

John hesitated at the gate. His giddy excitement for this mission had been only somewhat dampened when he'd discovered that he would have to visit Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. He did not like wizards. He had despised them ever since his Father Crastor days, when wizards had systematically persecuted his chaos magicians until the movement disintegrated. Chaos magic was still technically illegal in the wizarding world, although very few people remembered it now. Over the centuries, he had tried now and then to get to know some wizards in a friendly way, for he believed in second chances if he believed in nothing else. A few good ones notwithstanding, he'd found wizards to be pretentious at best, mad tribalists at worst. They were so proud of their own way of life they would go to cruel lengths to protect it from contamination by anything new or foreign. From people like him.

The gate was tall, of a simple design, made of wrought iron. It was surely a placeholder for the real gate, the layers of magical enchantments that surrounded the school. This gate was purely for show, just like the wand in his pocket, which he'd only bought the day before. Luckily he hadn't needed to buy robes as well; his plainest Aezerothi robes could pass for wizard robes. Beyond the gate he could see a neatly maintained landscape. Out of it, the castle rose like a giant, a lumbering creature plucked out of its place and time. He took a deep breath, and pressed the button on dusty intercom. Silence. A few tense moments passed. He pressed it again. He began to wonder whether the intercom actually functioned at all. Perhaps it was some kind of test, a way to spot the muggles who did not know the proper way in.

A man's voice came through. "Hogwarts School for Boys and Girls, what's your business?"

John jumped a little, surprised that the thing was working. He held down the button as he spoke. "Yes, hello," he said, trying to sound relaxed. "I know this is a bit unusual, but I was wondering if I could have a word with your librarian, Madam Pince. She's not expecting me, but it won't take long." He'd asked around in town to get the name of the Hogwarts librarian, hoping that knowing it would lend him some credibility.

The voice spoke again, a tone of suspicion coming through the fuzzy electronic distortion. "What's your business with her then? If you've got a message I'd be happy to pass it along."

"No, I really must speak with her directly," John replied. "It's a somewhat delicate matter. I've got a book for her, but I must ask a few questions before I hand it over."

There was another pause. Then the voice asked, "Have you got the password?"

John rolled his eyes. Of course these paranoid lunatics would have a password. You'd think he was breaking into a bank vault, not visiting a damned boarding school.

"No, I don't know anything about any password. What is it, 'Wizards Rule'?" he said sarcastically.

"Alright close enough. I'll be but a moment." came the voice on the other end.

"Oh for fuck's sake," John muttered under his breath, his nervousness briefly replaced with irritation. He did not know which mood was more dangerous for him.

A few minutes later, a short, stout man with thinning hair came walking up, puffing a little with the exertion. He gave John a friendly wave and ushered him in through the gate.

"You know I was just having a bit of fun with you with that whole password business," he said jovially. "It's just it's my job to keep the muggles out, and you can't be too careful, you know." John thought he saw the man wink.

"Of course," he replied. A wave of revulsion swelled in him. The man talked of muggles as if they were some sort of household pest, and he was letting John in on a secret home remedy he'd found to trap them. The man's immediate intimacy with him made him feel dirty.

"Now we'll get you checked in, just up here in the office," said the little man, gesturing toward the main entrance to the castle. "I'm afraid there's no apparating on campus, so we'll have to get there the muggle way," he said in a fretful tone, as if to apologize for this insult.

John wanted to tell the man that muggles don't walk anymore, they have cars now, because muggles, unlike wizards, do not deny the inevitable march of time. Instead he said nothing, and decided to be grateful that he did not have to invent an excuse not to apparate.

"So, where do you come from?" asked the man breezily as they walked.

"Ireland," said John.

"I judged as much by your accent," said the security guard. "I meant where are you coming from *now*."

"Ireland."

"Ah. Long trip for a library book."

"Well, Hogwarts' library is no ordinary library," said John, hoping this would wrap up the conversation.

"That's true," the man chuckled. "Yep, you could say that again." The sound of their feet crunching on the gravel path filled the air. It was early afternoon. The sun was shining, though it was not warm.

"So, Ireland. That's interesting. Say, did you catch the match last night? That was quite a beating Puddlemere dealt the Shadeland Shamrocks. O'Leary must've woken up on the wrong side of the bed, that or he was half-drunk."

"You know I've never followed quidditch, to be honest."

"Never followed quidditch! Hopping hippogriffs, why not?"

John shrugged. "Sports were never my cup of tea."

"But it's not just a sport, it's quidditch!" He waited for John to defend his ludicrous position. When he saw that the defense was not forthcoming, he let out a quiet harumph and looked down at his feet. A moment later, he changed tack.

"Did you see the Prophet this morning? Seems Pritt's expanding the south end of the floo network. Says it'll be good for small businesses, but we all know that's a lot of hogswallop. He's just trying to win the young peoples' vote. Soon we'll be overrun with Southerners."

"I don't follow politics either."

"Ah, sure. That I can understand. I remember way back in the Thrumpus days, we had real leadership. But nowadays they're all either clowns or crooks, am I right?"

John smiled. "Yes, quite right."

"So, what do you follow?"

John shrugged again. He tried to look nonchalant but his heart was racing. He had not prepared himself for small talk. He should have brushed up on wizard popular culture before he came here. He cast about for a safe topic. "Books, I suppose."

"Mmm, that's good. You know my wife is always telling me I ought to read more. Just can't seem to find the time. Maybe if I spent less time at the tavern I could find it, you know what I mean?" he gave John another wink.

John wished desperately that this man would shut up. He did not understand why some people cannot stand empty silence in a conversation, and so must fill the silence with empty words. He did not fear wizards, and so he was not worried about discovery for his own sake. He feared that they should turn him away before he could meet the person he'd come here to see. There was more than just the reward money at stake. To leave here without so much as the man's name was a possibility John could not bear. Or her name. Yes, it could be a woman.

