

Prologue

The fragrance of freshly baked cakes and pastries combined exquisitely with the scent of the brewing coffee within the quaint, little coffee shop. Narrow display shelves hung on two of the walls and a couple of small, round tables sat in the middle of the shop, awaiting those customers who wanted a place to sit, relax, and enjoy their coffee.

A little under a year ago, the owner had added a long table against another wall. Four chairs sat in front of this table and in front of each chair, on top of the table, sat a computer monitor. A small partition separated each monitor for privacy. This modification now provided computers for customers to use while they enjoyed their coffee...at a small price.

A few months after the shop added the computers, a handsome man of African heritage, around twenty years old, started coming in every morning. Several of the employees would promptly greet him, to which he'd energetically respond.

His slender appearance, almost to the point of gauntness, caused the glasses he wore to look larger on him than they should. The manager had presumed unemployment and the inability to eat well had caused the young man's slenderness. And, as a kind gesture for his friendly and steady customer, the manager had started giving the young man a piece of cake and free use of a computer each morning.

However, being unemployed hadn't caused his slenderness, even though he didn't have a job at the time. During the past year, slightly over one year after he had graduated from school, the young man had traveled the country. During his travels, he kept himself quite busy and didn't eat properly, only grabbing a bite now and then.

This morning, as he had every morning, the young man purchased his coffee and greeted the shop manager. He shook hands with the manager and chatted about how the weather had already turned rather cold for early October. The discussion went on for several minutes covering various other topics. Finally, the young man shook hands with the manager one more time, took the piece of cake, thanked the manager, and made his way over to the long table against the wall.

He turned on one of the computers and sat waiting for it to boot up. While it did, he began to reminisce of when he first learned about computers back in school. The school the young man had attended first instituted their use at the beginning of his last year there. Luckily, one of his friends knew how to use a computer and had helped everyone in their social group to muddle through using one.

His thoughts then transitioned to the group of close friends with whom he hung around at school, a little over four of the six years he attended there. And, as the informal leader, the young man frequently led them all into situations that tended to get them into trouble more often than not.

His friends consisted of two girls and one other boy. The boy had been his best friend and roommate from the first day they started at school. The two girls had also shared a room, but in a different dormitory.

Remembering those times always brought a smile to his face.

He hadn't seen any of them for over a year though. One of the girls, the computer savvy one, and his best friend married a year after graduating. The other girl in the group began working right after graduation. She led a busy life and her friendship with the other three grew

distant. She didn't even make it to their friends' wedding. So, the young man hadn't seen her at all since they graduated.

The week after his friends' wedding, he started his yearlong tour of the country. Last October, during his tour, he heard that his other friend too had wed. However, she had married someone not of their kind.

The computer had finally finished booting up and he immediately navigated to his favorite Internet news page. Although the young man seldom found anything of interest on this page, he went to it every day just on the chance that he might come across something associated with his world. In fact, during his yearlong travel, he had similarly viewed local periodicals for the same reason. But, he seldom found anything of interest in any of them either.

Today's visit to the news page turned out differently. He didn't even have to scroll down the page, because the top headline caught his attention. So much so, that he let out a gasp, which one of the shop's employees heard. The employee peered around the man's shoulder, but could only see the last few words of the two-line title of the article: "...Found Dead...Mysterious." The employee shrugged and continued to dry the wet mugs.

The young man began to read the article and, as he paged through it, tears began to form at the corners of his eyes. Once he had finished the article, several tear streaks shown on his cheeks. He quickly wiped the tears and wet streaks clear with a napkin, before anyone could notice. Then, without finishing his coffee or eating the cake, he turned off the computer, donned his overcoat, and walked directly to the shop's door.

On his way, a few of the employees said goodbye, but he didn't acknowledge them. The young man merely continued to the door and exited. He walked around the corner of the shop and into the alley behind it. There, leaning against the wall, the young man tried to compose himself.

After a few moments, he stood back up and glanced around to make sure no one could see him. Then, he closed his eyes and, with a short hop into the air, disappeared.

The owner of the coffee shop noticed that the young man didn't come into the shop the next day. He even gave some concern when he didn't see him for several weeks. As time passed, the owner gradually forgot about the young man who had visited his coffee shop almost every day for nearly six months. If they met today, the owner would probably not even recognize Abe after over twelve years.

A Mother's Son

Four rough-looking boys shoved a fifth boy from one to the other, like a rubber ball in a game of four-squares.

Three of the ruffians stood taller and heavier than the victim. The fourth bully, named Benjamin Pumler, seemed the same size or even shorter than the victim. No one dared call him Benjamin to his face, except his teachers. Everyone called him Benny...Benny the Brat when he wasn't around. It seemed odd that Benny, the smallest of the four, would take the role of this gang's leader. He led mainly because the other three proved dull-witted at best. However, to say Benny led the group with his intelligence would be a stretch of the truth, since he rarely received a passing grade at school.

When one of the bigger thugs shoved the boy once more to Benny, Benny grabbed him by the lapels of his shirt and pulled him close to stare into his eyes. Although Benny had a mean-looking face and quite deplorable breath, the young victim looked relieved, as the shoving had finally come to a close. However, he readied himself, as the beating would now begin.

Benny sneered into his victim's face.

"Still living up to your name, hey...Christian? Still turning the other cheek?"

At which time Benny let go of the Christian's lapels, put his hand on Christian's cheek, and shoved him to the ground as hard as he could.

"Now, go home crying to your mommy, like the little girl you are." Benny gibed.

The gang of ruffians all laughed.

Christian adjusted his glasses back into place, glad that he had his mother buy him the type of frames that wrapped around his ears; otherwise, he'd be searching around the ground each day for his glasses after the bullying had concluded.

Although his arms felt sore from the shoving, his cheek sore from the push to the ground, and now his bottom sore from the landing, Christian didn't consider crying. He wanted to retaliate. Christian looked up and down the deserted, suburban street for any spectators and saw no one. He didn't do this to see if anyone would come to his aide, but to determine if anyone would see him if he struck back. However, he quickly pushed the thought of retaliation from his mind and waited.

Moments later, Benny commanded, "Let's go guys!"

Once the gang had moved several feet away, Christian picked up his backpack and continued his walk home.

He had come to expect the encounter with Benny's gang as a daily event. Although Christian didn't seek it out, he didn't try to avoid it either.

Only two events would allow him to escape this daily brutality. One, when the teachers held Benny after school for detention, which happened frequently to Christian's delight. The other occurred on days that Christian would stay after school to help a teacher, work on a school or class project, or do some homework or research that he couldn't do at home.

Christian typically came away from these brutal encounters with several bruises and a few scrapes or cuts. Today's he gauged as the mildest in a long time.

Although a mild beating, Christian still went through the usual thought process that followed these encounters. Using his agility and coordination, Christian knew he could easily beat Benny. He also thought he could hold his own against the other thugs by outsmarting them,

which he thought shouldn't be hard to do. They might even run away once they no longer had a leader to direct them.

Christian would thoroughly think through these ideas, picturing and plotting his attack plan for next time. Then, he'd come to the same conclusion he always did...that he'd never fight back. Quickly following this yielding resolution came a brief state of anger, where he'd ask himself, "Why don't I fight back?" He'd then remember the two important reasons why.

First, his mother, Katy, had taught him and frequently reminded him after his scuffles of her belief that, "Purity of heart and mind will protect you in body and spirit." Christian never completely understood what this meant. She'd also tell him "Doing anything in anger would only hurt him more in the end and fighting never solved anything." Christian understood this and he tried to live by it out of respect for his mother.

People who met his mother would frequently intimate the oddness of her pacifist beliefs. But, it didn't matter to Christian what they said. He always tried, as best as he could, to follow the things she taught him. Christian wanted to make her proud of him. He loved and trusted his mother. Away from school, he had no other friends but her. Adding to this bond, Christian knew that she too had no other friends but him.

Although living by his mother's teachings had become second nature to Christian, he had another reason to avoid getting angry...the main reason...a secret reason. For the past six years, he could, in certain circumstances, make things happen. Or, to be more precise, things happened when he became emotional.

While away from home, especially at school where people knew him, Christian remained on constant guard to ensure his emotions didn't get out of hand. This probably contributed significantly to his not having any close friends at school any more, even though he was a handsome boy.

Christian's wavy, blond hair always fell back into place, no matter in what game, work, or scuffle in which he participated. He also had blue eyes that matched the color of a clear summer sky. Because of his handsome features, some of the girls in his class had tried to become friends with him. But, he tried to ignore them or, in some nice manner, chase them off for their own good.

At home, he didn't maintain that same emotional guardedness, although he did keep them in check there as well. Christian's first experience with making things happen occurred at home. That first time that he could recall took place on his sixth birthday.

His mother had baked a spectacular cake and had lit the candles on it. When Christian saw the cake, he became excited and sparks flew out of the candles. He and his mother thought that someone had replaced the regular candles with some sort of trick ones. A few years later, he came to understand what really had happened.

A more recent memory took place two Decembers past. Although rare, Christian's stepfather had joined his mother and him at the breakfast table and sat reading the newspaper. On the table, a cigarette burned in an ashtray to his left and a coffee mug sat to his right. Christian's stepfather cleared his throat and, without looking up from the paper, announced, "I'll be working on Christmas, so there won't be any need for exchanging gifts or putting up a Christmas tree."

Before he could catch himself, Christian quickly grew very upset and, moments later, the bottom edge of the newspaper started on fire. His stepfather, after extinguishing the blaze, stated, "I must be more careful to keep the paper away from the ashtray."

Christian's stepfather failed to realize that the corner of the newspaper closest to the coffee mug had caught fire, not the one closest to the ashtray.

Christian remembered other incidents, but he tried hard to control his emotions to keep them few and far between. He didn't want to cause any concern for his mother, nor did he want his stepfather, Douglas Drewell, to have any need to pay close attention to him.

Douglas Drewell, Doug to all of his bosses and friends, if he had any friends, always maintained a well-groomed appearance. Looking good consumed him. Not only how he physically looked, but also how others saw him. He wore the best suits, drove the most stylish car, and lived in one of the nicest looking houses in the neighborhood. At least it LOOKED nice from the outside.

Doug worked for the most prestigious company in the country, the Howard Corporation. As one of the more junior managers in the local office of the corporation, he'd take that extra step to get noticed without really doing any work. Although ambitious, Doug didn't want to work hard to succeed and would step on whomever it required for him to make a name for himself.

Thinking of this always caused Christian to chuckle. The reason being, the only time Christian could recall he and his mother ever visiting Doug's office, Doug actually DID step on someone.

A man had bent down to pick up a dropped folder and, in his haste to get over to Christian and his mother, Doug stepped on his coworker's hand. Without even a hesitation toward the man, Doug rushed over to them.

"Katy, what are you doing here?" he demanded in a softened, but angry voice.

Before his mother could respond, Doug added, "I told you never to come to my office! Leave now and never come here again!"

He then turned and stormed away, once again almost stepping on the same coworker. Luckily, the man astutely fell backward to avoid the collision.

Christian couldn't recall why they had gone to see Doug in the first place. Only four years old at the time, he only remembered that his mother didn't mind too much not talking with Doug.

Christian finally reached his street and, as he rounded the corner, he hesitated as he came upon an advertising sign for real estate insurance. The sign had popped up overnight a few years ago, but now the bushes in back of it had grown and overtaken the edges of the sign. This proved that the advertisers who had placed it there had forgotten it. Yet, for some reason, the picture of the middle-aged man in the advertisement always gave Christian an odd feeling when he passed by.

One day, Christian had just walked passed it when he thought he had noticed one of the buttons on the man's suit coat looked undone. However, when Christian glanced back at the picture, he found them all buttoned. Another time, he could have sworn he thought he saw the man's nose twitch.

After one final glance back at the picture and seeing that nothing looked out of place, he continued on his way home.

Christian almost stopped in the middle of the sidewalk when he remembered that he only had one more day of school before the end of the year. He had totally forgotten because of the encounter with the bullies and, perhaps, Benny and his gang had taken it easy on Christian due to the impending summer vacation. In any case, he'd have three months away from their bullying.

Christian needed only to go to school tomorrow for two final exams. He received exceptional grades in all of his classes, which exempted him from having to take finals in the others. But, the teachers in the other two classes required everyone to take a final exam. Regardless, Christian would finish with his tests long before Benny, so he'd have a bully-free walk home tomorrow.

He could think of no better way to start his summer.

Although excited about summer vacation, Christian would miss school because he enjoyed learning and practicing what he learned. He enjoyed mathematics the most, because he loved working out the solutions. The teachers always treated Christian well, since they found him easy to teach and he frequently assisted other students to understand the lessons too. This probably added to the reason for the punishment he received from Benny and his gang.

The end of this school year brought an added excitement, since next year he'd begin junior high school and would no longer be just a grade schooler. Christian looked forward to the challenges this change would bring.

All of these pleasant thoughts made the already sunny day even brighter. And, the sound of a lawn mower in operation down the street only reinforced the imminent arrival of summer vacation.

Christian entered the gate of the immaculately painted white fence that opened into a remarkable yard. The yard always felt alive and it made him feel safe. Christian never quite understood why the yard made him feel that way, but it just did. He assumed it had to do with feeling safe at home and subconsciously he included the yard as part of it.

Christian understood the liveliness of the yard much more easily. It felt alive because of the health and lushness of the lawn, plants, and trees throughout -- front, back, and sides. This liveliness resulted from his mother's care. Neighbors frequently told her that she must have the greenest thumb in the world. Apparently, his mother worked in the yard during the day while Christian attended school, since he never actually saw her working there during the school year.

Before he arrived home from school, she'd finish her gardening and await Christian's arrival inside. He always found her in the kitchen, where she'd have his afternoon snack waiting for him. While he ate the snack, she'd remain in the kitchen to talk. Then, after catching up with each other on the day's events, she'd begin to make dinner for the two of them.

Doug seldom came home for dinner, but would typically take one of his bosses or clients out to eat. Doug never took his wife or Christian out for dinner, saying that he didn't want to waste the money.

Christian bounded up to the front door, between the gaudy, out-of-place, Roman pillars that flanked both sides of the doorway. Doug added them to the house to give it "real class" even though the house had only two stories and measured just 1,300 square feet, including the

basement. Christian knew the house's measurements, because he'd heard Doug say, on more than one occasion, "I need to have a house larger than two thousand square feet. A house this small just doesn't look good for me."

Doug would say this more to himself than to Christian or his mother.

Christian entered the house knowing that he'd find his mother in the kitchen. However, he glanced to the right into the living room anyway. He didn't see her, just the ten-year old, green corduroy couch and chair and the twenty-year old portable television atop a three-legged stool. Live plants of some sort sat atop small tables in front of each of the two windows.

Similarly, when he glanced to his left into the dining room, he didn't see his mother there either. In fact, the vacant room only contained two live plants atop narrow pedestals. Each plant also sat in front of one of the two windows in that room.

Straight ahead lay the stairs going to the second floor and, to the left of the stairs, a short hallway led to the kitchen. Christian pushed on the kitchen's swinging door. He felt most comfortable and cheerful in the kitchen, because he and his mother spent most of their time together in here.

To the left of the door sat the small table with two chairs, at which he and his mother ate all of their meals and, frequently, sat talking. A scrumptious peanut butter, jelly, and banana sandwich and a glass of chocolate milk sat on the table in front of one of the chairs. Christian smiled to see one of his favorite snacks waiting for him.

He peeked around the door into the kitchen. There stood his mother, tidying up, wearing her favorite flower-patterned housedress. She had two other dresses, which summed her whole wardrobe. Her brown hair seemed always in a state of minor disarray, but she never acted concerned about her appearance. Although, once in a while, she'd mention that she could stand to lose a few pounds. For the most part, though, she seemed happy.

"Welcome home, sweetheart!" said Katy with a smile. "How was school today?"

"Today was my last class with Mr. Hatch, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Kelly, and Miss Richards," he said rather sadly. "They all wished me luck and, in one way or another, told me how sad they were that I wouldn't be their student any longer."

"So, you have your final exams with Mr. Bradley and Mr. Charleton tomorrow, right?"

"Yes, and I'm really looking forward to acing Mr. Charleton's exam. It seemed like he had it in for me all year and this was my first year with him. I'm not sure why he'd act that way."

"I'm sure it was nothing. Probably, you were just excited about finishing your final year as a grade schooler."

Christian smiled, although slightly curved from curiosity.

"I was just thinking about that coming home. I'm really looking forward to it."

Katy turned to tidy up some more and Christian thought about one of the reasons why he enjoyed talking with her. Because of their closeness, it seemed like they frequently thought the same things or else she could read his thoughts.

Christian snickered at the concept.

He described the events of his last full day of school and how much he looked forward to the next school year. Since he had no noticeable cuts, scrapes, or bruises from the bullies, and his hair always remained in order, he decided not to mention the encounter. For one thing, he didn't want to worry his mother. More importantly, he didn't want to hear her explain, yet again, how 'the marks will go away and the knowledge and comfort of not reverting to anger

and fighting will reward him for the rest of his life.’ Christian had heard this many times over the years, after receiving a beating from the bullies. He’d acknowledge that he understood what his mother said, but it never really helped make the pain go away any quicker.

After finishing his snack, Christian and his mother talked a while longer. They discussed the things they could do over the summer, including celebrating their birthday together.

By an odd coincidence, Katy gave birth to Christian on her own birthday and it would occur in about a week. Always a multi-faceted occasion for celebration, they enjoyed sharing it with their best friend: each other. They always had a good time, even though no one else gave them presents and most of the time they couldn’t afford to get each other anything either.

Doug never celebrated the day with them. He also didn’t buy them presents, so he could save money to keep up his appearances. In fact, he only gave them money to buy food and purchase things Christian needed for school. Katy insisted upon Doug paying for all of Christian’s school-related needs. Doug complied solely to maintain appearances with the school, ensuring no scene developed that would make him look bad.

After an enjoyable talk for an hour or two, Katy told Christian to go down and put his things away and get ready for dinner. He smiled and did as she asked.

The only door to the basement opened from the kitchen. It sat to the left of the hallway door with the stairs going down directly under those going up to the second floor. At the foot of the basement stairs, Christian turned right into his room.

In his room, a full-sized bed sat against the wall opposite the door. Doug had decided to give Christian a full-sized one, so that “the kid” could use it until he became old enough to leave home. Doug thought this would save him from spending money on another bed as Christian grew older and taller. However, Katy insisted it had to be a comfortable bed so that Christian received a good night’s sleep.

To the right of the door sat a desk with a small reading lamp. It wasn’t much of a desk, just large enough for his laptop and an area to do his homework. He also had a high-speed Internet connection behind the desk, which Katy also insisted that Doug buy. She wanted to make sure Christian could do research and gather information for his schoolwork.

A three-foot wide, floor-to-ceiling bookshelf stood against the wall at the foot of the bed; the only other piece of furniture in the room. The length of the bed and the bookshelf together comprised the entire length of the room.

Christian had the shelves almost completely filled with books. Although had read a majority of the books in the school’s library, the bookshelf contained some of Christian’s favorites.

The books included the classic adventure stories he enjoyed reading, such as *Treasure Island*, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table*. He also enjoyed reading biographies of great historical leaders from various categories such as politics, military, and business. Christian had several of these on the shelves as well. However, intermixed with all of these books, and pretty well concealed unless one looked directly at them, he had a few books on telekinesis and Extra-Sensory Perception or ESP. Christian had saved some of his lunch money, part of the food money Doug gave them, and had purchased these books to help understand how he could do the odd things he did.

Christian walked in, set his computer bag on the desk, and glanced over at the bookshelf.

“If only I could learn how to use or control this ability I have,” he thought.

He grabbed his desk chair, walked over to the bookshelf, and, by standing on the chair, pulled down a book called '*How to Control Your Telekinetic Abilities.*' He sat on his bed, opened the book to the dog-eared page, and read the highlighted sentence, "Empty your mind and concentrate on the object."

Christian set the book down and focused on his empty glasses case on the desk. He stared at the case, opening his eyes wide, and then squinting to focus harder. After ten minutes of this, he ended with the same result as every other time he'd tried it. So, he put the book back on the shelf, took his computer out of its bag, and plugged it in to get it ready for his last night of studying. Then, he went upstairs to help prepare dinner.

Christian would typically help his mother do dishes, but tonight she told him to go to his room and finish preparing for his exams. Reluctantly, he agreed to let Katy do the dishes on her own and proceeded downstairs for a few hours of studying.

Just as he finished his studies and prepared for bed, Christian heard the creak from the house's front door opening and closing, followed by heavy footsteps above. A few moments later, Doug's voice echoed in the kitchen. As usual, the sound of Doug's voice never sounded comforting, whether he spoke to Christian or to Katy. Doug always emitted a tone of anger in his voice, but his mother never said anything back. After several LONG minutes, Doug's voice quieted and Christian could hear footsteps going up to the second floor of the house.

The second floor, the same size as the first, belonged to Doug and considered off limits to both Christian and his mother. However, Christian had ventured up there once, last year, during one of the only times his mother had ever left him alone at home.

Christian slowly climbed the stairs to the second-floor landing. At the top of the landing, he faced his own reflection in a mirror hanging on the wall in front of him. Under the mirror sat a small table with an empty candy dish on top of it. The only doorway exiting the landing opened directly behind him on the other side of the stairwell. So, he followed the narrow hallway along the railing to the door.

Upon exiting the hallway, he saw a large, very comfortable looking leather couch situated almost directly in front of the door and facing to the right. In front of the couch sat a solid oak coffee table with an etched glass center. On the right wall, at which the couch faced, hung a large flat television. After the initial moments of awe subsided, Christian rushed over and began to sit on the couch and grab the remote, when he thought it best not to disturb anything. Instead, he decided to continue looking around.

Behind the couch, and up against the wall of the front of the house, sat a desk with one of those rolling tops. The desk had three drawers down each side, or so it appeared. The right side contained a door designed to look like a set of drawers with a desktop computer concealed behind it. Christian didn't open the door, but assumed the computer's existence, since on top of the desk sat a large flat-panel computer monitor.

Against the wall opposite the television, stood a state-of-the-art stereo system. Christian found it odd he had never heard the stereo, or for that matter the television, but this didn't surprise him. Doug would buy the best things just for show, whether he used them or not.

To the left of the stereo, an arched doorway opened into the bedroom. A king-sized, wooden sleigh bed dominated the room. A matching mahogany nightstand and floor-to-ceiling armoire with mirrored doors comprised the rest of the bedroom furniture.

To the left of the bed a smaller doorway led into a walk-through closet. A shelf, about a foot higher than Christian, stretched the length of the closet along the right-hand side. Shoeboxes filled the shelf. About twenty suits hung below the shelf, along with a rotating tie rack filled with ties. Lastly, a chest of drawers sat at the end of the right-hand wall under the shelf.

Along the left-hand side, a mirror covered the entire wall.

Continuing through the closet, Christian entered the most luxurious bathroom he had ever seen. He and his mother shared a small bathroom at the far end of the kitchen, just big enough for a shower, toilet, and sink. In this marble-floored bathroom, a whirlpool tub, big enough for two people, and a shower, also big enough for two people, covered one side of the room. Opposite them sat a sink, actually two sinks, long enough for three or four people to use at one time. Light bulbs surrounded the mirrored doors above the sink. It reminded Christian of something one would see in a performer's dressing room, like those used for putting on makeup. Christian, curiously, thought about looking behind the mirrored doors to see if maybe Doug had makeup, but decided not to touch them.

At the other end of the sinks sat the toilet, which must have had a heated seat, because electrical wires led from the seat to the wall. The doorway leading into the living area opened to the left of the toilet. In fact, Christian gathered, you could probably see the television from the toilet if you stretched your neck just a little bit.

