin knows what, and none have ever returned. I'm not sure there really is a 'Death,' but if there is, I'm guessing you can't just drop by for a visit and expect him to send you back to the land of the living." He sighed. "It's madness to go through the Veil. I've only ever heard of people committing suicide that way."

"A deathly conveyance and a deathly spirit," Alexandra said.

"What?"

Alexandra patted Skuld. "You said usually it requires spells or magic items to go to the Lands Beyond and not die. What about on a Thestral?"

The Lands Beyond

Journey looked thoughtful, and a little worried. "They say Thestrals can pass through the Veil. But that's just an old superstition, too. I've never heard of it working, Alexandra."

"Because they didn't have a deathly spirit guide?"

Journey's look became even more dismayed. "You can't really be thinking...?"

"You want my forgiveness?" Alexandra stepped towards the ghost. "Help me."

"Help you *die*?"

"Why not? You'd just be getting what you wanted in the first place."

The Radicalist looked so appalled that she almost believed he was sincere.

"What are you afraid of?" she asked. "You're beyond my father's power now, aren't you?"

He paused. "Actually... a ghost can't be killed, but there are ways to make our existence even less pleasant."

She gave him a hard look. "Like by telling Dean Grimm you're here so she can summon ghost hunters from the Bureau of Hauntings again? And have you relocated somewhere like the middle of a swamp, or some deep cave..."

"Now, let's not be hasty, Sta – Alexandra."

She kept staring at him.

"What do you want from Death?" he asked. "Do you think he can return your brother to you? Even a Deathly Power, if it exists, can't bring the dead back to life. There are some things beyond the power of magic."

"Maximilian has joined the Deathly Regiment," Alexandra said quietly. "He didn't just die – he went through the Veil. That means he's in Death's domain."

Journey blanched, which for a ghost was a striking effect, as he almost faded to invisibility. "You've heard of the Deathly Regiment?"

"So you know about it?"

"How much do you know?" Journey asked.

Alexandra frowned. Hadn't Absalom Thorn told her he'd died fighting the Deathly Regiment?

"They're the ghosts of people who have gone through the Veil, right? But I don't understand why anyone would want to fight ghosts."

Journey studied her, with an expression on his face that was hard to read. He seemed to be thinking very hard.

"What?" Alexandra asked. "What else do you know about them?"

He sighed, long and mournfully. "Only that they're beyond anyone's power to bring back to life."

"So everyone says. Unless you believe legends. Or you believe you can do things everyone says are impossible... like my father."

"You believe it because you want to believe it, Alexandra," Journey said. And before Alexandra could reply, he asked, "Suppose it's true that Death could return your brother to life. Do you think he'll do it just because you ask? What could you possibly offer Death for a boon like that?"

"Anything he wants," Alexandra whispered.

Journey hovered there silently, and Alexandra looked at Skuld, who had given up on getting another handout and returned to the trough to lap quietly at the liquid, which gleamed darkly in the faint ghostly light from Ben Journey's form.

"Will you help me?" she asked.

"You'll try to force me if I don't agree willingly, won't you? I could have resisted your summons, you know. You're an impressive little girl, but you're no necromancer."

"I don't want to force you. I want you to help me."

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"I'd be helping you go to your death. It's madness, Alexandra. Your brother died. He didn't come back, and he's not going to. You need to accept that. It's how life and death works."

"I don't need you telling me how life and death works." She scowled at the ghostly warlock, her expression turning dark. Having reached this point, she was more determined than ever before. "I will go through the Veil, whether you're there to guide me or not. Maybe I'll die with or without your help – but if you refuse to help me, then I promise, I'll go to my death cursing you, and you'd better hope *I* don't come back as a ghost."

Journey stared at her, with an expression that was almost fearful.

"You really are like your father," he said.

She smiled, without a trace of mirth.

"And you won't tell Lilith about me?" he asked. "Or anyone else? Including your father?"

"Do you really think you can haunt Charmbridge forever without being discovered?"

"Not forever, no." Journey drifted a little in the space of the stall. "But eventually, maybe I'll work something out." He didn't exactly sound sure what it was he wanted to 'work out,' but Alexandra didn't care. He turned around in mid-air, to look down at her again. "I don't know how you're going to open the gate to the Lands Beyond."

"I do." She shrugged. "I'm pretty sure I've figured out how to do that, anyway." She looked down at the blood that had been poured into the trough for the Thestral. "The hard part will be getting down there, especially with a Thestral. Even if I could get past the wards and the alarms, I don't think Skuld will fit in any of those stairwells."

"Oh, that's easy," Journey said. "I'm sure Lilith knows as well as the WJD does that a few wards and Colloportus charms can't really seal off those caverns completely. There are just too many tunnels from outside."

Alexandra smiled slowly.

Journey shook his head at her. "I still can't imagine what you think you can offer Death as payment for a life."

"Well," Alexandra said, "I'll start with an obol."



Alexandra tossed and turned all that night. She was having more of those nightmares, where Maximilian fell through the gate into the Lands Beyond and she couldn't save him, but she woke up and pounded her fists on her pillow. *I will save you!* she thought. She was pushing away all the doubts and arguments she'd heard from Anna, from Mr. Journey, even from that common sense voice in her own head, forcing herself to focus on the goal that seemed within her grasp, and not on the fact that she almost certainly was planning to go to her death. She'd sworn she would never give up and that she'd do anything it took to bring back Maximilian. It had become harder to hold onto that conviction, the past few months. It was increasingly tempting to let go and accept his death, as everyone kept telling her to do.

Now that she felt a glimmer of hope, she knew that she'd been right to be stubborn.

Anna returned the next day, looking as happy as Alexandra had seen her in months.

"Putting my father in prison turned out to be really stupid if they wanted to discredit him," Anna said, as she unpacked her things. "It's only made people listen to him more. He says the Confederation needs reform, that we've been letting Old Colonial traditions and pureblood prejudices maintain the status quo too long. That's why so many Cultures don't want to join as full members, and it's why we've been so fractured for all these years."

She went on and on about Confederation politics and the Congressional race in North California,

with an enthusiasm and fervor Alexandra had never seen before.

"It was hard," Anna said, "having to stand next to my father with all those people listening to him and staring at us. Especially when the Governor sent Aurors to 'keep the peace,' but of course they were really there to intimidate us." Anna gulped. "My mother could barely stand it. She's really, really shy. I wish my father didn't make her come along. I promised to go with him to all his rallies and meetings and dinners if he'd let Mom stay home more, and after a while..." She laughed. "I think I could almost recite his speeches." She stopped, when she realized Alexandra was staring at her. "What?"

"Sounds like you've gone into politics," Alexandra said, smiling.

Anna laughed. "Don't be silly." She stood up, after tucking books and scrolls into one of her lower drawers, and gave Alexandra a hug. "How was detention?"

"I shoveled horse manure."

Anna wrinkled her nose. "And the rest of your week?"

Alexandra bit her lip, while Anna couldn't see her face. "Boring." She stepped back, and looked at her friend, whose visit home seemed to have erased months worth of anxiety and dread. "So... you're back."

Anna nodded. "My father threatened to make me stay home until the election and afterwards, but... I talked him out of it."

Alexandra raised an eyebrow.

Anna looked down. "I told him if it hadn't been for you, he wouldn't have been freed. And that I probably would have had a breakdown without you."

"I don't think that's true."

"It is." Anna was still looking down. "Anyway... he let me come back and he didn't forbid me to talk to you."

"That's good, since we're roommates."

"I think what he decides next year may depend on whether or not he wins the election."

Alexandra sighed.

"Don't worry," Anna said. "I won't let him separate us." She looked up. "We're best friends forever, right?"

Alexandra was touched and impressed by Anna's resolution. She'd never heard her talk about standing up to her father before without trembling.

"Yes," Alexandra said. "Forever." Anna smiled, with a look of such affection and loyalty that it brought a lump to Alexandra's throat.

She struggled with her conscience yet again that night, as Anna excitedly gave all the eighth graders in the rec room a recap of her father's political campaign. They were listening to the Wizard Wireless, which briefly covered news from other Territories. Geming Chu and his two main rivals – one an Old Colonial traditionalist, the other a New Colonial who was favored by the Governor, and who claimed to be a reformer like Mr. Chu – were reported to be in a closely matched three-way race now.

But as Anna spoke, Alexandra was feeling guilt that twisted her stomach worse than the anxiety she felt at her plan. She had said she'd trust Anna, but she had to keep this a secret from her. She went over and over in her mind how she might persuade Anna to help her, or at least not try to stop her, but she couldn't see it – there was no way Anna would understand. Any rational person (other than Alexandra) would think that what she was planning was suicide. She was sure even her best friend wouldn't allow her to do something she believed was certain death. Anna might feel terrible about it, but she would go to Ms. Grimm.

It's what I should have done, to stop Max, Alexandra thought.

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Darla had also gone home over the break. Alexandra watched her in class the next day. Darla looked different – she was subdued, there was no trace of her usual haughtiness, and she hadn't taken as much care with her hair and makeup as she usually did; sitting next to Angelique, she looked drab. In Charms class, she barely made a token effort at casting a Revealing Charm, and seemed indifferent when Mr. Newton warned her that the final was only weeks away.

When she glanced in Alexandra's direction and found Alexandra looking at her, her expression changed for a moment. Alexandra found it startling – she saw mingled hope and fury and desperation, and then Darla clenched her jaw and looked away, her eyes cold.

What is her problem? Alexandra wondered. And then the thought occurred to her: *Maybe she misses her sister the way I miss Max.*

It was disturbing. She'd never really thought about how Darla might be feeling.

Alexandra paid more attention to the older students who were riding winged horses during P.M.E. Younger students were occasionally allowed to ride them, but the Granians were mostly reserved for the Equestrian Club and JROC officers, and in the JROC, only juniors and seniors with a serious interest in joining the ROC after they graduated. It wasn't often that they mixed broom drills with winged mounts, but Daniel Keedle and Eric Strangeland stayed after the class was over to take a couple of the Granians out of the stable.

Alexandra had never seen anyone riding Skuld. She almost asked Ms. Shirtliffe why they kept a Thestral at all, and then decided that there was no point in arousing the teacher's suspicion.

Fourth period, during Miss Hart's Magical Theory class, she sat down next to Darla, instead of in her usual seat. Darla glanced at her with a frown. Angelique, on Darla's other side, didn't notice. She and David were making eyes at each other.

"Meet me in the library tonight," Alexandra whispered.

Darla raised her eyebrows, and then she nodded. They didn't say anything to one another for the rest of the class period.

One of the benefits of Anna's preoccupation with her father's campaign was that she was always in the rec room listening to the Wizard Wireless after dinner. That made it easier for Alexandra to slip off to the library without worrying that Anna would come, too.

She waited at the same back table where she had met Darla last time. Darla arrived carrying an armful of books, wearing one of her expensive, fashionable robes, but no makeup or other ornamentation. She sat down across the table from Alexandra, and put the books on the floor at her feet.

Alexandra looked at Darla, trying to figure out what was wrong with her.

Darla frowned. "Well?" she said impatiently.

Alexandra raised her wand, and said, "*Muffliato*." Darla's expression became puzzled and wary.

"I need that obol," Alexandra said.

Darla's eyes widened.

Alexandra didn't say anything, just stared at the other girl. Finally, Darla asked, "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to go to the Lands Beyond," Alexandra said. "I don't know if Death will accept an obol for Maximilian's life, but the books I've read say that it's the only coin you can take there."

Darla blinked rapidly. "You're actually going to go to the Lands Beyond." She was looking at Alexandra as if she were crazy – but there was also something else in her eyes. Cunning, fear, hope.

"That's why you gave me *Deathly Conjures*, right? Because you thought I might actually figure out how to do it."

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“And you think you can meet Death?” Darla sounded skeptical, but there was also a desperate, hopeful tone in her voice that Alexandra was too familiar with, the sound of someone who knew that they were hearing something crazy and impossible, but wanted to believe it anyway.

“Yes,” Alexandra said flatly.

“You're really serious.”

“Do I sound like I'm joking?”

“You do know that you might die, don't you?”

“No, Darla,” Alexandra said in a withering tone, “that never occurred to me.”

Darla swallowed. “When are you going to do it?”

“Soon. After the North California election.”

“How are you going to get down to the sub-basement?”

“Don't worry about that. I have a way.”

Darla bit her lip. “I want to come.”

“What?”

“Not to the Lands Beyond!” Darla said quickly. “But if you're going through the portal, I want to see how you do it.” When Alexandra looked at her suspiciously, Darla said, “You just admitted you might not come back. You could at least let me learn as much as I can.”

Alexandra laughed sourly. “If I die, you might as well learn what not to do, you mean?”

Darla's expression was utterly serious. “Yes, that's exactly what I mean.”

Alexandra's laughter died, and her smile faded.

“If you change your mind,” Darla said, “I'll understand.”

“I'm not going to change my mind.”

“So you'll tell me when we're going to do it?”

Alexandra studied her, thinking, then nodded. “And you'll bring your obol?”

“Yes.”

“Fine. I'll let you know.”

Darla stared at her with wonder and something like admiration, and then picked up her books and rose from the table. Like Anna did when Alexandra had told her she was going to help her father, Darla seemed to have been infused with a shot of confidence and hope.

“Thank you,” Darla said, in a strained voice, and then turned away and hurried out of the library.

I'm not doing it for you. Alexandra closed her eyes and leaned against her chair, throwing her head back and pushing her bangs out of her eyes. She sat like that for a long time, feeling butterflies and worse in her stomach. But she was resolute. She was going to do this.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

There were only a few Charmbridge students from either North California or South California – elections in either Territory were apparently of interest to those in the other – but Anna had most of her classmates sitting in the eighth grade rec room the evening of the election, waiting to hear the results. Alexandra suggested a game of Heart of Three Kingdoms, but Anna was too agitated, pacing back and forth and trying to change the Wizard Wireless to a new station every time the current one started reporting on something other than the North California election.

“Won't it be exciting, to have the daughter of a Congressman in our class?” said Constance.

“Come set, Anna,” Forbearance said. “You're pacin' like a cat. Gonna wear yourself out 'fore you hear the results.”

Reluctantly, Anna joined them at the table. At that moment, Darla and Angelique walked in, with Innocence trailing behind them. Alexandra had seen little of Innocence this semester – the youngest

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Pritchard continued to sit with her fellow sixth graders in the cafeteria, and had stopped following either Alexandra or David around, but she also still seemed to be avoiding her sisters as much as possible. Constance and Forbearance both looked pleased to see her.

“Oh, Innocence, please come join us, dear,” Forbearance said, waving her sister over.

Innocence trudged over to them. She looked sullen and seemed to have lost some of her exuberance, but she allowed Forbearance to pull her to a chair next to her and put an arm around her. “Is everything all right, Innocence?”

Innocence nodded.

“Would you like to join us for a game?” Constance asked.

“No, thanks.” Innocence shook her head. “I just thought I oughter spend some time with you'uns, since I hain't been lately.”

“Well,” Forbearance said. She smiled, and her eyes glistened. “We're mighty happy 'bout that, hain't we, Constance?”

“Yes.” Constance seemed to be speaking in a deliberately soft tone. “We hardly see you t'all nowadays, 'cept in the cafeteria and in the hallways.”

Innocence nodded. “Sixth grade is a lot of work.”

Everyone laughed at that, and even Innocence smiled.

Across the room, Darla was chatting with Angelique and Sonja and Lydia, and she only briefly glanced in Alexandra's direction. Their eyes met for a moment, and then they both looked away.

Late that evening, a tense crowd of teens and preteens crouched around the Wizard Wireless, waiting for the final results of the North California election. It finally came, between Central Territory's latest Quodpot scores and a commercial for the new, improved, cross-Territory Automagicka bus routes.

“Only months before,” said the announcer, “Geming Chu was imprisoned beneath Mount Diablo on suspicion of being a Dark Wizard. Now, the last son of a respected pureblood Chinese family from San Francisco, who nonetheless incited fierce opposition from traditionalists because of his Muggle wife and anti-Confederation platform, is the new Congressman for North California.”

The rec room erupted in cheers.

“Anti-Confederation?” Anna said indignantly. “He is not anti-Confederation!”

Then all of her friends were embracing her, and Anna smiled, with tears streaming down her face.

They were still congratulating her and making jokes about asking her father to write a law extending summer vacation when Miss Gambola, on hall monitor duty that night, walked in and told them they were making too much noise. With good humor, the teacher evicted them from the rec room and sent them back to their dorms.

As they all filed out, Alexandra caught Darla's arm.

“Saturday night,” she whispered.

Darla turned and stared at her. She went pale, but nodded.

Everyone was still congratulating Anna in the hallway. Alexandra walked over to join her friend, and Darla walked away.

“I can't believe it,” Anna said in their room that night. “My father is a Congressman.” She was still beaming with pride, and Alexandra felt proud and happy for her friend, and terribly guilty for the secret she was keeping from her, as she said good night and crawled into bed.

Alexandra spent the rest of the week barely paying attention in class. She felt fairly confident that she could open the doorway to the Lands Beyond – that was a relatively simple ritual, once she had deciphered the obfuscating language concerning it in *Deathly Conjures*. It was another one of those things you couldn't do just by waving a wand and saying the right words, but she knew that if the Mors

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Mortis Society had been able to do it, she could.

Getting Skuld from the stables to the sub-basement concerned her a little more. Stealing the Thestral wouldn't be so hard – she had visited her a few more times since the night in her stall, and Skuld was accustomed to her now. All she had to do was slip out with her undetected. But she didn't think she could lead a Thestral through Charmbridge's halls, even if she was invisible to most students. She was relying entirely on Ben Journey fulfilling his promise.

The really hard part – the part that she couldn't really plan for, could only hope would turn out the way she wanted – she avoided thinking about. With single-minded determination, she refused to let doubts sway her now. If she thought about it too hard, she feared she might lose her resolve. What she was planning was tantamount to suicide. Every time she thought about her friends and her family (even Archie) and leaving them behind, she had to force herself to stop and fix her mind on her goal: Maximilian. Maximilian, lost in some deathly afterlife, waiting for her in Death's domain.

He had died to save her. How could she do less for him?

Chapter 25 — *Through the Veil*

As Alexandra ticked off the days towards the weekend, it was not the possibility of death or failure that gnawed at her and made her toss and turn at night. It was Anna.

Anna was spirited and happy, relieved by her father's freedom and victory, and as loyal to Alexandra as ever. She was always there when she sensed Alexandra being gloomy, supporting her in class and helping her with her homework, unaware that her best friend was once again plotting something secretive and terrible right under her nose.

By Saturday, Alexandra could scarcely think about anything else. Tormented by guilt, she imagined the look on Anna's face the next morning. Whether she returned alive or not, she knew that Anna would feel betrayed – again.

She saw Darla in the cafeteria that morning, sitting alone. Angelique and David had gone out to watch a Quodpot game, and Alexandra supposed Lydia and Janet and Darla's other friends were probably sleeping in. She would have joined Darla, but Constance and Forbearance had come down along with her and Anna, and it would have looked odd for Alexandra to snub them and sit next to her nemesis.

Darla ate little. She got up from the table shortly after Alexandra and her friends sat down.

"I'm not very hungry this morning," Alexandra said, and pushed her tray away.

Anna looked at her. "Are you sick? Do you want to go see Mrs. Murphy?"

"No. Stop worrying, Anna." Alexandra gave her a weak smile. "I'll see you back upstairs." She rose from the table and walked out of the cafeteria, not far behind Darla.

Darla was waiting by the stairs. She looked around furtively as Alexandra approached.

She was wearing a frilly pink morning robe over something lavender and blue underneath. She definitely hadn't been putting as much effort into her appearance lately – even Alexandra could tell that – but she was always dressed colorfully and expensively.

"Are you still going to do it? Tonight?" Darla whispered.

"Yes," Alexandra said. "Do you still insist on tagging along?"

Darla nodded. Alexandra wondered why the other girl had bags under her eyes. It wasn't *her* who was going to the Lands Beyond.

"Do you have a broom?" Alexandra asked.

"Of course. I don't use it much, but –"

"Meet me outside the stables, an hour after curfew."

"The stables?" Darla stared at her.

"If you're not there, I'm not going to wait for you." Alexandra turned and left Darla standing there with her mouth half-open.

She spent most of the day in the library, hiding. She thought perhaps she should write something – a letter, for Anna, for her mother, for Julia. That sounded too much like she was writing a suicide note, though. She forced herself to stop thinking like that. She couldn't afford to doubt or question now. She had to do this.

She visited Bran and Poe. They didn't talk long – Alexandra was afraid if she stayed too long, the elves would see the guilt and worry in her eyes, and know she was up to something. As it was, they seemed to sense something was wrong before she left. She wanted to hug them and tell them good-bye, and forced herself to wave cheerfully as if she'd be back to visit again soon.

I will. Of course I will, she thought. She'd be back, and Maximilian would be back. This wasn't like

last time, with the Time-Turner.

In her room that night, she took special care when feeding Nigel and Charlie.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked, watching Alexandra stroke her raven with a pensive look on her face, her thoughts already deep in the basement.

Alexandra turned to her. "Yes." She smiled. "I'm fine."

Charlie squawked: "Troublesome!"

Anna looked at her doubtfully, and Alexandra felt the knife in her gut twist, slowly.

"Anna," she said.

Anna stood there, her face showing concern.

Alexandra swallowed. "I trust you."

"I know," Anna said.

Alexandra shook her head. "You don't know." She put her hands on Anna's shoulders.

"Alexandra, what's wrong?" Anna began to sound very worried.

"I have to tell you something."

Anna nodded, wide-eyed.

Alexandra sat on her bed, drawing Anna over to sit by her side.

"Do you trust me?" Alexandra asked.

"Of course," Anna said softly.

"Even if I'm going to do something you don't approve of and think is stupid?"

Alarm flashed across Anna's face. "Alex –"

"I have to know I can trust you," Alexandra said. "No matter what." She seized Anna's hands and squeezed them. "Because I have to tell you something, and then you're going to want to stop me. I'm going to do something dangerous."

"Alex..." Anna gulped. "Please –"

Alexandra squeezed harder. "I have to do this," she whispered. "I have to. I was going to just do it – not tell you, again." Her stomach was in knots now, and she could barely force the words out. "But I can't. I promised you and I told you I'd trust you. We're best friends forever. I wouldn't want you to think... that I didn't trust you, again."

"You're scaring me, Alex."

"I'm going to save Max," Alexandra whispered.

"What?" Anna's shocked voice was loud enough to be heard in the next room.

Alexandra laid her fingers on her friend's lip. "It's not like the Time-Turner. I'm going to use magic –"

"Magic from that book," Anna said. "Dark magic." She squeezed Alexandra's hands back. "Didn't you learn from the Time-Turner, Alex? At best, you'll get in trouble again. At worst..."

"I have to do this, Anna." Seeing Anna so frightened and worried made Alexandra wonder if she should have said anything. It tore at her heart. But her voice was firm. She wouldn't let Anna change her mind.

"What are you going to do?" Anna asked.

"It's better if I don't tell you the details." Alexandra smiled. "I'll tell you afterwards."

Anna did not look reassured one bit; if anything, she was even more frightened. She seemed to sense what Alexandra was carefully leaving unsaid – that there might not be an afterwards.

"Alex," she whispered. "Please don't do this. Whatever you're going to do, you just want to believe it will work. Like you wanted to believe you could change the past with a Time-Turner. You *know* it won't. Please, why can't you –?"

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"I can't." Alexandra shook her head slowly. "You know I can't, Anna. You won't talk me out of this. You know that. Please don't try."

"Then let me come with you."

"No." Alexandra loved Anna for offering – but she knew Anna would never stand by and watch her do what she was actually going to do. "It would be more dangerous if you came."

Anna took a deep breath. "How dangerous?"

Alexandra said nothing.

"So you want me to just do nothing?" Anna shook her head. "I should go tell Ms. Grimm. For your own good."

Alexandra didn't reply to that either, nor did she move when Anna took out her wand.

"I could put a Body-Bind Curse on you," Anna said. "I could stop you."

Alexandra nodded. "You could." She didn't move.

Anna shook, and then she dropped her wand with a sob. "Please, Alex. Please. I'm begging you..."

Alexandra leaned over, and put her arms around her friend. "I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't think it would work, you know."

"Please," Anna whispered.

Charlie shifted restlessly, still standing on Alexandra's desk.

"Why did you tell me?" Anna asked, in a tiny voice.

"Would you rather I hadn't? I could have just snuck out, after you'd gone to sleep." Alexandra stroked her friend's hair. "But I trust you."

"You trust me," Anna said bitterly. "Now I have to choose between being trustworthy or being responsible."

"No... you have to choose between trusting me or not. I'm going to do this, Anna. I'm going to succeed."

Anna was silent for a long time. Alexandra was restless, anxious to go. But she couldn't leave yet.

"If you get hurt," Anna said, "it will be my fault."

"No!" Alexandra shook her head vehemently. "This is something I have to do. Don't ever blame yourself, Anna."

"But I will." Tears ran down Anna's face. She trembled, and squeezed her eyes shut.

"Shh," Alexandra said, squeezing her. "It'll be all right, Anna. I promise."

"I love you," Anna whispered.

Alexandra kissed Anna's cheek. "You're my best friend forever," she said. "You've been closer than a sister to me."

She rose slowly to her feet. It was nearly time for her to be at the stables. Their room was dark except for the moonlight streaming through the window. Anna sat very still, as Alexandra reached under her bed to retrieve her broom. She stood up and put on her cloak. She opened her desk drawer, and took out a glass flask and *Deathly Conjures*, tucking them both in separate pockets of her cloak.

"Fly, fly!" said Charlie.

Alexandra shook her head as she reached for the window. "You have to stay, too, Charlie."

"Never! Never!" Charlie said, hopping to the window sill.

Alexandra scooped the raven up in her arms.

"Stay with Anna," she whispered. She kissed the top of the bird's head. "You can't come with me this time."

"Never! Never!" Charlie repeated.

"Please," Alexandra said. "Don't make me cage you."

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Charlie made a squawking sound, and Alexandra worried that the noise might awaken Sonja and Carol, but after peering at her for a moment, the raven reluctantly hopped back onto her desk.

Alexandra opened the window, keeping a cautious eye on her familiar. Charlie croaked mournfully, but remained still.

"You'd better come back," Anna said. Her voice was small and on the verge of breaking.

"I'll be back," Alexandra said. "I'll always come back."

She floated out the window on her broom, closed the window quietly, and descended to the ground. Once there, she laid the broom carefully at the base of the wall, directly beneath her window, and crept around the edge of the building to the outside of the stable. She found Darla waiting there, wearing red and purple robes beneath a black cloak, and holding her broom.

"Does Angelique know you're gone?" Alexandra asked.

Darla shook her head. "She's already asleep." She looked at the stable doors. "How are we going to get in?"

"Easy." Alexandra pointed her wand. It was no harder than last time to Unlock the stable doors, and just like last time, she had to Silence the noisy goats. Darla was making faces at the noise and the smells.

"Why are we here?" Darla whispered.

Alexandra put a finger to her lips, as she took tack and a saddle off the wall. She wasn't actually sure whether Skuld had ever been ridden before – she hoped the Thestral would permit herself to be saddled. With her wand lit, she led Darla between the Granians' stalls to the one at the far end, and opened the door to Skuld's stall.

Darla peered inside. "It's empty."

"No, it's not." Alexandra looked at her. "You do know about Thestrals, don't you?"

Darla squealed and jumped back.

"Relax." Alexandra walked forward to pat Skuld's nose and stroke her long, leathery neck. "She won't hurt you."

"Are you planning to *steal* a Thestral?" Darla asked in disbelief.

"More like borrow." Alexandra took the flask out of her pocket and dipped it in the trough, filling it with blood.

"Eww," Darla said. "They really do put blood in the water they give those things?"

Alexandra frowned and held her glowing wand up to the flask. Now that she was looking at it closely, it did appear to be too thin to actually be blood, as she'd initially assumed. She stoppered the flask and put it back in her pocket, then turned around.

"Benedict Journey," she said. "I'm calling you." She gripped her wand. She'd prepared a rhyme, just in case she needed to summon the ghost again in earnest, but he'd promised he'd come when next she called him.

He rose from the ground directly in front of them. Darla's mouth dropped open and she looked nearly as pale as the ghost, staring at the dead custodian.

"He can't hurt you either," Alexandra said, seeing Darla's horrified look.

Darla didn't say anything. Journey looked at her, and said, "Well, hello there, Starshine."

Alexandra rolled her eyes. "I thought I was Starshine."

"I call all the girls Starshine."

"Well, stop it."

Journey sighed. "Darla, isn't it? Darla Dearborn?"

Darla nodded slowly. "You didn't say anything about Mr. Journey being here." She didn't take her

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eyes off the ghost.

“Are you afraid of ghosts?” Alexandra asked.