"So, have you read any good books lately?"

Again, John tried to sound relaxed. "Well, recently I read *Willoughby's Wand* by Zelda Crankshaw. I know it's an old one, but I was surprised to find I couldn't put it down. The characters were very complex, and she writes with a beautiful, poetic kind of prose." It was one of a few wizard books he'd read a long time ago to impress a beautiful witch. It hadn't worked on the witch, but perhaps it would work on this fellow.

At this, it was the guard's turn to struggle. "Gee, well, that's er, mighty interesting. That's some high literature, that is. I think I would need the children's version," he said with a laugh.

They were approaching the steps of the main entrance. Two rounded turrets flanked the large doors, their crenelations reaching high into the sky. The handrail of the stone balustrade beside the stair was carved in the shape of a great snake. Their feet echoed on the great stone steps. Above them, the keystone of the arched doorway was carved in the shape of a raven's head that seemed to be watching the enterer. John wondered how many magicians ever entered these halls under that raven's gaze. Then he wondered how many of them made it out alive.

"Rowena Ravenclaw's emblem," said the guard, apparently following John's eyes. "They say it imparts wisdom to all who enter here."

"I should be so lucky."

"You ever been to Hogwarts before?"

"No."

"Really! You don't say," mused the guard as they entered into the front hall. "You'll have to come back for our open house one day. It's great fun. There's tours and workshops, and Professor Trelawney gives palm readings and Professor Spragg brings out his collection of strange and nasty specimens. It's great fun for the kids and grown-ups, too."

"Yes, perhaps," said John vaguely. He was looking about the entrance hall. Sunlight streamed in through tall windows and bounced off the off-white stone, giving the hall an unexpected warm glow. It was many stories high, with a wooden staircase that snaked its way around each level. Off to the right was an enormous set of double doors. A long red and gold rug down the center made the place feel almost cozy.

"Right this way," said the guard, leading him toward a little office on the left. The guard offered him a quill and directed him to sign in in a large guestbook. John couldn't help but reflect that no one who had ever tried a ballpoint pen could possibly pretend they preferred a quill. He signed his name. He'd been John for nearly all his life, since Crastor had not been safe and he'd always thought Crastor a rather ugly name anyway. John was simple and common, and that was how he liked it. His latest surname was one he'd had for several years now. He'd gotten it off of a whiskey bottle.

"So mister John Hennessey, welcome to Hogwarts," said the guard, reading over John's shoulder. "I'm Fernsby, by the way, Oliver Fernsby, chief of security here." He shook John's hand with a vigorous grip. "Before we can head off to the library, there's just one more thing. I must have your wand please."

John extracted the wand from his pocket and handed it over.

Fernsby took the same lamenting tone that he had earlier. "I do apologize for the inconvenience. It'll be locked up here safe and sound while we're about the grounds."

"That's quite alright."

"Thank you sir, that's very good of you."

John got the sense that Fernsby had been expecting him to make more of a fuss. He quickly added, "It does seem a little excessive, but I understand that rules are rules."

"I know, in fact I agree it is overly cautious," declared Fernsby, who seemed to be lapsing into a practiced speech, "but when it comes to the safety of our students, we can't be too careful. Not to mention that we've a number of rare, even priceless magical artifacts within these walls. An abundance of caution, that's our policy. But come, we'll make our trip to the library and then you'll be on your way."

As they weaved through the castle toward the library, Fernsby took it upon himself to act as tour guide, pointing out bits of the architecture, a painting here, a tower there, and recounting their well-worn legends and anecdotes. This suited John just fine, as he much preferred Fernsby's stories to his questions.

They reached the library, and found Madam Pince behind the central desk. John thought to himself that he would like to paint her in a modern style, because she seemed to be composed entirely of right angles. She wore narrow, rectangular glasses and a shawl about her bony shoulders. When she saw them approaching she raised an eyebrow, and that too achieved a remarkable angle.

Fernsby introduced them. John extended his hand and she took it. Hers was the kind of handshake that feels like you are grasping a glass figurine rather than a living hand. John reached into his messenger bag and produced a leather-bound book. *Power, Powers and Pride: The Charm Wars of the 18th Century*. He lay it on the counter but did not take his hand off it, as if it were a chess piece and he was not yet ready to finalize his move. Madam Pince's suspicious gaze did not let up.

"I need to speak with whoever last borrowed this book," he said in a low voice.

"Why?"

She did not mince words, John had to give her that.

"Because the circumstances in which it was found were, let's say, *unusual*," he said, drawing out this last word. "Now, I'm sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for its being where it was. If I could just speak with the last person who borrowed it, I'm sure we could get it all sorted out in no time."

"Are you with the ministry or something?" asked Fernsby, who remained by John's side, listening with obvious curiosity.

"No," he said. He lowered his voice even further. "I am here on behalf of a colleague. A powerful man who has a vested interest in getting to the bottom of this situation as efficiently and discreetly as possible."

Fernsby leaned in closer. Madam Pince looked hard into his eyes. John forced himself to return her gaze, even though he sensed that she could sense his discomfort.

"It is not the policy of this library to give away the names of people who check out our books, especially not to strangers. This allows our readers to pursue their curiosity without fear of judgment or ridicule," she said sternly.

"An admirable policy," he replied. "I assure you, my colleague appreciates the importance of privacy. He would not ask this favor if it were not a serious and urgent matter. I wish I could give you more details, but I cannot. I know we are strangers, but I'm afraid that this book became our business when it was brought into our... sphere."