He entered back into the living area. Once again, he thought about sitting down on the couch and watching the television. But, he decided against it and returned to the first floor.

Soon after Christian heard Doug go up to the second floor, he climbed into bed. As he did, he heard his mother come downstairs. Her room sat across from Christian's at the bottom of the stairs. Her room measured slightly narrower than Christian's, but she didn't seem to mind. He even suggested a few times that they could switch, but she insisted that they keep the same rooms. One time when he suggested it, she joked, "Besides, I don't even know how to use an Internet connection."

As she came down this evening, Christian rolled and faced his closed, bedroom door as he could hear her crying. He thought about getting up and checking on her, but he decided against it. Over the years, Christian had spent many late hours talking with his mother in her room discussing his problems with her and comforting her at times too. Some of those nights, although few in number, his mother would come downstairs crying and Christian would jump out of bed to console her. However, over the last year or so, the frequency had increased and Christian didn't know what to do about it.

The encounters with Doug at night hadn't become any worse than previous years and, from what Christian heard, Doug never became physically violent to his mother. However, Christian heard his mother crying almost every night over the last few months.

Christian rolled onto his other side with his back to the door and, with a furrowed brow, tried to sleep.

A Visitor and A Decision

Christian woke the next morning and prepared for his last, but short, day at school. The excitement about completing his exams and officially becoming a junior high schooler, and of course starting summer vacation, nearly overwhelmed him.

After showering and dressing, Christian joined Katy in the kitchen for breakfast. She greeted him in her typical, happy mood, which she always tried to display around Christian. So, Christian put aside his concerns from the previous night, as he had over the recent weeks, since it appeared that whatever had bothered his mother last night no longer did.

In no time, he had arrived at school and had soon completed his final two exams. After one last round of goodbyes to his teachers, to include a very uncomfortable and brief goodbye with Mr. Charleton, Christian left for home.

Due to his excitement about starting the summer, he had reached his house before he knew it.

Christian almost expected to find his mother outside working in the yard, but he didn't see her. So, he supposed he'd find her in the kitchen preparing lunch for the two of them, since she knew he'd be home by then.

A slight bit of alarm overcame Christian when he entered the front door and found his mother sitting on the bottom of the second-floor staircase waiting for him. She had a very troubled look on her face and held an opened letter in her hand.

"Mother, what's the matter?" Christian asked with concern.

After a hesitation, she responded with somewhat of a stammer.

"This letter came for you, well, for us today. It says that you've been offered the opportunity to attend a special school for the next six years, called 'The Bishop School.' And, that a representative will arrive here this afternoon to discuss it with us."

"What type of school is it?" he asked excitedly.

After a moment of thought, he added, "I hope it's not a military academy. Although, a private school might provide some different learning experiences than a public one, but only if they'll pay for my tuition."

"It didn't say what type of school it is, so let's just wait and hear what the representative has to say, before we jump to any conclusions or make any decisions."

Katy then stood up from the stairs and guided Christian into the kitchen, where she had already prepared their lunch.

After lunch, they cleaned up the table and the counter top and washed all of the dishes. Katy had just placed the last cleaned dish into the cabinet, when they heard a knock on the back door. Since no one had ever come to the back door before, they cautiously approached it from opposite sides of the table and Katy opened the door tentatively.

In the doorway stood a young man, about twenty years old, dressed in an average looking suit.

"I hope you don't mind that I came around to the back door, but I knew you'd be in the kitchen. My name is Barnabus Balmighter and I'm here as the representative for The Bishop School."

“What kind of school is it? I’m not interested in any military academy!” Christian volleyed.

“Christian, please let the gentleman tell us, before you rush him off,” retorted Katy.

“Perhaps we should sit down and I will explain everything to you,” requested Barnabus.

Katy stepped back from the door, ducking to keep from hitting her head on the hanging fern, and gestured the man toward the table.

“I’m sorry, but we only have two chairs,” said Katy.

“Not a problem,” replied Barnabus.

He turned his back to them, pulled something out of his coat, and, with a slight movement of his arm, made a third chair appear out of nowhere.

Katy and Christian both jumped backward, with Christian almost falling over one of the other chairs.

As the man turned, pulling the chair toward the table and putting whatever he had taken out back into his suit coat, he saw the looks on Christian’s and Katy’s faces.

“I am SO very sorry. Please forgive me?” Barnabus pleaded. “You’re the first family that I’ve visited, since I took this job. If you’ll please have a seat, I WILL try to explain.”

Katy and Christian hesitantly pulled the two original chairs around to the opposite side of the table from where Barnabus now sat in the recently conjured one. Once they had taken their seats, Barnabus began to explain.

“I work in the Department of Scholastic Oversight of the Witches’ Council of America or W-C-A, which is pronounced ‘wica’.”

“Did you say ‘WITCHES?’” asked Christian, who beat Katy to the question by just a split second.

“Yes, I did. Specifically, my job is to make initial contact with non-magical families when their first child has been recognized for demonstrating magical abilities. That would be you Christian.”

Surprised, Katy turned and looked at Christian, whose mouth had fallen open and uttered an unintelligible murmur. Barnabus continued.

“The Council monitors all uncontrolled magical use, especially of children under the age of twelve. We do this for two reasons. First, in case the child does something highly noticeable, the Council can take steps to minimize the impact to the magical world. And second, to keep track of children that may someday become students at one of our magic schools.”

“SCHOOLS?” asked Christian.

After a quick glance at Katy, he added, “You mean there’s more than one?”

“Oh, yes. There are three schools throughout the country: one near the west coast, one near the east coast, and one in the center of our country. Since you’re nearest the central one, I’m here to offer you the opportunity to attend that school, the Bishop School of Witchcraft. So-named after one of the victims of the Salem witch trials.

“The schools were created and opened soon after that horrible time, so that young witches could learn to use and control their powers, thereby ensuring things like the witch trials never occur again. Even though none of the victims of the trials were

actually witches, the founders thought it meaningful to honor some of those poor people.

"It's often said that the founders may have been friends of the three victims for whom the schools are named and it could have been this friendship that caused them to be accused in the first place. However, the founders decided it was too much of a risk for the real magical world to get directly involved in the non-magical world's affairs."

Barnabus hesitated to see if Katy or Christian had any questions. Katy sat very intently listening to him, but had no questions. Christian had a look on his face as if he had taken a deep-water dive and had just finished gasping for air.

So, Barnabus continued.

"But you'll learn much more about the historical aspects of the school and witchcraft at the school.

"If you agree to attend, you'll no longer attend any non-magical schools. You'd attend The Bishop School for six years and, once you graduate, work for our society using the skills you gain in one of the many fields of magic. The field of magic in which you would work is determined by the magical discipline you choose and focus upon in school. These disciplines include things like Alchemy, Divination, spell casting, and more. These disciplines can lead to jobs ranging from healer to dragon handler."

"DRAGON handler?" exclaimed Christian.

"Oh yes, dragons can be found throughout the world. Therefore, someone needs to learn about them and to handle any incidents that they may cause.

"Now, if you should agree to attend Bishop, you'll have to follow all of the guidelines and policies of the school. One policy is that you must wear a uniform at all times during school hours. This uniform consists of black shoes and pants, a white dress shirt, a tie in the school colors, and a vest or jacket with the school's emblem on the left breast.

"We believe the uniform instills discipline in the students. Discipline is important at the magical schools, because undisciplined use of magic can be very dangerous. Also, it maintains order amongst the students. Therefore, a breach of discipline or breaking any of the guidelines and policies could lead to expulsion. Discipline is an important policy at the school, but there are others that you'll learn about if you agree to attend.

"There's no cost for attending the school. You pay no tuition and room and board are free. Oh...and the meals are breathtaking. Also, transportation to and from school is also provided free of charge. The only costs to you are your uniforms and supplies. You'll learn how and where to purchase these later, if you should decide to attend.

"Our on-campus security force ensures security and safety day-to-day, as well as for special events.

"We also have our own infirmary and medical staff. All of our staff members are graduates of the school and some of the top people in their specialties. We only pick the best and brightest to teach and guide our future witches.

"Students stay at the school for about eight months, September through mid-May. But, you'll have about ten days to two weeks each year for Christmas holiday, during which you may return home.

“Students live in one of our three dormitories ... well actually one of two for you. We have an all-male, an all-female, and a co-ed dormitory. The one in which you would reside is selected at the end of your orientation weekend at the school. You’ll live in this dormitory for the full six years and share a room with one other male student. Girls and boys are segregated in the co-ed one.

“In your room, you each will have your own bed, desk, dresser, and armoire, but you will share a large bathroom with other boys on your floor. Each dormitory is secured by a magically locked entry for your possessions’ security and to sway any students from the other dormitories from attempting any mischief. Plus, as I mentioned before, we have our own on-campus security to keep order and the peace.”

Barnabus paused again to see if Christian or Katy had any comments, but they sat there with indescribable looks on their faces. Barnabus took these looks as signs of interest and continued.

“The school year will consist of classroom and laboratory activities. You’ll have mid-year exams the week after the Christmas holiday and final exams during the last week of the school year. There are also extracurricular activities in which you can participate, including teams organized to compete in the annual competition against the other two schools in the country. This competition is held the last weekend prior to the end of the school year. The winner of this Tri-School Competition gets to keep the Salem’s Cup. You can imagine where the name came from, but you can learn more about this once you get to the school.

“Bishop has received many awards from the Witches Council and the International Witches Consortium over the past almost 300 years, unfortunately we have only won the Salem’s Cup a small percentage over those three centuries. The most recent and longest run we had wasn’t too long ago. We had a brilliant student that led us to victory five out of her six years at the school. We would’ve won it the sixth too, but it was her first year and one of the other schools had some very sharp and talented graduating students that beat us out.”

Barnabus paused once more. This time he did so to take a deep breath.

“If, however, you don’t wish to follow your magical path, we will have to take away your powers for the safety of our magical society. This is nothing dangerous, it merely requires us to bind your powers and clear your memory of ever having them and anything associated with them. This would also require us to do the same for you, Mrs. Drewell.”

At this, both Katy and Christian looked concerned. Barnabus saw this and quickly alleviated their concerns.

“Please believe me, if this needed to be done, it would have no effect on anything else in your memory and would be very quick and completely painless. Plus, a much more experienced wizard than myself would perform all of this,” Barnabus said with a chuckle.

Katy and Christian mustered up a small grin.

“I can tell you that I had an extraordinary time at Bishop. I came from a non-magical family too. I just graduated a few years ago. Immediately upon graduating, I began working at the Witches Council Headquarters. Then, just recently, I was promoted and

transferred to the central regional headquarters' office of the Department of Scholastic Oversight. I requested to be on the staff for Non-Magical Contacts, where my specific job is recruiting students for The Bishop School of Witchcraft. Kind of going back to my roots."

Barnabus again chuckled. Then, he concluded.

"What do you think, Christian? Can we expect to see you at The Bishop School of Witchcraft this coming September?"

Christian, at a loss for words, sat staring at the man. He never could have imagined that a magical world coexisted with the normal world. But, the offer to actually become part of it excited him. He eagerly turned to his mother, but quickly saw that she didn't share his excitement.

"Mother, what do you think?" Christian asked.

"I think we need to give this some thought before we agree to anything. It isn't that I don't believe what you've told us, especially in light of that...chair. But, this is something that I don't know anything about. And, you're asking me to give my one and only child's life over to you for basically two thirds of a year...for six years. I expected him to leave once he grew older, but he's just a boy. I love him dearly and he's more than just a part of my life. He is my life."

Katy paused briefly and looked at Christian, who blushed. Then, she continued.

"I don't think we can give you an answer today. We'll have to discuss this and give it much more thought."

"That's quite all right, Mrs. Drewell. I completely understand. My parents had to go through the same consideration process. But please take note that we must know your decision by Christian's twelfth birthday, which I understand is coming up in one week.

"On your birthday, a raven will land at your kitchen window and rap on it. Ravens are our means of sending long distance messages or letters to one another in the magical world. Just tell the raven 'Yes' or 'No' and it will return your message to us.

"If your answer is 'Yes,' you will receive a package of information explaining what you will need to do to prepare for the upcoming school year. It may come via bat, though, if all of the ravens are busy. You see, bats are used for shorter distance deliveries than the ravens, but sometimes they may be called upon to go that extra mile; no pun intended. Just for note, we use black cats for nearby message deliveries, but I don't believe the school would use one for this distance.

"If your answer is 'No,' one of the more experienced members of our office will visit you. I believe it would be Mr. Goldhead. He would arrive within the day to perform the memory spell and binding of Christian's powers.

"Well, thank you for your time, and we hope to see you this fall, Christian."

With that, Barnabus stood up pulling his chair away from the table. Again, with his back turned, he pulled something from his suit, and made the chair vanish.

Barnabus turned and looked up at Katy and Christian, noticing the different expressions on their faces from when he first made the chair appear. Katy now looked concerned, while Christian looked excited.

"You'll be able to do that too, and much more, someday Christian," Barnabus said as he walked toward the door.

Katy and Christian stood and followed Barnabus. He opened the door and stepped outside, while Katy and Christian stood in the doorway.

"Have a wonderful day," Barnabus said facing them.

Then, he bowed courteously, hopped into the air, and vanished.

It took a few moments before either of them could say anything. Both stood staring outside from the opened door, trying to determine if what had just happened really DID or not. Finally, Christian spoke up, or more precisely, started blathering excitedly.

"Oh mother, this sounds so wonderful! I just assumed the things I could do were just the beginnings of telekinesis. I never would've thought that magic was the cause...or that magic actually existed."

"What do you mean 'the things that I could do'?" Katy interjected quizzically.

Christian momentarily hesitated, then explained.

"Mother, for the past six years or so, I've been able to cause things to happen when I get emotional. They happened sometimes in anger or other times from happiness, but mostly when I became angry."

"What type of things did you cause to happen?"

"Well, do you remember that vase you had sitting on top of the television that I told you I accidentally knocked off and broke? That's not what actually happened. I was watching a movie, in which I'd really become involved. The main character had done something totally stupid, as they sometimes do, to where I actually yelled at the television. When I did, the vase cracked in two, then fell to the floor and shattered."

Katy looked surprised.

"There've been other times too. The last time happened at the beginning of this past school year. When you and I went shopping at the mall for clothes and school supplies. I saw this large boy picking on a girl I've seen at school, who's very shy and quiet. They were over in the food court and too far away for me to do anything about it, but I got upset. When I did, one of the chairs behind the boy slid over a few inches. When he stepped back, he fell over it. The boy became embarrassed and ran away.

"I always try to remain aware of when I'm getting mad, so I don't do things that other people might see. That way they won't associate these things with me. But, that was one of the few times I slipped and let the anger get the better of me."

"Have you done anything REALLY noticeable?"

"No. Only minor things that no one would notice unless, for some reason, they were specifically watching for something like that to happen."

Katy thought for a few moments. Then, she motioned for Christian to sit down at the table and she sat in the other chair.

"Well, I think that getting involved in this magical stuff seems very dangerous. It brings with it so much unknown. It'll certainly be life changing and concerns me that it could be life threatening. However, since it appears that you could use the knowledge and experience to help control your abilities, maybe this is something you need to do.

"I'll leave the decision up to you, sweetheart. All that I ask is that you give serious thought to both the advantages and disadvantages of attending this school, and making this magical world the one in which you will spend the rest of your life."

"I promise, mother."

“That’s all I can ask.”

With a weak smile, Katy stood up and kissed Christian on the forehead.

For the next six days, Katy left Christian alone to consider the weighty decision he had to make. Christian spent most of his days sitting in the back garden under their birch tree. Periodically, he would fiddle with the red ribbon his mother had tied around the tree as he pondered the good and bad aspects of embracing this new life.

They both had a difficult time getting through those six days for many reasons.

For one thing, they both enjoyed the time they spent together during the summer and, by now, would have already enjoyed several fun events. But, during the week, they hardly spent any time together, except for meals.

Katy also hated seeing Christian face such a heavy burden alone, but she knew that he had to make the decision himself. If she tried to help him, her concerns would definitely influence Christian’s decision. Doing so could ultimately drive a resentful wedge between them. Even though she had significant concerns, she couldn’t live with any type of resentment between the two of them.

Christian wanted so badly to set this decision aside and spend some fun and happy time with his mother, but he knew that he must give it the due focus it deserved. Christian also knew he couldn’t make a rash decision, because he’d have to live with that decision for the rest of his life. Plus, if he didn’t give it the full focus it deserved, his mother would know and be disappointed. He couldn’t live with that, especially after giving her his promise.

Finally, the morning of June 20th arrived. Christian woke very tired. Tired not from any physical exercise or exertion, but merely from the strain of his decision process over the last six days.

When he entered the kitchen, Katy had breakfast ready and sat at the table waiting for him.

“Happy Birthday, sweetheart!” she said to him.

“Happy Birthday to you, mother!” he replied with a smile and a hug.

When they separated, he had the chance to only say “I’ve given it...” when Katy told him to eat his breakfast first, then they’d talk.

After they had eaten breakfast, cleared the table, and washed the dishes, they returned to the table and sat down.

Christian again spoke first.

“I’ve given it serious thought, weighing all of the goods and bads, as I promised.

“I know that if I decide not to embrace the magical side, things could still work out. They’ll bind my powers and I won’t need to be concerned with guarding my actions and emotions any longer. In fact, I won’t even remember that I used to do that. And, maybe I could go on to do something great or become someone popular. Most importantly, I’d be able to spend my remaining six school years here at home with you, which is something I’d really enjoy.

“If I do embrace my magical side, I don’t know what I’ll be able to do or what my future will hold for me. It’s all unknown...a challenge. It’s this challenge that I feel I must take up and see how I do.

“Mother I hope that you won’t be disappointed and that you’ll accept my choice, since I feel that I’ve given it the necessary thought and consideration. I’ve decided to go to the Bishop School of Witchcraft and see what I can make of myself. If I discover later that this isn’t for me, I’ll return and live my life as we’d expected before, leaving the magical world behind and out of mind.”

As soon as he finished saying this, they heard a rap on the kitchen window. They both got up from the table and went into the kitchen, since they couldn’t see outside the window from the table. Once they could see past the fern that had blocked their view, they saw a black raven standing on the outside windowsill.

Katy turned toward Christian.

“Are you sure about your decision?”

“Yes, mother.”

“Then I agree and will support you in any way I can.” she said with a smile more forced than not.

Christian smiled at her with all the emotion he had and hugged her in the same exuberance.

Then, Katy opened the kitchen window. And, although it seemed odd, she addressed the raven and said, “Yes.”

In response, the raven nodded and flew away.

Christian ran off toward his room, laughing and howling in excitement.

Katy watched the raven fly away and murmured, “So it begins.”

The Package

In his excitement, Christian bounded down to his room, jumped onto his bed, and stared up at the ceiling. He imagined what to expect from attending this school and summoning magical powers when he wanted. Other things zoomed through his head, many of which he pulled from his adventure books and now wondered if they really existed. The many different images flitting through his mind and the exhausting mental effort over the last six days made him drowsy.

Christian sat on the back of a dragon, soaring through the air. The dragon breathed fire down at the ground, while Christian shot streaks of red light from his hand. Then suddenly, he felt a blow to his chest, like a burley man's fist.

Christian bolted awake in his bed, staring at the wall, confused and unaware that he still lay in his bed.

After a moment, he exclaimed, "Whoa, that was different. It seemed so real!"

He couldn't remember ever having a dream so vivid before.

After a few more moments he had shaken off the dream and became aware of the reality around him. He also noticed something...a smell...BIRTHDAY CAKE! He jumped off of the bed and scrambled up the stairs.

"Happy Birthday, again, sweetheart," Katy said to Christian as he burst into the kitchen.

"Happy Birthday to you again too, mother."

As Christian walked toward the kitchen table, he beheld the source of the delicious aroma. On the table sat a triple layer chocolate cake with a variety of colored candles, some pre-used and some new, all of them already lit. Next to the cake sat a small container of ice cream, two bowls, and spoons.

"Let's make a wish and blow out the candles," Katy said.

Christian closed his eyes to think of a wish. Katy noticed that the moment he closed his eyes, small sparks began to pop out of the candle flames.

"Christian!" Katy half shouted. The sparks stopped when Christian's eyes flew open. "Um, please blow out the candles, before they melt down onto the cake."

They both inhaled and blew at the same time.

Then, after they had finished their cake and ice cream, Christian commented, "The cake was wonderful, mother. Thanks for making it."

"My pleasure," she replied as she set her own bowl to the side.

"I have something for you," she said as she reached into her dress pocket and pulled out a small wrapped package.

"But mother, we agreed not to get each other birthday presents and to just do things to make each other happy throughout the year."

"I know sweetheart, but this is different. I'd planned on waiting until you were older to give this to you, but I think this birthday is more appropriate in light of your going off to the new school."

She handed the package to Christian.

He quickly unwrapped the paper to reveal a small jewelry-type box. He opened the box and inside he found a Celtic-designed medal on a silver chain.

"This is wonderful mother, but I've never really worn any type of jewelry before." Christian said honestly, although trying not to hurt his mother's feelings.

"I know, but this...this belonged to your father," Katy said hesitantly.

Christian looked surprised.

"It's a Celtic symbol of love, which he wore to represent the love we had for each other. I know I haven't spoken to you much at all about your father. It isn't because he was a bad man, in fact he was a very good man and we loved each other very much. You resulted from our love. I had hoped you would wear this, so that you'll remember that you are part of the loving relationship between me and your father."

A tear ran down her cheek.

"Thank you, mother. I'll never take it off," Christian said with a smile, as he slipped the chain over his head and around his neck.

"Mother...tell me more about father."

Katy stared at the tabletop for a few moments in thought. Then, she looked back up at Christian.

"There's a reason that I would prefer not to tell you too much about your father. It's not that we ever stopped loving each other. I loved him until the day he died and, actually, still do. It's just that he associated with some people that I thought might want to harm you and me, and I'm concerned that they may still be out there.

"Plus, I'm afraid that the more I tell you about your father, the more likely that your curiosity will get the best of you and you'll try to find out even more on your own. In doing this, you could make these people aware of who you are.

"I didn't think I'd have to worry about you being on your own for several years to come. But, in light of you going to this school away from home, I think you need to know about the risk. After so many years, they may have forgotten about us. However, for safety's sake, I need you to always be aware of your surroundings."

Christian looked surprised. He had never known any of this before and didn't know how to react. But, he trusted his mother and nodded that he understood.

Christian stood up and started toward the basement door. Then, he stopped and turned back toward Katy.

"Mother...what happened to father...was that the reason that you married Doug? I mean...to get away from these people?"

"I suppose so. I think I needed security more than love and, although he married me when I was pregnant with you, I don't think he married me for love either. Besides, I'm not sure he has enough love for anyone other than himself anyway," she said with a smirk.

Christian thought for a moment, snickered, and continued down to his room.

After lunch, they spent the afternoon together, out and about. Then, they returned home, where Katy cooked Christian his favorite dinner: Fried chicken with mashed potatoes and gravy. And, of course, they ate left over cake and ice cream for dessert.

They had just finished doing the dishes when, once again, a tapping sound came from the kitchen window.

Turning as one to look, they saw that the raven that had visited them in the morning had returned; or so they assumed, since all ravens looked alike. This time, an envelope leaned against the window, blocking the view of the raven's lower torso. As Katy leaned forward to lift the window, the raven picked up the envelope in its beak.

Once opened, the raven hopped through the window, onto the inside windowsill, and stuck out its beak, so that Katy could take the envelope. Once she did, the raven hopped back onto the outside windowsill and flew off.