“No.” Darla shook her head, though her expression said otherwise.

“That’s good.” Journey smiled gently. “You know I’d never hurt either of you.”

His smile faded at the dark look Alexandra gave him.

“Um, we’re going to keep this between ourselves, right, girls?” he said. “I didn’t know you were planning on bringing a friend into this, Alexandra.”

“Darla won’t say anything. Will you, Darla?” Alexandra gave Darla a sharp look, and Darla shook her head, still looking a bit pale.

Alexandra began trying to put the saddle on Skuld. The Thestral was not terribly cooperative at first, and kept moving about the stall, forcing Alexandra to chase her. She became quite frustrated, until Journey stood in front of the beast, and made soothing noises. Skuld stopped and thrust her nose inquisitively through the ghost, then let out a disgruntled snort as Alexandra threw the saddle over her.

Her job of putting on the saddle and tack was not a very good one, Alexandra was sure. Either Julia or Maximilian could have done much better. Thestrals weren’t even shaped like Granians – Skuld was thin and bony and her wings were leathery and bat-like. Alexandra cinched the saddle and arranged the reins, and hoped it would all stay on. She turned to the ghost.

“Where to?” she asked.

“Get her outside,” Journey said. “We’re going down into the valley.”

Darla said nothing as Alexandra led Skuld by the halter, out the stable doors (which she carefully closed and locked behind them), and away from the academy, across the equestrian track and the damp, green lawn, following Journey.

“I’ll fly Skuld,” Alexandra said, once they were beyond the light shed by the school and almost into the trees. “You follow on your broom.”

She stepped up into the stirrups hanging at Skuld’s sides and nearly launched herself over the bony creature’s back and face-first into the grass on the other side of her. She made a grunting sound as she flopped across the saddle on her stomach.

Darla covered her mouth with the back of her hand. Alexandra glared at her. She supposed she must look quite comical, squirming around suspended in midair on an invisible steed.

Skuld craned her reptilian neck around to give Alexandra a quizzical look. Alexandra grimaced and righted herself in the saddle.

“I’ll see you on the valley floor, by the cliffs immediately ahead of us,” Journey said, looking over his shoulder, and he descended into the ground.

Skuld was not like the Granians at the Kings’ ranch. She wasn’t used to being ridden, and Alexandra was saved from being dumped to the ground only by the fact that the creature was so docile. Darla’s eyes remained wide as she clutched the broom she was sitting on and followed Alexandra up over the trees and then over the cliff overlooking the broad river valley that separated Charmbridge from the Muggle world.

Ben Journey was waiting in front of a cave, over a quarter of a mile below.

“This cave leads to a tunnel beneath Charmbridge?” Alexandra asked, as she tried to get Skuld steady on her feet on the slope that rose from the valley floor to this hole in the cliffs.

Journey nodded. “Sure does.”

“How many of these are there?”

“I don’t know exactly – quite a few. There are a couple closer to the school, in the forest, but Skuld here couldn’t crawl through those.”

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“Does the WJD know about them?”

Journey chuckled dryly. “I’m sure they do.” He began to float backwards, into the cave.

“I had no idea,” Darla murmured.

Alexandra eyed her suspiciously, then led the Thestral into the cave after Journey. Darla stood there a moment, and then followed Alexandra and Skuld into the darkness.

It was a long, uphill hike. Skuld didn’t seem to mind being led underground, though occasionally she extended her wings, and looked annoyed when they scraped against the stone walls on either side of them.

“The Indians didn’t dig these tunnels,” Journey said, as they passed a cave with some drawings painted on its walls. Alexandra didn’t pause to look. “They were here already. But the Indians used them. Then the Confederation came, and sealed them off, but you know, they couldn’t keep them closed. There will always be ways in and out of Charmbridge.”

Alexandra nodded, and they kept walking.

It was almost two in the morning when they reached a rough stone corridor that looked familiar. It became more familiar as Journey led them on, until they reached a cave that was just large enough for a dozen or so students to stand around in a circle. Alexandra had to help Skuld squeeze through the entrance – the Thestral was beginning to protest at the enclosed spaces.

“Here we are,” Alexandra said. She looked around at the stone walls, and then held her wand up to shine light on the flat rock where pictures of men and monsters and sinister bird creatures were painted. She looked at Darla. “I’m sure you remember this place.”

Darla nodded.

Alexandra held her hand out. “The obol?”

Darla reached into her robes, and withdrew a tarnished, silver coin.

“Well, I’ll be hexed,” Journey said, as Alexandra took the obol. It was ancient, scratched, and faded, with a vaguely masculine profile on one side and a design that looked like it was made of some sort of vines on the other. There were no letters on it.

She turned around, to face the painted wall. Journey was floating there, arms crossed over his chest.

“Next step’s up to you, Star – Alexandra.” He shook his head. “I don’t know how to actually open a portal to the Lands Beyond.”

“I hope Hermes Trismegistus knew what he was talking about, then,” Alexandra said.

She stepped forward and took out the flask of water. Blood was one way to call ghosts, and certain types of blood magic could open a door to where ghosts dwelled. She’d seen that last year, in the rituals the Mors Mortis Society had performed, and that had helped her make some sense of some of the rituals described in *Deathly Conjures*.

Darla and Journey watched as Alexandra poured the crimson water in a circle around the wall, and then stood back and pointed her wand.

“Wait!” Darla said. “Don’t you remember last year? Aren’t you going to put a protective circle around the portal first?”

Alexandra turned, lowering her wand. “Won’t it close after I go through it?”

Darla gave her a look that clearly said, *You are an idiot*. “I can’t believe you actually thought you could do this by yourself.”

Alexandra’s eyes narrowed. “Would you like to go through first, since you think you know more than me?”

Darla paled. “No.” She swallowed. “But I’d rather not be attacked by angry ghosts.”

Journey frowned. “Ghosts can’t hurt you, Starshine.”

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“So what got Benjamin and Ms. Gale?” Alexandra asked. “Ms. Grimm said it was a jibay.”

“Or a chindi,” Darla said. “They might be the same thing. I’m not sure.”

“Whatever!” Alexandra shook her head, frustrated. “I know they come from the Lands Beyond, because we saw one.” She looked at Darla. “I wasn’t planning for anyone else to be hanging around when I opened the portal.”

“Yes, I can see you’re not much of a planner,” Darla said.

“I already have the obol,” Alexandra said, raising her wand and pointing it at Darla. “Maybe you should just leave.”

Darla gulped. “I want to stay. Please – I brought some sand.”

“Sand?” Alexandra stared at her, as Darla took out a small bag.

“It’s what the MMS used last year to protect us from evil spirits,” Darla said, holding the bag out to Alexandra. “Some of us actually plan ahead. Especially when we can’t count on using a wand and threatening people.”

“Some of us are begging to be hexed,” Alexandra muttered, taking the bag. She poured black sand from it in a semicircle in front of the painted rock wall, while Journey watched apprehensively.

The ghost stepped forward, and stopped directly in front of the line of sand. “Well, break my wand,” he said. “I... can’t pass.” He looked amazed.

“Guess you didn’t learn everything, hanging out with my father,” Alexandra said. She reached down and dragged the tip of her wand through the sand, creating a little gap. “How about now?”

Journey reached his hands out, making a pushing motion, and abruptly, he was inside the broken semicircle.

“That’s interesting,” Alexandra muttered. She’d learned a few spells for binding ghosts, and seen salt mentioned, but the black sand Darla had given her was a mystery to her. She poured a little more out from the bag, covering the gap in the circle.

“Satisfied?” she asked.

Darla nodded, still looking pale. Journey looked quite uncomfortable – he was now trapped inside the semicircle, Alexandra realized, unless she or Darla let him out.

She turned back to the wall behind her, and gathered her thoughts to resume the spell to open the portal to the Lands Beyond.

The MMS had used some kind of Indian chant. Alexandra didn’t know the words they’d used, and suspected they had only been for effect anyway. She used a Latin incantation – one of the few actual incantations that were spelled out in *Deathly Conjures* – and made a semi-circular motion with her wand, ritually tracing the semi-circle of blood in the air and then pointing at each of the four compass points around the rock wall.

Nothing happened. Alexandra frowned, and reached into her cloak to withdraw the black book. She flipped it open to the page describing the ritual she had just attempted. Her lips moved as she mouthed the incantation silently to herself – yes, she was sure she’d gotten it right.

“You need blood,” Darla said. “Not water mixed with a little animal blood from the kitchen.”

Alexandra looked down at the dark stain in the dust at her feet. “Been studying blood magic, have you?”

“It’s in the book,” Darla said. She sounded upset. “I thought you were going to use the bone flute to open the portal.”

“The what?” Alexandra turned to stare at her.

“The bone flute that you got from the Generous Ones. A bone flute from the underworld is what some wizards used instead of Portkeys. They can open portals...” Her voice trailed off.

"Where did you hear that?" Alexandra asked.

Darla tossed her head. "I assumed you knew what you were doing. See, if you'd accepted my offer, I could have helped you." Underneath her haughty demeanor, though, was an edge of anxiety and desperation. She seemed as upset as Alexandra that the portal hadn't opened.

"I told you," Alexandra said slowly. "I don't have the bone flute anymore."

Darla frowned. "Right. I forgot."

Alexandra opened the book again. "Do you have a knife?" she asked.

"A what?" Darla stared at her. "No, of course I don't have a knife!"

Alexandra looked around. Her eyes fell on a rock with an angular edge to it. It didn't look very sharp, but it would have to do. She stooped to pick it up, while Darla's eyes went wider. "What are you doing?"

Alexandra opened the black book to the page that was a black, whispering void. She stared at it for a moment, and heard the whispers, like little fingers brushing against the base of her skull and tickling her ears.

"That's not a true portal," Journey said. "I can feel something from it, but it's just a little bit of magic some warlock enchanted into that book. It's a connection to the Lands Beyond, but you couldn't go through it even if you could make it larger."

"I know." Alexandra pressed the edge of the rock against her palm and made a slashing motion. The first time, it barely broke her skin, only leaving a rough scrape across her hand.

Darla flinched as Alexandra pressed harder. She drove the sharpest bit into the flesh of her palm, as hard as she could, and when she felt a stab of pain, she shoved harder and dragged it forcefully across her skin. The pain burned now. Wincing, she held her hand up over the void on the page of the book and curled her fingers.

A few drops of blood dripped onto the page and disappeared. For a moment, Alexandra thought the whispers grew louder.

"This is Dark magic," Journey said. "It may be just a little bit of blood magic, but it's still Dark."

"You'd know, right?" She ignored the way Journey's mouth tightened.

Darla had her hands over her mouth. As she watched, Alexandra stepped up to the painted wall and pressed her hand against it. She smeared her bloody palm across the surface of the rock, making a half-circle with her own blood and ignoring the way her hand throbbed. When she stepped back, she pointed her wand again.

It required slightly different gestures, and she had to look up one of the other incantations from the same page as the one she'd used last time, but she summoned all her confidence as she began reciting the Latin. If this didn't work, she'd just have to resort to doggerel verse.

Her blood looked black against the stone, with only the light from her wand shining against it, but suddenly it became blacker still. Darla gasped as the painted figures on the wall began to move – scrambling away as the bloody mark Alexandra had made seemed to tear open the wall, the rent widening until there was a black void before them, stretching from the floor to the ceiling. Now everyone could hear the whispers.

"Merlin," Journey muttered.

Darla shook and pressed herself back against the opposite wall of the cave. Even Skuld took a few awkward steps to the side, snorting at the black gateway before her.

"Okay, hold still," Alexandra said. She didn't look at Darla as she grabbed the Thestral's saddle and began hauling herself up, praying Skuld wouldn't choose this moment to become skittish or uncooperative. Alexandra had to crouch low to keep from hitting her head on the ceiling of the cavern,

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and it would be very easy for the Thestral to rear up and smash her against the rock, or scrape her off against a wall.

“Starshine,” said Journey, gazing at her from where he stood, now hovering a foot off the ground so that he was just about eye level with her. “You won’t bring your brother back. You know that, don’t you?”

“Stop saying that!” Alexandra controlled her voice, only because she feared that shouting might startle Skuld. She fixed him with a look of grim determination. “It’s too late to talk me out of this now! With or without you, I’m going through the Veil.”

He let out another long, gusty sigh.

Darla was trembling. All the blood had drained from her face, but as Alexandra looked at her, she whispered, “Good-bye, Alexandra.”

“I’ll be back,” Alexandra said.

She turned to Journey. The ghost looked sad.

“Let’s go,” she said.

Skuld didn’t seem to fear the darkness in front of them. When Alexandra urged her forward, the Thestral took a few cautious steps until her nose was right against the black void. She made a snuffling noise, investigating. Alexandra prodded the Thestral forward again, and they plunged through.



Chapter 26 — The Most Deathly Power

It was cold. Alexandra had never felt such cold in her life, not even when she'd gone wandering into a blizzard without a coat. It wasn't the kind of blistering cold that came from wind and snow, chilling the skin and then seeping into the bones. It seemed to drain all the warmth out of her from the inside out, leaving her without even the memory of what it was like to be warm. But she didn't shiver. Her teeth didn't chatter. The cold was an endless, bitter torment, and she knew that she could feel this way forever and never die.

Is this what ghosts feel? she wondered. And then came the more horrible thought: *Is this what Max feels?*

The whispering was louder.

There was no sky. There was nothing that she could see above or below. She held up her wand. There was only a pinpoint of light at its tip.

Skuld was still beneath her, and she could hear the Thestral's wings flapping. She thought they were descending, but she couldn't feel motion, just the Thestral's bony back flexing slightly beneath her.

"Where are you taking me, Skuld?" she asked. "Where are we going?" The words fell flat in her own ears, as if the darkness was swallowing sound as well as light.

The Thestral snorted. Alexandra held on.

"Starshine?" came a voice from nearby, and suddenly she saw Ben Journey's ghost floating next to her.

"Am I dead?" she asked. She looked at her hand. The tear in her skin where she'd cut her palm with the rock was still there, but it had stopped bleeding. It was just a black gash now.

"I don't think so," Journey said. "But nothing is alive here."

"Where are we going?"

"Don't ask me, girl. I've never been here before."

Gradually, something took shape in the darkness around them. Alexandra thought it was a landscape, if something seen only as shadows among shadows could be a landscape. Distant, massive shapes that were felt rather than seen; closer, a solidness that rushed up at her until the Thestral's hooves made contact with something. Alexandra let out a breath she didn't realize she'd been holding, but it didn't sound like a normal breath – it sounded like a ghostly whisper. She wasn't sure she was really even breathing. She put a hand over her heart, and was reassured to feel it beating.

So I am still alive, she thought.

The whispers around them were much louder. They had become voices.

What she'd heard back in the cave – what she had heard at the Gift Place of the Generous Ones – were just soft whispering echoes of these voices. They wailed and howled and moaned. Some sounded despairing, some sounded frightened, some sounded angry. Alexandra shivered, not from the cold.

"Who are they?" she asked.

"Spirits of the dead," Journey said.

"Like you?"

"No. I don't think so." Journey shook his head.

"What is this place? I mean, is there... a road? Are there buildings? I can't see anything." Alexandra squinted into the darkness, and raised her wand. "*Ter Lumos!*" she said, but the pinpoint of light did not become brighter.

"Yes," Journey said. "We're on a road. I can see stone houses along it."

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Alexandra looked around. She still saw nothing but shadows just barely distinct enough to mark out anything other than darkness. Even the ground at Skuld's feet looked like an endless pool of darkness all around her. "How can you see all that? Are the houses where the spirits live?"

"No. I can't see them." Journey looked uncomfortable, though Alexandra didn't know why.

"Is this hell?" she asked.

"No. It's just another place."

"Is Maximilian here?"

"That I don't know."

She was silent, then asked, "Where does the road go?"

"I have no idea."

"Can we ask the spirits for directions?"

"I don't think you can ask them anything."

"This isn't very helpful."

Journey frowned. "You're the one who said you needed a ghost to guide you, Starshine. I never claimed I could actually find Death for you."

Skuld shifted beneath her, unhappy about standing still so long.

Alexandra said, "Let's follow the road, then. And stop calling me Starshine." She urged the Thestral forward, and they began to move. Journey continued to drift alongside her.

"She can see the road, I think," he said. "Funny, I never believed any of those tales about Thestrals when I was alive."

Alexandra listened to the moaning and the wailing. As unnerving as it was, it was also frighteningly easy to tune out, even after a little while.

"Why do the spirits in this place sound so miserable, if this isn't hell?" she asked.

"When most wizards come back, they come back as ghosts." Journey looked thoughtful. "But I think these spirits... they aren't even ghosts. They're just some bit of a poor soul, the angry, bitter part that didn't want to die, maybe."

"Can they hurt you?"

"No, they can't hurt me."

"Can they hurt *me*?"

Journey paused at that. "I don't think so."

"That's reassuring."

Journey's voice carried a trace of irritation. "Who was it who wanted to enter the Lands Beyond?"

She couldn't argue that point. She wondered how long they would be walking for, and if Skuld could get there faster by flying. *It would help if we knew where we were going.*

She patted the Thestral's leathery neck, and another thought occurred to her. "You said I wouldn't be able to come back on my own."

"There's no way that I know of for you to do it." Journey looked off into the blackness.

"Not even on Skuld? But doesn't that mean she can't get back either? What about you?"

"I... can leave," Journey said quietly. "I can go back through the Veil any time."

"How? Is the portal nearby?"

"There is no portal, Alexandra. Not from this side."

"Then how can you go back?"

"Because I'm already dead."

"That doesn't make much sense."

"I can't explain better than that." Journey's ghostly sigh was even more eerie and mournful here.

The Most Deathly Power

“There are things you just can't understand, unless you're a ghost. Trying to tell you what a ghost feels would be like trying to explain how to do magic to a Muggle.”

“What about Skuld? Is she trapped here, too?”

“Folks used to believe that Thestrals can cross back and forth across the Veil. Of course, nowadays everyone says that's just superstition. Old witches' tales.” Journey shrugged.

“If Skuld can return, maybe she can bring me.”

“I don't know... I wouldn't count on it.”

“What happens if I don't return? Am I trapped here forever even though I'm not dead?”

That was a horrible thought – although there was much about this place that was creepy and unsettling, only now did fear start to creep its way into her heart.

“I don't know,” Journey replied.

The talking had distracted her from the darkness and the unearthly cold, but as she and Journey fell silent, the only sound became the wailing, weeping voices, and the soft clod of Skuld's hooves on whatever the road Journey said they were walking on was made of. Alexandra wondered what would happen if she jumped off of the Thestral's back and tried to walk on her own. She decided not to try that just yet. She thought about what she'd come here to do. The thought that Maximilian could be trapped here filled her with even more despair, and she could feel her hope and confidence draining away from her, just like the warmth in her body.

Perhaps she would die here. Or worse, never die at all. She leaned forward slowly, and embraced Skuld's neck, feeling the Thestral still ambling along unconcerned. The Thestral was alive, though she did not feel any warmth from the beast's body either. Yet she couldn't imagine that Skuld would be walking along so calmly if she felt the same things Alexandra did in this place. Somehow, the Thestral was immune to the heat-sucking cold and the darkness that devoured hope, and the constant whispering and moaning and crying of undead spirits. That alone gave Alexandra a little bit of courage to hang onto.

“Maximilian isn't one of them, is he?” she asked. “They sound... so unhappy.” The cold had almost become a part of her now, but she shivered again at the thought of Maximilian being one of those souls trapped here, lost and bodiless, crying out into an endless night.

Journey didn't answer. Alexandra closed her eyes and bowed her head, wishing and hoping.

We can't walk forever, she thought.

She didn't know how long they walked. The Lands Beyond were worse than the Lands Below – with no light, no landmarks, only endless howling in the void, it was very easy to lose track of time altogether.

It would be easy to go mad here. Was that what had happened to the lost souls she heard? Maybe Journey was wrong. Maybe those tormented souls were actually the voices of wizards and witches before her who'd come here to treat with Death, and instead found nothing, and been trapped here for all eternity... she shuddered. Real fear was beginning to set in.

Skuld stopped. Alexandra's head jerked up with a start. She hadn't been sleeping – she wasn't sure it was possible to sleep here – but she had no sense of how much time had passed.

Rising out of the darkness before her was an enormous structure, with gray-white stone steps leading up to gray-white stone pillars surrounding a vast, cavernous entrance. It looked to Alexandra exactly like the sort of place where she'd expect Death to reside. But how could it be here? She looked around, and behind her, and everywhere else was the same featureless darkness.

Journey said, “We can't go on.”

She looked at the ghost. “Is this where Death lives?”

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He blinked at her. "What do you mean?"

"In there." She gestured at the stone building. "Is Death in there?"

He looked confused. "In where?"

She frowned, becoming annoyed. Anger made her feel braver, so she didn't try to suppress her irritation as she pointed. "That big stone building!"

Journey turned his head and looked directly at it, and then back at her. "I don't see a stone building, Alexandra. I just see an end to the road."

She stared at him for several seconds, wondering if the dead wizard were playing some sort of trick on her. "The road ends because there's a great big building in front of us!"

He shook his head. "There's nothing there."

"What do you mean there's nothing there?" she shouted. "This is the only place I've seen where there's anything *but* nothing!"

Beneath her, Skuld became skittish. The endless darkness of the Lands Beyond and the voices of dead spirits didn't spook her, but Alexandra's shouting was upsetting her.

"If you see something," Journey said slowly, "then maybe you're meant to go on."

Alexandra tried to calm Skuld, while thinking. Nothing in *Deathly Conjures* nor any of the other books she'd read had told her what she might find in the Lands Beyond. There was no mention of Death's residence.

"Go on, Skuld. Keep moving," she said to the Thestral, but Skuld made a sort of hissing sound and refused to budge another inch. Alexandra looked haplessly at Journey.

"Riding Skuld is the only reason I didn't die when I went through the portal, isn't it? What happens if I get off her?" When Journey frowned and opened his mouth, Alexandra sighed and cut him off: "Let me guess – you don't know."

He closed his mouth.

She closed her eyes, trying to recall every scrap of information she'd read about the Lands Beyond. Nothing came to mind that would help her. She was already supposed to be dead, and for all she knew, she was. Maybe this was *all* happening in her head. She pressed her hands to her face, thinking that she could easily go crazy just sitting here thinking. She wished that she could feel some body warmth from her hands or her cheeks, but she didn't.

"Okay," she said. She hooked her foot into a stirrup, and swung her leg over Skuld's back, preparing to dismount. To her relief, she didn't feel tired or sore – at least the Lands Beyond had robbed her of those sensations as well. She hesitated, and then, before Journey could say anything, she dropped.

Her boots hit the ground with a muffled sound. Skuld was still standing on one side of her, Journey floating on the other.

She pressed her hand to her heart again. *Still beating.*

"I'm going inside, I guess," she said to Journey. She patted Skuld. "Can you make sure Skuld is still waiting for me when I come out?"

"I'll do my best," Journey said. "I can't stop her if she decides to take off, you know." He peered ahead, looking at the stone structure but obviously still not seeing it. "I don't know if I'll even know when you leave..." His voice trailed off. She knew what he was thinking: *If you do.*

"All right. Good-bye, then." She looked at the ghost. "For what it's worth, I forgive you."

Journey nodded, and for the first time since they'd entered the Lands Beyond, he smiled. "Thank you, Starsh –"

"Is it *so hard* to stop calling me that?" She shook her head and turned to proceed up the steps to the great building.

The Most Deathly Power

The stone columns were smooth and polished, seated on plinths with what looked like Greek inscriptions on them. The doorway rose high overhead, forcing her to crane her neck up to see the overhanging stonework, which had figures carved into it, looking vaguely like what she imagined gods might look like, though the faces and figures were too high above her to make out details. The overall impression she had was of some cross between a Greek temple and a mausoleum. It seemed appropriate for how she had been imagining the Lands Beyond might appear; something resembling Hades, from the books of Greek mythology she had read before she ever learned about the wizarding world.

There was no door, so Alexandra walked through the entranceway and found herself in pitch darkness. Even the whispering ceased as soon as she crossed the threshold.

She held out her wand, and said, "*Lumos*." To her surprise, it lit up, casting enough light that she could see herself, and gray-white stone at her feet, and an immense hallway ahead of her.

"Hello?" she called out.

No one answered her.

She began to walk forward. The hallway was grand, but austere. There were stone images carved on the walls, high above her head, and dark doorways leading off in all directions, but no furniture or any other decorations, and where her feet touched the floor, she didn't see so much as a speck of dust. She walked on for a while, holding her wand up and looking at the stonework overhead. There was a great, coiled dragon swallowing a sphere that might have been the Earth... or an egg. She couldn't be sure. Then there were more animals... wolves, serpents, a raven, a turtle...

"What is this all supposed to mean?" she asked aloud. Perhaps it was symbolic? Or perhaps Death just liked animals.

She paused when she noticed that one of the darkened doorways she was passing by was not so dark – there was light coming from within. She moved to the doorway and looked inside.

The light came from a single candle, set in a tall, silver stand. Beneath it sat a man wearing chain armor and a tabard, with a sword hanging from his belt. He looked just like a medieval knight. His chin rested on his hand, his elbows rested on his knees, and he was studying a chessboard.

"Hello?" Alexandra said.

The man didn't respond. Alexandra cautiously stepped into the room.

The knight still didn't say anything as she slowly walked over to look at him and the chessboard. It looked very old; the pieces were carved blocks of wood.

"Do you play chess?"

The sudden question almost made Alexandra jump. She took her eyes off the chess pieces and looked at the knight. He had finally looked up from the board. He was a beardless man with whitish-blond hair; once, he might have been handsome, but now his face was lined and weathered and pallid.

"A little," she said.

"Perhaps..." The knight spoke hesitantly, as if he had not used words in quite a while and was trying to remember them. He made an awkward gesture with his hand over the pieces. "Perhaps you can see some move I cannot?"

She looked down at the board again.

"It looks like you're going to be checkmated on the next move," she said.

The knight nodded unhappily. "I'm sure there is an escape... if I only study the board long enough."

"Are you playing Death?" she asked.

He nodded again. "Yes. He said I could have all the time I like to make my move. He won't return until then."

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Alexandra looked at the chessboard again. She was not the greatest chess player – David beat her most of the time – but she didn't think there was any way for the knight to escape checkmate. She stood there a moment longer, and the knight resumed resting his chin on his hand and staring at the board, motionless.



“I have to go find Death,” she said.

He didn't answer, so she left.

Back out in the grand hallway, the stone carvings had changed. Now the figures were human. There was a large, naked, muscular man with a beard wrestling with a skeletal figure. The skeleton was pinning him to the ground; the man, though his arms were huge and his legs were like tree trunks, had a desperate look on his buffoonish face.

Alexandra frowned. She thought the picture looked familiar, like a story she had read. Except it seemed wrong.

She continued walking, beginning to get frustrated. There was no end to the hallway, and the dark doorways she passed by seemed endless as well.

A ghostly child skipped out of one, crossed the hallway, and darted through another doorway. Alexandra halted immediately.

Another child – a little girl wearing an old-fashioned dress and bonnet – ran from the doorway she'd just seen the first child disappear into.

“Hey!” she called. The little girl kept running, and Alexandra ran after her. “Wait!”

The girl was definitely a ghost – Alexandra could see through her. The girl ran into another doorway, and Alexandra thought she heard a giggle. She paused at the threshold of the doorway, and then followed.

It was pitch black inside. She held up her wand, and saw nothing but darkness all around her, but from somewhere, she heard children chanting a nursery rhyme:

*“Ring-a-ring-a-rosie,
A pocket full of posies...”*

“HELLO?” Alexandra shouted. “Please... will you talk to me?”

The distant sing-song chorus continued. Alexandra backed away, slowly, and stepped back into the hallway. She caught movement in the corner of her eye, and spun around. In the darkness of another room, across the hall, she saw what looked like many small glowing figures dancing in a circle.

*“Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down!”*

Alexandra dashed across the hall and through the opposite doorway, but the ghostly children scattered and were gone. She definitely heard laughter.

When she backed away this time, she didn't emerge from the darkness. She turned, and saw no doorway, no light. She desperately groped her way ahead through the darkness, but the grand hallway did not reappear.

She put a hand over her heart again – it was pounding faster. She wasn't really afraid of the dark, but dread and uncertainty were taking its toll, and she was also beginning to recall the Boggart she'd faced the previous year, stepping out of the darkness, looking like –

“Hello.”

Someone stepped out of the darkness in front of her. She gasped and almost dropped her wand.

“You were expecting me, weren't you?” Death looked down at her.

She knew it was Death, because he looked exactly as she had imagined him. She didn't know why she'd assumed Death would be a 'he,' but his voice was masculine; deep and almost pleasant in tone.

“You're staring,” said Death.

“Sorry.” She kept staring.

“So, what do I look like?”