Madam Pince seemed to be thinking. She opened a drawer in front of her that contained a very large book. She slid *Charm Wars* toward her, out of John's reluctant fingers, and examined the stamp on the inner cover. She flipped through the large book in the drawer. She scanned a particular page, and then lingered on it, frowning a little. John was burning with curiosity. He wanted to rip the big book out of her hands. She slammed it shut and slid the drawer back in place.

"Alright," she said. "Just this once. Do you hear me? Only in this one exceptional case."

John nodded gratefully. He felt sweat on his face. He was desperately eager and he did not care now if they saw it. He was so close. Madam Pince reached for the little book on the counter but John shot his hand out and pinned it down.

"First, the name," he said in a trembling voice.

Madam Pince's angular eyebrow shot up again. But she answered.

"Katherine McAlister."

Fernsby let out a hearty laugh. John withdrew his hand, and Madam Pince took the book from the counter and held it protectively to her chest. Fernsby gave John a slap on the back. "Yes, Irma that's fine, Kate can handle him!"

Students streamed out of the classroom. John stood waiting like a stone as the stream parted around him. He and Fernsby had spent the last twenty minutes waiting outside the classroom, in which time John had mostly asked him questions about himself. The man had two children, and that had been a rich source of safe conversation. Now Fernsby was greeting various students by name as they passed by, while John stood still and pale and silent.

He tried to temper his expectations. She was just an ordinary witch who had stumbled onto Aezeroth, that was all. She'd surely never been in the high warlord's palace. The guests that night were all high-ranking military officers. What was her book doing in one of their bags? Was it mere coincidence that it was a book about war? It had to be. The most likely explanation was that she was an ordinary witch who'd stumbled through the portal, and she had been robbed of her book and who knows what else. Then the book had been traded around. It would have been a novelty to anyone in the Horde, albeit a dangerous one. No one in Aezeroth knew anything of earth, much less of wizards. But they had their own humans in Aezeroth, and they were sworn enemies of the Horde. Possession of that foreign book, with its illustrations of humans doing magic, would have been suspicious in any circumstances. For a high-ranking officer of the Horde to be sneaking around with it was almost treason. Someone must have slipped the book into an officer's bag to defame him. Or her. There had been some women officers, too. But then why not make a show of revealing it? Why had it only come to light days later, when a servant was caught with it, who claimed that she'd found the book in an officer's bag, but which officer she could not guess? Perhaps something had gone wrong in their plan. Yes, that was it. That was the only explanation. What mad fancy had led him to consider any other possible scenario?

"Mister Hennessey?"

John snapped back to attention. Fernsby was waiting by the open door of the classroom. The students were gone. John stepped forward a little unsteadily, readjusting to the demands of the present moment.

A woman appeared at the doorway. The first thing he noticed was her excellent posture. She looked to be about forty or so, with honey-toned skin and black hair in a French plait. She was a little taller than he was, which was not a great accomplishment for he was only 5'2". She had a sturdy build, and a wide mouth which was neither particularly attractive nor particularly unattractive. She looked him over with courteous mild interest.

"You've a visitor, Kate. Says he'd like to speak with you, if you have the time," Fernsby said to her.

She nodded. "I think I do. Depending on how much time he asks."

John looked to Fernsby, then back to the woman, who were both looking at him.

"Oh, uh," John began nervously. "Hard to say. This conversation will either be very short or very long, I expect." Damn his nerves. Why was he so anxious?

She gave another stolid nod. "In either case, you don't have to wait around, Oliver. I'll bring him back to your office when we're through."

"Thanks Kate. If he causes any trouble, you know how to reach me," he said with another characteristic wink. "See you in a bit then," he said cheerfully to John as he departed.

She stepped back into the classroom and gestured for him to proceed. "Come. We might as well meet in here."

He entered. The classroom looked like any other. There was a chalkboard with streaks of dust where some notes had recently been erased, and there was a large, dark green teacher's desk. On the opposite wall from where they entered, three large windows rose toward the ceiling, so that the room was bright with natural light. She closed the door behind him and glided to the front of the room. John's heart was racing faster than ever. She was just an ordinary witch, he tried to tell himself. But she did not seem ordinary. Every little movement she made seemed so poised, so steady. It was like the air around her was charged with a fierce, determined energy. He followed behind her.

She turned and extended her hand. "Katherine McAlister," she said. "But most people call me Kate."

"John Hennessey," he said, grasping her hand. He felt an electric excitement course through him as he shook it.

"So, McAlister," he said. "You don't seem Irish. Or Scottish." Why had he said that? That was a stupid thing to say. She had a very slight accent on top of her British one, one that only came out on certain words and that was hard to place. It was the sound of someone who had surely learned English at a very young age, but who had perhaps not spoken it regularly growing up.

She paused and looked at him for a moment. "The name is, but I'm not. Hennessey, any relation to the whiskey?" Only her eyes were smiling.

"No," he said with a nervous laugh.

She stood before the teacher's desk and leaned back onto it, crossing her arms. He moved toward one of the students' desks across from her hoisted himself onto it. His legs did not reach the ground, so he let them dangle childishly.

"I'm here about a library book. Charm wars of the 18th century. I believe this was in your possession recently?"

"Oh, yes!" She said brightly. "Has it been found then? I lost it and I swear I turned the whole house upside down looking for it." Her perfect posture relaxed a little.

"Do you remember where you last saw it?"

She tossed her hands up in an animated shrug. "No idea. There are only a few places where it could have been. Home, my office, maybe the library or somewhere on the grounds. I'm sure I left it in one of those. But I checked my home and my office top to bottom."

John nodded, thinking. Her exasperation seemed entirely genuine.

"What is it? What's this about?"