Katy took a moment to read the front of the envelope and then showed it to Christian. On the front, it had 'Master Christian Drewell, Freshman, The Bishop School of Witchcraft' hand-written in the most elegant script. Katy handed the envelope to Christian, who turned it over. A wax seal secured the flap, which contained the impression of a large B inside of a triangle.

Christian dug under the wax seal and lifted the envelope flap open. The moment he did, the envelope floated from his hands and hovered in mid-air. The flap opened wider on its own and miniature fireworks shot out from inside, accompanied by a trumpeting fanfare that didn't sound miniature at all.

After a few seconds, the fireworks and trumpeting ceased and a piece of folded paper floated out of the envelope. Floating in mid-air, the paper unfolded until it reached the width of a normal piece of paper, but stretched to twice the length. It then floated down to allow Christian to grab it. Tentatively, he reached out and plucked it from the air.

For the most part, the text on the paper followed the format of a form letter. He and Katy read the letter together, which started with a typed greeting that read, 'Greetings Christian Drewell.' Handwritten next to it they saw 'And Happy Birthday.'

The rest of the letter, typed, read:

Welcome freshman to the Bishop School of Witchcraft. We are pleased that you accepted our invitation to attend this wonderful educational institution.

Classes will begin on Monday, September 1st.

Below you will find the list of classes that you will take your first year. These are all of the introductory level classes, which will give you a sound basis to begin your magical education. And, thereby allowing you in your latter years here at the school, to focus on the fields of magic that you wish to follow toward meeting your magical career path. Coursework will be accessed for classes and homework via the school's private computer network.

You will also find, below, a list of clothing and equipment that you will need to bring with you to the school. You may acquire some or all of these articles in Bishop Town, which is located just outside of the school's gates.

Transportation will be provided to Bishop Town on the Friday before the beginning of school. You will have all day Friday to gather your clothing and equipment and to look around town. You must be at the school ground gates at 6:00 p.m. sharp. Tardiness will NOT be accepted.

Your transportation will pick you up at the designated location, shown below, at 8:00 a.m. on Friday. If you are not there at 8:00 a.m., you will miss your transportation and must find your own means of getting to the town and school.

Saturday and Sunday you will follow a set schedule that will allow you to become oriented to the school. It will consist of a tour of the school, meeting the school staff, and getting to know your fellow students. On Sunday, representatives from the various school clubs and teams will be available with whom you can speak about joining, if you so desire. The orientation will conclude Sunday evening with the beginning-of-the-school-year feast, at which all students attend. During this event, you will be selected into your respective dormitory, where you will live the entire six years that you attend the Bishop School of Witchcraft.

Let me conclude with some policies to which you must adhere, especially during your orientation weekend. Disobeying these policies will result in punishment and, if severe enough, could result in expulsion:

1) Obey all orders or directions given to you by school staff or designated school representatives.

2) Obey all curfews and areas designated as off limit.

3) Be on time for all planned events that you are expected to attend.

4) If you do not agree with an order or direction given to you or you are caught breaking any of the rules, do not attempt to talk your way out of the situation.

Quibbling will not be tolerated and will result in greater punishment.

We maintain these rules to keep discipline in the school. Discipline ensures everyone's safety and keeps things running smoothly. By following these rules, you will have an enjoyable time here at the Bishop School of Witchcraft. We look forward to seeing you.

Mr. Robert E. J. Davis

Headmaster, The Bishop School of Witchcraft

Witches Council of America (WCA)

Classes:

Alchemy 101 w/Lab

World History of Magic, Part I

Divination 101 - Numerology & Palmistry

Magical Agriculture 101 w/Lab

Spell Casting 101 - Basic Latin

Magical Creatures 101 - Level 1

Clothing:

- Boys: Five pairs of tapered, black pants; Girls: five knee-length black skirts

- Five button-down, white collared shirts (male or female style, respectively)

- Five pairs of black socks/hose (girls' hose must cover their calves)

- Two pairs of black-laced shoes (girls' shoes must have flat-heals)

- One, at least, school tie (male or female style, respectively)

- One school blazer and vest

- One black, hooded winter cloak with black fastenings
- Bathrobe
- Bathing suit (optional, conservative) -- Male: shorts; Female: one-piece
- Shower shoes
- Toiletries

Equipment:

- One laptop or portable computer with word processing and wireless capability
- One wand
- One cauldron (black, student size)
- One set of glass vials
- One set of brass scales
- Large backpack or book-bag

Items Allowed, But Not Required:

- Candles (decorative)
- Posters/pictures for decoration (tasteful--determined by school)
- Small area rug (approximately 2' x 3')

Transportation Pickup: 8:00 a.m., Friday, August 29th

Location: School bus stop, northeast corner, intersection of Elm and Birch, Whiteville.

Bring this invitation for boarding access.

NOTE FOR PARENTS

Enclosed you will find three forms. Please read them and take the appropriate action to respond to the forms as necessary or desired.

As they read that last note, three normal sized pieces of paper emerged from the envelope and hung in midair. Katy reached for the first one and it floated closer to her, so that she could grab it.

The first one, entitled 'Medical Care,' she read aloud.

"The Bishop School of Witchcraft has its own infirmary and nursing staff. If any serious injuries should befall your child, our nursing staff will take immediate actions to mend or cure the injury and the school will contact you immediately. Cures can be found for most injuries from broken bones to minor curses.

"Although cures can be crafted for eye-related minor curses (such as the bug eyes or crossed eyes curses), hereditary eye-related problems cannot be cured (such as myopia and stigmatism). If your child has an eye-related malady, please ensure that they have an up-to-date pair of prescription glasses prior to arriving at school. We highly recommended that glasses be worn rather than contact lenses, since we can magically mend broken glasses; whereas finding lost contact lenses is virtually impossible, even with magic."

Katy turned to Christian and said, "It's a good thing we just renewed your prescription. I'm also glad they have a medical facility, but please try to avoid these minor curse things."

She mustered up a smile, but it took an effort not to show her concern.

"I think I'll keep this one as comfort while you're gone," she added.

Katy folded it and put it into her apron pocket. Then, she reached for the next form, which had 'Bishop School of Witchcraft Student Bank Account Form' at the top. Katy plucked this one out of the air and read it aloud.

"In coordination with the Bullion's Exchange of Bishop Town, the Bishop School of Witchcraft offers an opportunity for parents to open a student account at Bullion's Exchange for their child. Parents may, if they wish, deposit funds into their child's student account for his/her use. Parents may even specify how much or how little of those funds their child may withdraw per week. This student bank account can be set up by completing the information below and having your child turn in this form at the beginning of the freshmen orientation weekend."

Katy turned to Christian and said, "I think this would be worthwhile, but you'll have to watch your spendthrift ways."

They both laughed.

"I'll fill this out and you can take it with you. Alright?" Katy suggested.

Christian agreed.

Katy turned to the third and final form entitled 'Bishop School Parent Volunteer Form.' It had a space to list the names and grades for all of the children the family would have attending the school and a place for the interested parent's name, occupation, and employer. Then, it listed examples of areas or events for which a parent could volunteer. Examples included assisting at Open Houses, welcoming/assisting at the Freshmen Orientation Weekend, or chaperoning dances or field trips.

Katy glanced at Christian, who had a questioning look on his face.

"I don't think I'm quite ready to volunteer for these type of things just yet," Katy said.

As soon as she said that, the last form left her hand, folded itself up, and popped back into the envelope. Then, the envelope tore itself into a thousand tiny pieces that fell to the floor, where it disappeared.

"Isn't this awesome mother? The letter and how it opened, and all of these events that I'll get to attend, and meeting all of these people, and going shopping for magic items, and these classes sound so intriguing!" he exclaimed rapidly and excitedly.

"It all seems so real now!"

"Yes, it does." Katy replied.

Christian wanted to continue talking about the letter and all of the things that would take place during the coming school year. But, Katy motioned to put the letter away for now and get ready for bed.

Hesitantly, Christian complied.

New Friends and New Experiences

The rest of the summer passed uneventfully, from a magical perspective. Although the two of them did have some fun times over the summer, they didn't have as many as they had in past summers. In fact, aside from these few fun times, they didn't spend much time together at all.

Katy spent most of her time trying to keep herself busy and not thinking about Christian's departure at the end of the summer. Christian spent most of his time alone thinking about leaving home and what to expect at school.

The summer passed quickly for Katy. For Christian, it just seemed to drag on forever. But, as time does, it finally passed and the last week of August arrived.

At the beginning of the week, Katy and Christian began a list of all the things that he needed to take with him. For the next couple of days, they added a few more items keeping in mind that Christian would have to carry everything he would take.

When Thursday morning arrived, they began to gather all of the things on the list together and, Thursday night, they packed them into the green duffle bag they had purchased for the trip. They loaded everything going down the list item by item.

"Jeans?"

"Check."

"White t-shirts?"

"Check."

"Boxer shorts?"

"Checkered." Christian said with a laugh and quickly joined by Katy.

"Vitamins?"

"Check."

"This is a one-month supply, so I'll send you a 'Care' package at the end of each month, with a new supply of vitamins. Promise me you'll take your vitamins every morning. I don't want you getting sick while you're there."

"I promise." Christian replied.

She had ensured he took a vitamin every morning for as long as he could remember. Christian assumed his mother must have purchased them from a health store, because they came in a plain, un-labeled, brown plastic container with a twist-off, re-closable cap. Wherever she got them, they must have worked, because he had never come down with any type of illness ever. And, he hoped to keep that record going.

They finished loading the duffle bag, filling it to where they couldn't have added one more thing. Then, they put the remaining few things and his computer into Christian's backpack.

When they had everything ready for his early departure the next morning, they set the two bags by the front door and went downstairs for bed. As they turned toward their respective bedrooms, Katy stopped in her doorway and turned around.

"Sweetheart?"

"Yes, mother?" Christian replied, stopping in his doorway.

Katy said nothing, but rushed over and took Christian in her arms and gave him one of the strongest hugs she'd ever given him. She immediately turned and hurried into her room.

Christian lay down on his bed, knowing he wouldn't fall asleep easily. The excitement surged through him and thoughts just kept shooting through his head. He stared up at the ceiling, waiting for sleep to come.

Christian could hear his mother in her room. She wasn't sleeping either. He could hear her crying.

Surprisingly, Christian did fall asleep. What seemed like moments later, he heard his mother's voice, "Christian, it's six o'clock. Time to get up. The taxi will be here in thirty minutes and you don't want to be late for the bus."

This comment caused Christian to jump from his bed, grab his glasses, and run upstairs.

Katy had already showered and dressed, and stood by the stove preparing breakfast.

"Sweetheart, you go shower and dress, while I finish making breakfast," she said, only glancing in the direction of the basement door.

Christian hardly heard what she said, already entering the bathroom.

Shortly, he exited the bathroom dressed and ready to go, just in time to see Katy setting the now empty frying pan into the sink.

They sat down together to eat. Katy hardly ate anything, whereas Christian gobbled two helpings of everything down. No sooner had he cleaned the second helping than they heard the taxi honk. They quickly cleared the table and hurried toward the front door.

Christian grabbed the duffle bag, which caused him to lean heavily to one side and almost hit his head on the fern hanging near the door.

"Sweetheart, let me carry that thing," Katy requested.

"No mother, I need to get used to the weight, since I may have to carry it most of the day any way."

Katy shrugged and said, "Okay, but at least let me carry the backpack."

Christian wanted to carry both bags, but thought it best not to create any unnecessary ill feelings between them. He didn't want them to part for such a long time angry at each other. So, he agreed.

The taxi ride took slightly more than an hour to get to Whiteville, located closer to the middle of the state. This left Christian with a quarter of an hour before the bus would arrive to pick him up.

As the taxi came to a halt, just across the street from the school bus stop, Katy said, "We can sit here in the taxi until the bus comes, if you'd like."

Christian turned to her. He knew she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible before he left, so he worded his reply carefully and tried not to upset her.

"Mother, I think it'd be best if I went over and stood with the other kids. I thought I'd try to make a friend or two before we get on the bus, so I can have someone to talk to on the trip to school. I'm not sure how long the bus ride will be, but it'd be really long if I had to ride alone the whole way there."

Katy's face saddened.

"I know that we'll miss each other, but I'll write to you as often as I can. I suppose I can send the letters to you by raven, or bat, or something. And, I'll look forward to your replies," he said with a smile.

Katy smiled too and said, "And you be sure to take your vitamins. I don't want you to catch a cold, or worse, while you're there."

"I will mother," Christian said with a smile.

"Here's a little bit of money. I don't know if they use dollars and such, but you're going to need some to buy lunch and other sundries."

"But mother, ALL of this? What about you?"

"Don't you worry about it."

After a moment of looking at each other, Katy grabbed Christian and gave him another bone-crushing hug, one from which Christian didn't know if she'd ever let go. But, she did.

They both exited the taxi. Christian picked up the duffle and slung it over one shoulder. Then, he grabbed the backpack and put it over his other shoulder.

"Hey, this helps balance me out," he said with a chuckle.

Katy smiled back.

"I love you sweetheart. Be safe."

"I love you too, mother."

He turned and walked away, across the street, to the bus stop.

Katy got back into the taxi and watched as Christian walked away. A few moments later, she told the driver to take her home.

Four other kids waited around the bus stop area, but none of them were talking to each other and no two stood together. As Christian approached, he said hello to each one. As a response, he either received a nod or smile. But, none of them seemed interested in establishing a long-term discussion, much less a friendship.

Christian thought to himself, "This could be a LONG bus ride."

He set his backpack and duffle bag down, laying the duffle on its side. The duffle, as full as they had made it, supported his weight without a problem. So, he sat down and watched the other kids.

The only girl seemed nervous, staring straight ahead, lost in thought and either chewing her fingernail or twirling her hair. One boy would check his watch, stand for a few moments, walk about four paces, stop and check his watch, stand for another few moments, then return to the original spot to start the cycle again. Another boy stood talking to himself or to something he held in his hand, although Christian could see nothing there. The last boy, the only other person sitting down, sat on what looked like a steamer trunk with wheels, reading a book that Christian would swear turned the pages on its own.

Christian had just thought that their transportation should arrive any moment, when a limousine pulled up to the bus stop. He thought, "Now this is what I call a ride!"

He noticed that the other kids watched, but didn't move toward it. So, he stayed sitting for the moment.

The driver exited and walked around to the side of the car facing Christian, who thought "Cool, we have a driver who opens the door for us, too."

However, as the driver opened the door, a young girl stepped out of the car. She was a pretty girl, slender with black hair, hazel eyes, and impeccably dressed. Christian thought she looked taller than him, but part of her tallness resulted from the heeled shoes she wore.

As the driver closed the door and went around to the trunk of the car, she removed the headphones that connected to something in a small purse she held in her hands. Then, she put the headphones into the purse and slipped it on like a backpack. The driver returned with three pieces of matching luggage and, after placing them next to the girl, he touched the brim of his hat, nodded to her, and returned to the driver's door.

A moment later, the car drove away.

Christian stared wide-eyed at this whole spectacle and, unknowingly, continued staring at the girl once the car had gone. She eyed each one of the other kids, but none of them gave her a second look. Then, she noticed Christian staring at her. So, she walked over to where Christian sat and joined him on his duffle bag.

"Hi, my name's Gwenevere," she exclaimed. "And you are...?"

"Christian, Christian Dr..., umm Christian."

"Well Christian, what's a nice looking young man like you doing on a duffle bag like this?" she smiled.

Christian turned red and fumbled for a reply. But, before he could mutter an answer, she continued.

"You can call me Gwen. My mom's a witch and my dad's non-magical. However, he's one of the top executives in the regional headquarters of the Howard Corporation. I of course get my magical abilities from my mom, but I get my fabulous taste for the better things in life from my dad. I figure, why not become a witch? That way I can have the best of both worlds."

She smirked at Christian. And, without noticing any response, she continued.

"My mom's a direct descendant of Merlin, so she's an Arthurian buff; hence the name Gwenevere."

"Wait! You mean to say that Merlin was an actual living, breathing person?" Christian asked in amazement.

"Of course," she replied with a chuckle.

"Everyone knows that Merlin was real, unless..." she hesitated.

"Oh, you must come from two non-magical parents," she concluded.

Christian nodded.

"Well, you know I may just have to take you under my wing and show you the ropes of the magical world," she said with a smile and a wink.

The redness that had begun to subside returned in full color in Christian's face. Just as he compiled a reply, the appearance of a little yellow school bus saved him.

Based on the number of windows, Christian guessed that the bus held about six seats on each side, which added up to fitting about twenty-four people comfortably.

Christian thought to himself, "This could be a very long and uncomfortable ride. If we pick up many more kids, we'll be sitting two or maybe three to a seat."

The tinted windows of the bus kept him from seeing inside, so he couldn't see the number of students already aboard.

Once the bus came to a stop, the doors opened and the driver stepped out.

Holding out a clipboard, he said, "Everyone on board. Let's go. We have more stops to make. Have your school invitations out for boarding."

Christian stood up and, after helping Gwen to her feet, turned to the driver and asked, "Excuse me, is there someplace we can store our bags?"

"Yeah, there's a locker inside for ya," the driver replied, as he began to review his list of students.

Christian picked up his two bags and walked over to the bus. He got in line behind the other four students at the stop, with Gwen behind him. He could hear some children already on the bus and, from the number, it sounded like they would have to sit uncomfortably crowded.

Christian showed his invitation to the driver and dragged his duffle onto the bus, watching the steps so he wouldn't trip. Once he reached the top step, he looked up into the bus. At that instant, both bags dropped from his hands and would have fallen out of the door if Gwen hadn't stopped them.

The bus had eight rows of seating on each side. However, in place of the typical school bus seats sat large, cushioned sofas. And, behind the last row of sofas, he saw a boys and girls bathroom on opposite sides of the bus. The main aisle continued into the rear of the bus.

At the back, lockers, about the size of those found at an airport, lined both sides of the aisle. They sat three units high and six across. Although amazed by all of this, Christian couldn't believe what he saw at the end of the aisle, beyond the lockers. A set of spiral stairs shot upwards to a floor above. More likely, the bus held several floors above, since behind the stairs glistened two, shiny elevator doors.

Christian looked around totally confused, eyes and mouth wide open. He looked over at the bus driver who, without looking at Christian, said impatiently, "Come on, move along. We ain't got all day."

Christian looked back at Gwen, who said, "Way cool, huh? Welcome to the world of magic."

Gwen helped Christian gather his bags, and his wits, and they proceeded into the bus. No sooner had they cleared the stairs, as the driver closed the doors and put the bus into gear. Christian glanced back toward the front window and, once again, couldn't believe what he saw. It reminded him of when a spaceship in one of those science fiction movies would go into hyper-drive, because everything outside became a blur.

He turned and took one more step, when the bus driver yelled back, "Hurry up and get settled in, we're almost to our next stop."

All of the seats toward the front of the bus had at least two spots taken and Christian thought it would be rude to grab a seat alone, now that he had befriended Gwen; or, more precisely, she had befriended him. So, they proceeded toward the back.

As they neared the last few rows of seats, Christian saw a boy, about the size of one of Benny the Brat's thugs leaning over taunting someone. But, he couldn't see whom the bully was picking on. So, Christian marched directly toward the boy.

Standing right behind the boy, Christian could finally see the victim. A girl, somewhat plain in appearance with shoulder-length brown hair, pallid complexion, and glasses, sat there with her head bowed and hair hanging down covering most of her face. She appeared to read a book, although Christian could see that she couldn't do much reading. She grimaced frequently as a result of what the boy would say to her.

Christian shouted, "Leave her alone!"

The boy whipped around, pointing a short, wooden stick at Christian. Gwen gasped, but Christian stood his ground.

"Mind your own business, if you know what's good for you," the boy said to Christian.

He went to turn back toward the girl, when Christian dropped his bags and jumped in between the two of them.

"I said to leave her alone!" Christian barked sternly.

The boy stepped close to Christian so that they stood nose to nose. Then, he growled, "What's your name?"

"Christian," came a firm reply.

"You better watch your step...Christian."

As the boy turned, he nearly knocked Christian over, but Christian managed to keep his balance. The boy proceeded to the elevator and, as the doors began to close, he glared back toward Christian.

"Are you all right?" Christian asked the girl, as he adjusted his glasses on his nose.

"Yes, thank you," she replied, barely glancing up at Christian.

"Is it all right if we sit here with you?" he asked.

"Yes. Please," she said, again barely raising her head.

"Great. I think I'll store my bags first and...I'll be back," Christian said with a chuckle.

He said these last few words in the voice of the movie character, The Terminator. As he turned away, he didn't see the perplexed look the girl gave him.

Christian followed Gwen toward the lockers. He noticed that the lockers had names on them in alphabetical order, apparently the names of all the students riding the bus today. He found his locker near the front, based on his last name, Drewell.

Since he didn't care to let anyone know his last name, he looked around. Gwen, the only person nearby, had gone closer to the other end of the lockers. So, Christian quickly opened his locker and lifted his duffle to the opening. Before he had the chance to toss it in, the locker sucked the bag right out of his hands with a loud "Whoosh."

Startled, Christian fell backward into the lockers behind him.

Gwen ran over to him and asked, "Are you alright?"

Christian nodded his head and then approached the open locker very carefully. He waved his hand over the opening, but detected no suction coming from within. So, he picked up his backpack and lifted it near the opening. Once again, the locker sucked the bag inside with a "Whoosh."

Although startled once again, Christian didn't fall backward this time. Instead, he peered inside the locker. However, he could only see pitch-black darkness.

Christian closed his locker and walked down to help Gwen lift the bigger of her two suitcases.

As they lifted it, Christian said, "This one'll never fit through the opening."

"Just watch." Gwen replied.

As they lifted the bag toward the locker, it began to suck in the bag. But, as the bag reached the opening, the end of the bag closest to the locker began to stretch longer and narrower, until it fit through the opening. In a moment, after an extended "Whoooooosh," the bag disappeared.

"Cool!" said Christian.

"But, how do we get them out? Especially since you can't reach in to get them, because they're not there," he added.

Gwen explained.

"When you open the locker door, the locker will spit them out. It kinda looks like the locker's sticking its tongue out at you. You can then lift it down and it will do the same for each of your bags.

"Another thing is that only you can open your locker. It won't allow anyone else to open it, so there's no need for locks. And, if someone tries to force it open in any way, the locker will suck them inside."

They both chuckled at this thought, while Gwen shut her locker door. And, as she did so, Christian looked up at her name and saw that it read 'Torres, Gwenevere.'

As they walked back to their seats, Christian asked, "I noticed that your last name is Torres. Is that Hispanic?"

"Yes," Gwen replied.

"I've never really talked much to anyone of Hispanic heritage or even been outside of the United States. Do you have any family or relatives outside the country?"

"Yeah," Gwen said, as they took their seats with Christian between the two girls.

Then, Gwen explained further, while the other girl listened to the conversation.

"Just last year, we moved to this area from L.A. Although I grew up and spent most of my life just outside of L.A., I was actually born in Mexico. My dad was born in Mexico too, but he and his parents immigrated into the United States. He grew up in northern California, but his family would travel back to Mexico during the summer to visit his grandparents. As dad got older, on their summer visits, he started exploring many of the cultural aspects of Mexico, such as Aztec ruins.

"He graduated from Cal Tech with a degree in chemical engineering and had a job lined up with the Howard Corporation out there. Before he began his job, he went back to Mexico for one final summer vacation. While there, he went exploring one of the more ancient ruins and encountered a Quetzalcoatl, or a Mexican dragon. My mom, who's a magical biologist specializing in dragons, had been at the ruins studying it.