“Don't you know what you look like?” Alexandra was having trouble not stammering.

“Of course I know what I look like,” Death replied. “But I don't know what I look like to *you*.” Beneath a black cowl, a gleaming white skull tilted slightly. “If I had to guess, though, I would guess a skeleton in a robe. You seem the type.” In his long, black robe, he appeared to be standing before her with his hands behind his back.

Alexandra nodded. “Yes, that's right.”

“I thought so.” Death regarded her with a frozen grin. “Do you find me frightening?”

“A little... I guess.” Alexandra swallowed. “Who were those children?”

“Spirits of the dead, of course.”

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“Ghosts? Who can't leave?”

“Anyone can leave,” Death said. “But sometimes they would rather stay here.” Death tilted his head, and Alexandra could hear singing again, faintly.

*“Ashes, ashes,
We all fall down!”*

“I'm rather fond of that tune,” Death said.

“It's about the Black Death, right?” Alexandra said. “When you killed all those people in Europe.”

“I didn't kill anyone. *Yersinia pestis* was responsible for that. And wherever did you hear that that song is about the Black Death? Nonsense. It's just a nursery rhyme. It changes over time. Every child that comes here seems to know a different version. Why are you here?”

It took Alexandra a moment to catch up to the abrupt shift in the conversation with Death's question.

“My name is Alexandra Quick,” she said. “And I've come for my brother.”

“Ah,” Death said, in a long, drawn-out way. “I've been expecting you.”

“You have?” She blinked.

Death nodded. “You've come to bargain for your brother's life.”

“Yes!” She felt elation and astonishment. “Can you return him to life? Can you bring him back?”

Death didn't answer immediately. Alexandra tried to suppress a shiver. Her eyes darted right and left, but there was still nothing around them but the circle of light shed by her wand, and pitch black darkness beyond.

“It's been quite a while since someone came riding to my abode on a Thestral,” Death said. “It used to be that I could scarcely go half a century without someone dropping by, but I don't get many visitors nowadays.” She felt the Power's eyes on her, even though there were no eyes in those blank sockets. “I don't think I've ever been visited by one so young. You're either a very foolish and reckless child, or very determined.”

“Maybe both,” Alexandra said quietly.

“Indeed. I almost never let visitors return to the land of the living, you know.”

“You said anyone can leave.”

“Not alive.”

Alexandra swallowed again. “Can you send my brother back to the land of the living?”

Death withdrew his arms from behind his back to fold them in front of his chest, letting the sleeves of his black robe hang down almost to the floor. Alexandra saw a flash of white bone before the hands disappeared back into them.

“Perhaps I can,” Death said. “But why should I?”

Alexandra took a breath – or at least, tried to. She wasn't sure she was actually breathing. “I've brought an offering.”

“An offering?” Death's tone of voice suggested that if he had eyebrows, he would be raising one now.

“I have an obol.” Alexandra reached into her pocket and took out her obol. She handed it to the skeletal figure. One of Death's bony hands emerged from his robe and received it.

“An obol,” Death repeated slowly, turning the coin over in his hand. “An obol is the price of *your* passage. But you see, someone must die to create an obol – I gain nothing by returning a life already forfeit in exchange for a life already paid.” She felt Death's stare upon her, despite his lack of eyes. “I am not some ferryman to be bribed.”

Someone must die to create an obol. Alexandra stared at the coin. “What do you want for my brother's life?”

The Most Deathly Power

“What do you offer me?”

She frowned. “I’ll serve you.”

“Serve me?” Death made a wide, sweeping gesture with his other hand. “Doing what, sweeping my hall?” And suddenly they were back in the grand, stone hallway, with fearsome, six-armed demons carved in stone on either side of them. “What do I need servants for?”

“I’ll do anything you want – I’ll bring you anything –”

“Only a very foolish and reckless child uses words like ‘anything.’” Death held up a hand, before she could answer. “No matter. What do you imagine that you can do for me or bring me, Alexandra Quick?”

“I don’t know.” Alexandra felt frustration and anger. “You must want something. You wouldn’t even be talking to me if there wasn’t something I could offer you. Unless you’re just toying with me.” She wasn’t sure if she could cry, here, but she was beginning to feel like she was going to. “Do you want me to beg? I’ll beg.”

“I am not a prideful Power; groveling does not amuse me.”

Alexandra held up her wand. “Will you let Maximilian return to life if I beat you in a duel?”

Death’s laughter was cold. “Are they still telling tales about challenging me to a duel? You’re a mortal in the Lands Beyond, and I am the Most Deathly Power. If I want you to die –” Death wiggled a finger, and Alexandra felt a chill that seemed to stop her heart for an instant. “I only accept ‘challenges’ from visitors who offend me. Do not delude yourself, child.”

She was becoming desperate. “How about chess?”

“I only play one game at a time.”

She heard the amusement in his voice, and became angry. Death *was* toying with her, now – she was sure of it. After everything she’d done to get here, it was all just a joke to the deathly Power.

She wanted to scream – instead, she took a deep breath. “What if I stay and you let Maximilian go?”

Death stood quietly for a moment, studying her. “A life for a life. You are willing to sacrifice yourself, in exchange for your brother?”

She’d known it might come down to this. She’d been prepared for it, but staring it in the face was still daunting enough to make her hesitate.

Oh, Anna, I’m sorry. Mom... Julia...

“Yes,” she whispered. “Take me.”

Death’s empty eye sockets stared at her. “I do believe you mean it. You are willing to die for your brother.”

“He died for me,” she said softly.

“A headstrong, determined child indeed.” Then Death made a negating gesture with the hand holding the obol. “But no. I can already have you, if I choose to take you. You tried to cheat me, Alexandra Quick.”

“What?” She opened her mouth in protest. “Cheat you? How?”

“In all my days, no one has ever tried to bribe me with a fake obol before.”

“What?” Alexandra was wide-eyed and confused now.

“Did you really think the Most Deathly Power would be fooled by a Glamour Charm?” He opened his hand, and Alexandra saw that the coin lying in his skeletal palm had changed. It was no longer the ancient, faded coin that Darla had given her. It was now the familiar gold of Confederation coinage. The Seal of the Confederation was stamped on one side, and as Death turned it over, she saw an engraved pigeon on the other.

She was so stunned, she was unable to speak for a moment. Death flipped the coin into the air,

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caught it, and chuckled, making a hollow, eerie sound. "You're lucky that I have a sense of humor. I will make a bargain with you."

"A bargain?" Alexandra's mind was still reeling in shock and confusion.

"A life for a life." Death closed his fist around the coin again. "Give this coin to someone else, and your brother will return to you." He extended his arm and opened his hand, holding the coin out to her.

She took it, trying not to let her fingertips touch Death's hand. "I don't understand."

"Your erstwhile obol is now a Deathly token. A rare gift from me to a child whose audacity amuses me."

She stared at the coin in her hand. It still looked like an ordinary pidge. "What happens to the person I give the coin to?"

"A life for a life," Death said. "That is the bargain."

"Wait – you mean whoever I give this to will die?" She looked up at Death. "I can't do that!"

"Really? A moment ago you said you would do anything."

And a voice in her head said: *You did say anything! You told your father that, too. You said you'd perform Dark Arts, sacrifice yourself, do anything he asked to bring Maximilian back!*

She swallowed. "I don't want to sacrifice someone else." Her voice became pleading. "Why can't you take me?"

"Because," Death said, and his voice lost some of its harshness; "that is not the way it works."

She shook her head. "What is this, some kind of test? I won't kill someone!"

"That is up to you." Death shrugged.

"You're cruel!" she said angrily.

"Often." Death nodded.

She sniffed. Perhaps she could cry in this place. "Can... can I talk to him?"

Death shook his head. His hands were clasped together beneath the sleeves of his robe again, and his head was inclined forward so that she could only see a glimpse of his skull, in the darkness beneath his cowl.

"Please?" she begged.

"No." Death's tone was so final, Alexandra closed her mouth and stood there, trembling a little.

"Good-bye, Alexandra Quick," Death said. "I will not see you again before your time."

And she was standing alone in the darkness.

She stood there for minutes, or possibly much longer, before she shakily dropped the coin into her pocket, and turned around and walked out the way she'd come. Her wand was still glowing, but it diminished to a pinpoint of light again when she stepped out of Death's stone residence.

Skuld and Ben Journey were still waiting outside, in almost the exact position where she'd left them.

"Starshine!" Journey exclaimed. "I mean, Alexandra!"

Skuld raised her head and snorted. The Thestral seemed pleased to see her.

Alexandra stumbled down the steps.

"Did you change your mind?" Journey asked.

"Change my mind?" She looked at him blankly.

"I thought you were going into – whatever it is you see there." Journey gestured, but when Alexandra looked back over her shoulder, there was nothing there to see. "You just decided to turn around and come back?"

Alexandra shook her head. "I must have been gone longer than you noticed." She patted Skuld, and then grabbed hold of the saddle and hauled herself back up onto the Thestral's back.

"You weren't gone at all, Alexandra!"

“Well... it's time for us to go back.”

“Back?” Journey looked at her, agape.

Alexandra leaned forward, and tugged on Skuld's reins. “Up,” she whispered. “Take me home, Skuld.”

Death hadn't given her directions. She had no idea how she was supposed to get back, but if the Deathly Power wanted her to go wandering around in his realm, lost, it would be a pretty poor joke. She hoped Skuld would be able to find her way back. The Thestral took off, flapping her bat-wings and leaving the ground behind. In moments, they were surrounded by darkness and whispers and endless cold again. Alexandra didn't even notice whether Journey was still following.

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It didn't seem as if they flew for as long as they had when they'd descended. Alexandra never saw a gateway or anything of the sort – one moment they were in the Lands Beyond, and then Skuld was stepping through the portal in the cave from which they'd left. In fact, she was half-flying, and let out a startled screech as she had to fold her wings abruptly and nearly sit back on her haunches to skid to a halt, narrowly avoiding slamming into the far wall. Alexandra was almost dumped to the ground, and then nearly thrown into a wall when Skuld righted herself and made a frantic circle within the cave, trying to get her balance.

“Whoa, Skuld! Whoa!” Alexandra cried. Pulling on her mount's reins brought her up short, and gradually, the Thestral stopped dancing about, and calmed down enough to allow Alexandra to slide off the saddle.

Ben Journey was there. He floated before them, with an expression of amazement. Alexandra turned around, to see Darla, pressed against the wall, where she had been curled up with her knees against her chest and her face buried in her arms. Now she was trying to make herself into a tiny little ball with her hands protecting her head, but when she looked up, her red-rimmed eyes widened.

Alexandra continued turning about, looking around the cave. Skuld was now standing at the entrance looking eager to be out of there, and only Ben Journey standing in her path making soothing noises prevented her from bolting out of the cave. The portal to the Lands Beyond had vanished – the rock wall was solid and covered with motionless painted figures again.

Alexandra turned back to Darla, and walked over to her.

Darla slowly rose to her feet, pressing her hands against the rock wall behind her for support.

“You came back,” she whispered in disbelief.

Alexandra narrowed her eyes. “You seem surprised.”

As Darla stared at her, Alexandra dug into her cloak pocket, and found Death's token – the coin that Darla had given her. She held it up. Darla turned white.

“A pigeon,” Alexandra said. “A pigeon with a Glamour Charm.”

Alexandra couldn't see Journey's face – the ghost was still keeping Skuld from leaving. The Thestral tossed her head and made an impatient noise. But Darla just stood there, frozen in place.

Alexandra closed her hand around the coin in a fist, and lashed out and struck Darla in the face. Darla's head snapped back and struck the rock wall behind her. With a whimper of pain, she slid to the ground. Dazed, she raised a hand to her nose. Blood was trickling out of it.

“You gave me a *fake obol*!” Alexandra said, breathing heavily. She was shaking all over now.

Darla looked up at her, still clutching her nose. She looked scared, but there was something else in her eyes, something hard and ugly.

She moved her hand away for a moment. Her nose was bleeding profusely.

“What are you going to do?” she said. “Tell Ms. Grimm?”

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Alexandra stared down at the other girl. Confusion and disbelief were swept away by fury, and she drew her wand.

“ARE YOU COMPLETELY INSANE?” she shouted.

Skuld made a noise like a cross between a neigh and a hiss, and charged right through Journey and out of the cave.

“Now, Alexandra, let's all calm down here,” said Journey. “I'm sure this was a misunderstanding –”

“SHE GAVE ME A FAKE OBOL!” Alexandra lowered her voice, barely. “You *wanted* me to die!”

Darla's expression faltered. “I didn't think you were *really* going to go to the Lands Beyond. You're the one who's completely insane! What good would an obol have done you? Nobody –” She paused. “Nobody comes back from the Lands Beyond...” Her voice trailed off, and she pressed her hand back over her nose again, trying to stop the bleeding.

“You mean, you never actually expected me to come back.” Alexandra bared her teeth. “What was the point of telling me about Death, and the Deathly Regiment?”

“You actually believed those fairy tales?” Darla sneered. “Merlin, you're stupid!”

Alexandra's face turned redder, but her rage was already burning itself out, leaving her drained and confused.

“What was the point?” she asked. “Why would you do that?” She held up the coin again. Darla's eyes darted towards it with an expression that was at once covetous and despairing.

“A token,” Alexandra whispered. Darla's eyes darted back to her face. Alexandra stared down at her. “You wanted me to die so this could become some kind of magic item?”

Like the token Maximilian had worn around his neck – their father's locket – when he had gone to the Lands Beyond.

Darla's expression was hard to read, with her hand covering the lower half of her face. She didn't say anything.

“To save your sister,” Alexandra said, seizing the thought. Darla's eyes widened. Alexandra's expression turned angry and vengeful. “You wanted to kill me to save your sister? How was that supposed to work?”

Darla shivered, but remained silent. Alexandra gritted her teeth and pointed her wand again. “Why?” she shouted. “Why did you do it? What were you trying to do?”

Darla eyed the tip of Alexandra's wand, and then said, very softly, “What will you do now? Crucio me?” She lifted her hand again, revealing a nose, mouth, and chin covered with blood. “Let's see you do it.” There was fear in her expression, but her voice taunted Alexandra, daring her.

Alexandra's hand shook, and then, slowly, she lowered her wand.

“I didn't think so.” Darla pressed her sleeve over her bloody nose.

Alexandra stared at her, filled with cold fury and emptiness.

“Here,” she said, in a very soft voice. She held out the coin between her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes bored into Darla's. “You can have this back.”

Darla slowly reached for the coin, confused and frightened.

In the last instant before Darla took it, Alexandra closed her eyes and yelled in fury and frustration, and jerked her hand back. Darla flinched and cringed away from her. Alexandra stomped around in a circle, holding her head in her hands.

You deserve to die. I want Max back – I want him back so much – why should you live and not him? She was trembling, and tears threatened to spill out of her eyes.

She heard Skuld walking down the tunnel outside the cave they were in, and took a deep breath. She turned to Mr. Journey, who was still watching both girls.

"I'm going to get Skuld," she said. She looked at Darla. "You think you know so much? You don't know anything."

She turned her back on Darla, and walked out of the cave.

Skuld was a few yards down the tunnel, and snorted when Alexandra appeared. She had to speak softly and coax the Thestral a bit before she was able to grab her reins again, but once she had them, she was able to lead her back the way they'd come.

Journey looked troubled, but he didn't say anything about the confrontation, all the way back to the stable.

"I'd better make sure Darla gets back safely," the ghost said, once Alexandra had put Skuld back in her stall. "If she gets caught, she might turn you in as well, out of spite. Something's wrong with that girl..."

"You think?" In fact, Alexandra was no longer worrying about Darla at all. She glanced at the deceased wizard. "You're still here. I thought you'd be able to move on if you were forgiven."

"I told you, Alexandra, it isn't that simple." Journey sighed.

"You know, Mr. Journey," she said, "you've never actually said you're sorry for trying to kill me."

A surprised, guilty look flashed across his face. "I told you, Alexandra – I know it was a terrible thing I tried to do. That's why I'm here now –"

"I thought you're here because you didn't want to die," she said.

He regarded her silently.

"So, are you more sorry that you tried to kill me, or that you're dead instead of me?" she asked.

Journey didn't say anything, but when he looked away, she could see the answer on his face.

"Maybe you should work on that." She crossed her arms, shivering a little in the morning chill. "I guess Darla won't tell on you if you don't tell on her."

She left the ghost by the stable, and made her way around the academy, back to where she had left her broom on the ground. Two stories above, the window to her room was dark. She mounted her broom and rose quickly into the air. On the horizon, the sky was turning light gray.

When she cautiously pulled the window open, Charlie immediately cried, "Alexandra! Alexandra!"

"Ssh!" Alexandra said, though she almost knocked a chair over and made even more noise clattering her broom against the window sill and desk as she climbed through the window and closed it.

Anna had by now sat up in her bed. She looked as if she'd been curled up in a ball, but her face showed astonishment and disbelief, even in the predawn light.

"You came back," she whispered.

Alexandra nodded. She dropped her broom and stood there.

"Alexandra!" Charlie squawked.

"You came back!" Anna staggered to her feet, looking shocked and awed.

Alexandra began shaking.

"Are you all right?" Anna asked.

Alexandra didn't answer.

Anna wrapped her arms around her and began crying.

"Please don't cry, Anna." Alexandra held Anna with one arm, while wiping her own eyes with the back of her hand.

"I thought I was never going to see you again!" Anna sobbed. "I thought – I don't know what I thought! I just knew you were going to do something terrible, and something awful would happen to you..."

"Didn't you believe me?" Alexandra said. "I told you I'd be back."

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“Miss you terrible,” said Charlie.

Anna shuddered. “And... what happened?”

Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut. “Max is still dead.”

They stood there like that for what seemed like a long time.

“I’m sorry,” Anna said.

Alexandra opened her eyes. Anna was staring at her – her expression was confused, frightened, and compassionate.

“I’ll tell you about it,” Alexandra said. “But I think I need to sleep first.”

Anna nodded. “You don’t have to tell me, if you don’t want to.”

“I’m so tired.”

Anna nodded again, and helped her peel off her cloak and jacket, and watched as Alexandra stripped off her boots and socks and her pants and shirt.

“Sorry,” Alexandra said. She supposed she probably smelled like blood and Thestrals. She was too tired to take a shower. In fact, the exhaustion that was coming over her now was an almost irresistible force – she could barely keep her eyes open.

Anna shook her head. “It’s all right.”

Alexandra crawled into bed. Charlie hopped to the edge of her desk, next to her bed, and Alexandra reached up to stroke the raven’s feathers.

“Pretty bird,” she mumbled, and then closed her eyes. The last thing she remembered was Anna sitting by her bed, watching her as if afraid she might disappear again.

Chapter 27 — The Bone Flute



When Alexandra woke up, Anna was still sitting in the chair, asleep, with her head tilted forward. Charlie was perched on the edge of her desk, also asleep.

Charlie woke up first when Alexandra moved, and made a sound almost like a songbird's chirp.

"Pretty bird," Alexandra said, and Charlie repeated: "Pretty bird!"

Anna opened her eyes with a start.

"You should have gone back to your bed," Alexandra told her.

Sleeping like that couldn't have been comfortable, Alexandra thought, but Anna just shook her head.

"I nodded off." She blinked and rubbed her eyes.

As Alexandra got out of bed, her eyes fell on her cloak, which she had carelessly discarded to the

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floor the night before. In a sudden panic, she grabbed it and thrust her hand into one of the pockets. She breathed a sigh of relief when she found the pidge. The relief was followed by a moment of disorientation and shock, as she realized that it hadn't all been a dream.

It really happened.

She looked at Anna, who was staring at her as she stood there in the middle of their room, half-naked and still smelling faintly like a Thestral.

"I – I'll take a shower now," Alexandra said. She kept the coin clenched tightly in her fist as she went into the bathroom. She was afraid to let it out of her sight.

What if someone else touches it? she thought. And following on the heels of that thought: *Can it really bring Max back?*

She and Anna hardly spoke until they were both dressed. Alexandra put the coin into the pocket of her clean pants, and then held Charlie in her arms as Anna slipped on a casual non-school robe.

They looked at one another. They could hear Sonja and Carol also getting up, and other girls in the hallway outside heading for Sunday morning breakfast.

"I went to the Lands Beyond," Alexandra said.

All the color drained out of Anna's face. She looked as if she might faint.

"I'm not going back, Anna," Alexandra said. She sat down on the edge of her bed. "I'm done."

"Really?" Anna sounded hopeful and relieved.

Alexandra nodded and closed her eyes.

"You really went to the Lands Beyond?" Anna asked.

"Yes."

"And you came back." Anna sounded incredulous.

Alexandra didn't say anything. She was still thinking about everything – Death, Darla, Mr. Journey, and the coin in her pocket.

"You don't have to tell me about it," Anna said softly.

Alexandra opened her eyes and started to speak, but just then Sonja knocked on their door and opened it without waiting for an answer.

"Hey, are you guys going to breakfast?" she asked.

Alexandra and Anna looked at each other.

"Yes," Alexandra said. "In a little bit." She gave Sonja an annoyed look. "Do we have to start locking that door?"

"Well, excuse me!" Sonja said. "See you downstairs, then, maybe." She shut the door with a bang.

"Jerk!" squawked Charlie.

Alexandra shook her head and rolled her eyes.

She and Anna were quiet for a few moments. Then Anna asked, "Is it really over?"

Alexandra was very conscious of the pidge in her pocket. She could feel it against her thigh.

"Almost," she said.

Anna's face twitched.

Alexandra turned to her. "There really are things it might be bad to tell you, Anna. I promised I wouldn't hide things from you anymore, but... some secrets are dangerous."

"I know," Anna said. "You don't need to tell me everything you know. Just... don't hide things from me because you don't want me to worry. Don't lie to me. As long as I know you trust me..."

"I do."

Anna nodded.

"There is something you need to know," Alexandra said. She set Charlie on her desk, and got out

some owl treats to feed the bird. “Darla is crazy. She tried to kill me last night.”

Anna's eyes widened.

“She tried to trick me. She gave me something that would help me go to the Lands Beyond – but she didn't expect me to come back.”

“Why would she do that?” Anna whispered.

“I don't know. I think she's insane. I mean, really insane.”

“We have to tell someone.”

“Maybe.”

Anna frowned at Alexandra's reluctance. “There's no way to explain what she did without explaining what you were doing, is there?”

Alexandra shook her head. “I don't think so.”

“I guess you'd probably get in a lot of trouble, too.”

Alexandra gave Charlie another owl treat. The raven was greedily gobbling them down. “I broke into the stables, stole a Thestral –”

“You *stole* a Thestral?”

“Well, borrowed. Then I snuck into the sub-basements, opened a portal to the Lands Beyond –”

“How did you get a Thestral into the sub-basements?” Anna shook her head. “Never mind.” She looked down. “You're right. You'd probably be expelled.”

“And charged under the WODAMND Act.”

“But if Darla really is crazy –”

“I know.” Alexandra sighed.

“Why would she want to kill you?”

“I don't know.”

“So what do we do?”

Alexandra put away the owl treats. Charlie squawked. Alexandra ignored the protest, then opened the window. “Go on, Charlie. Fly.” When Charlie hesitated, Alexandra stroked the bird's feathers with her fingertips. “Fly, fly!” she said.

“Fly, fly!” Charlie repeated, and took off out the window.

Alexandra turned back to Anna. “We watch her, very carefully.”

“She's dangerous.”

“Without a wand, not very.”

Anna looked skeptical.

“I'll be careful,” Alexandra said.

She worried a little when she didn't see either Darla or Angelique at breakfast, but it wasn't unusual for both girls to sleep late on Sundays. She and Anna debated knocking on their door as they returned to their own room, but they encountered both girls heading downstairs when they returned to Delta Delta Kappa Tau hall.

Darla looked tired and pale, and had dark circles under her eyes. She and Angelique both stopped in their tracks when they saw Alexandra and Anna.

Alexandra and Darla stared at each other. Darla's expression was wary and resentful, but Alexandra was struck by how defeated she looked. As if the events of the previous night had taken some great toll on her as well.

“Please,” Angelique murmured. “Y'all aren't going to fight, are you?”

Alexandra looked at her. “Why should we?” How much did Angelique know, she wondered?

Angelique tugged on Darla's sleeve, and the two girls continued downstairs. Alexandra and Anna

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exchanged looks.

"Something's wrong with her," Anna said.

"You think?" Alexandra snorted.

"I mean it, Alex. She's not right."

"What can we do?" Alexandra shrugged uneasily. "I've already tried telling Ms. Grimm and Ms. Shirliffe that there's something wrong with Darla."

But it wasn't really Darla that concerned Alexandra most. It was the pigeon in her pocket.



Over the next week, Alexandra spent a great deal of time thinking about the coin Death had returned to her. She would take it out when she was alone and stare at it, turning it over and over in her hands. It still looked like an ordinary pidge. It didn't feel different. It didn't glow, or cause any strange sensations when she held it. She knew that there were spells to detect enchanted objects, Dark and otherwise, but Maximilian hadn't gotten around to teaching her any of those, and all they'd learned in class so far were Revealing Charms. Nothing hidden was revealed when Alexandra cast one on the coin.

A life for a life. She thought about that constantly. Death would return Maximilian to her – and all she had to do was choose someone else to take his place.

Sometimes she wondered why she hadn't given the coin to Darla. Darla tried to kill her – wouldn't she only have been getting what she deserved?

And she found herself staring at other people with narrow, calculating looks, as if weighing the value of their lives. Theo Panos and Jordan Klein still blustered and taunted her in JROC. Benjamin and Mordecai Rash held their tongues, as Constance and Forbearance had promised they would – Alexandra had not heard 'Mudblood' or 'sorceress' from them in months – but their disapproving expressions whenever they saw her with the Pritchards made it clear what they thought.

And then there was Larry Albo. She hated him most of all. There was nothing good about him – he was a hateful, arrogant, bigoted jerk who still gave her dirty looks whenever they crossed paths.

It would be easy, she thought. She could hand the coin to any of them. Even Larry would probably take it reflexively, before he stopped to think about why she was giving him a pidge. She played out scenarios in her head, with the same cold-blooded ruthlessness with which she'd planned out her theft of the Time-Turner and her trip to the Lands Beyond with Skuld, to get any one of her nemeses alone and give them the coin.

And each time the scenario played out in her head, she couldn't make herself *not* think about a body dropping lifelessly to the ground. She saw Larry's eyes staring upwards, empty and dead like Ms. Gale's.

Who cares? she thought. *Doesn't Maximilian deserve to live more than any of them?*

She'd trade her own life for Max's. Why not someone else's?

Darla continued to look sleepless and tormented in class. Alexandra wondered if she was having nightmares about her sister.

It took Anna to remind Alexandra about their year-end SPAWNs. They only had one more month of class. Reluctantly, Alexandra started trying to catch up on Magical Theory and American Wizarding History, and stayed in the Alchemy classroom during lunch to do Potions make-up work.

While Mr. Grue watched her balefully, muttering something under his breath, she thought about leaving the pidge on his desk. She could see it in her mind very clearly – the perpetually disgruntled teacher's bushy black brows would draw down in a scowl as he saw the coin, and he'd reach for it, meaning to hold it up and demand which of the students in his class were so careless that they were dropping pocket change on his desk – and then his face would take on a startled expression, just before

he toppled backwards, dead before he hit the ground.

Alexandra could see it all in her head.

Who'd miss him? she thought. Probably everyone in class would cheer.

"If you're going to daydream, Miss Quick, then get out of my classroom!" Mr. Grue snapped.

Alexandra started. The teacher was glaring at her. In front of her, her cauldron had almost stopped simmering. At the next table, Janet was the only other student still working on her Fireblood Potion. Hastily, Alexandra added more ghost peppers and touched her wand to the bottom of her cauldron, bringing it to a pungent boil again.

Death's token preoccupied her, morning, noon, and night.

If I give it to someone here, it will be traced back to me, she thought. That was a good reason not to give it to Mr. Grue or Larry. But in the Muggle world – who would know?

She could give it to Billy Boggleston, she thought. He'd be even easier to trick than Larry. And who would care? Who would miss him?

That night, she dreamed about Billy floating face-up in Old Larkin Pond. When she leaned over the water to inspect his body, his eyes opened and he grabbed at her, trying to drag her into the pond. The murky water turned to blood, and as Alexandra tried to pull his hands from around her neck, Billy's face became Maximilian's, mouth twisted in disgust and anger.

She shouted and woke up with her own hands at her throat. Anna was already out of bed, looking panicked.

"I'm okay," Alexandra said. "It was a nightmare."

"Maximilian," croaked Charlie, startling her.

The door to the bathroom opened abruptly. "Who shouted?" asked Sonja, standing there in a thin nightgown.

"Charlie!" Alexandra shouted at her. "Go back to bed!"

Sonja stepped back, alarmed, and then retreated, closing the door behind her.