"Well," he began. "You see, I'm part of what you might call a secret club. And that book was discovered in our clubhouse some weeks ago." He spoke at a slow, measured pace, in a tone that hinted at an unspoken subtext.

"The leader of our club, let's call him Thor," he said, in case she knew that the high warlord's name was Thrall, "is in quite a state over it. The presence of this book in our clubhouse suggests that an outsider may have been lurking under our very noses. Or perhaps, that one of us has not been entirely honest about their comings and goings. The real rub, though, is that the book wasn't found just anywhere, but right in the heart of Thor's personal quarters. So you can see why he's upset. It's quite important that we get to the bottom of this."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," she said, frowning. "Are you in some sort of cult? I didn't bring that book off of school grounds. Someone must have taken it."

"But who? And why? I tell you Kate—if I may call you Kate—I have been racking my brain over it, and it just doesn't make any sense. Now one possibility is that you really did simply lose it. But then why would one of us pick it up, and bring it back where its discovery might get them in serious trouble? And why, of all things, a book? How could they have gotten to it, if it was tucked away in your office or your home? On the other hand, perhaps you know one of us. Perhaps you willingly lent them the book, though for what possible reason I could not guess. If you do know one of us, that is, if you have recently come across someone who struck you as an outsider, we would very much like to know. Of course we would not hold you in the least bit responsible for anything. It's our own people we're concerned with, after all."

She shook her head. "I swear, I don't know anything. I borrowed a book, I lost it. There's nothing more I can tell you."

"You're sure you haven't seen any such foreigners on this campus then? I mean, very, very foreign. Not like me," he said with a smile. "They would be... strange. Inexplicable. Almost monstrous."

She shook her head. Her face was blank.

“Perhaps you stumbled onto our clubhouse by accident? That would be no transgression on your part, I assure you. That would be our mistake, and our responsibility.” Still she said nothing. In a decisive tone he added, “If you are keeping quiet because you want to go back, I would not be averse to arranging a sort of tour. Arrangements could be made. It’s the truth that matters, Kate, only the truth.”

She shrugged and shook her head again. John sighed. He had been exciting himself over nothing. She must have simply dropped the book, and then it was picked up by some Aezerothi who’d stumbled onto the earth side of the portal. And here he was wasting this woman’s time. But she did not seem impatient. On the contrary, she seemed very interested. She was looking at him intently, seriously, as though she agreed that this was a matter of grave importance. Emboldened by her attention, he kept going.

“There is one more possibility. That you are one of us. That you, like me, are a master of disguise. Able to move between this world and that one. If that is the case, you still have nothing to fear.” He added, quietly, “I promise you that.” He paused. His mouth was dry. He was inadvertently speaking in a voice so low it was barely above a whisper. “Perhaps you are, shall we say, two-faced.”

Her silence was maddening. She gave him nothing. She was looking at him strangely, though whether she was simply an ordinary witch who thought him strange, or whether she was something more, he still could not tell. There was such intensity about her, such gravity. Outside, a breeze rustled the trees in the courtyard. Neither of them moved. Neither of them took their gazes off of each other. She did not even blink. You could have heard a pin drop. No, he decided. This is no ordinary witch.

“I will be honest with you,” he continued. “I am two-faced. I am loyal to Thor only as long as it is convenient for me. But if I found someone who is like me, that is, really, truly two-faced like me, I would gladly march up to Thor and tell him to go to hell and take his reward money with him. I’ve never met anyone like me. But I have been hoping to meet such a person for a very, very, very long time.”

He leaned back and took a deep breath to indicate that he had finished his speech. Still she did not move. But there was something new in her eyes. For the first time, she seemed unsettled, lacking the composure that she had commanded up to this point. He sensed something bordering on fear.

Damn, he thought. She is just a witch, of course. And now I’ve told her everything and she thinks I’m some sort of dark wizard here to disrupt her little world.

Then she stood up. She walked toward the wall with the windows, her high heels clicking on the stone floor. One by one, she drew the curtains on each window, so that the room became dim. Then she crossed the classroom and went to the door. He heard the deadbolt slide into place. It only occurred to him later that she did these things without using magic. She came back and stood directly before him.

“Show me,” she said in Gutterspeak.

John blinked at her, trying to comprehend what was happening.

“Show me your other face,” she said, again in Gutterspeak.

John closed his eyes, and effortlessly slipped into his undead form. His frame shrank, his shoulders hunched, and his skin became papery and decayed, exposing the bones of his joints and the cavities where his nose and left cheek ought to have been. He opened his now yellow, glowing eyes. Kate let out a little noise, something between an “Oh” and a strangled gasp. Her hand was over her mouth. She took two steps back. John hopped down off the desk. He looked at her with apprehension, planning how he might silence her if she should scream. But when she lowered her hand from her mouth, he saw in the dim light that she was smiling broadly, and there were tears in her eyes. Then she began to change. Her skin became ashen and drawn, her thick black hair became faded and thin, the skin on her hand peeled away to reveal her knuckle bones, and her eyes turned to glowing yellow orbs. She was a remarkably well-preserved undead.

John laughed a wild, giddy laugh. She joined in. Their laughs crescendoed, so that soon they were cackling like maniacs. Then he leapt into her arms. She let out a yelp, and they stumbled and went

down to the floor together, embracing and laughing hysterically and both of them crying, too. They sat on the floor, clinging tightly to each other for a minute. Then they came apart a little and looked at each other, both gasping for air. Kate wiped the tears from John's cheeks, first from the good cheek, then from the top of the missing one, where the stream of tears was flowing into his mouth. He laughed again. They were both breathing heavily. She had one hand on his knee, and her other hand in his.

"I can't believe it. I just can't believe it," she said. "Where have you been all this time? Just earth and Aezeroth?"

He nodded. "You?"