"Well, since this particular dragon's invisibility-to-non-magicals spell didn't work, she started performing memory spells on all of the non-magical people who had seen it. When she came to my dad, before she could perform the memory spell on him, they

just stared into each other's eyes and fell in love. Soon after, they got married, and the rest is history. More precisely, it's my history."

Gwen chuckled, followed by Christian and the new girl.

"That's so cool," declared Christian.

"And romantic," she said with a smile, as she tried to interlock her arm with his. Christian moved his arm out of the way, feigning an itch on his leg. And, in the same motion, he turned toward the new girl.

"My name's Christian, by the way, and this is Gwen. What's your name?" he asked.

"Penelope," she replied.

"Do you have a last name?"

"Humblot."

"Are you always this talkative?" he joked, but she didn't reply.

"I'm just kidding," he said consolingly.

"Who was the big guy?" Christian asked.

"Derick Foulmoth. And you put yourself in serious danger."

"I've encountered guys his size before and they don't scare me. Besides, it's my duty to come to the aid of a friend," Christian replied, saying the last word almost as a question.

In response, Penelope looked directly at Christian for the first time. Her green eyes began to water slightly as she began to speak.

"My name's Penelope, but you can call me Penny. That's what my parents call me. We live far away from any cities or non-magical towns. Our property is unplottable and has a Repelling Spell cast on it too, so that no non-magical people can see it or come onto it.

"Since no one from the non-magical world even knew I existed, I didn't have to attend non-magical school. This meant my parents could begin teaching me magical skills and I could practice them at an earlier age than most other children. They told me that other children weren't taught magical skills until almost our current age, because they have to attend non-magical schools and aren't allowed to use magic outside of their home. Their parents do this so that they aren't tempted to use magic. Because, as I'm sure you know, if they're caught using magic outside of their home, especially in front of a non-magical person, they or their parents can be severely reprimanded by the Witches Council. I'm guessing that's how you two were brought up.

"My mom's a wiz at potions and charms, which she makes and sells to a nearby magical goods store. My dad, up until two years ago, worked at the regional headquarters of the Witches Council in the Office of Magical Beasts. But, he didn't agree with some of the policies they were establishing or enforcing, so he quit. Now, he freelances as a 'wand-for-hire' to help people get rid of pesky beasts that may be infesting their yards, houses, or whatever. It doesn't pay that well. But, it can be loads of fun, depending on the beast. He allowed me to assist him on many of his jobs, unless it was a dangerous beast he had to deal with. I remember one job where I helped him to catch a Nogtail and, although they're fast, if you know how to handle them they aren't so bad.

“While my dad worked for the Witches Council, I first met Derick. His father’s head of the Office of Magical Beasts at the regional headquarters where my dad worked. Dad took me to his office’s Christmas party just before he quit. Derick came too. We didn’t talk, but were just introduced to each other. I think it may have been at this party that my dad found out about the policies that inevitably forced him to quit, because he wasn’t happy when we left and never enjoyed going to work anymore after that.

“Dad mentioned to me on the way home from the party that Derick had numerous times performed magic outside of the home and several times in front of or, even worse, on non-magical people. However, each time, his father got him out of trouble. So, you see, what you did was very dangerous, because Derick wouldn’t hesitate to perform magic on you. Especially, since you didn’t pull out your wand to defend yourself. How come you didn’t?”

Penny had said all of this so fast, that it seemed like one, long, run-on sentence for the whole few minutes that she spoke. Christian hardly had time to take in everything and it took him a few moments to realize that she had asked him a question.

“Um, oh, so that’s what he had, a wand?” Christian asked.

“Well, yes. What did you think it was?” Penny asked perplexed.

“I uh ...” Christian started to reply, but Gwen beat him to it.

“You’ll have to excuse him. He was raised by two non-magical parents, so he doesn’t know a whole lot about what’s going on with regard to magic.”

“Two non-magical parents? Really?” asked Penny excitedly.

“Yes, you should have seen the look on his face when he saw the inside of the bus. And I had to explain to him how the lockers worked. His innocence is, well, just so adorable,” replied Gwen.

“I’ve never met anyone that had two non-magical parents. Actually, I haven’t met many non-magical people at all. How about you?”

“Well, yes. Like you guessed, I went to a non-magical school, up until this year. I had many non-magical friends back in L.A. that I used to hang out with. In fact, my life was more non-magical than magical, although my mom had been teaching me a bit of magic for several years now.”

“Wow, that sounds like it could have been loads of fun. Tell me some of the things you used to do with your friends.”

“Would the two of you like to be alone?” Christian interjected.

“We’re sorry, Christian,” said Gwen with a snicker.

“Well, we know a little about our backgrounds, so why don’t you tell us about yours?” Gwen posed to Christian.

“Yes, I’d love to hear about what it was like growing up without magic,” Penny said enthusiastically.

“Well, there’s not much to tell. I don’t know a whole lot about my father, because he died before I was born. People who met my mother and me together always said that I must look like my father, because I didn’t look much like her. My mother just recently told me a little bit about him. She didn’t tell me much, but it’s more than I knew before. She said that she didn’t want me to know too much about him for ... personal reasons.

"After he died, she married a man name Doug Drewell who adopted me. Although, he hasn't been much of a father to me or much of a husband to my mother."

"So, your last name's Drewell?" asked Gwen.

"I prefer to just be 'Christian.' Maybe someday I'll find my real father's last name and change mine."

"Since you don't know who your father is, maybe it's from him that you got your magical abilities," suggested Penny.

"My mother didn't say whether he was magical or not. But, I just assumed he wasn't. I mean she never said anything about it before and she didn't say anything about it after the school recruiter came to our house. She seemed to be as surprised as I was about all this magic stuff, so I'd suspect that he wasn't."

"Yes, but it IS possible," reiterated Penny.

"I suppose it's possible that she didn't know," replied Christian.

Then, he added, "I remember when all my magical incidents first started to occur, I thought there was something wrong with me. But, once I started investigating, I just thought that I had the beginnings of psychic powers."

"What incidents?" asked Gwen.

"What are 'si-kick' powers?" asked Penny.

"Not consistently, but every once in a while, I would make something happen. Like, make a chair move or make a paper start on fire. But, I could never make anything happen when I tried to do so. I even bought some books on psychic powers, which are powers that some people have that allow them to move things or make things happen with their mind," he said, concluding his comment toward Penny.

"I'd hoped these books would help me to control my powers, but they didn't help."

"The reason those books didn't help is because you don't have psychic powers, you have magical powers," said Gwen.

Then, she explained.

"I asked my mom several years ago about this, because I'd seen a movie where the person had psychic powers. I said to her, 'Hey look mom, someone with magical powers like us.' She told me that the difference between psychic and magical powers is that psychic powers emanate from the mind, whereas magical powers flow from the heart. Magic emanates from all living things and, as witches, we just tap into that magical flow and it allows us to make things happen. The more training and experience we have, the easier it is to tap into that flow. And, that in turn allows us to make more powerful things happen.

"Although most witches have the potential to perform magic from birth, we all need training on how to tap into it. Plus, we have to have a wand to draw and focus the magical energy within us. You, on the other hand, have been able to do it without the training and without a wand. This means you have a natural ability to tap into the magical flow, which is uncommon."

As Christian sat thinking about this, the bus driver's voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Everybody out. We've arrived at Bishop Town."

Looking Around Town

After retrieving their bags from the regurgitating lockers, the three children proceeded toward the front door of the bus. No sooner had they stepped off of the bus than Derick bumped into Christian as he exited, knocking the bags from Christian's hands. Derick continued on without giving the three of them a second look. The girls looked happy to see him walk away, whereas Christian took a step toward him. Luckily, Gwen caught Christian's arm and interlocked hers with his.

Christian looked at her, but Gwen just smiled.

So, the three of them grabbed their bags once again and walked toward two baggage carts, sitting just to the right of the town's entrance. The carts reminded Christian of the type used to load bags on and off of airplanes at the airport. He walked over to the one that had the sign 'Boys' on it. Gwen and Penny went toward the one with the sign that read 'Girls.'

While throwing his bags onto the cart, Christian looked over at the entrance to the school grounds. The gates loomed directly in front of him, just a short distance east of the town's entrance. He could hear some activity within the school grounds, but he couldn't see much. Rows of tall bushes flanked both sides of the path, which gently curved to the left beyond the gates. This just reinforced his excitement toward the upcoming evening, when he would get his first taste of this new world of a magic school.

Christian, Gwen, and Penny, the last three students off of the bus, together turned toward the town entrance. As soon as they did, the baggage carts disappeared.

The town thrived with activity, but by no means looked busy. Christian noticed that most of the activity came from his fellow bus riders. However, sprinkled here and there, adults and shop keepers talked and milled around town. Christian could only imagine the activity in town come Sunday afternoon, when all of the other students arrived to pick up their supplies for the school year.

The buildings themselves, a mixture of 18th, 19th, and 20th century architecture and age, created an interesting sight. This contrast occurred with the first two buildings in town.

A modern coffee shop named "Magical Mocha" sat to the left, while a post office that could easily have existed for a century or so sat directly across from it.

"I'm dying for a Jarvey Java! Let's go into the Magical Mocha." said Gwen excitedly.

"I'll meet you in there. I'm going to run over to the Post Office for a moment," replied Christian.

The trio split up, Penny going with Gwen.

Christian entered the post office and a noticeable din of animal noises overwhelmed him. After a few moments, he sorted out the sounds into a mixture of raven and cat noises.

"What can I do for you sir?" asked the clerk behind the counter.

Christian looked around and saw no one else inside. Christian pointed at himself and mouthed "Me?" toward the clerk.

"Yes, you young master, what can I do for you?" the clerk replied.

"I'd like to send a note to my mother."

“Put your name and address on this piece of paper and write your note on this other piece,” the clerk said, sliding two pieces of paper and a pencil toward Christian.

Christian did as the clerk instructed. He soon had the name and address completed and began to write the note.

The clerk took the sheet with the name and address and walked over to one of three windows to the back room just behind him. Immediately, a raven landed on the ledge of the window. The clerk whispered something to the raven and then came back to the counter.

Christian had finished his note, which simply read, “Mother, Arrived at school safely and made two friends named Gwen and Penny. I’m beginning my shopping and looking forward to orientation. Love, Christian.”

The clerk took it and slid it into a small envelope. Then, he turned and stuck out the envelope toward the raven, which took it in its beak and flew out a large window to the clerk’s left.

“It should be arriving within a few hours, pending any severe weather in route,” stated the clerk.

“How much do I owe you?”

“Mail’s free for students.”

“Excellent. And, how do we get replies?”

“Each student has his or her own post box in back. Let’s see, and your name’s ‘Drewell’,” the clerk said, looking at Christian’s name on the first piece of paper.

Then, he compared Christian’s name with a book sitting in front of him.

“Yep, we’ve got a box already marked for you. Let’s see...” said the clerk as he looked into the back of the office. “Nope, nothing in it as yet.”

“Thank you,” replied Christian, who then turned and exited the building.

When he entered the coffee shop, he found Gwen and Penny sitting at one of the tables in the middle of the shop. Gwen sipped a frozen drink with whipped cream on top. Christian couldn’t see what Penny drank, but could only see steam rise from the small opening in the top of her cup.

Gwen signaled for Christian to sit in the seat next to her.

“I bought you one too,” said Gwen with a smile.

“Thanks. I’m actually, pretty thirsty,” replied Christian, as he took the drink and began taking some very large sips from the cup.

“Christian, you shouldn’t...” Gwen began to say, but said it too late.

Christian immediately began to shout short, and sometimes rude, phrases at everyone in the shop in an almost constant stream. After about thirty seconds, he returned to normal.

Christian lowered his head in embarrassment, until he realized no one seemed angry. In fact, everyone laughed. He glanced around. Then, he gave Gwen a confused look.

“I tried to tell you,” she said through a chuckle.

Then, she explained.

“You have to sip these slowly. You know how if you drink something cold too quickly, you get that ‘brain freeze’ feeling? Well, if you drink these drinks too quickly, you’ll instead take on the characteristics of the creature it’s named after. It only lasts until the

spell wears off. For example, you just imitated a Jarvey. Another's the Puffskein Pumpkin Chai, which will cause you to make a low humming noise and your tongue will grow and search out any unprotected food, just like a Puffskein. And another's a Leprechaun Latte, which will make you jump up and dance a jig. They can be loads of fun or a surprise to those who don't know about them."

Christian nodded his head in understanding and, once the redness from embarrassment had subsided, he signaled that he'd like to leave. The girls agreed and the three of them went back out onto the street.

Next door to the coffee shop lay 'Whisler's Wooden Wands.'

Christian pulled out the list of things he needed to buy.

"I need to go in here for a wand. How about you?" he said to the two girls.

"My mom and dad just bought me a brand new one before I left," replied Gwen as she pulled out a sparkingly new wooden wand from an inside pocket of her silk jacket. "How about you Penny?"

Penny hesitantly responded, "I have one too."

"Let's see it," said Gwen.

Again hesitating, Penny reached inside her sweater. She pulled out a badly scratched up, but still usable, wand.

"My dad gave it to me before I left. It was his and he swapped this one with my old one, which was in much worse shape."

"Oh, this won't do. You should have a new one for school," proclaimed Gwen.

"This one will do fine," replied Penny, slightly offended.

"If you'd like, I can buy it for you."

"I said, this one will do just fine!" shouted Penny, who stomped away across the street to the clothing store.

"What was that all about?" Gwen asked, looking at Christian.

"You really shouldn't flaunt the fact that you have money in front of Penny."

"I wasn't trying to flaunt anything. I just wanted to make a friendly gesture," she insisted.

"I know. But, I think Penny's still working through some issues about her dad quitting his job. So, we need to be sensitive to that."

"I think she should be sensitive to the fact that I was only trying to be friendly."

"Why don't you tell her that?" Christian suggested with a shrug.

"I will," spouted Gwen as she, too, set off for the clothing store.

Not knowing what to expect, Christian walked toward the wand shop. He had hoped at least one of the girls would have stayed with him to explain what he needed to do. Christian entered just as a woman reached for the door to leave. Christian held the door for her as she left.

After closing the door, he walked along the shop's windows following a wall that went almost the whole length of the building. The wall led him to the counter at the other end of the store. When he had just about reached the counter, the shopkeeper popped up from behind it.

"Good morning young witch. I am Whisler the wand maker. Are you here to purchase or repair?" he asked.

"Purchase, please," responded Christian.

"Very good. Let me check my computer here."

After a few moments, he added, "There we are. And your name?"

"Drewell."

"Drewall...Drewall..., ah yes, Drewell, Christian?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Please follow me."

Whisler turned and headed toward a doorway to Christian's left. Christian followed.

They entered a room the length of the shop in which four room-length shelves lined both the left and right walls. Each shelf, slightly tilted downward, had a few dozen thin slots in which wands of various sizes and colors rested with a small bit of their tips protruding out of the shelf. All in all, the room displayed hundreds of wands.

"You can see that I have all shapes and colors of wooden wands. We have none of those new-fangled aluminum, retractable, useless ones that have appeared on the market. We only sell quality wooden wands," Whisler insisted.

"Do you have any idea as to which one might suit you?"

"No, sir. This is my first wand."

"Ah, I see. Well here's what you do. Just walk down the middle of the room between the shelves and let the wand pick you. The wand that fits you will begin to glow. It's just an enchantment that I put on the wand to more readily identify which is the right one. Once we register your wand in the computer, the enchantment is automatically removed and the wand becomes yours; almost a part of you."

Whisler then gave a short whistle and Christian could almost swear that he saw the wands come to attention, although they continued to lie on the shelves.

"Off you go then," as he gave Christian a little nudge.

Christian slowly walked forward looking left and right to see which wand would glow for him.

"Very good, continue on," urged Whisler.

Christian continued walking slowly down the middle of the room, until he came to the other end. None of the wands had glowed.

"Curious," stated Whisler. He then directed, "Return to me at the same pace."

Christian did so, but with the same result.

"Hmmm," puzzled Whisler, who then grabbed Christian and maneuvered him so that his left shoulder almost touched the left shelf.

"Walk very slowly, with your shoulder as close to the shelf as possible. But, DO NOT BUMP THE SHELF!" he demanded.

Christian complied and concentrated on not bumping the shelf, rather than watching the wands. Unfortunately, he made it all the way to the end of the shelves again.

"Return to me with your left shoulder next to the other shelf," instructed Whisler.

Christian began to do so, but with a look of certainty on his face. He just knew he'd walk all the way to the end of the shelf and have to leave the store wand-less.

He had taken five steps when Whisler shouted, "Stop. Please take one step backward."

When Christian did, he looked to his left and, on the third shelf just about at the level of Christian's chest, sat a beautiful, thick, pure black wand. The wand emitted an extremely faint green glow.

As Christian stared at the wand, Whisler came walking toward him.

"Now, let's see which one has picked you," said Whisler.

"Ahhh. VERY good. Well, follow me back to the front counter," Whisler concluded, as he picked the wand up off of the shelf and began walking back to the front of the store.

Christian followed, both pleased and concerned.

"Sir, why did it take so long for the wand to finally pick me?"

"Well, unfortunately, the weaker the flow of magic is through the individual, the harder it is for the wand to recognize its owner. Now, this doesn't mean that you won't be able to become much better at tapping into the magical flow, it just means that you are weak at this stage of your magic," Whisler explained, although mostly a lie.

He knew that wands actually can sense the magical potential in a person and it shows this in the degree of the glow it gives off when it picks its owner. Whisler knew that Christian would likely end up a mediocre witch, at most.

"But, worry not young witch, for you have a very unique wand here. It has the capability to channel great power. It's crafted from pure ebony, a very magical and powerful wood. But what really gives it the potential power is what's in its core. Inside the wand is a single, scarlet feather from the plume atop the head of a male Basilisk. These feathers are rare and VERY hard to come by. Only a handful of them have ever been acquired and, some years ago, I acquired two of these feathers. The only two I've ever had for as long as I've been making wands. This wand contains the last of those two feathers.

"Here let me check something," Whisler said as he stepped behind his counter.

He clicked away at a few keys on the computer for a few moments.

"Yes, as I remembered. The other wand selected a young girl about twenty years ago and she went on to do very well for herself. So, you should do very well indeed."

Again, Whisler had serious doubts about what he had just said.

"One more thing," said Whisler as he reached into his suit, pulled out his own wand, and tapped Christian's with it.

The moment he did, the new wand quickly glowed with a 'SNAP'.

"The wand is now yours, Mr. Drewell. Use it well."

Whisler placed the wand in a velvet bag and handed it to Christian.

Christian smiled a grand smile and thanked the shopkeeper. About to walk away, Christian turned back toward Whisler.

"Sir, I almost forgot. How much do I owe you for this?"

"All of your school related purchases will be tallied up together and one bill will be sent back to your parent or guardian at the end of the school year."

"Oh, ok. Thank you again," said Christian.

He exited the store, excited to show his new wand to his new friends. As he hurried across the street toward the clothing store, but came to an abrupt stop in the middle of the street. He saw both Gwen and Penny sitting on a bench outside of the store.

However, they sat on two separate benches on opposite sides of the store's doorway. Christian knew this meant trouble.

He thought for a moment, trying to decide to which one he should go first. Christian knew that whichever one he went to first, the other would feel hurt. So, he stepped forward about six feet from the store's entrance, directly in the middle of the two girls and asked, "What happened?"

They both jumped up toward him and began to talk, somewhat loudly. Although Christian couldn't understand everything they said, he picked up on a few things like 'Insensitive rich girl' and 'Moody loner'.

Christian shouted, "Stop!"

At which, the girls, startled, stopped and looked at Christian.

"Gwen, did you mean to hurt Penny's feelings in any way?"

"No!" she insisted.

"Penny, did you mean to hurt Gwen's feelings in any way?"

"Well, no," she said somewhat ashamed, with her head bowed.

"Then let's just continue getting our school supplies and touring the town. All right?" he said moving his head back and forth to the two girls.

The girls nodded their heads in agreement and the three of them went into the clothing store.

Christian went toward the men's side of the store and the two girls toward the women's side, still not talking.

Christian found a clerk near the back, magically moving a duster across the top of one of the shelves.

"Excuse me sir, but could you help me? I need to purchase..." as he unfolded his invitation letter, "...five pairs of tapered, black pants; five button-down, white collared shirts; five pairs of black socks; two pairs of black laced shoes; one, no, two ties; a blazer; a vest; and one black, hooded winter cloak with black fastenings."

"Ahh, you must be another one of our new students. And, it looks like you need the whole works," the clerk said, as he looked Christian up and down.

"Very well, please go stand on that pedestal," the clerk instructed.

Christian looked in the direction the clerk had motioned and saw a two-inch high, round pedestal over near the wall. He walked over, stepped onto it, and faced the clerk.

The clerk, looking at Christian, made a "Hmm" sound, and then pulled out his wand. Pointing the wand toward Christian, he waved his wand as if stirring a pot with it. The pedestal started to rotate, with Christian on it. Once the pedestal had completed one full, slow rotation, it stopped.

The clerk then made several violent slashes with his wand toward Christian. Any other witch might have flinched, but Christian still lacked experience in wand use and showed no concern. The clerk had created some sort of a grid in the air between him and Christian. Once the clerk had completed the grid, he peered at Christian through it, cocking his head from side to side. After about a minute, the clerk waved his wand through the air as if shooing away a swarm of gnats and the grid disappeared.

"Now that we have established your starting size. One question...left or right handed?" asked the clerk.

“Excuse me?” responded Christian.

“Are you left or right handed? This will determine on which side of the clothes your wand pocket will reside.”

The clerk then took a step back and, as if in a fashion show demonstrating a new line of clothing, showed Christian his shirt and vest underneath his cloak. Both garments had a slightly diagonal, thin pocket going up his left side, which blended in so well that Christian almost couldn't see it. The clerk, right handed, took his wand and slid it into the bottom opening of a pocket. When he let go, the wand remained in the pocket.

“The wand will remain in place until YOU physically pull it from the pocket. Nothing can jar it out. It will only come out from your touch. Your blazer has a similar pocket along the one side and your cloak contains several pockets, a few designed just for wands to give you a choice where to keep it.”

“Left-handed,” came Christian's answer.

“Excellent,” quipped the clerk.

In a blink of an eye, the clerk pulled his wand from the vest. Then, he pointed it at several parts of the store and, lastly, at a nearby table. Clothes flew off of shelves and from other tables and began to stack themselves neatly on the nearby table. A shoebox landed on the top of the stack.

“If you take care of these clothes, they will last you your whole six years here at the school. They will grow as you do and then return back to their original size, once you graduate. You can then pass them on to your children. However, I'm pretty sure that everyone has had to return at least once for some replacements during their six years. And most of those replacement uniforms aren't in very good shape to be passed on,” he said with a grin.

“Would you like to take these with you now or would you like to pick them up later?”

“Later. Thanks,” replied Christian, as he stepped down from the pedestal.

“Very well. I will have them in a shopping bag for you when you return.”

“Thank you,” Christian concluded.

He started to walk toward the woman's side of the store. Then, he glanced back just in time to see the clerk levitating the clothes into a bag.

The girls had just finished getting their outfits. The clerk helping them had already put Penny's into a small bag and had almost finished filling a third bag for Gwen. Christian assumed that Penny must have had most of her uniform items handed down to her from her mother or father, but he knew better than to ask.

The three of them returned to the street and had just reached the center when Penny exclaimed, “I need to go into 'Play and Play' to see if they have something for my lyre.”

Then, she took off like a shot.

Christian looked at Gwen, who shrugged.

Christian looked at the name of the store and asked, “The sign says that it's a music and sporting goods store. Does that mean like soccer, football, and baseball?”