"Charlie!" squawked the raven, sounding disgruntled.

Alexandra tried to go back to sleep, angry and embarrassed.

She'd done very little reading since returning from the Lands Beyond, outside of what she needed to do for classwork. As everyone else began fretting over final exams, term projects, and SPAWNs, Alexandra returned to the library to read about Death.

She re-read Beedle the Bard's *The Tale of Three Brothers* and Brother Randolph's *How Goodman Raced Death*, and even tried to delve into *The Master of Death* again. It was hard to gain much insight from wizarding fairy tales; the Deathly Power she had met resembled the figure of wizarding lore, true, but he also resembled the Grim Reaper of Muggle legends.

The only thing she noticed in common among all the tales was that Death didn't like to be tricked, cheated, or denied – and he always won in the end.

Angelique came to her in the library one evening, while Anna was doing Arithmancy drills with another girl. Alexandra didn't notice her at first – she was absorbed in a book about ancient Greek wizards and what they believed about Powers.

"Sonja says you woke her up screaming the other night," Angelique said.

Alexandra looked up from her book. Angelique was glancing around as if afraid to be seen talking to her.

"Sonja has a big mouth," Alexandra said. "And I wasn't screaming. What business is it of yours?"

Angelique looked down. "Darla has nightmares, too."

Alexandra frowned. "So what? Everyone has nightmares."

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"I know you two were up to something," Angelique said quietly. "Something you shouldn't be messing around with."

Alexandra slapped her book shut with a snap that made Angelique jump. "I'm not up to anything, especially not with Darla. What do you want, Angelique?"

She was startled when Angelique swallowed and a tear ran down her cheek. "I'm scared," she murmured.

"You're scared of Darla?"

"No." Angelique shook her head. "I'm scared *for* Darla."

Alexandra regarded the other witch with a frown. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Please, Alexandra," Angelique whispered. "Whatever y'all are doing, stop it. Didn't y'all learn your lesson last year?"

Alexandra clenched her teeth. "Darla and I aren't doing anything together. And I'm not doing anything Dark. Have you tried talking to Darla about this?"

"She denies everything, too." Angelique wiped at her eye. "I know she's been writing to John."

"John Manuelito?" Alexandra asked incredulously.

Angelique nodded. "I think she saw him over the summer."

Disgusted, Alexandra said, "She really has gone crazy. Look – Darla and I aren't friends and we're not conspiring and she's not my problem."

Angelique gave Alexandra a reproachful look.

Alexandra sighed. "What do you want me to do? I'm telling you the truth, Angelique. I couldn't help Darla even if I wanted to. I'm sorry about her sister, but I think she's lost her mind."

Angelique blinked. "You're sorry about her sister?"

"She told me about Hilary." When Angelique kept looking at her with an odd expression, Alexandra leaned forward and whispered, "I know about how she died –"

Angelique looked aghast. "Died? Darla told you Hilary died?"

Alexandra stared at her, feeling an icy mix of anger and dread. "She didn't? But – you said something happened..."

"Hilary eloped with a Muggle-born... some day-school graduate. It was a big scandal, but – I don't understand. I'm sure you misunderstood." Angelique looked even more upset.

"Angelique," Alexandra said slowly, "maybe you need to turn her in."

"Turn her in for what?" Angelique asked.

If Darla gets expelled, she'll tell about everything I did, too, Alexandra thought. But she said, "You should tell Ms. Grimm or Dean Cervantes that you think Darla is in trouble."

Angelique winced. "And get her expelled? Or arrested?"

Alexandra closed her eyes. *When has Ms. Grimm ever believed me? Who will be the one who goes to prison – the Congressman's niece who's one of the Elect, or the Enemy's daughter?* "I can't help Darla, Angelique."

Angelique sniffed. Alexandra felt sorry for her, as she rose and left, but she refused to feel sorry for Darla. She had no reason to feel sorry for Darla anymore. She was a twisted little liar. Everything she'd said had been a lie, part of whatever Dark Arts conspiracy she and John were involved in.

Alexandra watched Darla even more closely after that, but all she saw was someone who seemed to be falling apart under the stress of upcoming SPAWNs. She dressed as elegantly as always, but her face was no longer glamorous and her eyes no longer sparkled – indeed, even the other girls seemed to be put off by her sunken, pallid expression and her depressed demeanor. In class, she sometimes seemed on the verge of tears, and Mr. Grue and Mr. Newton snapped at her frequently for not paying attention.

Alexandra wasn't overly concerned about SPAWNs. She studied for them out of duty more than anything else. Much more important was her upcoming trip to Roanoke. April was almost over, and after SPAWNs and finals, Alexandra would visit the Kings again. Her mother had agreed to let her spend the end of May and most of June at Croatoa.

I can return with Max, she thought, sitting on the edge of her bed one night, holding the coin in her hand. Death had given her the means to do so – why was it so hard?

She wouldn't be going directly from Charmbridge to Roanoke – she had to return home first. Both Claudia and Ms. King had insisted on that. Alexandra didn't know why. She'd been away from home for four months already – what difference would another month and a half make? But she had to take the bus back to Larkin Mills, and apparently there was going to be a telephone conversation between her mother and Julia's mother, and then a week later, Claudia would drive her to Chicago herself.

A week in Larkin Mills, Alexandra thought.

She could visit Archie at the police station where he worked. He'd taken her there before. He'd even let her see the jail, and the prisoners.

Most of the people her stepfather arrested were petty criminals: drunk drivers, shoplifters, the occasional drug bust. But Larkin Mills had its share of serious crime.

Alexandra stared at the coin in her hand. There were criminals who deserved to die, weren't there? Criminals who deserved to live less than Max.

Someone really bad, like a murderer or a rapist, she thought. *It wouldn't be bad to give someone like that the coin, would it?*

Then Anna came in, and Alexandra hastily clenched her fist to hide the coin. Anna raised an eyebrow at Alexandra's flushed, guilty look.

"Have you finished your Magical Theory essay?" Anna asked.

"Yeah." Alexandra nodded. It probably wasn't a very *good* essay, but she'd finished it.

"Good." Anna bit her lip. "Umm, can we practice metal-to-wood transformations again? I just can't seem to get it right."

"Sure." Alexandra smiled. At least there was something she could do to help her friend.



The first JROC drill day of May was cold and miserable, with a deluge of rain and temperatures almost cold enough to turn it into slush. They had few drills left before the end of the year; Alexandra knew Ms. Shirliffe would be asking her soon if she was going to continue in the JROC next year.

But Ms. Shirliffe didn't appear that afternoon. The company stood at attention out in the exercise yard, mostly shielded by Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland's Umbrella Charm but still feeling cold rain whipped into their faces by the wind, while the student commander waited uneasily. Colonel Shirliffe was *never* late.

Finally, after nearly fifteen minutes, Miss Gambola came jogging out to meet them, holding her hooded cloak fast against the wind. The younger teacher approached Eric, and after a few moments of whispered conversation, the Mage-Sergeant Major turned and addressed the other students.

"JROC drill is canceled today," he announced. "Everyone is to return to their dorms. Dismissed!"

Everyone was talking as they proceeded indoors. JROC drill had never been canceled before. Alexandra heard some of the older students questioning Eric; he shook his head and said that he'd only been told by Miss Gambola that Colonel Shirliffe had been called away on urgent business and that all extracurricular activities had been canceled that day.

Alexandra noticed that William looked glummer than she'd have expected at being given a day off. Things had gotten a little easier for the Muggle-born boy, even as they'd become more difficult for her

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– he wasn't teased as much, and he was keeping up better with the other new wands. She hadn't seen him hanging around with Innocence much lately, though.

Alexandra forgot about William as she returned to her room. Along the way, she saw a lot of worried, anxious students, and more teachers and Assistant Deans than usual patrolling the halls. Something was going on.

She found Anna already sitting in their room, tuning the Wizard Wireless to the Confederation News Network.

“What's going on?” Alexandra asked.

Anna looked at her with a worried expression. “Your father,” she said quietly. “The Thorn Circle has attacked two cities.”

“What?” Alexandra's mouth dropped open, and she moved across the room to stand next to Anna and hear the news. There was a knock on the door to the bathroom. Sonja opened it before Alexandra could turn around, but she stood in the doorway without entering when she saw the look on Alexandra's face. Alexandra turned back to the Wizard Wireless without saying anything to the other girl.

“– simultaneous attacks on the Gringotts branches in both Atlanta and New Amsterdam's Goblin Market have all Regiments on stand-by, while the Department of Muggle Affairs contains the damage and risk of exposure to the Muggle world,” the news announcer was saying. “But perhaps more heinous than these brazen bank heists was the third underground attack, launched against the New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards, forcing an evacuation of the school.”

They listened for another hour, although they heard all the essential details (those that were being released publicly) within the first ten minutes. Somehow, the Gringotts branches in Atlanta and New Amsterdam had both been infiltrated from below. Their vaults had been emptied, and the buildings' foundations had been assaulted with magic powerful enough to cause the stone edifices to collapse. Many goblins had been killed, along with a few wizards.

In contrast to the attacks on Gringotts, the assault on the New Amsterdam Academy for Witches and Wizards seemed pointless. Nothing had been taken, no one had been killed; the students and staff had all escaped before the school collapsed into the ground. The only effect was a school full of terrified children and teachers fleeing into the adjacent Muggle neighborhoods as panicked parents arrived – in some cases, Apparating and riding brooms in plain sight.

Anna was looking at Alexandra very seriously, as they listened to Governor-General Hucksteen repeat for the third time that hour that “wizarding secrecy would be preserved” and “the vile perpetrators of this evil act will face swift justice!”

“I had no idea he was going to do this,” Alexandra said.

“I know that.” Anna's eyes darted in Sonja's direction. “But not everyone will believe that.”

Alexandra turned to look at Sonja, who flushed and said, “Of course I don't think you're responsible for what your father did.”

Anna was right, though; when they went down to dinner, hostile looks and fearful muttering greeted Alexandra as she entered the cafeteria. Some students even hissed aloud at her.

Alexandra was tense for the rest of the evening, and remained that way the next day – she knew the hexes and harassment, which had tapered off as everyone became more preoccupied with tests and term papers, were likely to return with a vengeance. She found herself constantly on guard once again. But her friends continued to sit with her at meals and in class – even Constance and Forbearance, whom she saw arguing with both the Rashes and with their younger sister, who continued to dress inappropriately and sit apart from her fellow Ozarkers. Alexandra hadn't seen much of Innocence lately, but from what Constance and Forbearance said, Innocence had become less boisterous, but more sullen and

uncooperative than ever.

Mage-Sergeant Major Strangeland led morning exercises that day, and informed the JROC that he'd been told by the Dean that Colonel Shirliffe had been temporarily recalled to active duty.

No one knew why Abraham Thorn had attacked the New Amsterdam School for Witches and Wizards, but if he could destroy one of the oldest and most prestigious schools in the Confederation, then surely Charmbridge was not immune. There were all sorts of rumors – that Aurors were going to be sent to guard the school; that they had received information about a possible attack on Charmbridge and all the other Big Four schools; that Charmbridge Academy would be evacuated.

Alexandra almost felt sorry for her frightened classmates, except that they seemed evenly divided between those who believed that the only reason her father hadn't attacked Charmbridge was because his daughter was here, and those who believed that her presence somehow put them in more danger. She wondered how long it would be before Diana Grimm showed up again.

There was no announcement delaying SPAWNs and final exams, however, and in Charms class, Mr. Newton gave Alexandra only a brief glance before launching into one of his dry, pedantic lectures, reviewing material for their final and the Charms portion of their SPAWN.

Anna suggested a group study session that evening in the eighth graders' lounge. Alexandra agreed, as did Constance and Forbearance, and to Alexandra's surprise, so did David, after sharing an uneasy look with Angelique. Darla, next to Angelique, hardly reacted at all – she was so pale and wan, Alexandra wondered if she were ill.

Not much studying happened when Alexandra and her friends gathered that night in the lounge. They were all talking about the events in New Amsterdam and Atlanta. Other students in the lounge watched them, and some seemed to be trying to eavesdrop on their conversation, even after Alexandra loudly declared that she didn't know any more than anyone else did. Finally she took out her wand and cast *Muffliato*, which ended the eavesdropping, but not the staring.

It was almost curfew when Alexandra suddenly felt a sharp, cold twinge running up and down her spine, followed by a sensation of numbness spreading throughout her body. She almost doubled over, and put her hands on the table in front of her to steady herself.

Everyone looked at her in alarm.

“Charlie!” Alexandra gasped.

She didn't know why – she had never felt any sort of physical or mental connection to her familiar before – but all of her instincts screamed that something had happened to Charlie. She bolted out of her chair, and though her arms and legs were still tingling with a horrible pins-and-needles sensation, making her movements unsteady, she staggered out of the lounge and towards her room, with her friends following behind her.

She ignored the Delta Delta Kappa Tau monitor as he admonished her not to run in the hall. Behind her, she heard him ordering David to stop right there. She skidded to a halt when she saw that the door to her and Anna's room was ajar. Behind her, Anna, Constance, and Forbearance nearly collided with her. Then she dashed into her room.

The closet was open and cloaks, bags, her broom, Jingwei's traveling cage, and other assorted items had been haphazardly flung out of it. Her backpack had been pulled out from beneath her bed and emptied onto the floor – all of her books and pens and quills and ink bottles, personal items, and coins had been dumped on the floor, along with the items she still had that had been Maximilian's: the wooden wands, the potion bottles, the Skyhook, the Flaming Dungbombs...

She took all this in in an instant, but then her attention focused on the two bodies lying on the floor. Her heart leapt into her throat, and she stumbled inside. Behind her, Anna let out a little scream, and

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Constance and Forbearance both gasped in horror.

Sonja was lying in a half-sitting position propped up against the doorway to the bathroom, while Charlie had fallen to the floor amidst the discarded contents of Alexandra's pack. She fell to her knees and scooped up the raven, moaning, "No, no, no, no!"

Her eyes went to Sonja, and she knew she should be more concerned about the girl, but it was Charlie's inert form making her feel as if she'd been punched, as if she couldn't breath.

Sonja opened her eyes and groaned. Anna had overcome her shock and rushed inside, followed by the Pritchards. Anna and Forbearance knelt next to Sonja, who was trying to lift her arm.

Alexandra looked down at Charlie. Tears ran down her face. She put her fingertips on the raven's breast – and felt a tiny, fluttering heartbeat.

"Charlie!" she gasped. "Charlie... please don't die! Please!" Her hand stroked the raven's feathers gently.

"Darla," whispered Sonja.

Alexandra's head snapped up. She heard Forbearance talking to Constance, and then Constance stepped out of the room and hollered down the hall for David to go get help – but her eyes focused on Sonja's lips. They were trembling and tinged bluish, but Sonja was forcing herself to speak.

"I heard Charlie... squawking... noisy," she said. "So I went in... Darla..." She shuddered. "I saw... she had... tried to get away, but she touched me with it..."

"Touched you with what?" Alexandra cried. Sonja's eyes were closing, while Forbearance held her hands and Anna went rummaging through a box of bottles and vials in her desk.

"Mistletoe wand," Sonja said. She groaned. "Hurts."

"A mistletoe wand?" Forbearance gasped.

Alexandra looked down at Charlie. She could still feel a numb, deadening sensation in her fingers and her toes.

"They're illegal, aren't they?" Alexandra swallowed. "Because they're used in Dark Arts."

"They're skinty counterfeits for a real wand," Constance said, standing by the doorway. "Can't bless or work magic proper with 'em – all they's good for is cursin'."

She cursed Charlie, Alexandra thought. Darla had come into their room to rifle through her belongings, and Charlie would have protested –

Still cradling the bird in one arm, she looked around, and rummaged through the items dumped on the floor. It only took her a few moments to confirm that of all the things she had kept hidden in her magical backpack – Maximilian's pack – there was only one item missing.

The bone flute.

She looked at Sonja, then back down at Charlie.

Darla had to know there was no getting away with this. Which meant she was desperate. Maybe beyond desperate.

Anna was trying to get Sonja to drink something, while Forbearance soothed and tried to comfort her. Alexandra rose to her feet and turned to Constance.

"Constance," she said. She rubbed her eyes with the hand that wasn't holding Charlie. "I need you to do something for me."

"Of course, Alexandra," Constance said, eyes wide.

Alexandra held out her familiar. "I need you to promise you'll get Mrs. Murphy, or Mr. Fledgefield, or someone, to take care of Charlie. Whatever they do for Sonja, they have to do for Charlie, too."

Constance took the raven gently in her arms, but she was staring at Alexandra. "But, what are you doin', Alex? You – you hain't goin' nowhere, are you?"

The Bone Flute

Anna and Forbearance were staring at her, too, but Alexandra fixed her gaze on Constance. "Promise," she said. She swallowed. "Please don't let Charlie die."

"I promise," Constance said. "But –"

Alexandra turned and picked up her broom.

"Alexandra!" Anna said. "What are you doing?"

Alexandra opened the window. "I don't know what Darla thinks she's doing," she said, "but I know where she went."

"Alexandra, if you know where she went, you have to wait for the grown-ups," Forbearance said.

"They oughter deal with Darla."

"They won't get there in time." Alexandra didn't know why she was so certain of this, but she knew that every second they waited, and every second they spent trying to explain things to the adults, would be a second Darla was getting closer to the portal to the Lands Beyond.

She had no idea what Darla was planning, but Alexandra was sure she needed to be stopped.

"Alexandra," Anna moaned.

"I'll be all right, Anna." Alexandra smiled at her friend. "I can handle Darla. But I have to do this."

She straddled her broom, leaned forward to duck her head low, and launched herself out the window.

Chapter 28 — Oak and Mistletoe

Charmbridge's lawn rushed past beneath her, and then Alexandra was over the woods, hurtling towards the river valley as fast as the Twister would carry her. Wind whipped through her hair and roared in her ears.

She didn't know what Darla's motives were, or what she planned to do. Very little of Darla's behavior made sense to her. Perhaps she had been right all along – Darla had simply gone insane.

She knew her friends probably thought she was just being reckless; she felt reckless, as she shot over the cliff and dived into the valley below. The river was gleaming in the moonlight, and Alexandra felt a mad rush of excitement, despite the situation, as she plummeted almost straight down.

It wasn't just recklessness that had sent Alexandra on this chase, though, nor was it only fury at Darla for cursing Charlie. Alexandra knew that what she'd told her friends was true – Darla's actions spoke of mad desperation. She might be insane, but she wasn't stupid; she knew she wouldn't have very much time before she was caught. Whatever Darla was planning to do, she meant to do it quickly.

And whatever she meant to do couldn't be good.

Alexandra decelerated hard at the end of her descent; her feet almost touched the ground as she reached the mouth of the tunnel at the base of the cliff. Then she shot forward, flying down the tunnel even as she lit her wand. It was mostly straight, and wide enough for a Thestral, so she wasn't worried about hitting anything. As rock walls blurred past all around her, she felt confusion give way to anger. Now the thought of Charlie lying cold and stiff in her arms filled her with rage. The lingering sensation of numbed flesh, stabbed by the same curse that had almost killed her familiar, made her even angrier.

That's four times, she thought. *Four times too many that you've tried to kill me, Darla.*

When the tunnel started to narrow and the walls became smoother, Alexandra slowed down. By the time she reached the entrance to the cave with the painted wall, she was gliding at barely jogging speed. She hopped off the broom and stepped inside, with her wand held aloft, radiating light, ready to fling a hex.

The cave was empty. The rock wall on the far side reflected the light from her wand back at her. The painted figures were motionless and undisturbed.

I'm too late, Alexandra thought. But too late for what? Had Darla already been here, opened the gate – gone through the Veil herself? It made no sense.

She heard a sound, echoing faintly in the tunnels. She spun around and squinted, listening.

It sounded like a girl's voice.

Still gripping her broom in one hand and her wand in the other, Alexandra exited the cave containing the portal to the Lands Beyond, and looked in the direction from which she thought she'd heard the voice.

It was the direction of the other cave down here with a gate – the gate to the Lands Below.

Alexandra walked forward, letting her footsteps echo. She didn't hear the voice again until she was almost to where the tunnel widened into a large cave with a hard clay floor, and then she saw light ahead of her – not the steady glow of a lit wand, but the flickering illumination of a lantern.

“Darla!” Alexandra shouted furiously, worried that she was too late, that Darla had already opened the portal somehow.

There was silence for a moment, and then the light moved, and Alexandra saw Darla emerge from the cavern ahead of her. She was holding a lantern. She raised it so it cast light in Alexandra's face, and gasped. “Alexandra?”

Alexandra pointed her wand at the other girl. Darla's mouth dropped open.

"I don't know what you're up to," Alexandra said, "but it's over. You're done, Darla."

"You don't understand," Darla said.

"You're right." Alexandra's hand was shaking. She wanted to blast Darla's face off. "And I don't care."

Then another figure stepped out of the cave behind Darla, holding onto her legs and peering around her. A house-elf, naked but for a rag wrapped around its waist. It looked familiar.

Alexandra stared at it for a moment. Thoughts whirled in her head, and then she pointed her wand and said, "*Stupefy!*"

Darla screamed and cringed, dropping the lantern and covering her face, but the red beam from Alexandra's wand struck the elf, knocking it back into the cavern behind Darla, out of sight.

Darla crouched, hunched over for several seconds, before she removed her hands from in front of her face and looked at Alexandra with a fearful expression.

"Why did you Stun Nat?" she whimpered. On the floor next to her, the lantern was still lit. Cast against Darla's face from below, its light gave her an evil, sinister appearance.

"Because I know what elves can do," Alexandra said. "But I can take you."

Darla's eyes narrowed as she slowly straightened up again. "Is that so?"

"Yes. Especially since I know your secret. *Accio* mistletoe wand!"

Darla flinched as a stick came flying out of the sleeve of her robe and went spinning through the air into Alexandra's hand. Alexandra dropped her broom to catch the wand. She glanced at it. It was an unremarkable-looking stick, not even cut evenly or polished like a regular wand.

"You cursed Benjamin," Alexandra said. "And all those elves. You killed Ms. Gale."

"I didn't mean to." Darla's voice quavered. "She surprised me – I didn't mean for her to fall down those stairs!"

"Everything you told me was a lie – *everything!*"

"As if you didn't know." Darla began speaking with more assurance, and her haughty expression returned, though Alexandra could still hear the fear in her voice, and see it in Darla's pale face and wide eyes. "You knew. You believed what you wanted to believe. You'd believe anything to bring back your brother."

Alexandra clenched her teeth. "You tried to kill me. You tried to kill Charlie!"

"I wasn't trying to kill your stupid bird!" Darla cried. "If it would have left me alone – but no, it's just like you, it couldn't stay out of the way!"

Alexandra almost didn't see the spell coming at her, and she ducked just before the hex sizzled past over her head. Darla screamed and shouted another curse. This time Alexandra deflected it with a Blocking Jinx.

"I knew it!" Alexandra shouted. "I knew you had another wand!"

Darla was indeed holding a long, white wand in her hand.

Alexandra cast a Disarming Spell, and was surprised when the other girl shouted, "*Protego!*" and blocked it, then fired a Stunner. Alexandra ducked the red beam, cast a Shield Charm of her own when Darla tried to hex her again, and with angry motions, pelted Darla with hexes until the other girl staggered backwards, frantically trying to continue Shielding herself.

Darla was able to deflect another curse, and then her wand crackled with sparks and the stone over Alexandra's head made a cracking, grinding sound in response. Alexandra looked up quickly, but the tunnel over her head did not collapse. She looked back down at Darla, and blocked another Stunner.

She stood there, watching her opponent for a second. Darla was trembling, but there was a wild,

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determined look in her eyes.

“Why, Darla?” Alexandra asked. “What is this all about? Impressing John?”

“John?” Darla laughed bitterly. “John's like you – he thought I was just a stupid, ignorant, little girl.” She sniffed. “I believed him, at first. I thought I really could summon Death, until I realized he was just using me –” Her expression was distant, for a moment, and then she focused on Alexandra again, and glowered. “But you actually did go to the Lands Below. And the Lands Beyond. *Why did you have to come back?*”

Her last question came out as a scream, and she cast a cloud of flickering blue mist that poured out of her wand and billowed towards Alexandra. Alexandra blew it back at her with a gust of wind she conjured from her own wand, and Darla frantically dispelled it.



Alexandra said, “*Levicorpus!*” and Darla flipped head over heels and hung in midair in the middle of the tunnel with her robes falling down around her, exposing her legs.

Darla made a sound which at first Alexandra thought was a groan of defeat, and then she felt

something grab her foot. She looked down and saw a stone hand, and without thinking, pointed her wand and blasted it to pieces.

There was only the one hand, but while she was destroying it, Darla managed to unjinx herself and land on the floor of the tunnel. She picked herself up, angry and bruised. She flung another hex, which Alexandra blocked with a flash and a shower of sparks.

"Weak." Alexandra waved her wand tauntingly. "You may have a wand, but I'm still better than you." Then she paused – the wand Darla was holding was not her own, but it looked familiar. Long, white oak...

"That's Innocence's wand!" she cried. "What have you done to Innocence?"

"She's all right," Darla said softly. "I didn't hurt her." But there was a haunted, guilty look as she turned her face away from Alexandra for a moment.

"You really are a crazy bitch!" Alexandra snarled. Her hand trembled, and then she steadied it as she leveled her wand again.

"Am I?" Darla pointed her wand – Innocence's wand.

"*Protego!*" Alexandra said, and another Shield Charm sprang up in front of her.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" said Darla.

Alexandra saw a green flash of light. It seemed to flare out of Darla's wand in slow motion, and then it came right through her Shield Charm and engulfed her.

She fell backwards, while the world went dark around her, except for little pinpricks of light. She didn't feel herself hit the ground, but she was already in terrible pain – as if she'd just been stomped on, hard, all over her body, from her spine to her skull, from her fingers to her toes. Everything hurt and her vision was black and white and blurry and breathing felt like inhaling knives.

She heard a sound, like a deep gurgle, and after a moment, realized it was being made by her, in the back of her throat. She tasted something – blood.

She forced her eyes open. Tunnel vision blacked out everything but what was directly in front of her face. Right now that was Darla, leaning over her with an expression that was a mixture of contempt and fear. She was holding her wand, looking at it and then back at Alexandra.

"I guess it's harder, with a person," Darla said quietly. "But if I could k-kill Mr. Whiskers..." She blinked rapidly. Her eyes glistened with tears. She took a breath, and her voice became steadier. "It should have worked on someone I *don't* like."

Alexandra brought a hand to her face. It was very difficult – any part of her body that she concentrated on felt like a spike had been driven through it. When she lifted her hand to look at it, she saw that it was covered with blood.

Darla shook her head. "I think it's the wand. If I had my own wand, I'll bet it would have worked."

"Crazy..." Alexandra rasped. She sucked in a breath, though she wanted to cry as the air burned her lungs.

Darla's eyes fixed on hers. She leaned over again and pointed the long, oak wand.

"Maybe I am weak," she said. "Maybe it will take two or three tries."

Alexandra didn't say anything. It was taking all her strength just to hold her head up and keep her eyes open.