She nodded, with a little shrug. "Mostly."

"How old are you?" he asked.

She sighed, and seemed to hesitate.

"It's alright, I won't tell anyone I swear! I'm just, I'm just so excited to meet you. I'm close to six hundred by my reckoning."

She nodded slowly. Looking into his eyes, she seemed to be searching for something. But her expression was not suspicious. Her gaze was hopeful and earnest, even sweet. She looked down and laughed again, a lovely, genuine laugh that fought its way forth through the tears.

"You know it's not polite to ask a woman her age," she said.

"I know, it's monstrous of me."

She smiled. "I am two thousand years old."

"Mother of God," said John, in an awe-struck voice. What a woman. What a life! He tried to comprehend such a span of time but he could not. He would try again later, perhaps, but now his head was swimming and his thoughts were racing, and his comprehension could not keep up.

"Even you can't believe it," she said.

"No, no I believe it! Believe me, I believe it. It's just been a long time since I met anyone older than me. And you're, well you're..."

"Really old."

John nodded and laughed, and she laughed too. She gripped his hand more tightly.

"Well John Hennessey. Luck is on your side today. I'm done with classes, and to hell with the faculty meeting. We have a lot of catching up to do."

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They strolled through the grounds arm in arm. The afternoon had become cloudy and gray but John hardly noticed. Flowers were blooming, the walk was invigorating, bright-eyed students bustled about, and on his arm was someone who was just like him. Not a human, not an undead, but both. Dead and unable to die. She grew more beautiful to him with each passing minute. Her tight plait had loosened, and a few rebellious strands dangled freely. Her attitude was still poised, but it was softer, full of genuine warmth. Some students shot greedy, furtive glances at this stranger on their teacher's arm, but he did not care. Let the wizards think what they would. Let them unleash their worst. None of it mattered now. All that mattered was Kate.

Like John and all Aezerothi people, she had a proclivity for one of the nine types of Aezerothi magic. She was a rogue, gifted with nimble hands and feet, keen perception, and the ability to become invisible. She was a general for the Horde, or at least she had been. She'd stepped away two and a half years ago, just before taking the Hogwarts job. She needed a break. She felt too removed from earth, and too enmeshed in the intrigues of the Horde's elite. She had not yet decided how long her break would last, or if she would return at all. The high warlord of the Horde still sent invitations to her residence, for he valued her political advice and he missed her company. She had been a guest of his that night, perhaps for the last time. Her name, Flaed—for that was her name in Aezeroth—was well-known now. Perhaps she would retire and wait a couple generations until she was forgotten, before

returning to Aezeroth and rising to political prominence once again. It had been this way for a long time. She loved politics, but she did not want to attract too much attention. She would rather be a bird whispering in the king's ear than wear the crown herself.

"I like to teach history when I come back to earth because it's a good way to keep up with the times. You think I'm joking but I'm serious. History doesn't change, but they're always changing how they want you to teach it. You can learn a lot about people from how they look at their history."

"That makes perfect sense to me," John agreed solemnly. "But if you want to keep up with the times, why not teach at a muggle school? These wizards have always been stuck in the past. They're further behind muggles now than they've ever been."

"Perhaps that's why I keep coming back to them," said Kate. "With all its new technology, the modern muggle world is a little intimidating."

"Bah, nonsense!" said John cheerfully. "Most muggles don't understand how their own technology works. They barely know how to use it. You'll pick it up in no time, and I promise it's far better than quills and candles."

She smiled and patted his arm. "I appreciate your faith in me."

Their path snaked beside a low building, and beside the building there stood a wide wooden platform that was several feet tall. The sight of it was somehow eerie to John. It reminded him of a gallows.

"What is that?" he asked.

"A little stage for student performances," said Kate. "Plays, concerts, not for big ceremonies but for little ones."

"Hm," he said. He stared at it and tried to imagine string quartets and Shakespeare in the park.

"Every time I walk past it I think that it's just the right size for a guillotine or a gallows," said Kate.

"NO," said John, tugging on her arm. "I was just thinking the same thing!"

She threw her head back and laughed. "Look at us, what a pair of anachronisms we are!"

John turned away from the platform. "This place is an anachronism."

"You don't like it," she said, watching him. "You don't like wizards?"

John shrugged.

"You can tell me," she said. "I'm not one of them."

"You're not?" he looked at her in surprise. "But," he spluttered, trying to make sense of this. "How? Do they know?"

"No, and I'm trusting you not to tell them," she said with a warning look. "I know a few spells. Nothing impressive, but it is enough. I learned it the hard way."

"That's the most unbelievable thing you've said today. Nobody learns to have wizard magic. You're either born with it or you're not."

"Well," said Kate with a haughty smile, "I am exceptional."

"Of course. But I still don't get it."

"Perhaps one day I will teach you 'wizard magic,' as you call it."

John scoffed. She threw him a playful, questioning look. He looked away. He was relieved that she was not one of them. She still liked wizards, though. That was disagreeable but forgivable. He looked down at the hem of his robe, which was muddy from their long walk over dirt paths and grassy glades. They were approaching the main campus again, and the dirt path was becoming stone. She was waiting for him to explain himself.

"I have a history with wizards," he grumbled. "We fought once and I lost. But they're also pretentious and stubborn and prejudiced. Try to show them a ballpoint pen and they'll think it's the harbinger of their destruction. Is it so wrong to be friendly with muggles? Or to—" he was going to say, 'do magic without a wand,' but he stopped himself, more out of habit than anything else.

"Ah," said Kate. "I see."

John felt slightly annoyed that she was not agreeing with him. "What?" he asked peevishly.

Kate spoke calmly, and not unkindly. "*They're* the ones who are stuck in the past. *They're* the ones who can't move on."