“They might have a few things regarding those sports inside, but looking at what they have in the window, it looks like most of their sports merchandise is for Quodpot.”

“Quodpot?”

“Yeah. It’s the main magical sport here in the States. There are even regional professional leagues throughout the country. And, this is most likely the only sport available here at school.”

“Well, what is Quodpot?”

“Picture a soccer field with the typical eleven players per side. Then, you make a few changes. First, instead of a goal, you have a metal pot about the diameter of a kid’s wading pool sitting on top of a fifty-foot pedestal. Second, you make it three dimensional, ranging from ground level up to fifty or more feet in the air. Third, instead of dribbling a soccer ball with your feet, you carry a ball called a ‘quod’ in your hands, while flying on a broom.”

“Did you say flying? On a BROOM?”

“Sure. Everyone learns to fly sooner or later. But only the better broom handlers can fly with one hand and hold a ball in the other, all while dodging opponents.

“Oh, and one other small thing. You have a time limit. Specifically, the limit is on how long you can hold the quod, which varies whether using an amateur, school, and professional quod. If you surpass these limits, the quod will explode in your hands. And then you’re out of the game.”

Christian didn’t know what to ask or say to that. He would have to see it to believe it.

“I think I’m going to go into the computer store and see if they have anything new I might need,” said Gwen.

“I’ll wait here for Penny, then we’ll come in. I need to get a few supplies too,” Christian responded.

Gwen nodded and waved goodbye, as she strode toward the building across from the music and sporting goods store.

Christian walked over to the window of the sporting goods store and perused the equipment displayed for Quodpot. The quods, which apparently came in various colors, reminded him of a semi-deflated soccer ball. Other types of equipment on display included gloves, pads, helmets, and, to his amazement, even a few brooms. He stood next to some other students looking at the stuff and whispering amongst themselves. Christian gazed at their reflections in the window to see if he could tell the subject of their discussion, but he couldn’t make it out.

However, over their heads he saw the reflection of a man watching them from down the street. He probably wouldn’t have noticed the person, except Christian thought the man reminded him of someone. As he turned to look at the man, the stranger quickly moved out of sight.

Christian shrugged it off, since he wouldn’t know anyone around here. He assumed it all a trick of the window’s reflection and disregarded it.

Just then, Penny came out and the two of them continued over to the computer and school supplies store.

As they entered the store, Penny asked, “Christian, I was wondering if you would help me pick out a computer? I’ve never had one before, although I did see one once at my dad’s office when he worked for the Witches Council. So, I don’t know what I’ll need for school.”

“Sure. No problem,” he replied assuredly.

They walked in and saw Gwen talking with one of the clerks. Christian led Penny over to the computer section.

“As you can see, all of these are portable computers, because they can easily be carried. I would imagine the one you saw at your dad’s work was a desktop version, a box the size of Gwen’s middle suitcase.”

Penny nodded in agreement.

So, Christian continued his tutorial.

“Looking at the descriptions of all of these portables, they all have wireless capability, so the choice is up to you. All of these are pretty good. The Orange brand has the best operating system, but this little one’s the most powerful and most ex....”

Christian stopped in mid-word, because he had begun to talk about the price, which could create some anxiety between the two of them. Instead, he quickly started a new sentence.

“Here, this is the one I’d recommend. It’s pretty good in quality and reliability. It’s the one I’d get, if I needed a new one,” he lied.

He had suggested a computer of good quality and reliability, but also one of the least expensive. He knew he would have selected one of the more expensive ones for its capability; of course, that would depend on how much Doug would allow his mother to spend on the computer. However, for Penny’s needs, Christian knew that this computer would work just fine.

“Thank you, Christian,” Penny said, giving Christian a genuine smile.

Penny had REALLY smiled for the first time since they’d met, and Christian recognized this. He couldn’t help but wonder, though, if she smiled for his act of friendship in helping her or for his act of kindness, recognizing that he had tried to avoid discussing the price. Either way, Christian appreciated Penny’s smile.

They went over to the clerk who had helped Gwen and had just finished putting Gwen’s purchases in a bag. Christian told the clerk what Penny wanted.

As soon as Christian had explained everything to the clerk, leaving only the monetary dealings to complete the sale, Gwen interlocked arms with Christian and said, “So, what do we need to get you while we’re in here?”

Then, she dragged Christian away from the clerk ... and from Penny.

Christian, and Gwen, grabbed the few things that he needed, returned to the counter, completed the purchase, and the three of them returned to the street.

Penny’s moodiness had returned.

Next to the music and sporting goods store, a small bank called “Bullion’s Exchange” stuck out at the corner of the street. Since none of them had to go in, they happily walked toward the ice cream and sweets shop, Moo-Line Rouge, across from the bank and next to the computer and school supplies store.

The store bustled with activity. Christian could now see where most of the other students from the bus had gone. Most of them milled around the shelves and shelves of candies and snacks, while a few stood in line at the counter ordering ice cream.

Since Christian didn’t have much of his drink from the coffee shop, he still needed something to quench his thirst.

“Anyone up for a milkshake or ice cream?” he asked.

"I am. Just a single scoop. Any flavor will do," replied Penny, as she began to open her change purse.

Christian reached out and touched Penny's hand. When she looked at him, he said with a friendly smile, "I'll get it."

She smiled back and said, "Ok. I'll grab this table."

While Penny walked over to the table, Christian turned toward Gwen.

"What can I get for you?" he asked.

"I'm not sure. I'll come with you," she replied, still arm-in-arm with him from the time they left the computer store.

They walked over to the counter and stepped into line. The boy in front of them had just received his ice cream and waited for his change. The boy ate some of his ice cream and his cheeks immediately turned red.

"Did you see that? His cheeks turned red from the ice cream. Do you think it's an allergic reaction?" Christian asked Gwen.

"No, silly," replied Gwen with a giggle.

"Why do you think this is called Moo-line ROUGE?" she added giggling and emphasized the last word.

Christian looked puzzled.

"Every time you take a bite or sip of the ice cream it turns your cheeks red. The more and faster you eat it, the redder your cheeks will get. This is a chain store and you'll find them all over the country, especially in towns near magic schools. My mom would take me to a nearby Moo-line Rouge every once in a while. Sometimes we'd see who could get the reddest face without getting a true 'brain freeze' from the ice cream."

"Well, at least it won't cause me to howl like a wolf or anything," Christian said with a chuckle of his own.

Once the boy had received his change, he left the store with his face getting redder and redder with each bite.

Christian stepped up to the counter and ordered a chocolate shake. He turned to Gwen, "Did you decide what you want?"

"Maybe I'll just have a sip of your shake, if that's ok?"

"Um, sure," he said somewhat reluctantly.

Then he turned and looked at the menu on the wall.

"What flavor should I get for Penny?"

"Well, she did say 'any flavor' right? So, get her 'Any Flavor'," Gwen said as she pointed to the bottom of the menu.

Christian looked at the list and actually saw a flavor called 'Any Flavor.' He thought about it and decided Penny might have meant this one. So, he ordered a single scoop for her.

After having the clerk add the cost to his gradually growing tab, the two of them joined Penny at the table.

"Thank you for the ice cream," Penny said sincerely to Christian.

"You're welcome. I hope you like it."

She took a bite and her cheeks immediately turned red.

"Mmm, raspberry tart. It's one of my favorites. How did you know?" she asked.

“Actually, I didn’t. I bought you one of those ‘Any Flavor’ flavored ones.”

“You did?” she said excitedly and concerned, as her cheeks turned redder without having taken another bite of ice cream.

“You do know that ‘Any Flavor’ actually means ANY FLAVOR, right? I tried that once before and got fish flavored,” Penny explained.

“No, I didn’t know that. I’m glad it turned out to be a good one,” he said apologetically, while giving Gwen a stern look.

Gwen turned her eyes toward the ceiling, while taking a sip of Christian’s shake. Christian couldn’t tell if the redness in her cheeks came from the shake or not.

Once they had finished the ice cream, snickering at each other’s reddening faces, they checked out the many assortments and flavors of candy.

They all had fun names and some with associated side-affects, such as: Banshee Bites, which, according to the advertisement, are so good they’ll make you scream; Chocolate Spider Truffles, with crunchy legs and sticky centers that bind your lips together for a few seconds, just like a spider web; Jack-O-Licorice, which turns your head orange and pumpkin-shaped and causes you to get funny looks on your face, while you eat it; and Broomstick Brittle, which is peanut or almond brittle shaped like a broomstick and comes in various sizes, including a party size the length of a real broomstick.

After looking at the various treats, the trio ventured back outside into the town street.

Next door to the ice cream shop, but set back from the street, sat a small souvenir shop. It had one entrance to the street and one coming from the hotel to which it connected. The hotel, by far the largest building in town, sat catty-corner from the bank. Although somewhat larger in both length and width than the other buildings, it definitely dwarfed them all in height with three stories. Christian thought it looked like the oldest building they’d come to so far. Its architecture reminded him of the southern plantations from the early 1800’s.

They decided to press on toward the rest of the town.

Turning the corner, across the street from the bank, a restaurant butted up against the hotel. It had an entrance to the street, but they couldn’t tell if it also had an entrance inside connecting it to the hotel. The restaurant looked quaint, but newer than the hotel.

Next to the bank stood a small bookstore. Penny said that she wanted to go into it to see if she could get textbooks for their freshman classes. Christian and Gwen both questioned her as to why she would want to do that, since they would receive all of their class information via the school’s computer network. She explained that she still wanted to have the text as a backup, but they both knew that she probably felt more at home with the books than with the computer.

Christian and Gwen said they’d meet her in Medea’s Magical Supplies and Apothecary shop, which sat across the street. Penny agreed as she stepped into the bookstore.

This part of town held the oldest and probably the original buildings of the town. These included the bookstore and Miller’s groceries, which sat next to the bookstore,

and across the street sat the magical supplies shop with the pet store next to it. The structural design placed them around the time of the Revolutionary war. The street ended at another building from this same period. However, because the sign hung at an angle, which kept him from reading it, Christian couldn't tell the purpose of the building. However, it had two stories while the others only had one.

Christian and Gwen entered the magical supplies store and Christian thought someone had transported him back to medieval times. The smells and sights almost created a sensory overload for him. Candles and lanterns, which hung on the walls and from the ceiling, lit the store's interior. The only sunlight filtered through three small, arch-shaped, stained-glass windows, along the front of the store.

Except where lanterns or candles hung, the rest of the front and side walls held shelves from floor to the 10-foot high ceiling. Various sized vials, flasks, and jars containing heaven knew what filled almost all of the shelf space. A low counter, about chest high for Christian, went almost the width of the building at the back of the store. The counter had an opening between it and the left-hand wall, providing access behind the counter. This open path also led to a door, which went behind the back wall. An open doorway leading to the pet store next door created the only other open space in the shelved walls.

Various sized pots, cauldrons, and kettles sat in stacks on the floor along the front wall. Two long tables took up most of the space in the middle of the store, allowing just enough room for people to walk between and around them. The tables held various other items, some of which looked familiar and others that didn't. Here, Christian saw the brass scales that he would have to purchase. However, he didn't see the set of glass vials he needed. Those he'd have to ask about, but he wanted to look around first.

Before he knew it, almost an hour had passed since they entered the store. Christian had looked at almost every jar and vial on the shelves seeing things like Jobberknoll feathers, Doxie venom antidote, and Re'em blood, which the store owner kept locked up with other, apparently, valuable magical goods.

Christian had also spent several minutes watching the apothecary working behind the counter.

Penny had already entered the store and stood at the counter purchasing something and Christian didn't see Gwen anywhere. So, he decided he'd better buy his items, before the girls became impatient.

He walked up to counter and stood next to Penny.

"You were looking very intently at the jars when I came in. I would imagine you probably haven't even heard of most of the creatures or plants from which many of these ingredients come. I'd be happy to explain some of them to you some day. I think I know what a lot of them are," Penny proposed.

"That'd be cool," Christian said with true excitement in his voice.

"So, which things do you need to buy?" she asked.

The woman behind the counter looked at him expectantly, so Christian turned more toward her as he read from his invitation. "I need a student-sized, black cauldron, a set of glass vials, and a set of brass scales."

The clerk reached under the counter and pulled out two small boxes.

"Here are your vials and scales. What type of cauldron are you interested in purchasing?" she asked.

"Black, student size," Christian replied, reading from his list.

Penny chuckled.

"Yes dear. Would you like an iron one, which comes naturally black? Or, we have pewter and stainless steel ones that are magically stained black. Plus, we have a new collapsible iron cauldron, which is most easily transported."

Christian turned to Penny with a look of "HELP" on his face.

Penny smiled and turned to the woman.

"Can you demonstrate how the collapsible one works?"

"Certainly."

The woman walked down near the end of the counter, bent down, and came back holding what looked like a black plate. She set the plate on the counter in front of Penny and Christian, took out her wand, and tapped it twice. The plate popped up into a cauldron about twelve inches wide at the fattest circumference.

"To collapse it, you merely tap it twice again, and it will flatten back out. Why don't you give it a try?" she said gesturing toward Christian.

Christian hesitantly took the wand from the velvet sleeve in which Whisler had placed it.

"Ah, a new wand from Whisler's I see," said the woman, seeing the velvet sleeve.

Then, upon taking a closer look, she said, "And a very nice one at that."

Christian held the wand like he would a knife as if planning to stab at something.

Penny took his hand and rearranged how he held the wand.

"Like this. More gently," she instructed.

Now holding the wand closer to the correct way, he tapped the cauldron twice and a spark flew out of the end, hitting a small jar on the shelf behind the woman. The jar fell from the shelf and, quick as a wink, the woman pointed her wand at the falling jar and stopped it in mid-air, a foot from the floor. Then, she levitated it back to the shelf from which it fell.

After the woman had safely returned the jar back onto the shelf, everyone looked back at the cauldron, which still sat on the counter full sized.

Almost simultaneously, the woman and Penny both said, "The black iron one."

After Christian had obtained all of his items, he said to Penny, "Where did Gwen go to?"

Penny, with an almost unnoticeable look of disappointment, replied, "She said she was going out into the nursery."

Penny nodded towards the door that led behind the back wall of the shop.

Christian, carrying his new cauldron with the other two items inside of it, followed Penny behind the counter and through the door.

As he entered the room, it looked and felt like a typical, humid nursery, until he looked more closely at the plants. Some of the plants moved by themselves and others emitted strange noises. As they walked in further, one small plant even hissed at

Christian when he got too close. Christian had a feeling similar to the one he would get while walking in his yard back home, but here the plants didn't just live, they acted alive.

They found Gwen near the other end of the nursery, sitting on the edge of a plant bed touching one of the plants. As they came nearer to her, Christian saw that she was actually petting it.

"Gwen, what's that?" he asked.

"It's a heliotrope. It likes to be scratched," she replied.

"It likes to be what?"

"Scratched. If you were this hairy, you'd be itchy too," she protested.

"You seem to know your plants pretty well, huh?"

"Yeah, my mom's been teaching me about magical plants and herbs and how to take care of them for years now. I'm pretty good at recognizing them and handling them the way they need or wish to be handled."

Then, she started walking around the nursery naming the plants, every now and then bending over to caress, pat, or talk to one of them. Some of them she even knew what types of potions and mixtures in which to use them, a skill of which her mother had taught her well. Gwen admitted that she truly looked forward to learning and practicing magical agriculture at the school.

Christian and Penny followed Gwen around the nursery, amazed at the knowledge that she had about the plants. By the time they reached the door again, she had covered the whole nursery. With nothing else to look at in there, they left the supply shop and went into the pet store.

The pet store had the same architecture as the supply shop. In fact, it looked as if they had been one long building at one time. Then, someone must have decided to separate the two. The most notable difference, someone had added windows to the front of the pet store to display new arrivals.

The setup of the store looked like any pet store, except for the odd named items on the shelves, such as puffskein snacks, crup collars, dugbog terrariums, and kneazle toys.

Christian had pretty much wandered the whole store looking at all of these oddly named items, not knowing what any of these creatures looked like or why anyone would keep them as pets. He turned to ask one of the girls about the animals, when he noticed that they had both gone.

After looking around some of the aisles, he found the girls at the front of the store. As he approached, he heard them giggling and making noises that sounded something like baby talk. When Christian came up next to them he saw what had caught their interest.

Several odd-looking creatures frolicked in the front window. One looked like some sort of terrier with a forked tail. Another looked like a small cat with spotted fur, big ears, and a long fluffy tail. Penny played with these two animals on one side of the shop entrance.

Gwen stood on the other side of the door holding a furry ball, which emitted a low humming noise. Christian would have thought she held a toy for the cat-like creature, except the furry ball moved periodically. A few more of these furry-ball creatures sat in

the window display. The only other creature in the window display area, a small blue speckled bird, sat on a perch hanging over the furry-ball creatures.

"What are these?" asked Christian.

"Well, that one's a crup," said Penny, pointing at the dog-like creature.

"And it seems to like you," she added.

Christian, hesitantly, put his hand down to the crup and petted it. It wagged its forked tail happily.

"That's a kneazle," she said, this time pointing at the cat-like creature.

"They can be temperamental about who they let get near them, much less touch them. I had one up until about a year ago and this one seems to like me too," she explained as she reached in and scratched it under its chin.

"Those are puffskeins," she said pointing at the furry balls.

"They like everyone and love getting attention. You can hold them and pet them, you can even toss them around and they won't mind. But you shouldn't toss them around, because they can get hurt. One thing you have to watch about them is that they have really long tongues and will eat anything that its tongue can handle.

Especially boogers, if you fall asleep near one," she whispered with a giggle.

"Ewww!" replied Christian, also giggling.

Then he asked, "What kind of bird is that?"

"I'm not sure," she replied.

"That's a jobberknoll," came a voice from behind them.

They both turned to see the clerk standing behind them and watching them enjoy the creatures. The clerk continued.

"It's a very pretty bird that can keep down the insect problems in your house, since that's what it eats. The good and the bad about it is the noise it makes. It won't utter a sound for as long as it lives, and jobberknolls live to be five or six years old. But, just before they die, they let loose with a scream consisting of every noise and word they've heard throughout their lives, beginning with the most recent and working backwards. This can take several minutes and is really disturbing and annoying.

"Another benefit of owning one is that you have a great source for making Truth Serums and Memory Potions. Their feathers are great for making these concoctions."

"Cool. Thank you," responded Christian.

Christian and Penny started to leave the store when they realized that they had left Gwen standing inside holding and petting the puffskein.

"Oh, by the way, the humming noise from the puffskein can be very relaxing and entrancing," Penny added snickering.

Christian went over to Gwen, took the puffskein from her, and put it back into the window display. Then, he guided her out of the door. After a few moments, she snapped out of it.

"I'm starved. No wonder, it's almost one o'clock. Are either of you hungry?" Christian asked.

Both of the girls nodded.

"Why don't we try this place, Targ's Tavern? It was established in 1710," he read from a small sign next to the door.

Stepping toward the door, the three children saw a hand-written sign hanging on it. The sign read, 'No students allowed after the lunch hour. Lunch hour ends at 1:00.'

"Based on this sign, they must serve food and we still have time," proposed Christian.

"But its nearly one now, they won't let us in," said Penny.

"And, its...a...tavern," whined Gwen.

"Yes, it's nearly one, but not one yet. So, they'll have to serve us," he said to Penny's comment.

"Come on, this will be fun. Like going back to the colonial days to eat," he said to both of them, but more in reply to Gwen's comment.

Christian started toward the door.

Penny and Gwen looked at each other and, with resigned looks on their faces, followed him into the tavern.

As Christian expected, the tavern looked just like the ones he'd seen in the movies. The dozen or so lanterns hanging around the walls and pillars didn't light the tavern very well, and the dust-covered windows allowed very little light to shine through them. The patrons offered a surreal contrast with regard to their dress. Some fit in well with the décor wearing cloaks and clothing that could easily have fit in with the colonial times, while others wore jeans with flannel shirts or modern jackets.

The three students sat down at a table near the door ... a preference requested by the girls, in case they needed to make a quick exit.

Christian continued to look around, fascinated by the place. Their table sat near the tavern's side wall, which allowed him to see everywhere in the tavern without turning around. The bar started about a quarter of the length of the tavern away from where they sat and stretched half the length of the tavern, leaving another quarter length between it and the opposite wall. In the opposite corner from the door, through which the children had just come, stairs led up to a second floor. Christian imagined the tavern had rooms upstairs where people could sleep, also decorated in colonial style.

Christian noticed two doors behind the bar. One, mid-way down the bar and mostly open, led into the kitchen. The second, completely closed, stood just this side of the first. While Christian sat admiring the scene, the second door opened and Christian caught a quick glimpse of some barrels and crates. Then, a burly man with a bushy handlebar mustache and long sideburns stepped out. As he did, he glanced over at their table and an exasperated expression flushed his face.

He set the pot, which he had been carrying, down behind the bar and with a wave of his wand slammed the door to the storage room shut. Then, he stomped toward the opening at the far end of the bar and walked around the bar toward the children. As he turned, Christian saw that he wore a dirty, white apron. Christian assumed this made him either the bartender or the cook, or both.

"What are you kids doing in here? Didn't you read the sign on the door?" he said as he approached them.

"Yes, sir. But it isn't one o'clock yet. We still have five minutes," Christian replied.

"And what do you suppose you could eat in five minutes?"

"What do you have ready now?" Christian volleyed back.

The man turned grumbling and trudged toward the kitchen.

“Do you think it wise to aggravate him like that?” asked Penny.

“Are we going to have to eat leftovers?” Gwen whined.

“I’m sure everything will be and taste just fine. They won’t want to treat us poorly, because we could be a positive or negative source of advertisement for them with the other kids,” Christian explained.

The man returned.

“We have a roast beef sandwich with fried potatoes and beef stew. Which one you want?”

“I’ll take the roast beef sandwich,” replied Christian.

“I’ll take the stew, thank you,” said Penny.

“Do you have a salad?” asked Gwen.

“A SALAD?” barked the man.

“I’ll take the stew also, thank you,” Gwen quickly responded, shrinking back in her seat.

“Whatta ya want to drink?” the man asked gruffly.

“Root beer for me,” replied Christian.

“Me too,” said Penny.

“Do you have iced tea?” questioned Gwen.

But, seeing the irritated look the man gave her, she quickly added, “Root beer for me too.”

The man waved his wand and the food appeared on the table.

“Eat fast,” the man said, just before he stomped off back to the bar.

“See I told you this would be fun,” touted Christian.

Penny gave a feeble smile. Gwen didn’t smile at all.

The food turned out quite tasty after all; even though Gwen complained the whole time she gobbled her meal down.

The man watched them and, as soon as they finished eating, he settled the check and escorted them out the door.

Once outside, the three children discussed where to go next.

Although the street ended at the tavern, a wide walking path led south, between the grocery store and an old house built during the same time as the other buildings in this part of town. The house had a sign hanging in front of it, which read, ‘Bivius’ Bed and Breakfast.’

Another narrower path separated Bivius’ and Targ’s, which led to yet another walking path that went both north and south behind the tavern and the B&B. A thick forest sat menacingly on the other side of that path, making it a bit ominous for them to go that way.

“What’s over here?” Christian asked, as he started to walk toward the path between the grocery store and the B&B.

As he approached the path, a sign that had hung on the side of the store flew off and floated in mid-air in front of him. The sign read: ‘No Students Beyond This Point. Private Residences.’

As Christian stepped to the side of the floating sign, it moved over in front of him once again.

“Ok, I get the hint,” he said as he took a couple of steps backward.

The sign flew back and hung itself on the wall.