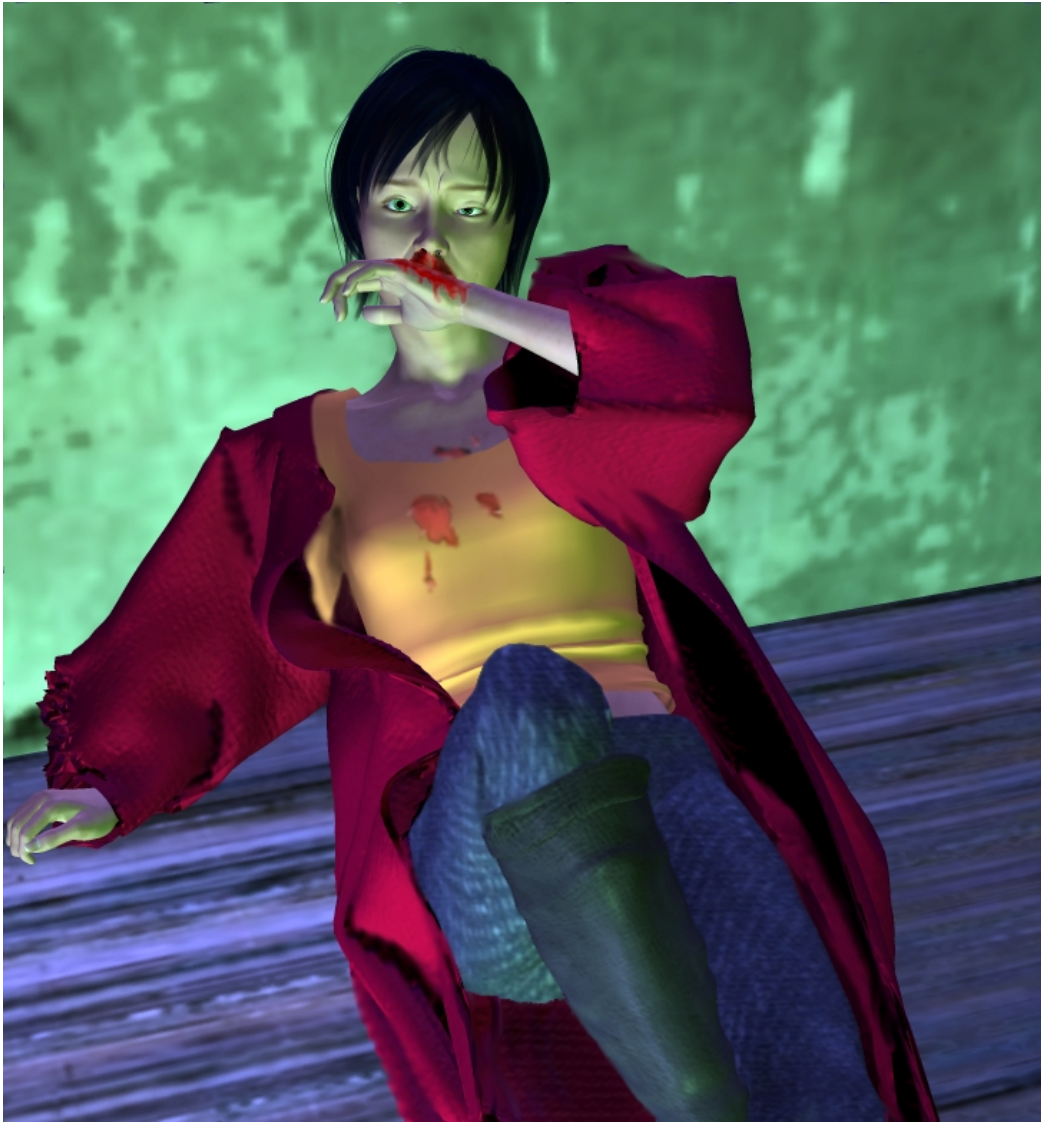
Then Darla stood up. The mad, hateful expression on her face melted away. She looked regretful, and tears trickled down her face.

"I never wanted to hurt anyone," she said. She looked down, and then turned and moved out of Alexandra's field of vision.

Alexandra couldn't hear her or see her. With a groan, she let her head fall back to the floor. It hurt as

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it smacked the stone beneath her, but she hardly noticed; she was already dizzy and nauseous. There was no more light, and she lay there in darkness, too weak to move or even cry out.



“Alexandra?” Someone was shaking her. “Alexandra!”

Alexandra turned her head. There was a light shining directly in her face, and she winced. The light moved. She opened her eyes a crack, and found herself staring directly up at Anna.

“Oh, my ancestors!” Anna said. The soft light from her wand made her face look even paler.

Alexandra tried to sit up, and her head swam. She almost hit it on the stone floor again as she fell back down.

“Alexandra!” Anna caught her. “You – you’re covered with blood!”

Alexandra brought a hand up to her face again, and felt that it was still sticky. She could see blood down the front of her shirt.

“Where's Darla?” Alexandra croaked.

“Darla? I – I didn't see her – what happened?”

“How did you get here?” Alexandra's head was pounding, and her body felt like she'd been run over, but her mind was starting to clear a little. She looked around, and paused when she saw Mr. Journey standing in the tunnel, a few feet away.

“You brought Anna here?” Alexandra said.

The ghost nodded. “I told her you were in trouble.”

“How... what about Sonja, and Ch-Charlie?”

“Mrs. Murphy took them both to the infirmary,” Anna said. “When we told her they'd been struck by a mistletoe wand, she said she'd look up the right counter-curse and treatment in her healer's books.”

Alexandra closed her eyes. She wanted to cry with relief, but then she remembered – there was no time for that. She opened her eyes and tried to lurch to her feet, but her head was still swimming, and she leaned heavily against Anna.

Anna took a couple of green and purple leaves out of a pocket in her robe. She held them out and placed them on Alexandra's lips. “Here,” she said gently. “Chew on these.”

Alexandra did as she was told. The leaves tasted bitter and acidic, and filled her mouth and nose with pungent fumes as soon as she bit into them. She coughed and choked, and Anna held her chin up.

“Don't swallow them, but keep chewing,” Anna said. “What happened to you, Alex?”

The leaves weren't making the pain go away, but they were restoring her senses.

“How did you get here?” Alexandra asked. “Did you borrow a broom to fly down into the valley?”

“Fly down into the valley?” Anna's brow wrinkled. “I followed Mr. Journey through the secret tunnel he showed me.” When Alexandra blinked at her, confused, Anna said, “From the woods?”

Alexandra looked at Journey.

“There's more than one secret tunnel,” the ghost said.

“You just... appeared to Anna, and she followed you?” Alexandra couldn't imagine what Anna's reaction must have been to seeing the ghost of the groundskeeper for the first time. A shadow crossed over her face and she looked at Anna guiltily. “I didn't tell you –”

“I know.” Anna sighed. “I told you you didn't have to tell me everything. I wish you'd told me about *him*, though.” She gestured at the ghost. “Never mind that. Innocence is missing, along with Darla.”

“Innocence!” Alexandra tried to stand up, and Anna put a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

“Alex, we need to get you to the infirmary!”

Alexandra looked at her. “Darla is going to sacrifice Innocence.”

“What?” Anna gasped, and her eyes went wide.

“Help me up.” It was a command. Anna hesitated, and then obeyed. Alexandra wobbled unsteadily as she rose to her feet, then felt another rush of blood from her head as she stooped to pick up her wand, which was lying on the floor. Anna had to hold her to steady her again. While Alexandra was bent over, she hacked and coughed and spat out the bits of leaves in her mouth.

When she stood up again, Anna gently laid a hand on the back of her head, and said, “Tilt your head back.”

Alexandra did as she was told. Anna murmured, “*Aguamenti*,” and water gushed from her wand, pouring across Alexandra's mouth and nose. Alexandra took some into her mouth, while Anna used a handkerchief to wipe the blood off her nose and chin.

“Alex – what happened?” Anna asked.

Alexandra turned her head to the side, and spat out water, then looked at Journey. “You didn't tell her anything, did you? Just that I was down here and needed help?” Her voice rose angrily. “You brought Anna down here and no one else, when Darla is somewhere around throwing Killing Curses!”

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“*Killing Curses?*” Anna squealed in horror.

“Darla's gone, Starshine,” Journey said quietly. “She went through the gate. Nothing I could do to stop her.”

“She took Innocence with her, didn't she?”

“Darla took Innocence... through the gate?” Anna repeated. “I – I don't understand. I don't understand how you knew to follow Darla down here, or –”

Alexandra grabbed Anna's shoulders, and put a finger to her lips. “Ssh,” she murmured, listening.

They could hear a low, keening sound, like a prolonged sob, wavering in volume, but sounding like someone in the depths of misery.

“It's a house-elf,” Journey said. “Darla left the poor fellow behind.”

Alexandra looked at Anna. “Stay here.” Again, it was a command, and Anna swallowed nervously, and almost grabbed her sleeve to stop her, but Alexandra was already walking into the large circular cavern that was the entry to the Lands Below, holding her wand at the ready.

Huddled by a wall, the half-naked house-elf was rocking back and forth with his arms wrapped around his knees, shivering and moaning to himself.

Alexandra approached cautiously. She knew house-elf magic was potent, and she had no idea how this house-elf would react to her, especially after she'd knocked him out with a Stunning Spell.

“Hi,” she said.

The elf didn't respond.

She licked her lips. She could still taste blood and the pungent juice of the leaves Anna had given her. “Your name is Nat, isn't it?”

The elf looked up, regarding her with enormous, round eyes. There was no hostility in his expression, just misery.

Alexandra said, “I'm, um, I'm sorry I Stunned you.”

Nat blinked slowly.

“You're Darla's house-elf, aren't you?” she asked.

Nat blinked again. “Nat belongs to the Dearborns,” he moaned. “Nat did what Miss Darla told him... Master will be very angry at Nat. Nat is a bad, bad elf.” He jabbed his fingers into his own eyes, making Alexandra wince.

“No! Stop it!” she cried, as Nat covered his face with hands, with fresh tears spilling out through his fingers. Forgetting her wariness, she stumbled forward and knelt at the elf's side. “You didn't have any choice, did you?”

“Nat... has done a terrible thing,” Nat moaned, rocking back and forth again. “Nat has done a very terrible thing.”

Alexandra was aware that Anna was walking into the cavern behind her. She wanted to tell her friend to get out, but she was afraid to take her attention off of the elf.

“Nat,” Alexandra said softly. “Darla went to the Lands Below, didn't she?”

Nat wailed louder.

“She made you send her there, didn't she? With an obol.”

Nat abruptly rolled over and began beating his tiny feet and fists against the stone floor. “Nat is supposed to *take care* of his Mary and his Darla and his Hilary! Nat has failed all of his Misses! Nat has disobeyed Master! Nat is a bad! Bad! Bad! House-elf!”

With each 'bad,' Nat slammed his head against the floor beneath him, until Alexandra grabbed him.

“Nat, stop it! You did what you were ordered!”

“Miss Darla made Nat do it... Nat took Miss into the basements even when Nat knew he should not...”

every time Miss summoned him, Nat should have told Master but Miss begged him and said Nat must say nothing for Miss's sake..." The elf's shoulders shook, and Alexandra thought he might begin bashing his head against the floor again if she didn't keep her hands on him.

"You brought Darla down here," Alexandra murmured. She looked up at Anna, who was staring at the two of them with a horrified expression. Mr. Journey was lingering just within the entrance.

Nat wailed. "Nat begged Miss, please do not do this thing!"

"She gave you an obol," Alexandra said. She swallowed. "And you sent her and Innocence through the gate, didn't you?"

Nat's lips trembled, and then he nodded. "Miss took another girl... Nat asked, 'Why?', and Nat begged, 'Please don't,' but –" His eyes blinked rapidly, and then he broke into another bout of violent sobbing.

"I don't understand," Anna said. "Why would Darla take Innocence? Why would Innocence go with her?"

"I don't know," Alexandra said, but she was beginning to figure it out. *She wanted to know everything about my trip to the Lands Below, and I told her about the bone flute, and the Generous Ones, and the Gift Place... I told her everything.* She shuddered.

"Nat," she said. "Can you open the gate for me?"

"What?!" Anna shouted.

Nat looked at her in horror. "Nonononono!" he exclaimed, shaking his head violently. "Is forbidden! Never may house-elves do that –"

"The Compact. I know." Alexandra swallowed. She squeezed Nat's shoulders, and looked into his eyes, so much larger than hers despite the fact that he was only a fraction of her size.

"Nat," she said. "I need to save them. Both of them."

"Alex, what are you talking about?" Anna hissed.

"I need you to send me to the Lands Below," she said. "I don't have an obol to give you. But if it's within your power – then please, I'm begging you. I've been there before – and I came back."

Nat looked horrified and astonished.

"No, Alex, no! What are you saying?" Anna grabbed her by the back of her cloak, as if to drag her away, and Alexandra shrugged her hands off.

"Darla doesn't know what she's getting into, but she's going to do a terrible thing," Alexandra said. She lowered her voice. "You know that, don't you?"

Nat folded into himself, burying his oversized head between his knees and whimpering.

"Even if she comes back alive, she can never undo this," Alexandra said. "Her life will be over. You don't want her to do this, Nat."

Nat began bawling. Tears gushed from his eyes and Alexandra thought the sound was loud enough to be heard in the Lands Below, but she continued to speak in a soft voice: "Send me to the Lands Below. Let me stop her."

"Alex!" Anna cried.

Nat lifted his head and opened his eyes. "It is forbidden," he repeated.

"But you can do it," she whispered. "You can *disobey*. Can't you?"

"Disobey... the Compact?" Nat began trembling violently, as if he might explode at the very thought, and Alexandra kept a tight grip on his shoulders.

"Yes," she whispered. "Disobey. For Darla. And for Innocence. Let me save them. Please."

Nat gulped. His face had turned a ghastly shade of grayish green. Alexandra wondered how terrible it must be for him to contemplate violating his oaths. What fate would befall him? She suspected she was

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asking him to do a terrible thing, too – but there was no other choice.

“Miss will save Nat's Darla?” Nat asked, in a tiny voice. “But Darla and Miss is not friends...”

“No, we're not.” Alexandra held the elf's gaze, and her voice remained steady. “But I'll save her – I'll save them both. I swear it.”

The cavern was quiet and still for several long moments. No one moved. No one said a word.

Then Nat said, so quietly that Alexandra had to lean forward to hear him, “Nat will... do.” A convulsion went through his body.

“Thank you,” Alexandra said.

She rose to her feet and turned to face Anna. Anna's face was white.

“Darla is going to sacrifice Innocence,” Alexandra said. “She's going to send her to the Lands Beyond. I can't explain everything – there's no time – but I know this, Anna. I know it.”

Anna gulped. “Tell Ms. Grimm –”

“Darla has the bone flute – she's probably with the Generous Ones already –” She shook her head, as Anna looked confused.

“How long will it take to go back and get the adults?” Alexandra asked. “And then explain to them what's happened? And then convince someone to come down here?” Her words came out in a rush. She couldn't blame Anna for thinking she was talking madness again – she didn't want to think about how mad what she was planning actually was, because she didn't have a plan. But she also knew that everything she was saying was true. “And then – do you think Ms. Grimm or anyone else is actually going to go to the Lands Below because I tell them I know what's going on? And how would they find their way to the Gift Place – where they have to go? Do you think they'll let me come along to lead them? Anna, Innocence is going to die! And Darla – she's going to do something terrible!”

Anna stared at her. She said nothing, while Nat picked himself off the floor and stood crouched at Alexandra's feet, shivering.

“I have to go,” Alexandra said.

“Is there any other way to save Innocence?” Anna asked.

Alexandra shook her head.

Anna swallowed. “Then let me come with you.”

Alexandra smiled, and wrapped her arms around her friend.

“No,” she said, squeezing Anna tightly. For a few brief moments, Anna's loyalty and courage lifted her spirits and staved off her doubt and fear.

Anna didn't argue. She just trembled, and hugged Alexandra back.

Alexandra put her lips to Anna's ear, and whispered, “Best friends... forever.”

Anna held her tighter.

“After I go through the gate,” Alexandra whispered, very softly, “put a Body-Bind Curse on Nat, so he doesn't start punishing himself. I have a feeling he'll do something terrible to himself if you don't.”

Anna gulped, and nodded quickly.

Alexandra released her, and gestured for her to back away. Anna did, until she was at the edge of the cavern, well away from the clay that filled the center of the chamber.

Alexandra raised her wand and said, “*Accio* broom.” Her broom, still lying in the tunnel outside the chamber, flew right through Ben Journey and into her hand.

“You'd better make sure Anna gets back upstairs okay,” she said to the ghost.

Journey nodded. “Good luck, Alexandra.”

Alexandra looked at Anna. “I'll be back.”

Anna nodded. “I know.” She sounded more hopeful than confident, but she smiled, and her eyes

Oak and Mistletoe

were shining. "You always come back."

Alexandra stood in the center of the cavern and straddled her broom. She held up her wand and said, "Nox," extinguishing her Light Spell.

She turned to the elf. "I'm ready."

Nat was already shivering as if his arms and legs might shake themselves free from his body, but he nodded, with his head also trembling violently.

"Please save Nat's Darla," he pleaded.

"I will," Alexandra said.

Nat closed his eyes. The clay at Alexandra's feet turned smoky and black, and then insubstantial, and she fell through it, into darkness.

Chapter 29 — A Life for a Life

She didn't fall very far.

Alexandra was ready this time. She knew what lay beneath Charmbridge. It was a long drop into a deep underwater lake, but unlike last time, she expected to fall and she was already on her broom, so she brought herself to a halt after only a few yards.

It was completely dark. She listened, and could hear only the faint sound of water dripping off of stalactites.

In the lake below dwelled an underwater panther – an enormous, fire-breathing beast with a golden hide that was impervious to spells.

That was the momma cat – if she was lucky, it wasn't here right now. It had a litter of cubs. Last year, they'd been the size of mountain lions. Alexandra had no idea how big they'd have grown by now, but she didn't want to encounter any of them.

Which meant she had to get out of here as quickly as possible.

She descended a little further, and a little further, watching the darkness below for any signs of glowing, lantern-like eyes. She didn't know how close she was to the water's surface – it was hard to judge distance in absolute darkness. She descended as low as she dared, and then drew a quiet breath.

"*Lumos*," she said, and her wand illuminated the vast cavern, reflecting light off the black water ten feet below, and revealing numerous tunnels and caves all along the edges of the lake. On the far side of the cavern, the lake simply disappeared into shadows, too far away for the light of her wand.

Alexandra had been hoping she'd recognize the tunnel she and Maximilian had taken last time, but she didn't. They all looked alike. She didn't waste time studying them; she picked one, and zoomed into it without looking back.

She relaxed a little after she had flown for a full minute, following several twists and turns in the tunnel, and heard no noise behind her – no angry roar, no scrabbling of claws on stone, no sounds of pursuit. Either the cats were all away, or they hadn't noticed her, or she'd come and gone before they could emerge from the water.

Or they were waiting for her somewhere ahead.

Anna might not have had quite so much faith in her if Alexandra had admitted how unplanned and unprepared she was. Her Lost Traveler's Compass was still lying on the floor of her room, along with her Skyhook and all the other things that had been in her backpack. She forced herself onward, hoping that memory and intuition would guide her. It was all she had.

She continued flying, and crossed over a deep chasm that split the tunnel; it was much too far to leap. No one without a broom would have been able to cross it, and it seemed bottomless. Alexandra kept flying. She almost ran into a stalagmite barrier rising in her path, and for a moment, feared she had hit a dead-end. She could only see more darkness on the other side of the stalagmites, beyond the circle of light cast by her wand. She got off her broom and squeezed through the largest gap between them. It wasn't easy and she almost got stuck, but she pushed and grunted, and ancient stone crumbled around her fingers before she tumbled through, landing on top of her broom.

Fifty paces past the stone formations that had almost blocked her path, she emerged from the tunnels at the foot of a tall cliff that stretched from one end of the horizon to the other, beneath a black, starless sky. Before her, the ghostly gray landscape of the Lands Below rippled like a vast blanket. It was indistinct and almost featureless, at first glance, but Alexandra knew that there was terrain out there – there were cracked mud flats and gray marshes and huge black lakes, and a seemingly endless plain cut

with long, twisting ravines, and somewhere, far in the distance, mountains.

The mountains were where the Generous Ones lived, and that was where Darla had gone.

Darla, however, had the bone flute, which had transported Alexandra, Maximilian, and Charlie there instantly.

When Alexandra had flown back from the mountains to this cliff, it had taken – hours? Days?

Time is different in the Lands Below, she reminded herself. She and Maximilian had spent three days in the Lands Below, but when Alexandra had returned, a week had passed. For all she knew, Darla had already made whatever bargain she intended to make with the Generous Ones, and Innocence was already dead –

No.

She mounted her broom and took off.

It had taken her longer to return last time because she'd been hurt. After her escape from the Generous Ones, she had been bruised, beaten, and burned, exhausted beyond measure, and overwhelmed with grief and guilt, having just seen her brother die.

She was hurt now, too – she could still feel pain throughout her body, and there was still dried blood on her face – but at least she was clear-headed. She was also tired; she tried to ignore that, and the numbness in her fingers and toes from the first curse Darla had hit her with, through Charlie. She started to wonder whether she'd ever see Charlie again, and then forced that thought out of her mind as well.

She zoomed across the Lands Below, pushing the Twister as fast as it would go. She was careful to stay close to the ground – so close that her feet almost brushed rock outcroppings or little dunes that suddenly popped up from time to time. The sky above wasn't really a sky – it was the ceiling of an immense cavern, the size of the Lands Below itself, and anything that flew too high attracted the attention of hordes of fierce bats.

Alexandra and Maximilian had walked, when they had first come to the Lands Below, because they hadn't known where they were going. This time, Alexandra knew her destination vaguely – she recognized the changing terrain beneath her, if not the precise locations – and she didn't care about attracting attention. So she let the Lands Below speed past beneath her.

She crossed mud flats inhabited by strange, stunted plants and large, multi-legged creatures. She passed over desert plains filled with sand that suddenly launched itself into the air in spinning, sandy whirlwinds without any wind, and cacti that moved when you didn't look directly at them. She recognized the rocky ravines that flashed past beneath her, and occasionally saw rabbit-like creatures hopping about, and once a snake that looked big enough to swallow a car whole.

The Lands Below were strange and dangerous, but Alexandra didn't fear anything that lived here as much as she feared where she was going – the Gift Place of the Generous Ones.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Time is different here, she thought again. She didn't have a watch and she had only a vague idea of how long she'd been on her broom. Long enough that her hands hurt and her butt was sore, and she badly wanted to land and take a break, but she didn't. She thought about all the laps Ms. Shirtliffe had made her do on bare broomsticks. It was starting to hurt like that.

But there were mountains ahead of her.

The geography of the Lands Below, she suspected, was not strictly linear. She wasn't sure she could have really passed over all the regions she'd seen in the relatively short amount of time she'd been flying, but the surreal, dreamlike quality of the landscape and the unchanging, gray light had a way of messing with one's sense of time and distance.

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It didn't matter now, though. She was here. She saw a particularly tall mountain, with a narrow path winding around and around it, descending into the valley below. There were tiny stone houses here and there, and caves.

And Alexandra had no idea what she was going to do.

She had literally been flying by the seat of her pants. She'd sworn to Nat that she would save Darla and Innocence. She wasn't even sure she'd be able to save herself. She had barely escaped from the Generous Ones last time, and she had been fighting for her life when she got away. What was to keep them from simply killing her now?

Nothing, she thought. *So what am I going to do, turn around?*

She descended into the valley between the mountains, and noticed something odd. There were no Generous Ones anywhere in sight.

When she and Maximilian had arrived here last year, the elf-like Generous Ones had been moving about all over these mountains where they dwelled. But now the mountainsides were empty; she saw no movement anywhere.

She dropped lower, and saw a large, circular stone house, sitting in front of a tall, carved wooden pole. But there was no smoke coming from the hole in the roof of the Place of Exchange. The Generous Ones weren't gathered there.

Alexandra felt a chill – there was only one other place she knew of where they might gather.

She rotated about on her broom, hovering high in the air with sheer drops and jagged cliffs all around her. Finally, her eyes settled on two peaks that looked familiar. There was a deep, deep chasm between them; it went down farther than she could see. It was pitch black at the very bottom.

She swallowed, and dived into the chasm.

Cliffs rushed past her. She angled almost straight down, and it was like staring into an enormous tunnel, larger than any of those below Charmbridge. The darkness was waiting to swallow her whole. Like it had swallowed Maximilian.

Her instincts were screaming at her to get out of there – instead, she kept going, until she was in the darkness and could see only a dim, gray light above her. Once she was in the shadows, she realized that it wasn't really completely dark at the very bottom of the chasm – there was light down there.

She dropped faster, until the air was whistling past her ears. There was a fire burning in front of a large rock, and there was a pinpoint of light from a wand... there were at least a hundred elves gathered around a flat black depression at the very bottom...

The blackness in their midst was total and all-consuming; no light from the fire or the wand reflected from its surface. Alexandra heard whispers.

The gate to the Lands Beyond had been opened.

She was directly overhead before anyone noticed her. The first to spot her were some of the Generous Ones. They pointed and uttered startled squawks.

Darla was standing before the black pool of darkness, with her back to the fire, and next to her stood Innocence.

Alexandra was still decelerating when she slammed into Darla. Her broom hit hard enough to jolt her, and she felt a solid thump as Darla cried out in pain. Darla and Innocence had been standing on a slight rise between the depression where the portal was located, and a wider, flatter depression where dozens of Generous Ones were sitting or standing. Alexandra and Darla both went tumbling together into the midst of the elves, scattering them like bowling pins before sliding painfully across the ground. Alexandra ignored the burning sensation in her knees and elbow from skidding across rock, and the new pains from the collision, and even as Darla cried out and tried to rise, Alexandra clenched her fist

and punched the other girl in the face.

Darla screamed in pain. Alexandra staggered to her feet. Darla rolled over and groaned.

Dozens of pairs of eyes blinked at her. Darla's face was a ghostly mask as firelight flickered across it. Alexandra put her foot on the wand Darla had been holding, now lying just out of her reach, and pointed her own wand at her.

"Petrificus Totalus!" she said.

Darla twitched as the curse hit her, and then she became as stiff and unmoving as the rocks around her.

Alexandra turned to face the large boulder on which, she assumed, the leader of the Generous Ones would be perched.

It wasn't Cejaiaqui, the ancient, wizened elf whom she remembered, who was gazing down at her now. It was Tiow, the first of the Generous Ones to greet her and Maximilian. He was not as old as Cejaiaqui, and didn't wear as many beads and trinkets as Cejaiaqui had, though he did have several feathers dangling from his ears, and he held a carved wooden stick.

"Alexandra Thorn," Tiow said. "Daughter of Abraham Thorn." His expression was hard to read. "You have returned."

"Yes." Alexandra stood there for a moment, and when the Generous Ones didn't immediately attack her, she walked over to Innocence.

Innocence had not moved since Alexandra had arrived.

She was wearing one of Darla's borrowed robes, and her hair was tied in a pretty bow, but her blue eyes were vacant. She stared blankly ahead, and did not respond when Alexandra waved a hand in front of her face, shook her, and called her name. Alexandra spun to face Tiow.

"What did you do to her?" she demanded.

Tiow raised his hairless eyebrows. "We? Did nothing to the child." He pointed a dry, leathery finger at Darla. "Darla Dearborn bewitched this one."

Alexandra scanned the assembly in front of her. All of the Generous Ones were gathered here, like last time. After their initial exclamations when she had dropped out of the sky and assaulted Darla, they had been mostly silent, but they were all staring at her. They wore beaded vests and sandals and snakeskin belts, and some of them glittered with metal jewelry and polished stones attached to their fingers and wrists and necks. There were small, elongated skulls hanging from the belts of a few; others held sharp stone knives or long spears tipped with polished stone points, and a few, like Tiow, held wooden sticks. Alexandra remembered being burned by those.

She had no idea what they were thinking. In the darkness, most of their faces weren't visible, and only Tiow spoke.

"You are very brave to return," he said. "Your need must be great."

She looked at him.

"I can't play your word games," she said. "I don't want to exchange gifts with you. I just want to take Darla and Innocence and go home. Please – we've done nothing to you. Let us go."

Tiow's eyes narrowed. "You have done a great deal to us, daughter of Abraham Thorn. Or do you not recall your most inhospitable departure from our lands when last we saw you?"

"I remember. I remember that you tricked us, and you sent my brother to the Lands Beyond."

Alexandra fought to keep her voice steady. "And now you're planning to do the same thing to Innocence?" She took Innocence's hand. Innocence didn't resist, and didn't respond, but Alexandra realized the younger girl was holding something – she took it from her fingers, and looked at it. It was a metal disk, stamped with the Seal of the Confederation. Confused, she looked up at Tiow. "What kind

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of monsters are you, that you sacrifice children?"

"We?" Tiow smiled unpleasantly. "If you think we are monsters, Alexandra Thorn, then you truly know nothing of the Generous Ones. We did not bring this child here to be sent to the Lands Beyond – she did." Tiow pointed at Darla again. "We do not sacrifice children – you do."

"What are you talking about?" Alexandra shouted.

"Every seven years," Tiow said. "It is your Deathly Regiment. Every seven years, you wizards send us one of your children."

"No," Alexandra said.

Tiow still wore that malevolent smile. "Your Confederation wanted the gates to the Lands Below closed. You wanted all creatures who dwell here to stay here. You wanted the Powers propitiated, and you wanted the wizard tribes of this world powerless to undo the magic of the world your people came from – what you call the 'Old World.'" He chuckled contemptuously. "So you came to us and treated with us. Such powerful magic you desired, and still desire, to control the Lands Below for yourselves. We did not set the terms of the bargain; you offered. We do not demand children; you send them."

Alexandra shook her head, sickened. "How could you – how could we – how could they do that?"

Tiow shrugged. "Such are the ways of wizards."

"Not all wizards," Alexandra glared at him. "You don't have to accept what they offer!"

"Why should we care about the lives of human children, if you place so little value on them yourselves?"

Alexandra stared into Tiow's inhuman face. "And what did Darla want, in exchange for Innocence? What were you going to give her?"

Tiow looked surprised. "I just told you, human child." He pointed his finger at the still silent, motionless Ozarker girl. "She is the sacrifice under the terms of your Deathly Regiment."

"What?" Alexandra shook her head. "That doesn't make sense – Darla can't do that!"