John stopped walking. He unlinked his arm from hers, and he felt his cheeks grow hot. He had never thought of his scorn in that light before, and for that he felt ashamed. She barely knew him, and yet she had peered into his soul so easily. "You wouldn't understand," he said in a voice like barbed wire.

She took his hand in both of hers. "My friend," she said. "I understand better than you know." John looked into her eyes and saw only sympathy. She was not trying to tease him nor even to change his mind. He lamented that there was so much he did not know about her. There was so much that they would never know about each other. The specter of the past seemed to rise between them, separating them like a gulf.

She gently pulled him forward, and they began walking again. They were approaching the central courtyard. "What did you do when they asked for your wand?" she asked.

"I gave them one."

"Good. It was good of you to lie. You would not have made it this far if you hadn't."

"It felt reckless. I was afraid they might ask me to use it."

"Well, there are benefits to caution and there are benefits to recklessness. Life is full of moments when we must balance the two. I suspect one such moment may be approaching as we speak."

A wiry elderly man was crossing the courtyard and coming toward them, waving weakly at Kate. John immediately disliked the look of him. His black robe was old and faded, and the green and gold edging gave the black a sickly green undertone. He was almost entirely bald, and his face had a pinched and dour look, with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Good afternoon, Kate," he said in an attempt at friendliness that came off as stiff and strained.

"Hello Ezra."

"I see you have a visitor," he said, looking at John.

"Yes, this is my new friend, John Hennessey. John, this is Ezra Hornswood, our defense against the dark arts teacher." The old man bowed slightly.

"So, a new friend?" Hornswood said slowly, his false smile growing more malicious. "What brings you to our campus, friend?"

Kate answered. "John was running a favor for a mutual acquaintance of ours. But it turns out he is originally from my hometown, which for a little town like ours makes him practically family."

"Well, isn't that nice," he said with the tone of someone who has just found something unpleasant stuck to the bottom of his shoe. John's irritation was tempered by his delight that she had just called him family.

"Is this your first time at Hogwarts?" Hornswood asked.

John nodded.

"Ah. And where did you go to school?"

John glanced at Kate, but she was not going to answer for him again. "I went to muggle schools," he said uncertainly.

Hornswood narrowed his eyes. "How interesting. So your parents are muggles, then?"

John felt like he was being inspected under a magnifying glass. Fernsby's idle curiosity had been harmless, and now in hindsight it was rather endearing. By contrast, Hornswood's curiosity was anything but idle.

"I don't know. My parents died when I was young."

"Oh dear, I am sorry to hear that. Did you not grow up with someone else who knew them? Other relations, perhaps?"

"No."

“Ah. What a shame. I’m sure that must have been very hard for you.” His words dripped with the sickening sweetness of cough syrup. John’s patience was growing as thin as Hornswood’s polite veneer. He cast about for an excuse to bid the old man farewell, but Hornswood went on, “At any rate, you must have studied magic with someone, surely.”

“Sure I did.”

“Who?”

“You’ve never heard of him.”

Hornswood smiled, flashing yellowed teeth. “That does not mean I would not like to hear of him. I am always interested in news from the rougher edges of the wizarding world.”

John’s patience snapped. “Professor Hornswood,” he said icily, “you must forgive my orphan manners. But I fail to see how any of this is remotely within the realm of your business.”

A shadow seemed to pass across Hornswood’s face, and the polite smile disappeared.

“Well,” said Hornswood with equal coldness. “I shall forgive your orphan manners when I find a reason to.”

“And perhaps one day you will,” said Kate soothingly. She rested her hand on John’s elbow and began pulling him along again. “Good afternoon, Ezra,” she said as they departed.

They crossed the courtyard and passed through a corridor between two buildings. “*That is why I don’t like wizards,*” John hissed to her once they were some distance away.

Kate gave an acquiescent nod.

“And please don’t defend him.”

“I wasn’t going to,” she said defensively. “Of course I don’t like Hornswood. Nobody likes a stubborn, prejudiced old man,” she said as a mischievous smile spread across her face.

“What’s funny?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “Now, there is still one more important issue we must discuss.”

“Are you calling me a stubborn, prejudiced old man?”

“The portals, John, we must discuss the portals. Have you noticed they are changing?”

“He had no right to talk to me that way.”

Kate gave a heavy sigh. John looked at her with narrowed eyes, but she looked straight ahead. “John,” she said.

He was expecting some kind of reprimand, but to his surprise she said, “I think I owe you an apology. I chose to be here, and I am used to wizards like Hornswood. You did not, and are not. As a political advisor, it is my job to make stubborn old men reconsider their positions. But you are not a politician, and I am not your advisor. It is wrong of me to tease you for your feelings. It is not the way a friend should behave and it is not, shall we say, remotely within the realm of my business.”

John was stunned. Kate was full of surprises. “Thank you,” he said.

“That being said,” she continued, “do not look to me to be your cheerleader. You have your opinions on wizards and I have mine. As adults, I think we can agree to disagree. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Yes,” said John. “Thank you.” He imagined her at the negotiating table, seated between an Orc warlord and a troll chief, brokering war or peace with that steady intensity of hers. He thought he felt the gulf between them shrink, just a bit, as he reflected that perhaps he did not need to know her past to understand who she was.

“And yes,” he added. “I have noticed the portals changing.”

“They are opening,” she said.

It was true. Over the past century, across earth and Aezeroth, the portals had been growing more reliable, easier to find and easier to use. Of course some portals had always been easier to read than others, but he had never in his life seen them all change together in a concerted way like this. Most portals on earth, most of the time, led only to Aezeroth, and vice versa. Planeswalkers have a term for this—sister planes. Throughout most of his life, it was extremely rare for a planeswalker outside earth

or Aezeroth to reach either of the two. It happened maybe two or three times every century. However, the past century had seen a marked uptick in the number of outsiders reaching one of the two planes. The implication was deeply unsettling.