Christian turned back around and saw that the girls had returned to the window display of the pet store. So, he joined them, making sure that the puffskeins didn't entrance Gwen again.

After several more minutes of playing with the creatures, the trio agreed they'd like to find a place to sit and relax a little. Gwen suggested that they might find some chairs in the hotel's lobby, so they headed back down the street.

As they reached the hotel, they walked between two of the four columns, which supported the balcony above. The columns reminded Christian of the ones that flanked the entrance to his own house, which of course made him miss home. These thoughts of home filled his mind as they entered the inn, at which time the bellhop near the door startled Christian.

The military appearance of the bellhop's red vest and pants with golden trim and brass buttons caught Christian's eye first, but didn't bother him. That the bellhop stood near the door or, more precisely, that he floated there DID startle him. Christian had never seen a ghost before.

“Welcome to the Ghostly Inn,” chimed the bellhop.

The three children entered the small, but very ornately decorated lobby. Four marble pillars, evenly spaced between each other, dominated the room and formed a square in the center of the lobby. Marble also formed the bottom third of the walls with the top two-thirds made from solid, polished oak. Gold laced the trim throughout the lobby and beautiful paintings and artwork hung on the oak walls. All of the tables and the front desk, also built of solid oak, shined from a recent, detailed polishing.

Directly to the right of the entrance, a large six-foot high fireplace took up a large section of the wall. Several feet in front of the fireplace, a couple of couches and chairs completed the square formed by the four marble pillars.

The three students made their way to the seats.

Christian sat down in the chair facing the front desk with his back to the fireplace. Disappointed because she wanted to sit next to Christian, Gwen sat at the end of one of the couches near Christian's chair. Penny did the same on the other couch.

Christian took this seat because it gave him the most visibility of a very fascinating scene.

The entire staff consisted of ghosts. A female clerk stood or floated behind the desk, along with a gentleman impeccably dressed in a suit. Every once in a while, a female ghost would float by carrying towels, flowers, or linens. And a ghost handyman even floated by once carrying his toolbox.

Although Christian only saw live people for clientele, none of them seemed to mind the spectral staff.

Hesitantly, but determined, Christian stood up and walked over to the bellhop.

“Excuse me,” Christian began.

“Yes, young sir. How may I be of service?” replied the ghost.

“I don't mean to impose or pry, but can you tell me how you all came to run this hotel.”

“You mean as ghosts?” he asked Christian.

Shyly, Christian nodded.

“It’s a very interesting, but brief story. The hotel burned down in 1823. The fire killed all of us employees. The owners rebuilt the hotel in the same design in 1825 and dedicated it to all of the employees who died in the fire. You can see the plaque on the wall over there.”

Christian turned and saw a metal plaque hanging above the fireplace.

“When we heard that they had dedicated the hotel to us, we all decided to come back and run the place once again. We haven’t been happier in our whole lives, or deaths, making our visitors happy and ensuring they enjoy our hotel.”

The bellhop paused and then added, “Is there anything else I can help you with, young sir?”

“No, and thank you very much.”

“At your service, sir,” concluded the bellhop, with a touch to his cap.

Christian returned to his seat and explained to the girls what the bellhop had told him. The three of them just sat relaxing and watching the ghosts floating all around them, going about their business. They did so for quite a while, until the suited ghost from behind the desk floated over to them.

“Excuse me. I do not mean to be rude, but the seating here is actually reserved for our paying clientele only. If you wouldn’t mind, please” as he gestured them toward the door.

The three of them got up and went back outside.

“That was AWESOME!” Christian exclaimed.

“I’ve never seen a real ghost before, but so many in one place. And, I even talked to one,” he added excitedly.

The girls both giggled at Christian’s enjoyment of the experience.

“Well, we still have a little over an hour before we need to be at the front gate of the school. Why don’t we hang out down at the coffee shop until it’s time?” proposed Christian.

“Can I make a quick run into the souvenir shop? I’d like to grab a postcard for my mom and dad,” asked Gwen.

Christian and Penny agreed.

Christian thought about staying outside, because he hated souvenir shops. They never had anything worth looking at in them. But, he went in anyway.

Once again, as he had experienced throughout their tour of the town, the things in the shop surprised Christian.

Yes, the souvenir shop had the typical things such as snow globes and post cards, but noticeably different from the non-magical versions.

Christian walked over to the snow globes and watched the activity inside, which occurred without anyone shaking them or turning them upside down.

The background of the snow globe, he assumed, represented the front entrance of the school, since the plaque on the base of the globe read ‘The Bishop School of Witchcraft.’ Two figures, a girl and boy, stood in the foreground. They both wore heavy winter coats as snow fell gently around them, until it reached their knees. Then, the

snow began to melt away and the two figures changed out of their winter coats, put on rain jackets, and opened umbrellas, just as rain began to fall in the globe. Flowers popped up as the rain subsided. Then, the two figures changed into shorts and t-shirts, opened lawn chairs, and sat down just as sunbeams started to shine on them. The pair soon stood up changed into warmer clothing, as the lawn chairs disappeared, and leaves fell all around them. Lastly, they put on their winter coats once again, just as snow started falling and the cycle began all over.

Christian watched the globe go through three more seasonal cycles, before he turned toward the post cards. Movement came from all of the cards, repeating themselves like short films. A girl dressed in a bikini and waving caught his eye the quickest. Christian looked to see if Penny or Gwen stood nearby. He spotted them both up near the counter. So, he quickly picked up the card and the girl said to him, in a sultry voice, "Wish you were here!" and winked at Christian. Then, he turned the card over, at which time the girl's voice, in an ordinary tone, said, "But enjoy your time in Bishop Town."

Christian chuckled and put the card back.

A few minutes later, the three of them had returned to the street and, after a brief stop at the clothing and computer stores to pick up their purchases, continued down to the coffee shop.

Almost all of the other freshmen had decided to wait out the last bit of time in the shop before going to the school gates as well. Luckily, the trio squeezed around the last available table in the shop and ordered three hot drinks. Christian took care to sip his drink slowly, unsure whether the hot ones had the same effect as the cold ones.

The three of them speculated about what to expect at school as they sat around the table. Gwen knew some things her mother had told her and Penny a lot more from her parents. But, none of them knew if they would find things still the same as when their parents went to school.

At five minutes to six, Christian, Penny, and Gwen gathered their things and proceeded to the school's front gate. The tension and excitement bubbled all around them as all of their fellow freshmen began to swarm around the gate with them.

The First Night

Promptly at six o'clock, the front gates began to open as a man and woman, who both looked to be thirty-ish, approached. They both wore long, black gowns or robes that flowed behind them as they walked.

The man, a handsome man of African heritage, had a slender build and stood over six feet tall. He wore pleasant looking glasses that accentuated his very well groomed beard and mustache. And, under his robe, he wore a nice, but unassuming brown suit.

The woman, about six inches shorter, wore a very nice pantsuit under her robe. She had pitch-black hair that shaped well her slender, high-cheek boned and well-tanned face. Accentuated by her beautiful blue eyes, her lovely features drew the attention of all of the boys, including Christian.

The gates had fully opened by the time the two adults had reached the entrance.

"Welcome to the Bishop School of Witchcraft. I am the Assistant Headmaster, Mr. Brown, and this is our Director of Student Life, Ms. D'Amor."

Almost in unison, the boys all said, "Good evening Ms. D'Amor."

Mr. Brown smiled and held back a snicker.

Ms. D'Amor smiled, blushing, and replied, "Good evening, students."

Mr. Brown continued.

"This evening we will be addressed briefly by our Headmaster, Mr. Davis, and then enjoy some dinner. After dinner, we will review the weekend's agenda, make some concluding comments, and send you off to your temporary sleeping quarters for these next two nights. Any questions?"

No one replied.

"Very well. If you will please follow us."

Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor turned and began to walk away from the gate.

The students followed, trying not to trip over each other. Especially, as some of the other boys kept trying to move up to the front of the group, so that they could walk closer to Ms. D'Amor.

As Christian had noticed earlier, tall bushes lined the path or drive, as it looked wide enough to accommodate a motor vehicle. These bushes not only blocked most of the view from outside the gates, but also of what lay on either side of the drive.

About twenty yards or so from the gate, the path stopped curving left and Christian could see the end of the bushes just a few feet ahead. However, he still couldn't see to what the path led as the drive made a right turn at the end of the bushes.

As the students reached the turn, Christian's mouth fell open in wonderment as a fortress emerged from behind the bushes. That is to say, the building looked like a fortress. More precisely, it looked like a combination of the forts of earlier in American history and a castle wall.

Christian recalled the drawings of Camelot in one of his favorite books and did a quick comparison in his head. Like a castle, the wall rose as high as a five-story building and extended longer than an entire football field. Unlike a castle, no keep or towers stretched above the wall, although it did have a square, stone turret, about twenty feet

higher than the wall and as wide as the wall's height, at each end of the structure and stuck forward from the wall about five or six feet.

Again unlike a castle, Christian guessed that these turrets were actually multi-floor residences. They contained seven floors, because he counted six levels of typical, everyday windows starting on the second level. The ground floor had only two windows, about one-third the size of the others, one on each side of the corner closest to the front entrance and about eight feet from the ground.

The last comparing features could apply to either a fort or a castle. The main entrance, two large wooden doors, rivaled the size of a medieval castle's gate. Finally, one of the most spectacular things about the edifice, which would have been a benefit to either a castle or a fort, was that it had been built right into the mountainside. From just behind the back corner of the left-side turret, the mountain face or cliff shot up about three or four stories higher than the turret and continued north toward the woods.

Then, Christian took in all of the distinguishing features that proved this to be neither a fort or castle. First, it contained eighteen large, colored-glass windows, nine on each side of the main entrance. The windows, equidistant between one another, stretched taller than the door. Second, an enormous shield with the school's symbol on it, a triangle with a 'B' in the center, hung above the entrance. The symbol's triangle had three equally sized, triangular-shaped corners: the bottom left blue, the bottom right red, and the top yellow. Lastly, over the wall, Christian could also see an elliptical, almost egg-shaped, structure that must be some part of the school and appeared to hang suspended in the air at the back of the school. Plus, from this angle, it looked to sit higher than the cliffs.

The scene would have presented a cold and martial impression, except a beautiful waterfall cascaded down about one hundred feet behind and to the right of the right-side turret. It fell from the top of the cliff on this side of the school, again about four stories higher than the top of the turret into a very large pond or small lake. The lake itself stretched toward the front entrance of the school, just beyond the closest corner of the right turret, and added to the beauty of the scene.

Truly awestruck by this magnificent sight, Christian stumbled as he transitioned from the path into the grass. He thought, at first, that he had strayed into the grass while taking in the scenery. But, he noticed that everyone had left the path.

Concentrating so intently on the view of the school, he hadn't seen that another structure sat to the left, and began almost in front, of the left-hand turret. He also hadn't noticed it because a small group of trees partially hid it from this angle. Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor led the students toward this structure.

The structure had a somewhat oval appearance to it with the longer sides parallel to the school. The group headed toward the closer of the two long sides and entered through an opening halfway down the structure. The opening led them between two sets of bleachers, set about thirty feet above the ground, and onto a grassy area about the size of a football field.

Once inside, Christian saw that the structure held two sets of long bleachers on each side of the field, each stretching the whole length of it. And, a walkway bisected each

set of bleachers. The ones furthest from the school simply had an open walkway between them, through which the group had just entered. On the other side, closest to the school, additional seating covered the walk path; apparently, the box seats for the venue. These box seats turned the path between the bleachers into a tunnel. And, even though these seats sat slightly higher than the rest of the bleachers, the tunnel only reached about eight feet high.

The field had no markings that Christian could tell. And, he could see no soccer or football goal posts, except one lone pole at each end of the field. Each pole had a platform at the top, about fifty feet off of the ground. He then remembered what Gwen told him and thought to himself, "This must be a Quodpot field."

Right now, however, the school had the field set up for the freshman orientation. Two, medium-sized, multi-person, rectangular tents took up part of the field. And, two long tables with ten chairs on each side separated the two tents. These tables sat parallel to a two-foot high platform, located several yards in front of the bleacher tunnel, and all of the chairs had been turned to face it.

A man who looked in his late thirties waited for them on the platform. He stood behind and leaned forward against a podium, strumming his fingers on the top of it. And, although Christian could not see most of this man's body due to the podium, he could see the very expensive looking suit the man wore, because the man didn't wear an outer robe like the other two adults.

Once the group grew near, the man stood up straight and, smiling pleasantly, said, "Welcome. Please take a seat."

The students all took seats, while Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor went up and sat in two empty chairs sitting on the platform behind the man.

Christian grabbed a chair nearest the platform. Gwen and Penny joined him, one on each side.

"Again, welcome to the Bishop School of Witchcraft," said the man.

"I am Mr. Davis your Headmaster. Since you've had a long day, traveling here and visiting our lovely town, I will wait until tomorrow to welcome you properly to the school. First thing tomorrow morning, we will cover the things you need to know and rules you must follow while you are here at the Bishop School of Witchcraft. Now, I will turn you over to Mr. Brown.

"But, before I do, please pass forward any forms from your invitation package that you may be delivering from your parents. Ms. D'Amor will collect them. Thank you."

And with that he stepped down from the podium, marched toward the tunnel, and left.

Christian pulled out the bank account form and added it to the stack of forms that Gwen handed to him. He passed the stack to Penny, who handed it to Ms. D'Amor.

Mr. Brown stepped forward to the edge of the platform and, leaning against the side of the podium, began to talk.

"I know that for most of you, this is your first time here to the Bishop School of Witchcraft. For others of you, this may be your first experience with magic. This may even be the first time away from home for some of you. So, I expect you probably have hundreds of questions you'd like to ask.

“Let me welcome you to ask me and Ms. D’Amor anything and we will do all that we can to answer your questions and ease your concerns. Let me also say that you may want to hold onto some of your questions. Given a little time, I think most of them will be answered, your fears will be quelled, and you will come to love it here as we all have.”

As he said this last bit, he gestured toward Ms. D’Amor. So, he decided to explain the comment.

“All of the school’s administration and teachers are graduates of the Bishop School of Witchcraft. So, we sat where you’re sitting right now. For some of us, it may have been longer ago than others, but we all sat in those seats, with the same questions and anxieties you have right now. So, please enjoy the weekend and, by all means, ask questions as the weekend progresses. If you still have questions or have thought of new ones by Sunday evening, we will have one final gathering here, at which time you may ask what still may be on your mind. That final meeting gathers us together prior to joining the rest of the school in the dining hall for our beginning-of-the-school-year feast, also known as the Great Feast.

“Speaking of which, I think it’s time we had some food too.”

Mr. Brown pulled out his wand, made a quick flicking movement with it, and food, drinks, plates, and utensils all appeared on the tables.

Since Christian had his back to the table, he didn’t know what had happened, until Penny gently elbowed him in the side. When he turned, his eyes nearly popped out.

The table didn’t just have some food on it ... food COVERED the table.

Multiple dishes of barbecued chicken, coleslaw, potato salad, macaroni salad, corn on the cob, baked beans, pinto beans, and green beans spread across the table. Several, already sliced, apple pies, cherry pies, and chocolate cakes, along with ice cream to go with them, sat amongst the other dishes. Pitchers of iced tea and lemonade, as well as large bottles of soft drinks, sat strategically along the table too.

Christian couldn’t believe how much food had appeared. He resolved to enjoy it while it lasted. He thought, “Who knows when the next time we’ll get to eat like this will be?”

After an hour or so, the eating had significantly slowed, aside from a spoonful of ice cream or a bite of pie here and there.

Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor, who had both joined the students for the meal, stood up from the table and walked back onto the platform. Ms. D’Amor once again sat in one of the chairs as Mr. Brown took his previous spot leaning on the side of the podium.

“Tomorrow morning at eight o’clock, Ms. D’Amor and I will be in to wake you. You’ll have one hour to get ready and meet here at these tables for breakfast. After breakfast, the Headmaster will address you all once again. He’ll provide the rules, guiding principles, and information that will allow you to live up to your magical and personal potential and help you to understand your responsibilities while here at our school. He’ll then introduce some of the other members of the school administration to you. Lastly, we’ll review your course schedules for this year.

“After all that, you’ll have some free time to wander the grounds and mingle with your fellow students. At noon, you’ll be summoned for lunch, which we’ll have right

here. After lunch, you'll be divided into groups and escorted into the school. Your escorts will give you a tour of the school, which will include one of the three dormitories and one or two of the rooms in which you'll have your classes. You'll also get to meet all of your instructors. What remains of the afternoon will be yours to do as you wish, but we'll gather back here at six o'clock sharp to conclude the activities for the day.

"On Sunday, wake-up will be at eight o'clock again with breakfast at nine. After breakfast, we'll have booths set up along the main path. From the people at these booths, you can gather information on the many teams, clubs, and activity groups we have here at school. You'll also have a chance to mingle with some students from the other class years. Food booths will be set up for you to grab some food and drink, as you desire, so we'll not have a formal lunch period.

"Schedule-wise, the day is open for you to become familiar with your surroundings and to mingle with your fellow classmates. The school will be open, but be on good behavior if you should go inside. Also, you can venture into town again, but be advised that the gates will close promptly at six o'clock. For those who are interested, our Quodpot team will be practicing at four o'clock right here on Sunday. The practice will end just before six, which is when you must all return here for our final gathering. We'll then proceed into the dining hall to join the rest of the students and you'll be selected for the dormitory in which you'll live for the six years you're here at Bishop.

"We have these two tents set up for your sleeping quarters for the next two nights, boys on my right and girls on my left. If the boys will please follow me, I'll lead you to your tent. And, if the girls would please follow Ms. D'Amor, she'll lead you to yours.

"However, before we dismiss, let me please ask that you not go wandering around at night for your own safety."

Pointing straight ahead, and over the heads of the students, Mr. Brown continued.

"Our forest is as dangerous as any forest, probably more so; especially at night. Also, venturing near the water in the dark could be dangerous too and we wouldn't want to lose one of our students before you even become one of our students," he concluded with a smirk.

"Are there any immediate questions that I may answer?"

Christian thought about asking where he could find a bathroom, but decided he'd wait and see where the other boys went.

"Very well," Mr. Brown said.

He stepped down from the platform and walked toward the boys' tent.

"See you in the morning," Christian said, waving goodbye to Gwen and Penny.

They both smiled and waved as they followed Ms. D'Amor.

Walking toward the boys' tent, Christian thought how he and seventeen other boys would have to sleep somewhat cramped in the tent. But, he didn't mind, since they would only sleep in it and do so for only two nights.

When Christian ducked through the tent flap, the sight shocked him once again as it had on the bus that morning.

The tent had two stories. The ground level held ten beds, five on each side. The beds, full sized beds, had canopies over them. Each had its own nightstand and a small

chandelier hung at the foot of each bed. An opening in the center of the ceiling allowed a view up to the second floor, which held the same accommodations.

Mr. Brown stood just inside the entrance giving instructions.

“Your bags are on the cart right here. You can stow them in the lockers at the back of the tent. Please use the locker with your name on it. We don’t want to be tugging anyone out of the wrong locker, after they’ve been sucked in. Bathrooms are in the back corners on both floors. The stairs to the second floor are behind the bathrooms.”

With that bit of information, many of the boys rushed for the stairs to get a bed on the second floor.

Christian set the things he had carried from town on the bed nearest the tent flap. Then, he gathered his duffle bag and backpack from the luggage cart. He decided not to bother with throwing his stuff in the locker, but instead shoved his duffle, backpack, and purchased items under his bed. Then, he hustled toward the bathroom.

While in the bathroom, Christian heard a commotion erupt outside the door. When he came out, he saw Derick trying to shove one of the other boys toward an open locker in an attempt to have the locker suck him in. Christian thought about rushing over to help his unfortunate classmate, but remembered what Penny told him about Derick. He decided it best to let Mr. Brown handle the situation.

Mr. Brown still stood next to the front entrance. As Christian prepared to tell him about the locker scene, Mr. Brown saw it for himself, and shouted, “Derick, please leave that boy alone!”

Christian went over and lay down on his bed and watched the activities throughout the tent. While Mr. Brown assisted one of the smaller boys with a large piece of luggage, Christian noticed that Derick hadn’t stopped as Mr. Brown had commanded. Christian became upset and began to wish that Derick would get sucked into the locker instead of the boy. Before he knew it, Derick stumbled toward the open locker and, with a loud and extended “Whoooooosh,” the locker sucked him in.

Christian quickly rolled on to his side facing toward the front of the tent.

Mr. Brown had just started toward the back to stop Derick, when Derick unnaturally stumbled and disappeared into the locker. Mr. Brown stopped and looked around the tent to see if he could catch someone with his wand out, which would identify who may have caused Derick to stumble into the locker. However, he didn’t see anyone with a drawn wand or trying to hide one.

With the help of a few other boys, Mr. Brown pulled Derick out of the locker with a loud “Pop.” Then, Mr. Brown returned to the tent’s doorway and, as he stood there he gave one last look around.

Christian still lay with his face toward the tent wall.

“Lights out in fifteen minutes, so get ready and get into bed,” directed Mr. Brown, as he stepped out of the tent.

With the mixture of emotions, especially from the anxiety of what he just did to Derick, and the experiences he’d had throughout the day, exhaustion quickly overtook Christian. He didn’t bother changing into pajamas, but just laid back and fell asleep within a few minutes.

Christian didn't see the arm and wand come through the tent opening at the fifteen-minute mark. Nor did he see Mr. Brown flick his wrist and softly say, "candelas caderen", which caused every light in the tent to go out.

Somewhere between midnight and one o'clock, Christian awoke suddenly. He couldn't remember if something from his dream had caused it or if something actually had awakened him. Regardless, he knew he would have difficulty getting back to sleep.

He thought about just lying there in bed and waiting to see if he fell asleep again. But, the longer he tried, the more he began to think about all of the new things he would experience here at school. Doing this only solidified that he would not fall back to sleep easily. So, although Mr. Brown warned not to go wandering outside, Christian quietly tiptoed out of the tent. He knew that getting some fresh air would be the only thing to help.

Christian decided not to wander down by the girls' tent, in case someone found him outside. He wouldn't want to attend six years of school labeled as a Peeping Tom. He instead decided to go through the tunneled path through the bleachers, thinking he would go up and sit on one of the sides of the front entrance's stone stoop. From that vantage point, he could get a sense of the school's size and a good view of all of the surroundings.

Christian entered the tunnel, which stretched about forty feet. Although the moonlight somewhat illuminated the far end of the tunnel, the darkness within it gave Christian an uneasiness. Nevertheless, he traversed the tunnel without incident.

Once out of the tunnel, the little bit of light that shone from within the school provided him enough to see his way. As he walked toward the front door, a slight breeze rustled the shrubs that covered the front of the school. Those shrubs under the windows reached about chest-high for him, but the majority of them that stood between the windows stretched twice that height.

Christian sat down on the far side of the school entrance's stoop, closest to the lake. The roar of the waterfall became more noticeable outside of the bleachers and the moon, nearly full, gave off quite a bit of light. So, he decided to go down and sit by the lakes edge, where the sound of the water would help make him become tired again.

He sat staring at the waterfall, though he couldn't see most of it even by the moonlight. However, he watched the concentric, circular waves created by the waterfall flow toward him. He could swear that one of the waves looked three times the size of the others, but assumed the moonlight merely caused it to look that way.

One thing that he could see, even in the moonlight, was that the lake stretched along the base of the steep hills and cliffs much farther than he had noticed before. He guessed that it must go at least a half of a mile beyond the falls.