"Seven years have passed, and Darla Dearborn brought us the next child your Confederation has chosen."

"Are you crazy?" Alexandra shouted. "Darla's just a teenager! She can't choose anyone! Do you really think she speaks for the Confederation?" She gestured at Darla, who was still lying paralyzed on the ground, with blood trickling out of her nose.

Tiow shrugged again. "We do not question whom you choose to send – she brought us a seal."

Alexandra looked down at the disk in her hand. She shook her head and looked up again.

"You can't have her," she said, taking Innocence's hand. "You can't have any of us."

Tiow peered at her. "Did you not see the blackness?" he asked. "Do you not hear the whispers calling from the Lands Beyond?"

Alexandra did hear them. The back of her neck was crawling; she forced herself not to look over her shoulder.

"The gate has already been opened," Tiow said. "Only a living soul can close it."

Alexandra shook her head. "Leave it open, then."

Tiow laughed harshly. "That cannot be done. The Lands Beyond are not meant to remain open. The Most Deathly Power must be satisfied. The gate must be closed." His eyes narrowed. "And we certainly will not send one of our own through it." He pointed at her. "You choose, daughter of Abraham Thorn."

She stared at him. She was surrounded. She had no illusions that she could fight off all the Generous Ones a second time. She doubted she could even escape by herself – there was no way she'd be able to escape with Innocence and Darla.

Tiow gestured at Darla. "If this one has deceived and meant to send your friend, let her be the sacrifice. We shall not object."

Alexandra shook her head. "No."

"Then choose – yourself or the yellow-haired child."

Alexandra turned around slowly. The gate to the Lands Beyond yawned in front of her, the horrible black void that Maximilian had disappeared into. She heard the whispers and felt the cold.

The Generous Ones were silent behind her, though she thought she heard a gasp or a sob, followed by a brief scuffle.

No, she thought. Why is it always like this? How do people get forced to make these kinds of choices? Why are the Generous Ones so cruel – why is Death so cruel – ?

Death.

She reached into her pocket, and found the coin Death had given her.

She held it in her hand, studying it. It glimmered a little in the firelight. She closed her fingers around the humble, ordinary-looking pigeon, and squeezed her eyes shut.

"DEATH!" she shouted. She opened her eyes. "You already took my brother – you don't need to take anyone else!"

She raised the coin over her head, and with a scream, flung it through the Veil.

The Generous Ones murmured behind her.

Alexandra felt a wave of numbness that almost washed away her fear, as the Deathly coin disappeared into the void without a sound.

Nothing happened, at first. She didn't really know what she was expecting.

Then the blackness began to solidify. The murmurs of the Generous Ones changed to astonishment, as the black void disappeared, replaced by cold, hard clay. In moments, the portal to the Lands Beyond was closed.

Alexandra stared at it, knowing in her heart that it would never open again – not for Maximilian.

She turned back around, and faced the Generous Ones.

"No one needs to die," she said quietly. "Let us go."

Tiow was speechless. All of the Generous Ones were silent.

Then Tiow's face darkened. "Why should we, Alexandra Thorn?" He crouched, and rested his slender hands on the rock in front of him, staring at her with his eye level just above hers. "You are in our power, now, and you owe us a debt. Why should we let any of you go?"

"A debt? *You took my brother!* What more do you want from me?" She clenched her wand. "I won't accept any of your gifts." She gestured at the girl next to her, who still had not moved the entire time, and seemed completely unaware of what was going on around her. "Did she or Darla accept any of your 'generosity'?"

"No," Tiow said. "But you, daughter of Abraham Thorn, you insulted us and attacked us."

She pointed her wand. "I know I'll lose if I fight you, but I will fight –"

Tiow laughed, and Alexandra's wand flew out of her hand, tumbling end over end into the darkness, landing somewhere out of sight with a clatter. She stared in dismay at her empty hand.

"You escaped last time thanks to the treacherous help of one of your '*house-elves*.'" Tiow sneered, and Alexandra saw the Generous Ones turning scornful gazes at one of their number, standing near the back of the gathering. Alexandra gasped when she recognized the elf, whiter and smaller than the Generous Ones surrounding him, unadorned with feathers or trinkets, wearing only baggy, makeshift pants and a worn, oversized, denim jacket. His head was bowed, and Alexandra could see the scar where one of his ears should have been.

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“Quimley will not help you this time,” Tiow said. Indeed, there were now several Generous Ones crowding around the former house-elf, who simply stood in their midst and shivered.

Alexandra locked her eyes on Tiow. “If you take my life, then you'll owe something for it, won't you?” She tried to sound commanding and confident, though inside, her guts were twisting in knots. “I think my father, Abraham Thorn, might collect on that debt.”

Tiow laughed again. “You threaten us with your father?” Despite his laughter, though, his expression became thoughtful as he regarded her. “I think your words are empty. Your father sent *you* to be the sacrifice last time.”

Alexandra held the elf's gaze, and kept her face impassive. She didn't really know herself whether what Tiow said was true.

“Nonetheless,” Tiow continued, “even the mighty wizard Abraham Thorn cannot protest the taking of a life for a life. You *do* owe us a debt, Alexandra Thorn.”

“What are you talking about?” she demanded.

“Have you forgotten Cejaiaqui?”

“Cejaiaqui?” Alexandra blinked. “He's your leader.”

“He was our leader.” Tiow's eyes narrowed. “Until you slew him.”

Alexandra's mouth dropped open. “I did not!”

“But you did!” Tiow rose to his full height – which was only a little more than half Alexandra's, but standing atop the boulder, he towered over her, with firelight flickering against the rocky cliffs behind him. “Have you forgotten how you struck him down, with your wand and the wand of your brother?”

“I didn't kill him! He almost killed me after I blasted him!”

“He was grievously injured by his wounds, Alexandra Thorn. Cejaiaqui was old, even for us.” Tiow fixed her with an accusing stare. “We could not heal him. He perished soon afterwards.”

Alexandra stood there, feeling a deep sense of confusion and unease.

Am I a murderer?

She still thought the Generous Ones were murderous tricksters – but she hadn't intended to kill anyone. Hadn't she been fighting for her life?

Not when you blasted Cejaiaqui – you were just angry.

She'd been almost out of her mind with anger and grief. She had just seen Maximilian die.

She looked up at Tiow. “What do you want?” she asked quietly.

“A life for a life,” Tiow said. “That is the way.”

“Revenge? That's it? I was trying to escape, and *all of you* were trying to kill me –” Alexandra sniffed, and wiped at her eyes. It was so unfair. Everything was always unfair. She had tried so hard – but she was always outmatched, and playing by rules she didn't understand.

I probably should have died already, she thought. That almost made her laugh.

“Fine,” she said quietly. She lifted her empty hands, and let them drop back to her sides. “If you just want to kill me, what's stopping you?” There was a lump in her throat, but she faced Tiow bravely.

“Murder is the wizards' way, Alexandra Thorn,” Tiow said. “No – we will not slay you where you stand. We want a life given freely – not with a Seal, not in exchange for a token to be given to your father, but offered up as repayment of your blood debt. We will accept that as your gift to the Generous Ones.”

“Gift.” She snorted. Then a chill went through her. “You want me... to go to the Lands Beyond.”

“*I will not see you again before your time,*” Death had said. She hadn't expected that to be so soon.

“It does not have to be you,” Tiow said.

Alexandra felt another chill. *Trading lives again. Like we're all just coins.*

"I won't give you anyone else's life." She glowered at the elf leader. "What if I refuse? Will you just kill me then?"

"No." Tiow smiled slyly. "But you and your friends will never leave the Lands Below."

She looked at Darla and Innocence, both of them still immobile and helpless, then turned back to Tiow. "You want my life, given freely?" Her voice was barely a whisper. "All right." She swallowed past the lump in her throat, as Tiow's eyes gleamed triumphantly. "But you have to gift me something in return."

Tiow squinted at her. "And what is that, Alexandra Thorn?"

Alexandra took a deep breath. "First, you have to let Darla and Innocence go. No debts, no tricks – they get to leave freely."

Tiow nodded. "They have accepted none of our gifts. They are free to go."

"Second," Alexandra said, "you have to give them a way to return home. No counting that as a debt – it's part of letting them go free."

Tiow's smile faded. Alexandra clenched her teeth. She knew the sneaky elf had been trying to trick her! *Sure, say they're free to go, but of course they don't have any way to leave – and you'd just indebt them again.*

"Agreed," Tiow said, a little less amicably.

"Lastly," Alexandra said, "you have to let me go with them. Just for a little while."

Tiow frowned. "You seek to trick us. Are we fools, Alexandra Thorn?"

"I just want a chance to – to say good-bye." She closed her eyes, as she felt tears blurring her vision. "I won't trick you. I'm not like you." She said the last part with an edge in her voice, and the Generous Ones sensed it, and muttered and whispered to each other.

She opened her eyes. "I only came here to save Innocence... and Darla. Now you're going to take my life. I'm only fourteen!" Her voice wavered unsteadily. "You can't even give me just a little more time? Is that too much *generosity* for you?"

Tiow blinked, and exchanged looks with the Generous Ones who sat in a circle by his rock. They were the elders of the elven tribe, and one of them said something in their language. Then another one spoke. Tiow squinted and responded.

There was a chorus of voices as the Generous Ones began talking amongst themselves. Alexandra looked at Innocence, while her fate was being debated.

"Innocence," she whispered. She shook the girl. "Innocence, please wake up. Snap out of it!" She sighed. "What did Darla do to you?"

Innocence didn't respond, and Alexandra glared at Darla. Darla was still frozen by her Body-Bind Curse, though Alexandra knew she could see and hear what was going on around her.

At last, Tiow spoke. "Seven years, Alexandra Thorn."

She looked up at him in shock. "What?"

Tiow's smile was neither kind nor cruel – it was a calculating smile, but he sounded grudgingly respectful when he spoke to her. "We can be as patient as we are generous," he said. "Come here, and hold out your hand."

Alexandra stepped forward, until she was standing at the base of the rock, looking up at Tiow, and she held out her hand. She didn't flinch when Tiow produced a sharp stone knife.

"Do you swear, Alexandra Thorn, to repay your debt, a life for a life, in no more than seven years' time?"

Seven years, Alexandra thought. She hadn't been expecting that much time. She supposed that for them, this was generous.

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"I swear it," she said. "On my honor as a witch."

Tiow slashed downward, and Alexandra felt a sharp pain across her palm. She winced, but didn't move, as blood flowed from her hand, trickling down her arm and dripping onto the boulder at Tiow's feet.

Tiow nodded and seemed satisfied. Alexandra lowered her arm, clenching her cut hand. Blood continued dripping from it. It hurt a lot.

The Generous Ones were all staring at her, with varying expressions: anger, curiosity, amazement, pity.

She walked over to retrieve her wand. None of the Generous Ones tried to stop her. Some began disappearing, popping out of sight one by one, while Tiow remained seated on his rock, watching her.

She picked up her broom, leaving Darla's lying on the ground. She hurt all over, she was tired, and now she had bargained her life away. Alexandra rarely gave in to despair and she had fought so very hard, all year, not to break down, but right now, she wanted to cry.

"How do we get home, Tiow?" she asked, without looking at him.

"Quimley will take you, Miss," said a quavering voice.

Alexandra turned to find Quimley standing in front of her, hands clasped together. None of the Generous Ones were clustered around him, now – in fact, they seemed to be giving him a wide berth, those who were still lingering in the Gift Place.

"Quimley." She knelt next to him. "Did you... did you get in trouble? I thought the Generous Ones might hurt you for wanting to help me..."

Quimley shook his head. "Quimley is sorry... Quimley wanted to help Abraham Thorn's daughter, but the Generous Ones would not allow it." He looked up at her – it was rare for Quimley to look anyone in the eye – and his expression was woeful. "Alexandra Thorn has sworn a terrible oath."

"I know," she said quietly. "But I didn't have a choice, did I?"

Quimley looked down and didn't say anything.

"Anyway, seven years is a long time." Alexandra sighed, then she gave him a forced smile, and rose to her feet. She looked at her bleeding hand – the cut was long but shallow. She pointed her wand at it and cast one of the first aid spells Maximilian had taught her. It didn't close the wound, but the blood began oozing and congealing around the cut, instead of continuing to drip out of it. She turned to Innocence, who was still standing quietly in the same place.

"*Finite*," she said, trying to dispel whatever curse had been put on the girl. Nothing happened.

"*Finite incantatem*," she said. She went through every other counter-curse she knew. None of them worked.

Gritting her teeth, she pointed her wand at Darla, and said, "*Finite*." Darla's stiff posture collapsed, and she rolled onto her side and gasped.

"Get up," Alexandra said.

Darla slowly brought herself to her hands and knees, and then stood up. She kept her eyes on Alexandra the whole time.

"What did you do to Innocence?" Alexandra asked. "Undo it."

Darla wiped her bloody nose with her sleeve, then smiled.

"Give me a wand," she said softly.

"I don't think so." Alexandra glanced at where Innocence's wand was still lying among the rocks, and said, "*Accio* wand." The white oak wand flew into her hand. She pocketed it, along with the Confederation seal, and then pointed her wand at Darla again.

"What did you do to Innocence?" she repeated.

Darla stared at her sullenly.

“WHAT IS YOUR PROBLEM?” Alexandra screamed. She strode forward and seized the front of Darla's robe, holding her wand up so it was pointed down at the other girl's face. “This is all your fault! Do you have any idea what you've done?”

“What are you going to do, Crucio me?” There was no fear on Darla's face. She just gazed steadily back at Alexandra. “Nothing you do to me matters now.”

Alexandra's rage was spent as quickly as it had come. She released Darla, and pushed her away, panting. She turned to Quimley, who had cowered with his hands over his head when Alexandra began screaming.

“I'm sorry, Quimley. I didn't mean to scare you.”

Quimley looked up. “Alexandra Thorn will not hurt the bad girl?”

Darla snorted. Alexandra gave her a venomous look, and said, “No.” She took Innocence's hand. “Not unless she tries to do something stupid – if she does, I swear, I will.”

Darla looked away.

“Can you take us to Charmbridge Academy, Quimley?” she asked.

Quimley nodded. “There is a way from the Lands Below to there. Quimley must take your hands.”

Alexandra let Quimley wrap his fingers around the hand that was holding her wand, while her other hand held Innocence's. The elf looked at Darla, who folded her arms in front of her chest.

“Does she have to be conscious for you to bring her with us?” Alexandra asked Quimley, with an ominous look at Darla.

Quimley stammered, and Darla glared at her, then thrust a hand out at the elf, looking away disdainfully.

Quimley took Darla's hand. A moment later, they were yanked through space, and then they were standing in pitch darkness. Alexandra immediately lit her wand, and saw the cavern she had left, in the tunnels beneath Charmbridge. She recognized the clay floor beneath her.

She knelt, and put her arms around Quimley's neck, still keeping a wary eye on Darla.

“Thank you, Quimley,” she said, kissing the elf's cheek. “Thank you so much.”

“Alexandra Thorn is welcome,” Quimley said, sounding amazed at her gratitude. “Quimley remembers Alexandra Thorn's father. Quimley has seen that Alexandra Thorn is brave and good.”

Alexandra squeezed her eyes shut. “I don't know about that.”

“Quimley knows.”

Alexandra opened her eyes, and smiled gently at the elf. “Can I ask you one more favor?”

He nodded.

“Just call me Alexandra. Or Alexandra Quick, if you have to. But not Alexandra Thorn.”

Quimley looked a little puzzled, but nodded again. “As Alexandra Quick wishes.” He looked down, wringing his hands. “Alexandra Quick's father is a mighty wizard. Perhaps... perhaps he can help her...”

“Perhaps,” she said quietly. “Quimley... are you sure you don't want to stay here, instead of returning to the Lands Below? They could probably find a place for you at Charmbridge – even as a free elf.”

Quimley shook his head. “Forgive Quimley, Alexandra Quick, but Quimley will not live among wizards again, even as a free elf.”

What had his former masters done to him, Alexandra wondered, that made living among the Generous Ones preferable to living among wizards? “Do you really have to return to them?”

Quimley gave her a feeble smile. “It is where Quimley belongs now.” He blinked, and looked at Innocence, then Darla. “Take care of your friends, Alexandra Quick.” He looked back at her. “If Alexandra Quick summons Quimley, Quimley will come, though perhaps not right away.”

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She nodded. "Thank you."

The elf gave her one last, sad look, and then disappeared.

Alexandra stood up. "And you," she said to Darla. "You're going to go to –"

Darla slammed into her with a scream.

Alexandra stumbled back and fell against the wall behind her, as the other girl's sudden lunge knocked the wind out of her, and then Darla was grabbing her hair. Alexandra cried, "Ow!" and reached for the other girl's hand, and then her head was slammed into the wall. Stunned, Alexandra tried to raise her wand, and Darla smacked her head against the wall a second time. Alexandra saw stars. She tried to push Darla off. Her head struck the rock wall a third time, and her vision became fuzzy and the world swam and spun around her. She slumped to the ground. She felt hands rummaging through her pockets, but all she could do was groan in protest.

She tried to get up, as she heard footsteps retreating. She was too nauseous and dizzy. She took several deep, shuddering breaths, until the dizziness faded enough that she was more aware of the pain. She extended her hand, feeling rough stone beneath it, and her fingers brushed against something. Her hand closed around a wand – her wand.

"*Lumos*," she mumbled. The light that flared in front of her face blinded her and hurt her eyes. She winced and rolled onto her back before opening her eyes again.

She heard music.

She forced herself to a sitting position. The music came from not far away. It wasn't any kind of a melody – in fact, it was barely music at all. Just a series of notes, one after another, windy and discordant.

Alexandra knew that sound.

She lurched to her feet. Nausea made her double over and almost brought her to her knees again. She took deep breaths and straightened up, slowly.

Her head was throbbing. Innocence and Darla were both gone. But she knew where they were, and she followed the sound of the bone flute.

She found them in the room with the cave paintings. Darla was blowing into the bone flute. Innocence's wand was at her feet, glowing softly. And the portal to the Lands Beyond had opened.

Innocence was holding something in her hand, and walking towards the doorway through the Veil.

"Innocence!" Alexandra screamed, amplifying the pain in her skull. She kept screaming: "Innocence! Stop!"

Innocence didn't respond, but something else did. Smoke curled around the edges of the black void, and then the smoke became a shadowy figure – something vaguely human-shaped, but featureless except for darker spots in what would have been its face. It drifted free of the void, brushed past Innocence, and floated towards Alexandra.

Alexandra pointed her wand, trying to remember the spell Ms. Shirtliffe had taught, through the throbbing pain in her head. "*Anathema Anima!*"

The shade made a hissing sound and halted in mid-air, but did not retreat. Innocence was almost to the portal.

"*Anathema jibay!*" Alexandra shouted, and the spirit was sucked back into the void like a ring of blown smoke.

More were emerging from the darkness. Darla was still blowing on the flute, wide-eyed and desperate. Her face was sweaty, and she sounded almost out of breath.

"INNOCENCE!" Alexandra screamed. Another step, and Innocence would be through the Veil.

Alexandra pointed her wand at the girl, and squeezed her eyes to narrow slits, summoning all the

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anger she had left, and for one instant, forcing all other thoughts from her mind.



“*Crucio*,” she said.

Innocence staggered, and for a moment Alexandra's heart stopped, as she thought Innocence might stumble forward through the gate.

The metal coin Innocence had been holding dropped from her fingers, and she cried out. More shadowy spirits were drifting around her. Innocence shrieked as one touched her, and she fell to her knees.

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"Innocence!" Alexandra yelled.

The girl turned her head in Alexandra's direction and looked at her with enormous, terrified eyes.

"COME TO ME! NOW!" Alexandra's voice was a command, and she held out a hand, repeating it. "Don't think! COME! HERE! NOW!"

Innocence half-rose, and staggered towards her.

"*Anathema jibay!*" Alexandra shouted, banishing another one of the spirits. Innocence flinched as one of the shades suddenly loomed between them, and Alexandra repeated the incantation and sent it whirling into the void as well. "Keep coming, Innocence! Just close your eyes and follow my voice!"

Innocence obeyed. Alexandra banished another spirit, even as two more emerged from the gate. She reached a hand out and grabbed Innocence and pulled her close.

"*Anathema jibay!*" she said again, as another shadowy wraith lunged in their direction. Innocence was trembling and crying, and Alexandra said, "Keep your eyes closed and hold onto me."

Darla had stopped blowing into the flute.

She and Alexandra stared at each other, across the small dark cave, and then Darla stumbled forward. The wraiths turned on her.

"Darla!" Alexandra said. "Come here!" She pointed her wand at the nearest spirit and banished it.

Darla knelt and picked up the Confederation seal that Innocence had dropped.

"DARLA!" Alexandra was shouting again, as Darla rose to her feet. The jibay were flocking around her.

They looked at each other; Alexandra saw emptiness and despair in the other girl's eyes.

"I never wanted to hurt anyone," Darla said.

"DARLA!" Alexandra screamed. "COME HERE!"

Tears ran down Darla's face as she took two steps backward, still holding the seal. Her expression turned to one of terror as she fell through the Veil, and Alexandra heard her scream, the same scream that had haunted her dreams, even after Darla vanished from sight.

Innocence screamed, and Alexandra whispered, "Keep your eyes closed!"

The remaining jibay did not disappear as the gate to the Lands Beyond closed, but Alexandra banished them, one by one, even after the black void had become solid rock again and the painted figures on it moved back into place.

Only then did she collapse to her knees, still holding Innocence. Pain, shock, and horror swept over her, and she could do nothing but hold onto the other girl and rock her back and forth as Innocence trembled, crying for her sisters and her ma.

Chapter 30 — The Deathly Regiment



They found the two girls sitting on the floor of the cave. Innocence was still incoherent, and Alexandra was barely conscious. She knew they needed to leave, but her head hurt and she didn't really want to move, so she was relieved when Dean Grimm arrived with Miss Gambola, Ms. Fletcher, and Mrs. Murphy. That meant they would take care of Innocence.

She struggled briefly when Mrs. Murphy levitated her.

"I'm not a baby," she mumbled. "I can walk."

"Hush," said Ms. Grimm. It was a command, spoken in a gentle tone.

"Darla," Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm looked down at her. "Where is she?"

Alexandra didn't answer, at first.

"She's dead," she said at last. "She went to the Lands Beyond." She looked at Ms. Grimm. "Why did she do that?"

"Hush." The Dean took her hand. Alexandra turned her head, and saw Aurors in red vests rushing

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past, into the room with that awful doorway.

Fingers were gently cradling her skull, and Mrs. Murphy *tsked*.

"Give her a sleeping potion, Mrs. Murphy," the Dean said.

"No," Alexandra said, but a potion was held to her lips, and she coughed a little as it went down, and then she fell asleep and didn't dream.

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

When she woke up, she was lying in a bed in the infirmary. Daylight was streaming through the windows.

She sat up. She didn't feel as sick and tired and sore as she remembered. She was wearing a simple robe with only a shift beneath it. She sighed. Waking up in the infirmary was becoming depressingly familiar.

She found her personal belongings on the stand next to her bed, including her wand and her watch, which told her the time (almost one p.m.) but not the date.

She heard a voice squawk, "Alexandra!"

"Charlie!" She rose from the bed, and felt dizzy for a moment. Rubbing her head, she walked around the small partition that separated her from the cage sitting on a table on the other side of it. Charlie was fluttering inside the cage, and began squawking noisily: "Alexandra! Alexandra! Alexandra!"

"Charlie, you're all right!" She took Charlie of the cage, and held the bird in her arms. Tears rolled down her cheeks and fell onto the raven's glossy black feathers. Charlie's squawks became soft warbling sounds as she stroked her familiar and walked back to her bed and sat on the edge of it.

Mrs. Murphy walked over to her and smiled. "I should have left that bird in your room, or the aviary, but since both of you had been jointly cursed, I thought putting you close together might help."

"Thank you," Alexandra said, wiping at her eyes.

"You had a nasty bump on the back of your head," the nurse said. "And I thought you must have had another injury, with all the blood on your face and the front of your shirt, but all I found were more scrapes and bruises, and residual traces of Dark magic. I don't think there's a curse still on you. That must have been one hell of a bloody nose."

Alexandra mumbled, "Yeah, you could say that."

"I'll let the Dean know you're awake," Mrs. Murphy sighed. "Her sister is somewhere around. I believe she's going to want to talk to you, too."

"I figured," Alexandra looked up at her. "How long have I been gone?"

"You slept for an hour and a day. Standard formula sleeping potion."

"How long was I *gone*? In the Lands Below?"

Mrs. Murphy's eyes wrinkled around the corners, as she regarded Alexandra, and she suddenly looked older despite her cheerful demeanor and her bright red hair.

"Merlin's ghost," she murmured. "You really did go back there."

Alexandra just stared at her, waiting for an answer.

"You went missing two days ago," Mrs. Murphy said. "The Dean kept the details quiet, but —"

"Rumors. I know," Alexandra petted Charlie. "Is Innocence okay?"

Mrs. Murphy's expression was no longer cheerful. "Yes. She recovered once we discovered the... source of her condition."

"What was it?"

Mrs. Murphy glanced at the raven sitting in Alexandra's lap. "Her familiar."

Alexandra frowned. "You mean her toad? Misery? She disappeared months ago."

"The poor creature was in a box Darla Dearborn had hidden in the basement," Mrs. Murphy said

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quietly. “Miss Dearborn was able to use some crude Dark Arts to exert power over Innocence through her familiar.”

Alexandra sat quietly on her bed, receiving the news numbly.

“Miss Gambola and Mr. Grue broke the curse and restored the toad to health. Miss Pritchard was also ill from contact with those... *things* from the Lands Beyond.” Mrs. Murphy shuddered. “She’s better now, though she’s obviously... distraught.”

Alexandra nodded.

“Speaking of which, I need to check on her, and Miss Devereaux,” the nurse said.

“Angelique? What’s wrong with her?”

Mrs. Murphy looked at her sadly. “She hasn’t taken Darla’s death well, Alexandra.”

Darla’s death. Alexandra looked away.

“Ms. Grimm is meeting the Dearborns now,” Mrs. Murphy said. “She’ll probably come talk to you afterwards. I’d like you to stay here for the time being.”

Alexandra nodded.

“And please don’t let your raven fly around indoors.” The nurse gave Alexandra a small smile, and bustled off with her box of potions and salves, leaving Alexandra alone.

Charlie began to fuss, and Alexandra got up and put the raven back in the cage.

“Just for a little while, Charlie,” she whispered, as the bird complained. “We’ll go back to our room soon.”

One of the windows to the infirmary was open, to let in a warm spring breeze, and Alexandra heard voices carried in from outside. She walked over to it and looked out onto Charmbridge’s front lawn.

There were some students sitting singly or in groups here and there, talking or studying, no doubt preparing for SPAWNs, but Alexandra’s attention was drawn to the five figures standing just beyond the steps of the academy. Dean Grimm, in formal black witch’s robes, was speaking to a man and a woman who were also wearing dark, somber robes.

Alexandra recognized them. She’d seen Darla’s parents at the Goblin Market, the previous summer.

With them was the younger girl who had also been with Darla. The fifth person was a much older girl who also looked vaguely familiar. She was dark-haired and rather pretty, like her sisters; Alexandra had been a sixth grader, she realized, when Hilary Dearborn had been a senior. She had probably seen Darla’s older sister around school that year. The oldest Dearborn girl was standing as far from her parents as she could, while keeping a hand on her sister’s shoulder. Alexandra could see that the younger girl’s eyes were red, even from the second floor.

Mary Dearborn looked up, and for a second, their eyes met. Alexandra stood there for a moment, motionless, and then she backed away from the window, out of sight.

“Wicked!” squawked Charlie. It sounded like a warning, and Alexandra turned around, then jumped and almost let out a startled gasp.

Mr. Journey was standing in front of her. It was difficult to see him in full daylight, but she could make out the ghost’s outline.

“You came back,” he said quietly.

“Surprised?”

“Yes, I am.” His translucent expression was serious. “I’m glad, but I’ll be honest, Starshine, I didn’t expect to see you again. I don’t think anyone did.”

“What will it take to get you to stop calling me ‘Starshine’?”

“Sorry.” She could just make out the corners of his mouth turning up in a slight smile.

She walked around him, heading back to her bed. “Aren’t you worried about being seen?”

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"Your friend Anna told Lilith about me." The ghost let out a mournful sigh. "I don't hold it against her. She didn't really have a choice. But the Aurors are already here, and I'm sure the ghost hunters will be along shortly."

Alexandra sat on her bed again. "What will happen to you?"

"I'll be made to haunt somewhere else. Probably somewhere lonely and dark."

She was tempted to tell him that he deserved it, but she realized that whatever anger she had felt towards Benedict Journey was gone.