“Do you know about the portal on this campus?” she asked.

“Yes, in the Forbidden Forest. I always assumed that’s why they built the school here. Or at least one of the founders must have known about it. It’s one of the best portals on earth.”

“*The* best, in my experience. You should try it again, and you will see what I mean. It is smoother than ever. It makes planeswalking as easy as stepping into the next room.”

John shuddered.

“You are not happy about this either,” she said.

He shook his head.

“Good. I agree. It is only a matter of time before earth and Aezeroth find each other. When they do, it will be the doom of one. Probably Aezeroth. Whenever two technologically disparate cultures meet, the outcome is never peaceful. We are lucky when it is merely war, but often it is genocide. And then it is only a matter of time before some Hegemony explorer finds the sister planes. That will be the doom of both. ”

John nodded. The Hegemony was the colonial empire that ruled most known planes in the multiverse. Those that were not colonies outright were de facto colonies, for its economic system and interplanar culture were thrust upon them in any case. No plane had ever successfully resisted the Hegemony. Those who resisted were violently quashed. Some had fought guerilla wars and a few had actually won, but in the end that made little difference. They became economic slaves of the Hegemony regardless. Independent or not, the planes were still stripped of their resources, and their local cultures were marginalized at best or persecuted at worst. Earth and Aezeroth had always been in the outback, unknown to the rest of the multiverse. But the Hegemony’s borders were expanding, and it would richly reward any planeswalker who “discovered” a new habitable plane. With the portals opening, it was only a matter of time before the Hegemony discovered earth and Aezeroth.

He had slowed down while he was thinking, and now he stopped as a thought dawned on him. “That’s why you’re here. The portal.”

“Yes,” she said. “Among other reasons.”

They had walked to the edge of the campus proper and were on a dirt path again. Beyond the sprawling manicured lawn, the edge of the Forbidden Forest was visible. Beech trees swayed gently in the breeze, and the forest floor was dusted with bluebells. It looked so inviting, the kind of forest that called to imaginative children on a Sunday afternoon, or to hopeful teenagers on a first date. But John knew that it concealed even more secrets than he did. If the forest were on a map it would deserve an illustration of some magical beast like they used to draw on uncharted oceans, with a warning, *Here there be monsters*.

“I kill anything that comes through the portals,” said Kate.

John closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He tried to absorb the weight of her words. So, this was her policy. Gradually, almost accidentally, it had become his policy, too, more or less. He did not kill everything. He generally spared those who had simply lost their way, he spared children and animals, and he’d spared a couple planeswalkers who had won his heart. He would always owe a debt to planeswalkers, having been raised by one and saved by others. But he could not let any outsider reveal the location of his sister planes to the Hegemony. The stakes were simply too high.

He opened his eyes. Kate was reading his face again, with that look of hers that seemed to bore into his soul.

“I kill most things that come through,” he said quietly, through dry and trembling lips.

She waited, sensing that this was a difficult subject for him.

"I didn't used to," he continued slowly. "I hate it. I hate myself for doing it. But with the Hegemony expanding, and now with the portals opening... I don't know what else to do. I don't..." he trailed off, shame rising in his throat and blocking his speech.

Kate stood directly in front of him and gripped his shoulders, and spoke in a voice hot with passion.

"You are doing the right thing. You have done well. What's a handful of lives to save billions? If only all wars were so clear-cut. Have you seen what the Hegemony did to Zendikar, to Dominaria, to Theros? Do you think the Arawak Indians did not come to regret that they did not kill Columbus when they'd had the chance? I have been afraid that you would be like these sensitive modern people, who pretend that life is priceless. But deep down we all know that life has never been priceless. You are smarter than that. You know that freedom is not free. Freedom is very, very expensive. Sometimes a price must be paid. This is what it means to be a soldier. To choose the harder path for the greater good."

That electric energy he'd felt when he first shook her hand seemed to course through him again, as she practically shook him by the shoulders. For so many years he had felt suffocated by doubts and regrets, with no one to talk to. Kate was so confident, so certain, that John felt as though Christ himself had come down from heaven and absolved him of his sins, informed him that yes, he had been doing God's work along. He had not realized how desperately he had wished for someone, anyone, to come along and tell him this. Against his will, he felt hot tears begin to form in his eyes.

"The world is lucky to have you," said Kate with feeling. "And so am I."

Losing all composure, he embraced her tightly, and wished that he would never have to let her go.

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The sun was setting, and the dinner tables in the great hall were nearly set as well. John's feet were heavy as they trudged toward Fernsby's office. It had been an afternoon of laughter, tears and revelations, and now he and Kate agreed that it was time to part, amid reassurances that they would meet again soon. Kate reminded him that they have an eternity to get to know each other, to John's poorly-concealed disappointment.

The entrance hall felt warmer than before. It was tinted pink by the fading sunlight. The doors to the great hall were very near the main entrance, across from Fernsby's office. They would soon open for dinner, and here and there a few students milled about, hungrily awaiting the appointed hour. Among them was a cluster of four adults. One was Fernsby. Another was Hornswood, who was talking to a tall woman with gray hair, a stern aspect, and a magnificent witch's hat. Between Hornswood and the woman stood a very old man with a long beard, another prodigious hat, and bright blue eyes. Even John was not so removed from the wizarding world that he had not heard of the great Albus Dumbledore, and surely this was he. Their eyes met briefly and, feeling that Dumbledore was eyeing him with intense curiosity, John hastily looked away.

"Well hello hello," came Fernsby's upbeat greeting as they approached the group.