The fresh air and sounds of the water did their trick, as Christian once again began to grow sleepy. As he started to stand, he thought he heard movement by the tall bushes flanking the gate entrance. When Christian looked, he couldn't see anything moving. So, he brushed off his pants and turned to walk back to the tents, when he heard another noise coming from the same location. He turned and stared more intently

toward the bushes. Still he saw nothing. Then, as he began to turn back around, he thought he saw one of the bushes move toward him.

Whether a trick of the eye or not, Christian ran back toward the bleacher tunnel at full speed. Glancing fearfully over his shoulder to see if he had a pursuer, he didn't see anything. Regardless, he kept running just in case.

He had just turned into the tunnel when he ran right into something ... or someone. For the most part, the person dodged out of Christian's way, probably because he or she heard his running footsteps approaching. However, the near impact caused Christian to lose his balance and fall onto the ground.

The person helped Christian up and Christian replaced his dangling glasses back onto his face. Then, the two of them walked through of the tunnel together toward the Quodpot field. Once out of the tunnel, Christian saw that he had run into Mr. Brown.

"Mr. Drewell, isn't it?" asked Mr. Brown.

"Christian, sir."

"Mr. Christian? How very 'Mutiny On The Bounty' of you," responded Mr. Brown with a snicker.

"No, sir. My first name's Christian."

"Yes, I know Christian. You'll have to get used to my dry sense of humor, because you're stuck with me for six full years."

Christian didn't know how to respond to this, so Mr. Brown continued.

"So, why were you out wandering, when I warned you that it could be dangerous to do so?"

"I couldn't sleep, sir. And, I thought that the fresh air might help to make me tired again."

"I'm the same way. Sometimes, I just have so many things going on in my head that I just need to come out into the fresh air to clear it. Did it work for you?"

"Well, it would have, but I could swear that one of those tall bushes moved toward me while I was standing down by the lake. With that and the run back to here, I'm wide awake again."

"I think we'll be able to clear up your bush incident tomorrow morning. So, since neither of us is sleepy at the moment, let's go sit over on the platform and you can tell me a little about yourself."

Christian started by explaining how he preferred to go by his first name, because he really didn't want to have anything to do with his stepfather. This led into how he never had the chance to know his true father and that he didn't know whether or not he had received his magical abilities from him or not. This, then, led into a discussion of the unreliability of Christian's abilities. Most of the time he showed little or no ability and other times he could make something happen by just thinking of it. He even owned up to causing Derick to fall into the locker.

Mr. Brown listened closely to Christian's stories, providing a bit of advice or his own perspectives here and there. With regard to Christian's magical abilities, Mr. Brown told him that with the things he would learn at Bishop, he'd learn to draw out and control his abilities.

After nearly an hour, Mr. Brown suggested that Christian go back to bed and try to get some more sleep. Christian agreed. In fact, talking with Mr. Brown, and sharing his experiences and feelings with someone else, allowed him to relax.

Once back in the tent, Christian lie on the bed with his arms behind his head and staring up at the canopy. He recognized how talking with Mr. Brown seemed so comfortable. He had never talked about personal experiences and received welcomed advice from a man before ... almost like a father.

After a few minutes, Christian fell asleep once again.

Orientation: Introductions

Eight o'clock rolled around very quickly. Mr. Brown entered the boys' tent and into the middle of the first floor, to ensure that the boys upstairs would hear him. In a loud voice, but without shouting, he said, "Wake up, gentlemen. Time to get up."

All of the boys stirred. Some sat up immediately, while others continued to lie in bed rubbing their eyes and stretching.

Through sleepy eyes, Christian saw Mr. Brown give him a wink.

After a crowded visit into the bathroom, dodging a few boys as they rolled along on the heels of their wheeled shoes, Christian had showered and dressed within thirty minutes. He went outside to grab a seat at one of the tables, but saw Penny already seated. She saw him and waved for him to join her.

"So, how was your first night of your magical life?" she asked.

"Well, after that initial shock of the inside size of the tents, it went pretty well. Although, after a couple of hours, I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep."

"You haven't been up this whole time, have you?" she asked concerned.

"No, I decided to come outside and get some fresh air. I even walked down to the lakes edge to listen to the water."

He didn't tell her about the moving bush.

"On my way back, I ran into Mr. Brown," Christian added.

"Did you get into trouble for being out of the tent, since he did warn us?" she asked with both concern and admonishment.

"No, actually. He was very understanding about why I had come out for some fresh air. We even chatted for a while. Then, he sent me back into the tent to get some more sleep."

"That was very nice of him. I'm glad you didn't get into trouble, but you should be more careful."

Not many students had emerged from the tents, as yet. None of the adults had arrived yet either.

Penny, with her head bowed, began to speak again.

"Christian, I never did thank you for standing up for me yesterday against Derick. Thank you."

Then, she gave him a kiss on the cheek.

They both turned red. Penny bowed her head and Christian just sat there surprised.

The shock still showed in his voice, a few moments later, when he replied, "You're welcome."

They sat there in awkward silence for a minute or two, as the other students finally began emerging from the tents.

Two girls came out and sat down at the same table as Christian and Penny. Although they sat on the other side, Christian could still hear their conversation.

"AISI, S 2G2BT!"

"OMG! DEGT! SMHID!"

Penny had listened too and whispered to Christian, "What are those girls saying? It sounds like they're talking some odd language."

“You’re right, it is another language ... or more like a code. If I’m right, they’re speaking text language.”

Before he could continue, Penny gave him the confused look he expected from her.

“You see, in the non-magical world almost everyone, especially our age, owns a cellular phone. It’s this little electronic device that allows them to contact any of their friends who have a similar device.”

“Sounds like magic to me,” Penny said amazed.

“Well, I guess it’s kind of magical, in a non-magical way. The devices allow them to either talk to one another or they can send typed messages to each other. Sending these typed messages to each other is called “texting” and there are some people who really get into this “texting” to each other. So much so, that they sometimes talk as if they’re “texting” on their cellular phones.”

“That seems silly,” added Penny.

“Yeah, you’re right. But, I don’t think they can help it.”

“Can you understand what they’re saying?”

“I’m not sure, let me see.”

“YGBKM!” said one girl.

“AAMOF S SSINF. VSF,” replied the other.

“PU!”

“UKTR!”

“Not really,” Christian whispered to Penny. “The only thing I could make out was P-U, which I think means ‘that stinks’.”

Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor emerged from the bleacher tunnel and stepped up onto the platform. Just as Mr. Brown reached the podium, Gwen finally emerged from the tent and quickly made her way over to the empty seat next to Christian.

“Good morning everyone,” said Mr. Brown.

A few students including Christian replied excitedly, while the others tiredly mumbled a response

“I said GOOD MORNING EVERYONE,” Mr. Brown said with emphasis.

He received a chorus of “Good morning, Mr. Brown.” in return.

“That’s better. I guess you were all still a little bit asleep,” Mr. Brown said with a smirk back toward Ms. D’Amor.

“We’ve made a few adjustments to the weekend’s agenda. We had scheduled the Headmaster to address you for about three hours today, but he’ll only be able to stay just under an hour. So, we’ve decided to provide the school tours prior to lunch. Then, the time after lunch will be all yours. Tomorrow morning, we’ll review your class schedules and then cut you loose to visit the booths and enjoy the day. So, any questions on the agenda change?”

No one replied.

“Very well.”

Then, he pulled out his wand and began to wave it.

Christian turned around this time to face the table. Just as he did, food began to appear almost as if each dish grew right out of the table.

This time, several dishes of scrambled eggs, bacon, ham, pancakes, waffles, muffins, French toast, plain toast, and multiple containers of cereals appeared. Several bowls with different types of jam and pitchers of syrup, milk, and various flavors of juice accompanied the food.

Although Christian had stuffed himself the previous night, he grabbed for the food famished. He took a little bit of everything and devoured it all.

Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor joined the students at the tables. Mr. Brown took the seat across from Penny. As he reached for a pitcher of juice, he said, "So, Christian, were you able to get back to sleep last night?"

"Yes, sir. Thank you," Christian replied.

Gwen looked surprised.

Penny saw Gwen's expression and smiled.

"Sir ... " Christian began, washing down a bite of toast with some juice, " ... why did the Headmaster have to cut his time short with us today?"

"He was called away to the WCA Headquarters for a meeting."

"The recruiter mentioned a little about the Witches Council or WCA. But what exactly is it and how does it involve the Headmaster?" asked Christian.

Both Penny and Mr. Brown began to talk at the same time. Then, they both stopped in mid-sentence.

"Penelope, I'm sure you can provide some interesting perspectives, since your father used to work for the Council. Please continue," Mr. Brown said with a smile as he dished some scrambled eggs onto his plate.

After her initial embarrassment for having interrupted Mr. Brown had passed, Penny continued.

"As you know, or may not know Christian, the country's divided into three regions: the west, the central, and the east. This is also why we have the three schools; one for each region, with Bishop the one for the central.

"There are a total of four members who make up the Witches' Council, one representing each of the three regions and a President. This body has all governing authority for the witches within the United States. Their responsibility runs from approving legislative changes for our Constitution to holding court over individuals who severely break any of the articles of the Constitution.

"The Council's decisions are determined by majority vote from the three Representatives and the President. The President has more voting power than the other three members. For example, if two members vote one way and the President sides with the third member, the side with the President wins the vote. However, if all three Representatives vote one way, the President cannot win the vote."

"Or at least not supposed to be able to do so," Mr. Brown added, just before he took a bite of muffin.

"So, the Witches' Council is just this governing body?"

Penny began to blurt out an answer, when she hesitated and looked over at Mr. Brown. He smiled and gestured for her to continue.

"Well, yes and no. There's the Witches' Council governing body, but there are several Departments under the Council: some to help govern, some to help police, and

some to help in other ways throughout the country. For example, my dad used to work at the central region headquarters in the Office of Magical Beasts. Each office falls under a respective department at the regional headquarters, which in turn reports to the corresponding main department located within the WCA Headquarters, just outside of Salem. So, my dad's office falls under the Department of Magical Entities at the regional headquarters, which reports to the Headquarters department of the same title."

"So, what kinds of responsibilities fall under the Office of Magical Beasts?" Christian asked Penny, but glancing at Mr. Brown too.

Penny responded with only a quick glance at Mr. Brown.

"Overall, the responsibility of the office is to be the most knowledgeable and most capable for dealing with issues or incidents that may develop here in the United States regarding the various magical beasts in the country. If necessary, they may be called upon to attend meetings or conferences, or assist with incidents, anywhere in the world where their expertise may be required or requested.

"Specific responsibilities include assisting witches throughout the country with controlling or managing unwanted beasts that might be threatening the witch or their way of living, or may just be creating a nuisance. This assistance is done by the regional offices."

"So, what's the difference or relationship the Office of Magical Beasts has with the Department of Magical Entities?" asked Christian, as he continued his unplanned interrogation.

This time, Penny didn't look toward Mr. Brown, but immediately went into an explanation.

"First, the WCA is actually made up of several Departments, like the ones for Magical Entities and for Scholastic Oversight. Within these departments are two or more offices, specializing in some aspect of responsibilities that fall under that department. The Department of Magical Entities is responsible for anything dealing with magical creatures or beings. So, the other office under the Department of Magical Entities is the Office of Magical Beings. And this office is responsible for issues concerning all magical beings within the United States."

Christian looked at Penny. She didn't seem tired of giving him a magical government lesson and Mr. Brown seemed amused and impressed with her enthusiasm and knowledge. So, Christian continued with his next question.

"Are these the only two Departments within the Witches' Council?"

"Gosh, no. There's one for almost all of the specialty areas that we learn about in school. These include Magical Agriculture, Alchemy, Divination, and History. Magical Creatures, of course we just discussed, and Spell Casting is kind of covered by all of the departments. The other departments include Labor, Commerce, Transportation, and Security."

Continuing, Christian asked, "What are the responsibilities of these departments?"

He had no sooner asked the question when Mr. Brown spoke up.

"Looks like you'll have to wait until later to continue this history lesson, because our Headmaster is heading this way. So, looks like we'll begin the fun for the day."

These last few words he said with a look on his face that combined a smirk and a grimace.

As Mr. Brown got up from the table, he added one final comment.

“You know Christian, if your interest in our governmental system continues, you should enjoy the fourth-year, or senior, class on this subject. Maybe this means you’re destined for a lucrative career in our government.”

This last comment came with the same smirk and grimace.

Mr. Brown, quickly joined by Ms. D’Amor, proceeded up to the podium platform and stood in front of the same chairs in which they sat the evening before.

While Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor walked up to the platform, Christian reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a small, brown plastic bottle. He extracted one of the vitamins and reached for his juice glass with which to wash it down.

Gwen saw him doing this and asked, “Is that some sort of medicine?”

“No, just a daily vitamin,” he replied.

“You know, as a witch, you really don’t need to take vitamins. We remain healthy based on our ability to tap into magic,” Gwen commented.

“Really?” asked Christian, looking at both Gwen and Penny, as she had heard the discussion.

Penny nodded her head, even though she didn’t exactly know what they meant by a “vitamin.”

“That’s ok,” said Christian. “I promised my mother that I’d take them to stay healthy and, even if they really won’t be doing anything for me, I’m gonna keep taking them, since I promised.”

“Oh, you’re such a sweet boy,” said Gwen, who hugged his arm tightly.

Christian caught the look of disgust on Penny’s face, as they all turned toward the platform.

Mr. Davis approached from the covered walkway through the bleachers. Several people followed quickly behind him. While he climbed onto the platform and took his position behind the podium, the other people lined up off of the platform to Mr. Davis’ right.

Mr. Davis watched as these people situated themselves. Then, he turned toward the students.

“Good morning and welcome again, freshman of The Bishop School of Witchcraft. Let me begin today by introducing to you our administrative staff members. You’ve already met Mr. Brown, the Assistant Headmaster.”

Mr. Brown stood and waved. Then, he took his seat again.

“Mr. Brown has many responsibilities associated with his position. He’s the Director of our Honor System and is my right-hand on all student-related matters. This means that he has final say on almost everything with regard to the student body from basic living conditions to disciplinary actions.

“You have also met Ms. D’Amor,” Mr. Davis said as he gestured toward her.

Ms. D’Amor stood, waved, and sat back down. Some of the boys waved back and a couple even clapped.

Mr. Davis cleared his throat loudly to quiet the students.

“Ms. D’Amor is Director of Student Life. Her responsibilities include matching students with school advisors, working with student representatives, and overseeing the dormitories and all student affairs.

“Now, let me introduce some other administrative staff members you have not yet met. First, is Mr. Bangar.”

The first of two men in the group stepped forward and waved to the students.

“Mr. Bangar holds two very important roles for our school. He’s the Director of Discipline, whose purpose and responsibilities I will describe shortly. He’s also our school Quodpot coach. His experience and skills in this sport and his disciplinary expertise have been noteworthy for the many years he has been with us, developing and training very talented Quodpot teams for the school. Even though it HAS been many, many years since we’ve won the Quodpot tournament of the Tri-School Competition.”

Mr. Davis hesitated and gave Mr. Bangar a look of disappointment and irritation. Then, he added, “Thank you, Mr. Bangar.”

Mr. Bangar smiled with a look of embarrassment. Then, he turned and walked away toward the bleacher tunnel.

Mr. Davis introduced each of the remaining people. Each one, upon the completion of their introduction, departed as Mr. Bangar did.

The others included: Ms. Hardcase, Director of Operations, responsible for all matters related to grounds maintenance, housekeeping, and security; Mrs. Bangar, the coach’s wife and the school registrar; Mr. Bindwath, Director of Technology; and the two school nurses, Mrs. Turtledove and Mrs. Sanatore’.

After the two nurses departed, Mr. Davis made one final introduction.

“The appearance of our final inductee may be alarming, but I want to assure you not to be concerned. He’s the head of our school security team. Welcome, Tatshenshini.”

He gestured toward the tunnel. As he did so, something emerged from the darkness. The thing walked hunched over, so that it would fit through the tunnel. When it exited, it stood upright to its full almost nine-foot-tall height. Hair covered the creature from head to feet, like a gorilla, yet had a fairly hairless face. And, it wore a vest.

With long, natural strides it quickly reached the platform, which groaned under its weight.

Christian, with his mouth once again wide open, happened to glance over at Mr. Brown. Mr. Brown mouthed something at Christian, who could just make out what he said, “Your moving bush from last night.”

Mr. Davis began the introduction.

“Tatshenshini, as most of you probably have guessed is a Sasquatch. He leads a squad of three other Sasquatch, which makes up the complement of our security here at Bishop.”

In perfect English, the Sasquatch addressed the students.

“Good morning, young witches. As the Headmaster has said, my name is Tatshenshini. That is quite a mouthful for non-Sasquatch, so please call me Tatu. It is what some students began calling me several years ago, and it seemed to give them

such enjoyment. Please have a safe and enjoyable six years here at school, which means I hope that we do not have to cross paths during that time,” Tatshenshini said with a chuckle, which shook the platform.

“Thank you, Tatshenshini,” said Mr. Davis.

Tatu turned, stepped down off of the platform with a loud thud, and quickly disappeared into the tunnel.

While the Sasquatch departed, Mr. Davis unfolded a parchment and cleared his throat.

“With an emphasis on minds, hands, and heart, the Bishop School of Witchcraft prepares young witches for success in their magical careers and life. Distinguished by a rigorous educational program, talented faculty and staff, wondrous learning and living edifice, and multiple opportunities to prove and improve your talents, we have established our friendly community to build compassionate individuals, insightful thinkers, and responsible citizens of you for our magical world.

“Our philosophy here at Bishop remains a beacon for education in our magical society. The school community has a unique mission and continues to make the contributions to education that it has since the founders took a brave step in magical education here in America almost 300 years ago. We are guided by an abiding faith in the capacity of all children to learn, in the importance of learning through experience in a variety of settings, and in the importance of working together to better our magical world and ourselves. It is through this educational program that we seek to build a better tomorrow.

“Bishop is truly a community. The word ‘community’ is a particularly powerful idea. Literally, it refers to a compact between individuals who have agreed to live a certain way. ‘Community’ is a concept with very rich, provocative meanings, a concept full of implications for our lives together.

“I will now briefly explain how our community operates and exists, and the role you will play in establishing and maintaining it.

“First, ‘Honor’ and ‘Discipline’ are words that are NOT used lightly at the Bishop School of Witchcraft. We expect our students to act honorably and with integrity, always. Also, in dealing with others, we expect our students’ conduct to be appropriate and respectful, and to reflect a certain degree of self-discipline. To teach the lessons of Honor and Discipline, we have two separate and distinct systems. They are the Honor System and the Disciplinary System.

“Our Honor Code, the guiding light for our Honor System, states ‘I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I tolerate such conduct by others.’ It is as straightforward and understandable as any sentence can be, and applies whether magic is used or not. The students and adults who serve on the Honor Committee administer our Honor System. Mr. Brown, as Assistant Headmaster, is the adult with ultimate authority in Honor System matters.

“Our separate Disciplinary System involves behavior other than that addressed by the Honor Code. Our Disciplinary System is founded on a Code of Conduct; one feature of this system is the use of both merit and demerit points. The students and adults who serve on the Disciplinary Review Board administer the Disciplinary System. Mr. Bangar,

Director of Discipline, is the adult with ultimate authority in Disciplinary System matters, in consonance with Mr. Brown.

“Honor and Discipline at Bishop...two distinct systems...one distinct goal: to instill and support the values by which we seek to live.

“At this point I would go into more detail of the processes that we use to support the Honor and Disciplinary systems, but I need to shorten my address today to meet another commitment. You may reference additional information of the Honor and Disciplinary systems in your school handbooks provided.”

Christian heard a ‘popping’ noise behind him. A booklet about half of an inch thick sat now on the table in front of each student. The food of course had already disappeared, most likely in the same manner that it had appeared.

“Let me add that I not only recommend that you thoroughly read through the handbooks, but emphasize that you must do so. Ignorance of the rules established by these two systems will NOT be tolerated as a viable excuse for breaking them.

“Please don’t start flipping through your handbooks at this time. You will have plenty of time later to do so. I would now like to address our policies on academic behavior and classroom conduct.

“The guiding precept to any standard of behavior is RESPECT. If you treat others, as you would want to be treated, then you are probably behaving correctly.

“A student is expected to be on time to all classes and appointments. Only the Assistant Headmaster or the Director of Student Life has the authority to excuse students from an academic or other school activity.

“Classrooms are centers of hard work and lively discourse. All students are expected to participate fully in the life of the class and to respect and honor the class rules and each other.”

Christian had listened intently, up to this point. And, although the headmaster continued to talk, Christian found himself thinking about other things, such as living in the school, learning magic, and many other aspects of his new life.

After several minutes, Christian came back to reality. He glanced around at the other students. Some also sat daydreaming, others flipped through their handbooks, a few had fallen fast asleep, and the remaining few still listened to the headmaster. Christian tuned back into the speech.

“Any student reporting late to class, without written permission from the Assistant Headmaster or a faculty member, will be marked down as tardy for that class period. Any student arriving to class more than ten minutes late, without written permission from the Assistant Headmaster or a faculty member, will be marked absent for that class period.

“Three tardies in a particular class shall equal an unexcused absence day for that class. If a student accumulates, during the school year, two unexcused absence days for a particular class, the student shall serve Saturday morning detention for two consecutive Saturdays or some other form of detention at the discretion of the Assistant Headmaster.

“The penalty for an unexcused tardy is two demerits. The penalty for an unexcused absence is ten demerits. These demerits will be accumulated against the student and

the student's dormitory, which will affect the dormitory's chance for winning the school trophy at the end of the year. You can read more on the school trophy in your handbooks, later."

Christian now had something else to daydream about...how he could help win the school trophy. He began to imagine the various things that he could do to help, such as wrangling dragons and conjuring fireballs as big as a house. The pictures in his mind and the list of accomplishments required for the trophy continued for a while. Then, something the headmaster said, once again returned Christian to reality.

"Education encompasses more than just classroom learning. It is our intent to help our young witches to develop their leadership potential and to practice those skills that will guide their success after graduation. With this in mind, our students elect a Student Witches Council or SWC, consisting of a president and one representative from each dormitory. The students who fill these positions will act as conduits, exchanging information between the student body and the school administration. The SWC meets with the Director of Student Life weekly and the president is responsible for posting any announcements associated with the SWC on the main bulletin boards in our entry hallway.

"Students in leadership positions need to be aware that honor or discipline infractions or a pattern of discipline problems can jeopardize their leadership position and could result in the loss of their position as an SWC officer, Honor or Disciplinary Board member, dormitory leader, and so forth."

Christian, so excited and interested in the magical aspects of his upcoming schooling experience, had forgotten about the non-magical aspects of school life in which he could get involved. The thoughts of becoming class president, sitting on disciplinary boards, and acting as a dormitory representative completely occupied his thoughts and imagination. He remained lost in these thoughts, until he heard another comment from the headmaster.

"In conclusion. We take seriously our mission to foster positive personal growth in our students. And we expect our students to join us in this mission. Respect for honor and an appreciation of personal integrity are central to this mission. Those students who, by their dishonorable conduct, show that they have little respect for themselves or for others will find that their tenures at the Bishop School of Witchcraft will be short, indeed.

"Enjoy your weekend and we will see you Sunday evening at the Beginning-of-the-School-Year Feast."

As the students clapped in appreciation, some heartily, others not so energetically, and a few not at all, Mr. Davis said, "I will now turn things over to Mr. Brown."

Then, he stepped down from the platform and walked quickly toward the bleacher tunnel.

Mr. Brown approached the podium and, once again, took a position to the side of it. Once the Headmaster had entered the tunnel, he waved for the students to stop clapping and talking.

"I won't hold you here with another long speech, but I do want to make a few important points clear to you.