"I guess you can't just move on and join the Deathly Regiment, after all," she said. She noted his startled expression. "Is it true, Mr. Journey? Does the Confederation really sacrifice a child every seven years? The Deathly Regiment isn't something you join, is it? It's something the Confederation *does*."

The ghost stared at her, and even in the sunlit infirmary, she could feel a sudden chill.

"Where did you hear that?" he asked quietly.

"From the Generous Ones. Never mind – is it true?"

He stared at her in an unnerving manner until Charlie croaked, "Wicked!" and he turned away.

"Yes," he murmured. "It's what your father has been fighting against. What *we* fought against."

"Before you turned traitor, you mean?"

"Yes." The ghost turned back to face her. "I did oppose the Deathly Regiment, Alexandra – I still do. But I never knew the details, or *why* the Elect choose one of their own children every seven years. Your father, he knows a lot more, but he kept secrets even from his inner circle. He would never tell us everything." Journey's voice sounded bitter.

He drifted closer to her. "Alexandra, I do know this – the Confederation uses Unbreakable Vows, Obliviation, and worse to keep its darkest secrets. Don't let on that you know about these things."

"Everyone should know about these things!"

"What do you think they'll do to you if you start talking about the Deathly Regiment?" he asked.

"Why do you think even the few ghosts who know about it don't talk about it?"

Alexandra was silent.

Neither of them spoke for several long moments, and then they heard footsteps, which came to an abrupt halt as a cold voice broke through the silence: "I told you to stay in the basement until the ghost hunters come to collect you, Ben." Alexandra and Mr. Journey both turned to see Dean Grimm standing there, arms folded, with a severe scowl on her face. "I don't want you haunting my school or my students, especially not Miss Quick. I will Banish you myself if I have to."

"I just wanted to say good-bye to her, Lil–"

"You have no right to say good-bye to anyone," Ms. Grimm said, in a frosty tone. "You can say good-bye to the sun, when the Bureau of Hauntings is through with you."

Mr. Journey hung his head, and began sinking through the floor.

"Ms. Grimm," Alexandra said quietly, "why can't Mr. Journey stay here?"

The ghost stopped, still sunk though the floor up to his knees, while Ms. Grimm turned and stared at Alexandra in astonishment.

"You *want* him to stay here?" she asked. "After what he tried to do?"

"He can't hurt anyone now, can he?"

Journey's eyes were wide, and Ms. Grimm looked almost as surprised.

"If he's imprisoned somewhere by himself, he'll probably just sit there forever, getting more and more bitter and feeling sorry for himself," Alexandra said.

She looked at the ghost. "You saw Darla try to Avada Kedavra me." Ms. Grimm's mouth dropped open – it was as close to shock as she'd ever seen on the Dean's face – but she kept speaking. "You

went to get help, but you got *Anna*. Not the Dean or another adult. You were hoping me and Anna still wouldn't tell on you."

"I brought help when you and Darla came back," Journey said. "Not in time, but I brought them as fast as I could."

"After they already knew you were here." Alexandra's voice was calm, but accusing. "While you thought there was still a chance to keep your being here a secret, you went to get another kid, instead of an adult." She sighed. "I'm glad you did." She glanced at the Dean. "None of you would have saved Innocence – you'd have just sent me back to my room." She looked back at Journey. "But if *you* were acting like a responsible grown-up who was more concerned about kids being in danger than you being exposed, you'd have told Dean Grimm what was going on."

Journey frowned. Ms. Grimm's eyebrows were arched as she studied Alexandra.

"You need to *earn* forgiveness, Mr. Journey," Alexandra said. "You can't just ask for it."

Ms. Grimm regarded Mr. Journey with a frown. "Are you sure, Alexandra?"

"If someone wants to be forgiven," Alexandra said quietly, "they should at least get a chance to earn it. And nobody deserves to be trapped somewhere forever."

Journey was speechless. Ms. Grimm tapped her fingers against her arm, then said at last, "I would have to sponsor Mr. Journey for a Haunting Permit." She sighed. "Very well. I will see what I can do – but even with my signature, it will still need to be approved by the Department of Magical Education and the Bureau of Hauntings. I make no promises."

"Thank you, Lilith," Journey said quietly. He looked at Alexandra. "Thank you, Alexandra."

"Until and if your haunting is approved, you are to stay in the sub-basements," Ms. Grimm said. "I imagine my sister will have some questions for you, as well. And you *will* show me each and every one of those tunnels."

Journey nodded. Ms. Grimm waved a hand in dismissal, and he disappeared.

She turned back to Alexandra.

"Troublesome, troublesome girl," she said, shaking her head.

"Troublesome!" echoed Charlie, from the cage on the other side of the screen.

Alexandra looked down. "What happens to me now?"

"Diana will be questioning you. I can't speak for my sister, Miss Quick, but I think if you are cooperative and truthful, she won't be inclined to charge you. From what we have pieced together, Miss Dearborn appears to be the main culprit here, and you –" Ms. Grimm shook her head. "What you did was stunningly brave and stunningly foolish. But you saved Miss Pritchard."

"I didn't save Darla," Alexandra whispered. She looked away, towards the windows. "I promised I would – but I couldn't."

"Alexandra." Ms. Grimm laid a hand on her shoulder. "Some people can't be saved."

"I guess Darla was more clever than you after all," Alexandra said quietly.

Ms. Grimm pursed her lips. "If it makes you feel better to share your sense of guilt – yes, I underestimated Miss Dearborn even more severely than I've underestimated you. She was remarkably cunning. And I didn't think anyone could persuade a house-elf to Apparate back and forth between its home and Charmbridge without the master of the house knowing about it." She looked out the window, much as Alexandra had earlier. "Even an elf won't be able to Apparate into the basements without us knowing about it, now. And effective immediately, personal brooms will be kept in storage, not in your rooms."

Alexandra nodded. Maybe those were good precautions, but she knew you could always find your way around obstacles with magic.

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“Do you need some extra time to prepare for your SPAWNs?” Ms. Grimm asked.

“No.” Alexandra shook her head. “I’m fine.”

“You are not fine, Alexandra.” Ms. Grimm looked down at her. “Please believe me, child. I have extended as much protection and forbearance as I can on your behalf. You cannot continue your previous behavior. You’ve become a danger to yourself and others. I am not saying this to threaten you. I have to act in the best interests of the school. The pressure to expel you is greater than ever before.”

“I’ll be better,” Alexandra said.

Ms. Grimm studied her for a long time, then nodded. “Don’t disappoint me, Miss Quick.”

The Dean turned and left the infirmary, and Alexandra sat alone with her thoughts, for a little while.

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Mrs. Murphy had some of Alexandra’s clothes brought to her so she could change. The nurse told her that her friends were waiting for her outside the infirmary, so Alexandra was eager to leave. That was when Diana Grimm arrived.

The Special Inquisitor looked scarier than her sister. She was wearing snug black robes with a hood thrown back over her shoulders, and long sleeves and pants underneath. The effect made her look rather like an executioner, or a distaff Grim Reaper.

Ms. Grimm sent the nurse away and sat down in a chair opposite Alexandra. Alexandra sat on the edge of the bed. She waited expectantly.

“So,” Ms. Grimm said. “You went to the Lands Below again.”

Alexandra nodded.

“Anna Chu says you and Darla Dearborn were involved in something down in the Veil cavern, a couple of weeks ago. Performing some Dark Arts ritual intended to bring back your brother?” Grimm gave Alexandra a flat stare. “She was reluctant to give me details, even after I threatened her with Veritaserum. She was remarkably hostile.”

“You put her father in prison and threatened to Obliviate her mother,” Alexandra said. “And you’re surprised that she’s hostile?”

“I had no involvement with events in California. What’s this about threatening to Obliviate her mother?”

“A Special Inquisitor told Anna that if she didn’t become an informant and spy on me for you, they’d Obliviate her mother.”

Ms. Grimm’s icy expression wavered a little. “Alexandra, we don’t do things like that.”

“Even under the WODAMND Act?”

“We’re not monsters, Alexandra. Whoever spoke to Anna was out of line, trying to scare a child like that.”

Alexandra studied Ms. Grimm, wondering whether she believed her. Then she sighed. “Please leave Anna alone. I’ll answer all your questions.”

The Special Inquisitor nodded, and Alexandra spent the next hour describing both her trip to the Lands Beyond and her trip to the Lands Below.

She was cooperative, and mostly truthful. She left out only those things that Ms. Grimm couldn’t verify by speaking to Mr. Journey. She did not mention Death – she told Ms. Grimm that she and Mr. Journey had come back without learning anything. She didn’t mention the bargain she’d made with the Generous Ones, and she didn’t repeat what they’d told her about the Deathly Regiment.

If she bent the truth a bit in those parts of her story, she left nothing out when she described the final, fatal confrontation in the room where Darla had opened the doorway to the Lands Beyond. The emotion in her voice was real, and her eyes stared off into space as she described Darla falling through

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the Veil.

Diana Grimm was silent, until Alexandra looked at her, and asked, “Why did she do that?”

Ms. Grimm shook her head. “I don't know.” She looked troubled herself, then her expression became cold and businesslike again. “How did you return from the Lands Below?”

“We used the bone flute again,” Alexandra lied. She maintained her calmest, most sincere expression as Ms. Grimm studied her face. She didn't even know whether the flute had fallen through the Veil with Darla; if not, the Aurors surely had it now.

“You know about what your father did in New Amsterdam and Atlanta,” the Special Inquisitor said.

“Yes.”

“He needs to be stopped, Alexandra.”

“If I could help you, I would. But he had nothing to do with any of this.”

Ms. Grimm was thoughtful again for several moments. Alexandra tried to relax.

“Do you still have the card I gave you?” Ms. Grimm asked.

“Yes. If I hear from my father, I'll use it.”

She couldn't tell whether or not she was convincing. She kept worrying that Ms. Grimm's long, thoughtful looks meant she was using Legilimency, but finally, the Inquisitor said, “Your friends are waiting for you. You may go join them now.”

“Thank you.” Alexandra stood up, but then paused.

Ms. Grimm raised an eyebrow. “Is there something else?”

“What is the Deathly Regiment, Ms. Grimm?”

Both of the Special Inquisitor's eyebrows went up, very slowly.

“Where did you hear about it, Alexandra?” she asked.

“Old books. Someone told me that Maximilian joined the Deathly Regiment. And – Darla said something about it. Before she died.” She was watching Ms. Grimm's face very carefully, but she was unable to read anything from the woman's expression.

“It's an archaic reference to the Lands Beyond.” Ms. Grimm stood up. “Some warlocks seem to think there is more to it. They weave conspiracy theories about the significance of wizards who go there, along with fairy tales about Death. Haven't you dabbled enough in those sorts of tales, Alexandra? They're nonsense at best, and dangerous at worst.”

Alexandra nodded. “Yeah, that's what I thought.”

She had no idea, as she left Ms. Grimm's presence, whether the Special Inquisitor had been telling the truth or not.

She walked to the cage where Charlie was confined, and let the raven out. Charlie fluttered onto her arm as she walked to the window.

“Back to our room, Charlie,” she said. “I'll be there in a little bit.”

“Fly, fly!” Charlie said, and took off through the window.

In the hallway outside, she found Constance and Forbearance standing together whispering, Anna seated by the door, and David leaning against a wall.

David stood up straight when he saw her. Anna rose to her feet, smiling. The Pritchards turned around immediately, and exclaimed, “Alexandra!” together.

“You came back,” Anna said softly.

Alexandra took her hands and smiled back. “Told you I would.”

“Hey, Alex,” David said. He cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Hey,” she said back.

She let Anna's hands drop, as she turned to face the Pritchards. Constance and Forbearance stood

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there staring at her for a moment. Then the two of them both wrapped their arms around her, kissed her, and pressed their cheeks against hers.

"Thank you, Alexandra! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Constance said breathlessly.

"We'uns can't never repay you!" Forbearance said.

"Never in a thousand years!"

Forbearance was weeping. "You saved Innocence."

Alexandra swallowed and nodded, putting an arm around each of them. "How is she?"

"Scared awful, an' still knackered," Constance said. "But Mrs. Murphy let her go back to her room."

"I know she wants to see you," Forbearance said softly, pulling away and wiping at her tears. "She asks after you every time we'uns goes to see her."

Alexandra nodded. "I'd like to see her."

The five of them walked through the halls together. Other kids stopped and stared. Some took detours to avoid Alexandra, but Charlotte Barker gave her a little wave.

At the entrance to the sixth grade girls' dorm, the hall monitor looked them over and scowled when her eyes fell on David. "Where do you think you're going, young man?"

"Nowhere," he grumbled. He looked at Alexandra. "I was just waiting to see that you were all right, anyway. Guess I better go."

Alexandra patted him on the shoulder. "How's Angelique?"

He looked away. "Not good."

Alexandra didn't know what to say to that. David left, and the girls walked on to Innocence's room.

Innocence was sitting up in bed, scribbling notes as her roommate practiced wand movements for their Charms practical exam. Innocence dropped her quill and Ouida spun around when Alexandra knocked on the door, with the other three girls behind her.

"Alex!" Innocence exclaimed. Alexandra noticed that she still wasn't wearing her bonnet. She started to get out of bed, and Constance and Forbearance hurried inside.

"Oh, no you don't!" Constance said.

"Mrs. Murphy said you're to rest yourself up!" Forbearance said.

"She was just here, and all she said was I'm s'posed to rest, not lie in bed all durned day!"

Innocence was struggling to rise, while her sisters tried to push her back onto her pillows. Ouida shrank away a little and cast her eyes downwards as Alexandra walked in.

Sighing in exasperation, the twins let Innocence stand up. The younger girl stared at Alexandra, and then gave her a fierce hug.

"You saved my life," she said.

Alexandra ran a hand over Innocence's uncovered hair. "I guess I did."

"That means I owe you my life."

"No." Alexandra shook her head. "Just stay out of trouble, okay?"

Innocence nodded. Her eyes filled with tears. "I been the most horrible, awful, wickedest witch ever," she said. "I been nothin' but trouble and a malady."

Alexandra smiled. "I wouldn't say that."

"Let the child speak, Alexandra," said Constance.

Innocence rolled her eyes at her sister. "You'uns know I was bein' goomered by Darla, right?"

"Innocence," Forbearance said, in a scolding tone. "Mrs. Murphy said Darla done muddled your memories and led you 'bout, but that don't mean you don't own the corn for what you done on your own account."

Innocence nodded, expression downcast.

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“Could I... could I speak to Innocence in private, just for a minute?” Alexandra asked.

Innocence looked as surprised as everyone else. Constance and Forbearance exchanged looks between themselves, then exchanged looks with Innocence, and nodded.

“Of course, Alexandra,” Constance said.

Anna also nodded. “Sure.”

Innocence looked at Ouida, who said nothing, but retreated wordlessly from their room, followed by the older girls, who shut the door behind them.

“How are you, really?” Alexandra asked.

Innocence turned to the stand by her bed, where her familiar was sitting in a little glass terrarium. She reached inside and picked up the toad and held it in her hands.

“I was terrible grateful they found Misery,” she said. “Poor critter was half-dead... that awful Darla was bleedin' her an' cursin' her and doin' other awful things to her.”

“To you.”

Innocence didn't reply. She rocked the toad gently side to side.

“Innocence.” Alexandra put a hand on her shoulder. Innocence kept her attention focused on her toad.

“You're going to have nightmares,” Alexandra said. Innocence looked down. Alexandra continued: “And maybe you'll blame yourself. Maybe sometimes you'll be afraid.”

Innocence turned away, and set Misery back in her terrarium. “I'll be fine, Alex. Mrs. Murphy said –”

“Your sisters love you.” Alexandra stood behind Innocence. “You are so lucky, to have them around. And you have friends. Like me.”

Innocence turned around slowly. Her eyes were glistening.

“You will be fine,” Alexandra said. “But not right away. And pretending you're fine when you're not – it will mess you up. Let Constance and Forbearance worry about you and take care of you. Even if it annoys the heck out of you. It will make them feel better. And it will make you feel better.”

Innocence blinked rapidly, and then nodded, with her head bowed.

Alexandra didn't say anything for several moments. She glanced at Misery, who had crawled into a dish of water and was now happily soaking in it.

“I'm sorry about what I did,” Alexandra murmured. “In the cave.”

Innocence looked up at her. “What do you mean? You saved my life!”

“I know. I had to do it. But using C-Crucio –”

“Oh, you didn't do no such thing.” Innocence shook her head.

Alexandra frowned. “What? You must remember –”

“No, Alex,” Innocence said firmly. “I told Ms. Grimm – not Dean Grimm; her sister, the Special 'Quisitor – I told her 'bout that, but Ms. Grimm, she said I must've been mis'memberin', on account 'a I was in shock. She 'splained me. See, if'n you wished an Unforgivable, even if 'twas necessary, it be a crime an' she'd have to persecute you.”

“Prosecute.”

“Yeah, prosecute. 'Cause Unforgivables is unforgivable, and you oughtn't know such things anyhow.” Innocence's voice was earnest, and her deep blue eyes were full of sincerity. “So Ms. Grimm, she said I prob'ly couldn't rightly 'member what happened, 'cause've bein' in shock and traumer-tized. So I allowed as she must be right an' I was just addled, so you definitely didn't use no Crucios or no works like that.”

Alexandra stared at her, then nodded slowly.

Innocence smiled, and gave her another hug. “You really is the bravest, fiercest girl I ever knowed,”

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she said.

"Thanks." Alexandra patted her on the back. "Remember what I said."

"I will. I promise." She frowned. "Still don't mean Connie and Forbearance can boss me like I'm a lil' child."

Alexandra laughed softly. "I think you'll all cope."

She was about to open the door again to let the other girls back in, but paused a moment.

"Innocence," she asked, "did you ever let Darla borrow your wand before she started bewitching you?"

"Course not! Ozarkers don't never lend their wands!" Innocence picked up her white oak wand, which had been lying next to Misery's terrarium. "I feel plumb dirty, just knowin' what wickedness Darla put it to."

Alexandra nodded. "I was just wondering."

She left Constance and Forbearance with their sister, and was quiet as she walked with Anna back up to their room. Anna walked side by side with her, not breaking the silence.

Everything looked as it had been when she'd left, except that Anna had picked up the contents of Alexandra's backpack and put them back in the pack, and replaced it under her bed. Charlie was sitting on the windowsill outside, and Alexandra opened the window to let the raven in.

Alexandra looked at the door to the bathroom. "How is Sonja?" she asked.

"She's okay, too," Anna said. "She'll probably come in any time now –"

Alexandra reached over and locked the door. "I don't want to deal with her right now."

Anna nodded. "Are you okay, Alex?"

Alexandra looked at her. "Darla's dead."

Anna's brow wrinkled. "I know," she said softly.

"I couldn't save her. I still don't know why she did what she did."

"It wasn't your fault," Anna said.

"Max is dead, too."

Anna paused. She looked worried and a little confused.

"Max is dead, and he's never coming back," Alexandra said. "I couldn't save him, either."

Anna was very quiet. Then she said, "I'm sorry."

Alexandra began crying.

Anna put her arms around her. Alexandra's knees shook and she sank to the floor, Anna with her, and Anna continued to hold her as she wept, and all the grief and sorrow of the past year spilled out of her.

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In the days that followed, Charmbridge Academy tried to carry on as usual despite the wild rumors swirling around the school, as well as the witches and wizards from the Territorial headquarters in Chicago who continued to scour the grounds, inside and out. Three other wizards joined the Aurors who were stalking the halls. The newcomers didn't wear red vests or uniforms, only nondescript black robes and hoods. No one knew exactly what they were doing, but they spent a great deal of time in the basements. They didn't interact with the students or staff at all, and even the Aurors seemed to find them creepy. Alexandra overheard Mr. Grue call them "unspeakable" in a whispered conversation with another teacher.

She spent some of her time in the library going back over every book and newspaper she'd found that mentioned the Deathly Regiment. She looked up the two obituaries she remembered reading.

Hesperia Zill had been six years old when she'd 'joined the Deathly Regiment.' Wendell Rusch had been ten.

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Did their parents even know? Alexandra wondered. Or did they just get Obliviated? People must have known, once. But then it became just an old story, a legend, then a euphemism for death, and it fell out of fashion...

Hesperia had died in 1835; Wendell in 1856. Alexandra did the math, subtracting each year from the current one and dividing by seven. She hadn't noticed the pattern before, and she hadn't noticed that they were both children. But then, she hadn't been looking for it.

Twenty-one sacrifices since 1856, she thought. How many before that?

She thought she would have a hard time studying now, but in fact she found it was easy to clear her mind of everything except magical theory, or Ptolemy's Transfiguration Solutions, or the seventeen different Charms they had to demonstrate for their SPAWN. Even in her least favorite classes, Alchemy and American Wizarding History, she felt reasonably confident about her final exams, though she knew that given how many homework assignments she'd skipped, it would take a miracle for her to get better than 'C's.

She was also resigning herself to her reputation as a Dark Wizard's daughter. Already, rumors were circulating that she had killed Darla and tried to sacrifice Innocence. With everyone busy studying, few students had the time or inclination to persecute her, but she remained on guard.

If there was anyone having a harder time than Alexandra, though, it was Angelique, who seemed always on the verge of tears, and broke down completely during their Magical Theory final and had to be led out of the classroom by Miss Hart.

Alexandra sat down with her in the cafeteria, the day after their SPAWNs. Angelique often ate alone nowadays. Sometimes David joined her, but he didn't seem to know how to cope with her, and that afternoon, he was out on the Quidditch field.

Angelique looked up at Alexandra, and her eyes became wide and fearful.

"You didn't know, did you?" Alexandra said quietly.

Angelique shook her head rapidly. "I didn't – I swear!"

"I believe you." Alexandra turned her attention to her plate, and the two girls ate quietly for a few minutes. She could feel other people watching them, but she ignored the stares.

"It wasn't your fault," Alexandra said suddenly.

Angelique flinched.

"You couldn't have saved her." Alexandra met Angelique's eyes. "If Darla was determined enough and willing to hide secrets from her best friend, there's nothing you could have done."

Angelique stared at her, with tears welling up in her eyes. "I should have known," she whispered. "I knew she was up to something. I even suspected, when Mr. Whiskers – when Mr. Whiskers disappeared. B-but I didn't want to believe..."

Alexandra nodded. "Do you have any idea why she did it?"

Angelique shook her head slowly. "She lied to you about her sister dying, Alexandra. I think she was put up to something Dark by the folks she was hanging around with, like John Manuelito." She scowled, before sadness crept back into her voice. "But I just don't understand..."

"I don't either." They ate in silence again for a while, and just before Angelique got up to go, Alexandra asked, "Did you ever lend her your wand?"

Angelique looked startled. "No! I –" Her eyes darted away. "She asked, a couple of times, during the first couple months of school. She didn't tell me what she meant to do with it, of course, but she tried to talk me into letting her use my wand. I said no."

"So you're sure she never borrowed it when you weren't looking or when you were asleep?"

"I'm sure." Angelique looked down. She spoke in a very quiet voice. "I... I didn't trust her." She

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pushed her tray away, stood up, and hurried out of the cafeteria.

How did Darla Stun me in the basement? Alexandra wondered. *She only had a mistletoe wand until she stole Innocence's familiar.*

That was the part she still couldn't figure out. She supposed Darla's methods would probably remain as mysterious as her motives, but it was an unanswered question that bothered her.

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Colonel Shirtliffe, back from her temporary duty with the Regimental Officer Corps, held a promotion ceremony on the last day of school. Most of the new wands, including William, were promoted to Mage-Private or Witch-Private. Charlotte Barker, Ermanno DiSilvio, and Supriya Chandra were all promoted to Sergeant, and it was announced that Daniel Keedle would be next year's Mage-Sergeant Major.

"This is usually where I give my speech encouraging you all to continue with JROC next year," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "Frankly, I expect that we're going to need more mages in the Regiments in the years ahead. So all I can promise you is that next year, we'll be training even harder than this year, and I'll expect nothing less than one hundred-percent dedication." She eyed the uniformed students all standing at attention. "Dismissed!"

"Quick!" she called, as Alexandra started to leave with the others. Alexandra turned around to face the teacher, standing at attention.

Ms. Shirtliffe clasped her hands behind her back. "You know, you're one of the best witches in the JROC. Attitude problems aside. It's because of those attitude problems that I couldn't justify promoting you."

"I understand, ma'am." Alexandra hadn't really expected a promotion.

"You could easily make Witch-Private First Class before the end of the fall semester," Ms. Shirtliffe said.

"Are you expecting me to get in trouble again next year, ma'am?"

"No," Ms. Shirtliffe said. "I'm expecting you to join voluntarily."

Alexandra frowned.

"You've done this for two years now," the JROC commander said. "And we both know you're good at it. You can keep acting like a rebellious brat just because that's what's expected of you, or you can grow up and start excelling. Think about it, Quick. Dismissed."

Alexandra saluted and walked away, thinking over Ms. Shirtliffe's words.

She saw a few adults who weren't part of the faculty walking through the halls. This year, amidst all the security concerns, some parents were coming to pick up their children personally. She knew of at least two students in her grade who were not coming back to Charmbridge next year.

When she returned to her dorm, she found a man in the room with Anna.

Alexandra stopped in the doorway, surprised, as the visitor turned around slowly. He was tall and imposing, like in the picture Anna had hanging on her wall. He wore red and gold Chinese-style robes with several colors of fabric lining his collar and cuffs, and a great deal of jewelry hanging around his neck. On most wizards, it might have looked a bit effeminate, but on Geming Chu, it just made him look more regal. He studied Alexandra with an air of haughty scrutiny, while Anna looked between them nervously.

"You must be Alexandra," Mr. Chu said.

Alexandra nodded. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Chu." She paused. "Should I call you Congressman?"

"Mr. Chu will be fine." He laid a hand on Anna's shoulder. "I've decided to take Anna home myself, since I had to return to North California from New Amsterdam anyway."

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Alexandra nodded. "I see." Anna wouldn't be riding the bus with her, then. She felt disappointed, and wondered if Anna would be returning to Charmbridge at all.

Mr. Chu turned to his daughter. "Anna, I would like to speak to your friend in private."

Anna hesitated.

He spoke softly in Chinese.

She nodded. "Yes, Father."

He squeezed her shoulder, and Anna walked past Alexandra, giving her a small, anxious smile, before going out the door. Mr. Chu gestured at it, and the door closed, leaving him and Alexandra alone in the room, except for Nigel.

Guess a Congressman can ignore the 'No Boys Allowed' rule, Alexandra thought, but she didn't say that. Instead, she asked, "Are you going to let Anna come back to Charmbridge?"

The Congressman paced around their room, looking at the books on Anna's shelf, and the empty cage where Charlie slept when not flying around outside, and glanced at Alexandra's snake, curled up around the magical warming rock in his terrarium.

"I was worried, when Anna came here," he said at last. "Charmbridge Academy is one of the finest wizarding schools in the country, where many of the children of the Elect attend, so of course it was a great honor to send my daughter. But – I feared that Anna is too much like her mother." Mr. Chu turned to face Alexandra. "Anna's mother is very mild of temperament, which makes her a pleasing wife, but at times, she is a bit too... meek. Anna is much like her. I wondered whether she had the strength of spirit to persevere in a difficult academic and social environment. She needs to be strong. She will need strength and courage in the coming years, for I believe the Confederation has hard times ahead, and I feared that Anna was just too... weak."

"Anna isn't weak," Alexandra said, keeping her voice low. "Anna is a lot braver and stronger than you think she is."

Mr. Chu's expression was unreadable.

"Anna's my best friend," Alexandra said. "She's loyal and caring and smart and wise. You should be proud of her. Don't punish her because you think I'm trouble. And don't punish us for being friends because of who my father is."

He smiled. "You live up to your reputation, I see."

Alexandra almost gave him another retort, but kept her mouth shut, before she made things worse.

Anna's father resumed pacing around the room. "Since Anna began attending Charmbridge Academy, I have seen a change in her. She has become more assertive. She is more responsible. She shows the stirrings of confidence." He smiled wryly. "I have even seen hints of rebelliousness." He turned to face Alexandra again. "I believe much of that is because of you."

"You should give Anna more credit," Alexandra said.

He stood in front of her and looked her up and down, eyeing the JROC uniform she was still wearing. "Don't you learn to address adults, especially Congressmen, as 'sir' in the Junior Regimental Officer Corps?"

Alexandra's jaw tightened. "Yes, sir."

"Anna is a Congressman's daughter now," he said. "She needs to be mindful that what she does reflects on me, and on our family. So do her friends." He smiled. "I hope you will be mindful of that as well. It's clear that she follows you. Please try to keep her, and yourself, out of trouble next year."

Alexandra blinked in astonishment, and then said, "Yes, sir."

He nodded. "Good."

He turned towards the door. Apparently he had decided the conversation was over. Alexandra was

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still standing in a respectful posture, almost at attention. She licked her lips and said, “Sir?”