"Hello Oliver. I hope we didn't keep you waiting."

"No, no, it's no trouble Kate," he said with a good-natured smile. "I take it your meeting was a productive one."

"Yes, it certainly was."

"Very good, very good. Right then. Now, Mister Hennessey, you're not staying for dinner are you?"

"No, thank you. I really must be going."

"Right-o. Well you needn't worry about signing out, I'll take care of that." He produced John's wand from somewhere in his robes. "There's just one small thing before you go. It's come to my

attention that I made a certain oversight while checking you in.” Fernsby’s apologetic tone was creeping back into his voice. Swiftly, John stole a glance at Hornswood, who was watching with a smug expression. “If you wouldn’t mind just doing a little magic for us. Of course it’s only a formality. But, seeing as we know so little about you, it’s the proper protocol, actually. Any little spell will do.” He held out the wand in his two palms like an offering.

“Of course,” said John a little tremulously, picking it up.

“Come, Oliver, is this really necessary?” asked Kate.

John waved his hand dismissively. “It’s alright, Kate,” he said. “Rules are rules. And I wouldn’t want to bend the rules.” He had been mentally preparing himself for this the moment he’d read seen the Hogwarts stamp on the inner cover of that library book.

“An abundance of caution, you know, that’s our policy. Need to make sure you’re not just a clever muggle,” said Fernsby with a conspiratorial wink.

John smiled and nodded. He stepped back, scanning the room from floor to ceiling. This was the best way it could have happened, he reassured himself. They were not asking him to perform a specific spell. Any magic would do. But everyone was watching, including the students, and their gazes made him frightfully nervous. One bad flick of the wand, or a bit of magic for which there was no known spell, and he’d be exposed, not as a muggle but something even worse. He dared not glance at Hornswood again. He looked to Dumbledore, whose bright blue eyes were as curious as before, but not scornful. Those eyes wanted him to succeed.

Come what may. Just please make it something wizard-y, John prayed silently.

Then he whipped around and pointed his wand at the balustrade of the great wooden stair, which was carved in the shape of a lion. Immediately, a real, full-sized lion leapt from the spot. There were a few claps from students in the crowd as the lion shook its luxurious mane. Then the lion pounced toward the adults, and John was about to call up more magic to stop the beast when it landed softly by his side. Then, to his surprise, the lion stood upon its hind legs. It spread its arms wide, reached behind its back and produced a witch’s hat. It put the witch’s hat on its head, and some of the students laughed. Then the lion removed the hat and slowly spun around, displaying the inside of the hat to the audience so they could all see that it was empty. The room became quiet. Then the lion turned the hat open-end up, reached its entire arm deep into the hat, and produced a luscious red rose to the sound of more applause. It handed the rose to the gray-haired witch beside Dumbledore. It then turned toward Dumbledore, reached into the hat again, produced a second rose, and handed this one to Dumbledore. Turning toward Hornswood, it turned the hat upside down and shook it, to demonstrate that there were no more roses. Peals of laughter rose up from the crowd. The lion reached the hat behind its back again, and then brought forward its empty paws to show that the hat had disappeared. The audience roared with applause, and the lion took a deep bow. Then it descended onto all fours and appeared to become an ordinary, but still very real, lion.

As the applause died down, the first words John heard were Hornswood’s, and they stung him like acid.

“Clever muggle.”

John’s heart plummeted into his stomach. He glanced at Hornswood, who was staring daggers at him. John felt cold sweat on his brow. Hornswood knew. Or he suspected. The magic had been too good. He’d meant to bring the lion to life, but the rest had been an accident. He felt naked under Hornswood’s gaze. But a hearty pat on the back roused him from his nervous meditation.

“Couldn’t stop at a little one, eh? You had to make a show of it!” Fernsby exclaimed. John looked around and saw smiling faces.

Dumbledore was still clapping. “Expertly done!” said the old wizard. “I like your style, young man.” John felt his cheeks growing hot.

“And nonverbal, to boot! Why, perhaps you should be teaching transfiguration instead of me!” exclaimed the witch, pointing playfully with her rose.

John let out a nervous laugh, aware that he was blushing profusely. “Thank you, you’re too kind. Trust me, that would not be a good idea. The only thing I’m qualified to teach is art.”

“Are you really?” asked Dumbledore with interest. “Are you looking for work? We’ll be hiring an art teacher next year. Ours is retiring.”

John laughed at the absurdity of the idea. But then he found himself saying, “Sir, I’m an artist. I’m always looking for work.”

“Perhaps you should apply, John,” said Kate.

“That is, if you think it would be a good fit,” said Hornswood darkly.

“In any case, I do hope we’ll meet again,” said Dumbledore with a twinkle in his eye.

“Yes, and you’ll have to tell me your secret to bewitching that lion so effortlessly,” added the gray-haired witch. With a wave of her wand and a muttered incantation, she sent the lion back to its spot on the balustrade and to its former inanimate condition.

“Well now, I think it’s fair to say you’ve passed the test. Hey, how about that, now you can say you’ve passed a test at Hogwarts!” said Fernsby, delighting in his own joke.

“See you soon John,” said Kate, shaking his hand.

With that, Fernsby led him out of the castle and back to the gate. As John stood in the country road looking back at the castle, he had to admit that Rowena Ravenclaw’s raven had delivered her promised wisdom. He certainly had more answers than he’d had this morning, though he had more questions, too. He knew, too, that he had not crossed that threshold for the last time. Slowly, he made his way back to the inn in the village just down the road. That night, villagers walking by the inn noticed a young man sitting on an upstairs window sill with a guitar, one leg in his room and the other leg dangling out over the sill. For hours he sat there, strumming and singing love songs into the night.