He turned back towards her. “Yes?”

“Do you know what the Deathly Regiment is?”

Geming Chu turned pale. Alexandra's eyes narrowed as she watched his composure crack.

“You do know,” she whispered. “It's true, isn't it? A child every seven years – how can you do that?”

“Ssh!” he whispered frantically. He took out his wand and said, “*Muffliato!*” then stared at her. “How did you learn of this?”

“How could you keep it a secret?” Alexandra demanded, her voice rising now that their conversation was made private by Mr. Chu's spell.

“We have no choice!” he said. “All those who learn of the Deathly Regiment are sworn to secrecy by Unbreakable Vows! Obliviation is used on those who learn of it by accident. Did your father tell you? Does the Wizard Justice Department know that you know?”

Alexandra shook her head. “No. Are you going to tell them, and have me Obliviated? I'll find out again – I know I will.”

Mr. Chu pointed a finger at her and tried to sound as commanding as before, but he was clearly shaken. “You must not speak of this to Anna! You must not speak of this to anyone! You have no idea the grave danger you will put yourself in, and anyone you tell about it!”

“Anna is so proud of you,” Alexandra said. “No, I won't tell her that her father is part of a secret plot to sacrifice children.”

“I OPPOSE THE DEATHLY REGIMENT!” Mr. Chu bellowed. “IT IS AN ABOMINATION!”

Alexandra stood still, shocked, and Mr. Chu lowered his voice. He took a deep breath. “I was *ashamed* when I learned the price my great-great-grandfather agreed to pay, on behalf of our entire community, for us to join the Confederation. My great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father all knew the cost of being among the Elect, but they continued to submit to the Deathly Regiment. There are many of us in the Wizards' Congress, Alexandra, who wish to abolish it.”

“Like my father did,” Alexandra said, with sudden realization.

The Congressman nodded slowly. “Yes. But your father chose the path of insurrection and chaos when he could not change things from within. That is not the way.”

“So you're going to try to change things according to the rules, and in the meantime, someone still dies every seven years.”

He looked down. “Hopefully, we will succeed before the next child is chosen.”

“Who dies this year?” Alexandra asked quietly.

Mr. Chu raised his head and stared at her. “The sacrifice has already been made. If you know about the Deathly Regiment, I thought you knew – you saw it happen, didn't you?”

Alexandra's stomach turned to ice. “Darla,” she whispered.

He nodded. “She stole a Confederation Seal... I understand she originally intended to sacrifice another pureblood girl, but –”

“Why?” Alexandra asked. “Why would she do that?”

Mr. Chu gave Alexandra a long, appraising look. “You know less than I thought.”

“I want to know why she did it,” Alexandra said. Her voice became pleading. “I *need* to know, Mr. Chu.”

He closed his eyes, and seemed to be deep in thought. Then he opened them. “You already know too much,” he said. “If you know of the Deathly Regiment, the curses do not prevent me from discussing it. Still...” The wizard slowly reached into his robe, finding something in a pocket in its inner lining.

“One of the Elect – a pureblood child, one too young to have a wand – is chosen by secret lottery

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every seven years,” he said. “Only those of us who are charged with the secret of the Deathly Regiment are told of it. But somehow, Darla Dearborn found out. Her uncle, Congressman Dearborn, is being investigated now.”

He withdrew a slip of parchment. “Once we see the name, we cannot speak it aloud,” he said quietly. “That is one of the curses put upon us.”

He waved his wand over the parchment. Alexandra watched as words formed on it.

“Oh, Darla,” she whispered, as she saw the name:

Mary Elizabeth Dearborn.

She looked away, while Mr. Chu flicked his wand and the parchment crumbled to ashes.

“You cannot speak of this to anyone,” he repeated. “I place myself at risk by telling you. I am sure you would not put Anna in danger by telling her of these things.”

Alexandra shook her head. “No... sir. I wouldn't.”

“We will end the Deathly Regiment, Alexandra. I swear to you, that is my goal.”

“If you don't,” she said slowly, “someone has only seven years to live.”

Mr. Chu regarded her with a tight-lipped frown, and nodded.

“A pureblood,” she said. “It has to be a pureblood?”

“That is how the Elect justify their entitlement to their powers and privileges. But most don't actually know what cost they are paying for those entitlements.”

Alexandra stood quietly in thought, and Mr. Chu turned to go again.

“Is that why you married a Muggle?” she asked.

Mr. Chu paused, with his back still to her.

“Anna's a half-blood,” Alexandra said. “Your children wouldn't be eligible for this lottery, would they?”

Anna's father stood there a moment, then said, without turning around, “Only pureblood children can be chosen.”

He opened the door. Just before going outside, he said, “You will not speak of this – *any* of this – to Anna.”

He left her standing there. Down the hall, she heard him speaking to Anna in Chinese, sounding firm and fatherly. She walked to the window and looked out across Charmbridge's lawn, warm and sunny on this bright spring day.

Chapter 31 — Seven Years to Live

Dear Anna,

I don't think Jingwei likes flying all the way across the country. I know you wanted her to learn the way here, but maybe we should use C.O.P. for the rest of the summer... I'm writing this quickly 'cause she's sitting there watching me like she's gonna bite off my fingers if I make her wait much longer.

But! I have to call my mom once a week, so Ms. King takes me and Julia to ^{the Muggle} town every Sat. morning. (Even if it wasn't for the magic, my cell phone wouldn't work anywhere else 'cause of no tower.) So if you can get to a phone then, you can call me!

It's really nice here. Croatoa is beautiful in the summer, and me and Julia have almost talked her mother into letting us take the ferry by ourselves.

We're all going to New Roanoke tomorrow. We watched Martin and Beatrice graduate this afternoon – I'll tell you all about the BMI graduation ceremony in my next letter. It was pretty cool, but it was hard to watch too...

I know what you're thinking, Anna, but I'm fine. I mean, not fine fine, but I'm okay, really. It's been hard and sometimes ~~I'm not sure I want to go back to Charmbridge~~—

Alexandra crossed out and erased the last bit. She glanced up, into the disapproving gaze of the enormous great horned owl sitting on the open window sill. Jingwei hooted ominously.

Alexandra sighed and resumed writing. “Yeah, yeah, I know. Look, I'm sorry you have to fly all the way back to San Francisco.”

The owl hooted again, this time sounding weary.

Jingwei had arrived at Alexandra's window just before midnight. Had she arrived later, she might have been willing to sleep through the day and wait until the following evening to begin her return trip, but it was still early for the owl, and she was impatient to be off.

Alexandra hastily finished the letter, hoping Anna could sense what Alexandra had trouble putting into words. Even showing her emotions around Julia was still difficult. Alexandra was trying very hard to keep her promise and not hide things from her friends, yet she still found herself keeping so many secrets.

For example, she hadn't told anyone yet about the bargain she'd made with the Generous Ones. She wasn't quite sure how to tell her loved ones that she only had seven years to live.

She rolled up the letter and very carefully tied it to Jingwei's leg, mindful of the owl's great claws.

“Thank you, Jingwei,” she said, holding her hand steady as she offered a fistful of owl treats. Jingwei snapped them up with frightening precision; her large, sharp beak could easily remove a finger, but it never quite touched Alexandra's skin. Then with a final hoot, the owl took off, for the long, long flight to the opposite coast.

“You can come out now, Charlie,” Alexandra said, watching the owl flap away over the ocean and back towards the mainland.

Charlie squawked and emerged from the top of Alexandra's canopy bed. The raven had taken a while to settle in, after being forced to sit in a cage in the luggage compartment for the flight from Chicago, but Alexandra's room at Croatoa was now home to both of them for the next month.

They had returned from Blacksburg only a few hours previously, where they had been invited by Martin Nguyen and Beatrice Hawthorn to attend their graduation from the Blacksburg Magery

Institute. The ceremony had been impressive, with all of the Stormcrows flying overhead in an elaborate pattern before landing in a single, synchronized formation. Then there were fireworks, winged equestrian displays, marching trolls, and even a dragon – Alexandra's first. BMI put on an impressive show, with the help of the Roanoke Regiment.

Alexandra was glad that she got a chance to say good-bye to her brother's best friends – but she and Julia and Ms. King could not help but be reminded of the fact that Maximilian should have been standing there with them.

Julia had cried openly, because Julia was like Anna: she wore her heart on her sleeve, and she wasn't ashamed of it. Thalia King was strong and proud, but she had shed tears also.

Alexandra had held Julia's hand, but she'd kept her tears to herself. She couldn't say good-bye to Max in public. But the need to say good-bye had been aching within her since her return to Croatoa.

This was the reason she had still been awake when Jingwei arrived at her window. She had something she needed to do, and as much as she hated sneaking out – again – it was something she needed to do alone.

Down the hill, at the edge of the woods, she saw a soft glow appear between two trees, and linger there. A ghost was waiting for her.

She laced up her boots and threw on her cloak, then nodded to Charlie. “Wait 'til I'm outside, Charlie,” she said. “We're going for a walk.”

“Fly, fly!” said Charlie, hopping to the sill.

Alexandra opened her door and looked down the hallway. There was no light under Julia's door, and the house was mostly dark. She walked quietly, but as she expected, Deezie, Nina, and Olina were waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

Deezie looked at her with wide, anxious eyes, while Nina shook her head disapprovingly. Olina had folded her arms, as if to scold.

“We knows when childrens is walking about the house,” said Nina.

“We always knows,” said Olina.

“I figured,” Alexandra said, in a quiet voice. “I just want to take a walk.”

The three elves sighed as one, and shook their heads.

“This is something I have to do,” Alexandra said.

“Miss Alex is going to go *into the woods*, isn't she?” Deezie said, wringing her hands.

“Yes,” Alexandra said softly. “But I'll have Charlie with me, and the Thorn ghosts agreed to guide me. I'll be safe.”

The house-elves shivered. They looked at her, unconvinced.

“Did Ms. King tell you to stop me from going outside?” Alexandra asked.

“Nooo,” Nina said hesitatingly. “But we knows she would not approve.”

Alexandra sighed. “All right.” She turned around. “I'll go back to my room.”

“Miss is just going to go out her window, isn't she?” said Nina.

Alexandra kept her face turned away, to hide a rueful smile. “I could have done that in the first place, you know.”

“Miss should not go alone,” Nina insisted.

Alexandra turned back around. “I told you, I won't be alone.” She looked at them seriously. “This isn't like before. It isn't. Please...”

“Why doesn't Miss Alex go with Miss Julia or Mistress King?”

Because I have things to say I don't want them to hear, she thought, but she just repeated, “Please trust me. I'll be safe.”

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The elves studied her grimly, and then, voicing some unspoken agreement, Nina said, "If Miss is not back in one hour, we will wake Mistress."

"Two hours," Alexandra said. "It takes a while to walk to the crypt."

The elves shuddered.

"Thank you," she said, without waiting for them to reply. She leaned over and gave each of them a kiss on the cheek. They all looked abashed, but they didn't stop her as she went out the door.

It was a pleasantly cool night. Croatoa was hot and humid during the day, but at night sea breezes blew across the island, and Alexandra could smell the salty air even here at the top of the hill. She walked down the path from the Kings' mansion, then turned off of it as Charlie came flapping down to land on her shoulder. Then the raven took off again, soaring ahead into the trees, cawing loudly enough to startle the clabberts. They were all scurrying higher into the branches, but Alexandra noticed they didn't seem as alarmed by her passage as they had been previously; only a few of them flashed their red nodules in warning. Maybe they were starting to recognize her.

Charlie screeched, and Alexandra walked up to the ghostly figure waiting among the trees.

"Hello, Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather," she said.

Absalom Thorn nodded to her. "Hello, Great-Great-Great-Great-Granddaughter. I do not approve of your leaving the house without Thalia's knowledge. You owe her more respect for the hospitality she has shown you."

"I know," Alexandra said. "Just this once more, I promise."

The Thorn patriarch gazed down at her; there was something in his expression that reminded Alexandra a great deal of her father. Then he said, more gently, "You know that anywhere else would serve as well as our crypt, if you merely wish to say good-bye to your brother? He is not there. Only a stone with his name on it is there."

"I know," Alexandra said.

The ghost sighed, a breezy, mournful sound that reminded her of Mr. Journey. "Very well. Follow me and do not stray."

She did. Absalom Thorn drifted through trees and brush, pausing now and then to allow Alexandra to walk around obstacles that he simply passed through. Charlie fluttered from branch to branch overhead, then settled on her shoulder when one too many owls hooted from close by.

They were almost to the crypt when Alexandra said, "I know about the Deathly Regiment."

The ghost stopped dead in his course, and then slowly turned about to face her. His expression was grave.

Alexandra stepped closer to him, looking up at her great-great-great-great-grandfather's pale face. "Were you the first Thorn to oppose it?" she asked. "Are you the one who told my father about the Deathly Regiment?"

"No, to the last," he said. "I have seen enough Thorns die. I never wanted Abraham to follow in my footsteps. But he learned about the ghastly Regiment nonetheless, and he came to me."

"And you told him what you know?"

"Yes."

"Did you tell Valeria?"

He frowned. "Not... everything."

"Will you tell me?"

The ghost's expression turned gray and foreboding. "This is not your battle, child."

"Yes, it is," she said softly.

"So Abraham has enlisted you to his cause after all." He sounded sad.

“No.” Alexandra shook her head. “I wasn’t enlisted by my father, and I’m not joining him. I don’t like what he does, and I don’t think his way of fighting the Confederation is right.”

“If you do not intend to wage war against the Confederation like your father, then what do you hope to accomplish?”

“I don’t know.” Alexandra looked down, uncertain for the first time. It was true – she was just one girl, and she knew so little. For a moment, she felt like she was trying to build a rocket ship or bring Maximilian back from the dead all over again. What she wanted was far beyond her means. But when she raised her head again, she spoke with resolve. “My father made me a Secret-Keeper. He didn’t enlist me into his circle – he just made me a part of it. I didn’t have a choice. A lot of things have happened to me because of secrets other people kept from me.” She glared at the old ghost who reminded her so much of her father. “I want to know the rest – I want to know everything.”

“I do not know ‘everything,’ Alexandra.”

“You know a lot more than you’ve told me.”

“What can a little girl do? You will only endanger yourself and stir up trouble.”

“Troublesome!” squawked Charlie, as if agreeing with the ghost.

Alexandra bit her tongue. Then she locked her gaze on her ancestor. “Did you have any daughters?”

His eyes clouded. “One.”

“Was she weak and stupid? Was it only your sons who were worth anything?”

His focus snapped back to her. Angrily, he said, “Most certainly not!”

“Then don’t you think you should stop underestimating daughters?”

His glare melted away, and he regarded her thoughtfully for several moments.

“I will think about what you ask,” he said at last. “But do not press me, child. You are so young – I am not eager to see you take after your father and your brother, even if you do share their temperaments.” He turned away and resumed floating through the woods.

Alexandra bit her lip, but kept silent as she followed Absalom between the trees.

Deep in the woods, far from any visible path, they reached the Thorn family crypt. Other ghosts were milling about, but Joshua Thorn came strolling up to Absalom and Alexandra, tipped his hat with a smile to Alexandra, and then addressed his great-grandfather. “That boy is back, sir.”

Absalom Thorn’s eyes flashed. Confused, Alexandra asked, “What boy?”

“Your brother’s *friend*,” Absalom said slowly, with a peculiar emphasis on the last word. “We told him this is an inappropriate place for him to come weep, yet he continues to trespass on the final resting place of Maximilian’s ancestors.”

“I told him to leave,” Joshua Thorn said. “The blaggard threatened to Banish me!”

Alexandra drew her wand, and before any of the ghosts could stop her, she stormed into the crypt. “*Lumos!*” she said, wand at the ready, and then stopped dead in her tracks, just past the entrance.

“Big fat jerk!” exclaimed Charlie, from her shoulder.

Sitting on the cold floor, with his back against the stone wall and his head just a few feet below Maximilian’s marker, was a young man wearing a long, brown duster over a blue shirt and gray pants. His knees were drawn up to his chest. A broom lay next to him. He rubbed his eyes and looked up at Alexandra with a small smile. “Hey, there, Troublesome.”

“Martin?” Alexandra lowered her wand. “What are you doing here?”

Martin cleared his throat. “I could ask you the same question. Isn’t it past your bedtime?”

When she glowered at him, he looked away. “I just... wanted to say good-bye to Max, one last time. I’m leaving for Florida tomorrow morning. I might never be back here again.” He sniffed, and wiped his nose with the back of his hand.

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Alexandra stared at him. “Did you really threaten to Banish my great-great-uncle?”

He sighed. “Yeah. Sorry about that. They don't like me much.”

She looked over her shoulder. Absalom, Joshua, and Jared Thorn had followed her into the crypt.

“Alexandra?” asked Jared Thorn, her great-great-grandfather. “What are you doing, you foolish girl?”

“Please, just give us a moment,” Alexandra said. “I can handle the blaggard.”

The ghosts looked at her uncertainly, and scowled at Martin.

“Please,” she repeated.

Looking disapproving and annoyed, the three Thorn ghosts retreated from the crypt, leaving Alexandra and Charlie alone with Martin. She turned back around to face her brother's best friend.



Martin Nguyen was handsome, despite his red eyes and his dark hair trimmed so short that his scalp was visible. Many girls at Charmbridge had had crushes on Martin and Maximilian during their year as MACE Program exchange students. Darla had been smitten with the handsome Stormcrow, too. He had flirted with her but never seriously returned the younger girl's affections, and Darla had been devastated.

Remembering this added anger to Alexandra's tone as she asked him, "So what are you doing sitting here crying at Maximilian's tomb and threatening our ancestors?"

"He was my friend," Martin said quietly.

"I know he was your friend. That doesn't explain why you're here."

"Sorry," Martin said, and there was a touch of bitterness in his tone. "I forgot only his family is entitled to grieve over him."

"I didn't say that," she said, annoyed. "But..." She looked at him, his face half-visible in the light cast by her wand, and her voice trailed off.

"I just miss him," Martin whispered.

Alexandra remembered how even with half the girls at Charmbridge flirting with them, Maximilian and Martin had never done more than flirt back. If her brother had ever had a girlfriend, he'd never mentioned her – nor had Julia ever mentioned one, and she was sure Julia would have known if Max had a sweetheart.

She sat down next to him, as Charlie fluttered to a stone shelf overhead.

"Martin," she said. "You and Max..."

He looked away. She could see the sudden tension in his body.

The sudden realization caught her by surprise, and she didn't know what to think about it. "He never told me," she murmured.

Martin glanced at her warily.

"Why didn't he tell me?" she asked, sounding plaintive, and Martin's expression softened at her simple, hurt tone.

"Well, it's not exactly the sort of thing you talk about with your little sister, is it?" he said.

She looked down. "I guess not."

"He cared a lot about what you thought of him," Martin said. "Earning your respect was very important to him."

"It was?"

Martin nodded. "He was worried about you. Julia, too, of course, but Julia doesn't get herself into trouble the way you do..."

The two of them were silent for a minute, and then Martin slipped an arm around her shoulders, and Alexandra allowed it.

"I'm off to join the Florida Regiment tomorrow morning," he said. "But what I told you last year, and again at the ceremony, I meant. You and Julia, Max would want me to take care of you. If you ever need anything..."

Alexandra nodded. She gave him a small smile, with her eyes glistening.

He cleared his throat. "Look... Julia doesn't know. Neither does Ms. King. Some of his ancestors here have figured it out –" He nodded at the entrance to the crypt. "But I'm pretty sure they won't say anything."

Alexandra looked at him. "Julia and Ms. King wouldn't care," she said firmly.

He looked back at her, eyes bleak for a moment, and then he nodded. "You're probably right. But – oh, Merlin. Screw it. What you say or don't say is up to you." There was a heaviness to his tone. He

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pulled himself to his feet, and offered her a hand. "C'mon, Troublesome." He smirked, looking a little more like his old self. "I'll take you back to the house. Make sure you don't get lost in the woods."

She gave him a sardonic smile in return, but it faded quickly. "Would you give me a moment, too?"

Martin raised an eyebrow, puzzled.

"I came here to say good-bye to Max, too," she said softly.

He regarded her quietly for a moment, then nodded. "Sure." He shuffled towards the entrance of the crypt. "I'll just go outside and chat with your great-greats."

Alexandra shook her head, and then, once Martin was gone, she rose to her feet and looked up at where Maximilian's name was inscribed in the stone above her head.

"I'm sorry, Max," she said. "I tried to bring you back... but it just didn't work. I couldn't. I hope you're not angry at me, or disappointed."

She blinked back tears.

"I miss you," she said hoarsely. "So does Julia, and your mother. And your friends. We all miss you." She swallowed. "I hope you're at peace. I'm going to join you soon. I mean, seven years seems like kind of a long time, but I guess it's really not. I just want you to know – I did respect you. I'm proud of you. When I join you, wherever you are, I want you to be proud of me and what I did."

She didn't say anything after that, but just stood quietly in front of the gravestone with her head bowed. Finally, she heard voices rising outside, and Martin saying something snarky to Absalom Thorn, and she sighed.

She laid a hand on Maximilian's memorial stone. "Good-bye, Max." She glanced at the entrance again, and then laid a kiss on her fingertips before pressing them against Maximilian's name.

"I love you," she whispered. *And you will never be forgotten.*

Then she walked out of the crypt, and rejoined Martin and the ghosts of her ancestors.



The next day, Alexandra, Julia, and Ms. King took a trip to visit New Roanoke's magibotanical gardens. It was as interesting as Julia had promised, and Alexandra appreciated learning more about the giant flytraps native to the local marshes, as well as strangle-kelp, assassin moss, and dead man's finger. Julia wrinkled her nose at Alexandra's interest in the more dangerous plants in preference to the magical flowers that sang and chirped, and the imported wood nymphs that Julia had come to see.

Ms. King turned the girls loose on New Roanoke's main street afterwards, agreeing to let them window shop until it was time to ride back across the sound.

Julia was planning more shopping trips, sightseeing in New Roanoke and Blacksburg, and lots of horseback riding lessons, among other things. The Summer Cotillion, the Great Dismal Convocation, and the annual pirate ghost 'invasion' of Roanoke were among the events scheduled to take place that summer. Julia was still negotiating with her mother just how many trips off the island they'd be able to take while Alexandra was there.

Alexandra was agreeable to all of Julia's plans. She wasn't quite able to muster as much excitement as her sister wanted her to, but she was sincere in her desire to experience as much as she could.

Knowing that she had only seven years to live changed things. She had been pondering this ever since leaving Charmbridge. She couldn't be just a Secret-Keeper. She was more than just a girl called Troublesome. There must be something more she could do.

Maybe it was time to stop keeping secrets. She knew what her father was trying to do, now, and she knew why. She didn't agree with his methods, but if Abraham Thorn was determined to be the Enemy the Confederation feared, maybe she could make sure that everyone else at least knew why.

And maybe she'd find a way to cheat Death yet.

Julia nudged her with an elbow. "You're brooding."

"I am not." Alexandra gave her sister a small smile. "I can be thinking about things without brooding, can't I?"

"With such a serious expression. What were you thinking about?" Julia arched an eyebrow. Alexandra hesitated.

"Ha! Brooding!" Julia shook her head and *tsked*.

Alexandra rolled her eyes. They were strolling past boutiques and cafes, across the street from a sinister-looking black brick building. She was about to respond when she heard someone calling her name.

She and Julia looked at each other, and then turned to look down the street. A tall boy with red hair was waving at them. He broke into a jog and ran up the street, past several carriages carrying Old Colonials who frowned at the young man. His casual green robes were flapping loosely around the Muggle jeans he was wearing underneath. He slowed to a walk several paces from the girls, and then came to a halt.

"Payton!" Alexandra said, recognizing the Muggle-born boy. He had a rather plain face, but he seemed to have grown a bit into his body since the previous year, and his ginger hair wasn't quite as unkempt as she remembered.

"Hi," the boy said. "I thought I saw you through the window of one of those dress shops."

"It was a formal robes shop." Alexandra glanced at Julia. "Umm, this is Payton Smith. You remember – he danced with me at the Spring Cotillion last year."

"Ah." Julia's smile widened, and she extended her hand.

"This is my sister, Julia," Alexandra said.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Payton," Julia said, as Payton shook her hand.

"Yeah... nice to meet you, too." He nodded. "My parents are getting a Muggle tour of New Roanoke, but I kind of bailed on them – even the wizarding version of a historical tour is pretty boring, you know? And I don't get to come here very often, so..." His voice trailed off. He was looking at Alexandra, and shuffling his feet. Alexandra didn't know why he suddenly looked so nervous, or why Julia's little smile as she looked between them was making *her* flush.

Payton cleared his throat. "So, anyway. I was wondering if maybe you'd like to go to lunch?" His blush deepened as he looked at Julia. "I mean, both of you. Of course. If you haven't already eaten. Or weren't, you know, doing anything else, like errands –"

"Oh, nonsense," Julia said. "In fact, I was going to visit another formal robes shop, but Alexandra finds those very boring. Why don't you two go have lunch while I do a little more shopping?"

"Really?" Payton's face brightened. Alexandra stared at Julia, who was stepping away from them. Behind Payton, she gave Alexandra a pointed look and inclined her head towards a nearby cafe.

"But –" Alexandra hesitated, and Julia mouthed something at her and made insistent gestures with her hands: *Go! Go! Go!*

Alexandra narrowed her eyes at her sister, and then turned her attention back to the boy and gave him a small smile, as Payton regarded her apprehensively.

"Sure," she said.

He grinned. "All right. Cool!"

Julia grinned, too. "Yes, cool!"

Alexandra looked at Julia. "I'll meet you back here in –"

"Take your time," Julia said lightly. "I'll be looking at a *lot* of formal robes."

Alexandra rolled her eyes at Julia behind Payton's back, then said, "C'mon. There's a cafe on the

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corner.”

They walked off down the street together, with Julia beaming after them.

It was just lunch – Alexandra knew Julia was only trying to lighten her mood. But maybe that wasn't such a bad idea. Seven years wasn't such a long time, and there were so many things she wanted to do.

End Year Three

Alexandra Quick and the Deathly Regiment

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Thank you for reading *Alexandra Quick and the Deathly Regiment*. I owe many thanks to my most excellent betas, [SwissMiss](#) and [miles2go](#). (Also, I borrowed “dead man's finger,” the magical plant referred to in Chapter 31, from SwissMiss's story [Survivors](#).)

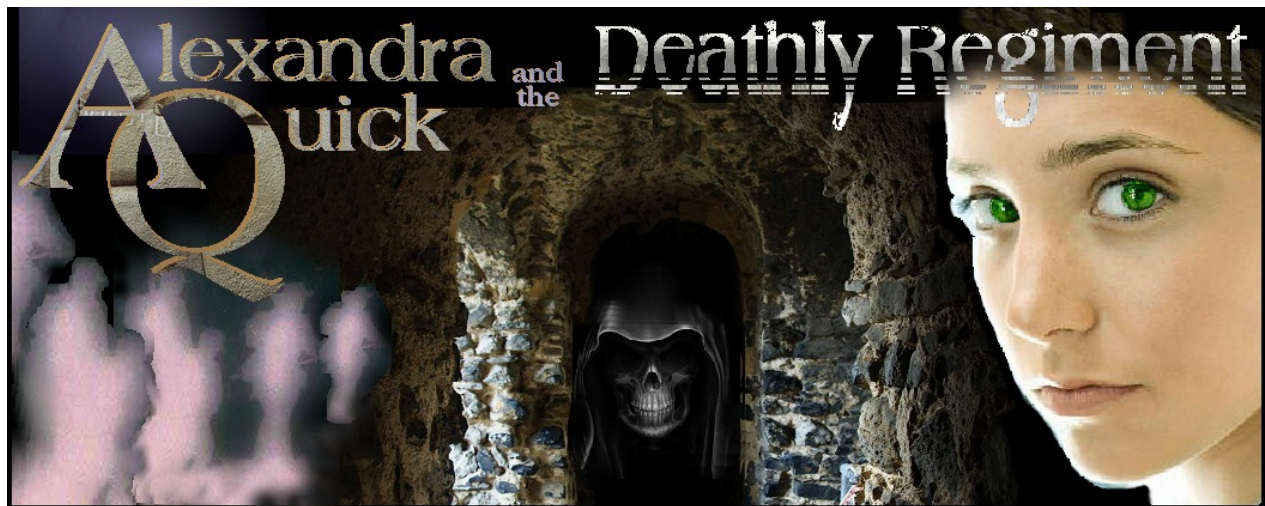
This is the third of a planned seven books in the Alexandra Quick series. Book four will be titled *Alexandra Quick and the Stars Above*. I expect to finish it by the end of 2011, and it will be posted at the same sites where I have posted my previous Alexandra Quick stories:

[FictionAlley](#)

[Mugglenet Fan Fiction](#)

[FanFiction.net](#)

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