“It’s very important that you read through your handbooks carefully. It will provide you with all of the information you need on getting the most out of your years at Bishop. And it will help you to understand what you should and shouldn’t be doing, while you’re a student here. These are things that you should understand clearly, for your sakes and those of your dorm-mates.

“The handbook also provides you some useful information about how things operate at Bishop, along with some historical information on the school itself. Becoming intimately familiar with the information in the handbook is important for many reasons, but here are two for you to remember and take heed.

“First, as Mr. Davis mentioned, and you will see as you read through your handbook, I have many responsibilities associated with the operations of student life here at Bishop. I take these responsibilities very seriously and will enforce them with that same seriousness. So, ignorance of the laws and rules won’t be an acceptable excuse with me.

“Second, and on a less serious note but just as important, the fourth-year, or senior, class students are allowed to quiz you, the freshmen, on any part of the handbook. This quizzing consists of three steps: the question, the answer, and the penalty. It’s the penalty that will drive you to be prepared for this quizzing. If you should answer the question wrong or don’t know the answer, the senior is allowed to cast one of two minor curses on you.”

A few gasps erupted from the students, to which Mr. Brown quickly responded.

“Don’t worry, don’t worry, they’re only minor curses. One’s the Elephant Ear curse, in which your ears will grow to five times their normal size. The philosophy behind this curse is to allow you to hear the answer to the question better. It really does allow you to hear things better, but is very uncomfortable and, of course, everyone will tease you about your ears.

“The other’s the Rabbit Tooth curse, in which your two front, upper incisors will grow to five times their normal size. The philosophy behind it is to allow you to take a bigger bite out of the information you should know from the handbook. There really isn’t anything positive about this one. In fact, it will hinder you from eating properly.

“The good news about these curses is that they can easily be cured by the proper counter curses, which any faculty or staff member can perform and will do so at the evening meal. So, if you should be cursed by a senior, make sure you don’t miss the evening meal, otherwise you’ll have to wait until the next day’s; and, it’s very uncomfortable sleeping with either one of these afflictions.

“The important thing to take from this is to study the handbook and be prepared for the seniors’ quizzes, so that you can avoid these curses.”

He paused to make sure everyone heard and understood what he had just told them. Although some students still looked worried, Mr. Brown let it go and decided to conclude his talk.

“Before we dismiss you to experience the wonders of the school, are there any questions at this time?” Mr. Brown asked as Ms. D’Amor joined him at the front of the platform.

No one seemed willing to ask any questions, either eager to start the tour or from embarrassment of asking a silly question in front of all the other students. Christian had dozens of questions, but he believed he'd get answers for most of them over the next couple of days and the others he would come to know soon enough.

"Very well. If there are no questions."

Mr. Brown hesitated to see once more if anyone responded. When they didn't he continued.

"When we leave here, we'll regroup in front of the building's main entrance, at which time you'll be divided into six groups. An upperclassman or staff member will take charge of each group and will lead you into the school. They'll take you on a tour of the school and, once the tours are completed, please return here for lunch. After lunch, you'll have the rest of the afternoon to yourselves."

Mr. Brown stepped down from the platform, followed by Ms. D'Amor. The students followed the two adults through the bleacher tunnel to the front entrance of the school.

Six people stood there waiting for them and, once the freshmen arrived, Mr. Brown began to introduce them. As he did, each guide smiled and either nodded, raised his or her hand, or waved.

"Freshman class, let me introduce your tour guides for today. First, we have Ms. Lucinda Ferris, fifth-year student, apprenticing in magical agriculture, and she's the SWC president. Next, we have Mr. Daniel Chin, the blue dorm representative and informal vice-president of the SWC, who is a sixth-year, journeyman student specializing in the handling of fire-emitting creatures; needless to say, he's fast on his feet! Next, we have Mr. Allen Kahest, a fourth-year, senior student and the gold dorm representative on the SWC; and an excellent student in Alchemy. Our last student tour-guide is Ms. Clair Daez, from the red dormitory, a journeyman student specializing in divination and especially adept at reading runes. You've met our final two tour guides during the introductions earlier. We greatly appreciate Mrs. Florence Turtle dove and Mrs. Maria Sanatore' taking the time to assist us.

"Let me thank all of our tour guides for their graciousness in assisting us today.

"Now, you six will go with Ms. Ferris." instructed Mr. Brown, pointing to Christian, Penny, Gwen, and the three other students closest to them.

Mr. Brown then divided up the remaining thirty students amongst the other five tour guides.

"Freshmen, please follow all directions provided by your guides throughout the tour. Feel free to ask them any questions. I'm sure they'll be happy to make the tour as informative and pleasant as possible. Once you've all completed your tours, which will end here at the entrance, return to the Quodpot field for lunch."

Then, with one final look around at the group, Mr. Brown gestured for everyone to proceed.

Orientation: The Tour

Once inside the main entrance, the grandeur of the school became immediately apparent. The entry hallway looked wide enough to fit two lengths of Christian's house, it rose about three stories high, and ran the entire length of 'the wall.' Immediately opposite the main entrance stood another set of doors, a little bit smaller in width and height ... but only a little.

"Welcome to Bishop everyone! My name's Lucy and I like all of my friends to call me that rather than Lucinda. And, please feel free to ask me any questions you have at any time during the tour.

"Those doors lead to the dining hall, where tomorrow night's feast will be held. But, I must warn you that it's off limits to freshmen during orientation weekend. They want to keep it a surprise until the great feast," explained Lucy, pointing toward the other set of doors.

She stood silent for a few moments, allowing the freshman the opportunity to take in the view.

On the outer wall of the entry hallway, situated between the stained-glass windows, hung almost floor-to-ceiling length tapestries. Based on their worn appearance, Christian assumed them as old or older than the school.

A variety of things either hung on or stood next to the wall opposite the main entrance. The most prominent, two large pedestals flanked each side of the dining hall doors.

Christian read on the pedestal to the left, in letters that almost seemed to glow, 'The Bishop School of Witchcraft Trophy of Honor.' A four-foot high trophy sat on the pedestal and the two-foot high base had writing on it. In large, fire-blue letters, glowed 'VIPERTOOTH.' Atop the base stood a two-foot high figure of a male witch, pointed hat and all. He held two wands, one in each hand, pointed out to his sides and slightly upward.

Lucy noticed the group looking at the trophy.

"This over here, as the pedestal says, is the school's Trophy of Honor. This is the trophy that the three dorms compete against each other every year to win. On the hour, sparks shoot out of the wizard's wands in the color of last year's winner. Unfortunately, we won't be able to wait around to see it, since we have a time limit for the tour.

"Last year the all-boys or blue dorm won the house trophy. They're also referred to as Vipertooshs, based on the dragon breed that symbolizes the dorm. During the four years I've been here, they've won the past three years and the gold dorm, or Longhorns, won my freshman year. I live in the red dorm and we're called Fireballs, but we haven't won the trophy in fourteen years.

"I guess now would be a good time to explain the dorm setups here. There are three: the red dorm is the all-girls one and it's over here to our right. The blue dorm, the all-boys one, is over there to the left. The gold dorm, which is the co-ed one, is at the back of the school. They built the school in the shape of a triangle with the three dorms or towers at the three corners."

“Lucy, why did they build it in the shape of a triangle?” the other boy in the group asked.

“No one seems to really know, but there are several theories. One’s that Bishop was the first of the three schools built and the shape of a triangle just happened to be the best fit in this location within the mountain cliffs. Then, the other two schools just followed the same design. Also, it’s thought that a triangle creates a smaller footprint, making it much more easily concealed from the non-magical world.

“Let’s continue on with the tour. I’ll take you over and show you a Fireball dorm room. If you’ll please follow me.”

As they started walking, they passed the second pedestal. Christian saw that it too had similar glowing text, which read ‘Salem’s Cup.’ However, nothing sat atop this pedestal.

“Lucy, what’s this pedestal?” Christian asked.

“This is where the Salem’s Cup, the trophy from the Tri-School Competition, would sit. As I mentioned a few minutes ago, there are three schools shaped like triangles, with Bishop having been built first. The other two are Eastey, located near the east coast, and Good, near the west coast.

“The Competition’s an annual contest between these three schools here in the United States. It includes various teams of experts from each school representing the best students in that school’s magical academics and extracurricular activities, culminating with a Quodpot tournament. Unfortunately, Bishop hasn’t won The Cup for several years.

“If anyone’s interested in trying out for one of the school’s teams for the Competition, please stop by the booths tomorrow. Maybe adding some new blood to the teams will be our recipe for victory. But, there’s no pressure on anyone to join, especially freshmen.”

As Lucy continued to lead the group toward the red tower, Christian noted the rest of the decorations and objects in the entry hallway.

Against the wall next to the Salem’s Cup pedestal, mirrored on the opposite side of the dining hall doors, stood a glass-enclosed trophy case with trophies and awards dating back almost three hundred years to when the school first opened. Trimmed in beautiful gold leaves, it reached two stories in height and stretched close to twenty-foot along the wall. The size, design, and location, along with the fact that it stuck out about two feet, ensured visitors noticed its contents upon entering the school.

Next to the trophy case, hung a large, glass-enclosed bulletin board. Although dwarfed by the trophy case, it provided plenty of room for notices and announcements. Christian didn’t get the chance to read any of them, but he did notice that part of the bulletin board, sectioned off from the rest, had a sign above it that read, ‘Disciplinary Board Results.’

A few feet beyond the bulletin board, they came upon a distinctively large statue of a man that stood out from the wall. The statue, more precisely, depicted a witch based upon the type of clothing he wore. His clothing reminded Christian of a pilgrim, which included a cape that reached just short of the ground. The pointed hat he wore truly revealed him as a witch, though.

The statue held his wand with both hands pointing the tip toward the ground, which reminded Christian of someone holding a handgun in a safe manner. The name on the base of the statue, Mandrakon, didn't sound familiar, but Christian assumed the man held some importance to the school based on the statue's location near the main entrance.

Two other significantly smaller statues, yet still larger than a grown man, sat along the wall as they continued down the hallway. In between the statues, hung various paintings of individuals, groups of people, and scenery. As Christian passed one of the paintings, he could have sworn that one of the subjects moved. He would have just assumed that the lighting had made it appear to move, until the man in the picture actually turned to the touring group and said, "Hello...Welcome to the Bishop School of Witchcraft."

Several feet beyond the third statue, a flight of stairs rose upward, wide enough for four or five people to walk up together. The stairs continued up for three floors, which matched the height of the entry hallway ceiling.

Directly under the stairs, a girls bathroom spanned the whole length of the staircase. And, beyond the bathroom, stood three more statues with additional paintings in-between.

As the tour transitioned into the red tower, this area looked like just a pass through between the entry hallway and another long hallway. Christian noticed a set of stairs leading down, but no stairs going up into the tower. Just as Christian observed this, Lucy walked over to the wall and tapped her wand against it while whispering something. As soon as she did this, an opening appeared. Then, Lucy gestured for everyone to enter through the opening.

The portal opened into a small gathering area with a set of spiral stairs, about three feet wide, leading up into the tower. The group entered the portal and, just as they started climbing, Lucy pointed to a door to the right of the stairs.

"That, everyone, is the most important room in the dorm."

"Really?" exclaimed one of the other freshmen girls.

"What's in there?" the other girl asked.

"That's the fresh linens closet," Lucy replied with a laugh.

Everyone politely joined in.

As they continued up the stairs, Lucy explained some things about the dormitory.

"Only the students who reside here know the sequence of taps and words that will allow them to gain entrance into the tower. It's the responsibility of the dorm representative to work with the Director of Student Life, Ms. D'Amor, to determine when or how often to change the password sequence.

"Each dorm has one representative on the Student Witches Council, or SWC. This person works with the floor leader from each class to address any problems or issues on that floor.

"I was the floor leader for my class my first two years and the dorm representative my third and fourth, until they elected me the SWC president at the end of this past school year. So, if any of you girls get selected as a Fireball, they'll be looking for a new dorm representative and a floor leader for your class within the first week of school."

A few moments later, the group arrived on the landing of the first floor. The stairwell and the landing formed a square, matching the shape of the tower. They had the option of using one of two doorways that exited the landing or go around to the next set of stairs leading to the next floor. The two doors exited into the same room, which looked like some sort of a meeting room.

Lucy led them into the room and, as they entered, she explained.

“This is the freshmen common room ... a room on the floor that everyone can use and gather in. There’s a common room on each floor for each class’ use. Anyone in an upper level can come down to a common room below, but residents on lower floors aren’t allowed access to upper level common rooms. So, you’ll find that meetings involving the whole dorm are typically held in the freshmen common room.

“Take a brief look around in here, then I’ll take you in to see one of the bedrooms.”

They had designed and decorated the common room symmetrically. Bookshelves covered most of the walls and mostly empty, although several books and a few knick-knack decorations sat on them. Two rectangular tables and one round table, set away from the bookshelves, provided workspace for the students to use. A couple of cushy chairs sat against the walls and matched the design of a large sofa, which sat in front of a fireplace.

The fireplace, located in the opposite corner of the room from the stairwell, dominated the room. It had an open hearth that stretched five feet deep with a six-foot high mantel. A smaller version of the school shield, like the one hanging over the school’s main entrance, hung over the fireplace.

After a few minutes, Lucy led them through the common room and into a hallway. A bathroom door stood directly across from the common room entryway they had just exited, of which Lucy offered its use to the girls in the group if they needed. Gwen and one other girl took her up on her invitation. Lucy then noted that the floor had another bathroom directly opposite of this one, on the other side of the floor, and offered its use to the boys. The group’s other boy hurried through the common room toward that bathroom.

After a few minutes, the boy and other girl returned. But, Gwen finally appeared five additional minutes later.

Then, Lucy led everyone down the hall and into one of the dormitory bedrooms.

“There are six bedrooms on each floor with two people per room and all designed the exact same way. But, who can tell me what predicament this causes for three of the bedrooms?”

The freshmen looked at each other puzzlingly. They all either shrugged or looked at Lucy questioningly.

“Three of these bedrooms would be facing in toward the school. So, how can these three be designed the same as the other three, if they don’t have windows?”

Lucy didn’t wait for any response, but answered her own question.

“They have magical windows.

“The view from these windows is along the front of the dormitory, located on the wall between the real windows of the respective floor and the one above it. And, in

fact, the windows from the gold dorm are situated in between the floors of the red and blue towers.”

Lucy gave a chuckle. Then, she continued.

“Of course, you won’t see these magical windows from the outside. But, from the inside, they look and act exactly like a normal window. You can open it for fresh air, look out at the school grounds, and even hang out of them to yell to friends below. It’s a sight to see one of your dorm mates or a gold dorm member with their body sticking out of the tower wall.”

Lucy laughed again and the freshmen joined in.

“The bedrooms are designed the exact same in all three towers. So, go ahead and look around.”

The door, located in the middle of the wall, allowed space for two wardrobes against the same wall; one behind the door and the other next to it. The canopied beds had their headboards against the side walls and the foot of the beds faced each other. Each bed had a large trunk at its foot and a nightstand next to its head. On the other side of the bed stood a four-drawer chest of drawers. Lastly, against the opposite wall, situated under one of the two windows, each student had a desk for writing and computer operations.

“Once you’re assigned a room, you can decorate it any way you want, as long as it’s done in a tasteful manner. Ms. D’Amor will make the final determination of whether your room’s tasteful or not,” Lucy commented.

Christian asked, “You mean we’ll all have rooms that look like this?”

Lucy nodded.

Christian thought to himself, “This is gonna be GREAT!”

The group returned to the winding staircase and followed it back out of the portal that Lucy had created. With another set of taps and whispers, she closed it once more, leaving no sign of a doorway in the wall. Then, she led the group down the open spiral staircase to the level below.

In contrast to the hallways of masonry stone above, the passageways on the lower level had been carved right out of the mountain rock. They reminded Christian of tunnels and the lighting added to this impression. Unlike the electrical lighting of the floors above, flickering light from oil sconces on the walls cast dancing shadows along the passageway.

“The teachers’ offices are down here, so follow me and I’ll take you to meet all six of them.”

“Lucy, are the classes held down here too?” asked Penny.

“No, classes are held in classrooms above ground. In fact, each class has its own classroom and I’ll show one of them to you later. However, Alchemy’s lab is held down here, near Professor Turnell’s office. I’ll be taking you over to meet him now.”

Lucy wound her way through the passageways, making turns here and there. If they should lose her, none of the six freshmen would find the way out. For this reason, they stuck very close to Lucy and to one another.

They finally approached a door, which made Christian think of a dungeon entrance. A nameplate hung on it, the only thing distinguishing it from a dungeon door. The plate read: Nicholas Turnell, M.P.

"This office belongs to Professor Turnell our Alchemy teacher. His office and the Alchemy labs are outside of the school's structure ... just in case."

"Just in case?" asked one of the other girls.

"Well, in Alchemy, if you don't follow the instructions or ingredients just right, you can cause an explosion or fire. So, they designed the Alchemy labs away from the school so that the school structure wouldn't be jeopardized in case of an accident."

All of the students looked surprised and concerned, except Christian who looked puzzled.

"Lucy, what exactly is Alchemy?" Christian asked.

Slightly confused and amused, Lucy responded.

"It's actually a pretty basic field of study. You take various minerals, herbs, plants, and liquids and combine them to make dry or liquid compounds."

Gwen whispered to Christian, "Think of it as magical chemistry."

Lucy turned and had started to knock when Christian asked.

"What does M.P. stand for?" as he pointed to the sign on the door.

"Magical Professorship. This is the highest level one can achieve in a given field and requires a specified level of expertise."

As Lucy turned and knocked, Gwen again whispered to Christian, "Similar to a PhD."

While opening the door, Lucy called out "Professor Turnell, are you in?"

A somewhat raspy voice replied, "Yes, please do come in."

The inside of the office also reminded Christian of a dungeon; a three or four-person dungeon based on the size, but still a dungeon. The lighting contributed to this dungeon-like appearance, the majority of which came from four wall sconces, an oil-burning chandelier, and one small window. However, the furniture gave it a less dungeon-like look.

About eight feet directly in front of the door sat a large desk. The top constructed of granite and the base of metal. On both side walls, floor to ceiling wall-mounted metal shelves hung. Against the back wall, directly behind the desk, a metal credenza measured the same height and length as the desk. All in all, the furniture looked new and modern enough to have come right out of an office furniture catalogue.

A single, wall-mounted metal shelf hung above the credenza. This shelf caught Christian's attention. First, various plants covered the shelf, but none of them currently bloomed. And second, this shelf received the only bit of sunlight from the single window of the room.

Some sort of device hung down in front of the window reflecting all of the sun's rays directly onto the shelf of plants. The reflector moved once while the students remained in the office, revealing that it moved with the sun to maintain steady sunlight on the plants.

Everything else in the room seemed fairly normal. The shelves contained various vials, bottles, jars, and packages. The credenza had some books atop it and the desk

had a few things neatly arranged on it. Notably, everything in the room sat neatly arranged, stacked, and organized including the desk.

Christian took all of this in, but found that the man behind the desk fascinated him the most out of everything in the room. As the professor stood to greet everyone, Christian saw that he looked and dressed sharply. The suit, really more of a cross between a suit and a tuxedo, looked spotless and without a wrinkle; as did his shiny, velvet-like cape. The man, handsome, tall, and somewhere in his mid-thirties, gave an air of power. But, he had a somewhat gaunt appearance, as though recovering from an illness.

“Professor, these are some of our freshmen students. We were wondering if you could tell us a bit about Alchemy and what they can expect in their first-year Alchemy class,” posed Lucy.

“Most certainly,” replied Professor Turnell.

Christian, although interested to hear what Professor Turnell had to say, kept tuning out what the professor said and focused more on the man himself. Christian sensed a fascinating mixture of things from this man; a contradiction personified.

Christian sensed strength and weakness, health and sickness. Good and evil? Christian thought about his stepfather, Doug. He too ensured he dressed well and kept things in order. However, Doug had no strength of character. Christian had neither fear nor dislike for Professor Turnell. Instead, the things he sensed about the man gave him a feeling of sad concern.

“Are there any questions?” asked Professor Turnell.

Christian had missed the whole discussion and wouldn’t dare to ask a question on something the professor probably already covered.

“If not, then enjoy your weekend and I’ll see you Monday morning in class.”

After a chorus of ‘Thank You’ the group left the office and wound its way through the passageways once again. They passed one of the other tour groups and, soon after, arrived at another office door. This one belonged to a Ms. Annabelle Sheyant, who taught World History of Magic.

Christian found nothing extraordinary about Ms. Sheyant or her office, other than everything in the office looked aged. This included the furniture, the books ... and Ms. Sheyant. Christian, with a grin on his face, thought she looked as if she could have lived a few thousand years ago, or at least several hundred.

Her insights into the benefits of world history, especially as it related to jobs and employment with the Witches Council, seemed quite informative. However, the thought of her class made even Christian yawn.

Soon, they had left to visit the next office, just a few yards down the passageway.

This office belonged to the Spell Casting teacher, Mr. Alexander Quazam. As they approached his door, Lucy noted to the group.

“Mr. Quazam’s of middle-eastern lineage and there are rumors that one of his ancestors may have been a genie. Regardless, he has a wonderful sense of humor.”

His humor became apparent from the moment they entered his office.

“Welcome. And, please, take a seat ... if you can catch one.”

With a slight flip of his wand, the two chairs that sat in front of his desk began galloping around his office. Periodically, the chairs knocked something off of a shelf, but it really didn't matter. Where clean and orderly described Professor Turnell's office, messy and disorderly epitomized Mr. Quazam's.

After about a minute, he had herded the two chairs back into their original positions and turned them inanimate once again.

"That's just a very small example of the fun you can have, once you master the art of Spell Casting. The one thing you must embrace is 'patience.' We don't start you off in your first year learning to wave a wand, and possibly getting yourself, as a minimum, or those around you into severe trouble.

"Your first year will consist of learning the language of spells and your second year will be interpreting spells. It isn't until your third, or junior, year that you will officially begin learning how to cast spells.

"Now, I know that there are some extracurricular groups and teams that will allow you to practice the art of casting prior to your official training. I don't recommend that freshmen, or sophomores, join these groups. However, there's no rule against it. If you should join one of them, please perform within your abilities and always have at least a senior monitoring your activities; preferably, an apprentice or journeyman level student, or an adult if possible."

This Mr. Quazam said with a very serious tone.

With less seriousness, he explained to the group what they could expect of the first year. Using his humor to describe their first year of Spell Casting, he almost made learning basic Latin sound like it would be fun.

After a hearty "Goodbye" to Mr. Quazam, the group returned to the passageway, where Lucy led them to a set of stairs. They climbed up several levels, turning at least a dozen times, and then Lucy made an announcement just before they reached the top.

"This is the office of Professor Herbert Gardner, the Magical Agriculture teacher. He's also an M.P. and happens to be who I'm apprenticing under."

At the top of the stairs, the door stood slightly ajar and the bright sunlight hurt everyone's eyes.

Lucy peeked her head into the room. "Professor?"

"Hello Lucy. And you have the freshman students with you. Excellent. Please come in," replied the heavysset man leaning over one of the many tables in the office.

Many things made this office much different from any of the others they had seen so far. First, as the sunlight demonstrated, this office sat above ground. The fragrance in the air, quite pleasing, caught their senses next. The humidity in the room engulfed them as they entered the office, because the entire ceiling and three walls consisted of glass, just like a greenhouse. Two glass doors, one on each side of the room, led to a separate, full-sized greenhouse next door. Finally, this office measured three times as long and twice as wide as any other office.

The desk, situated opposite the door they just exited and closer to the far wall, had a mixture of paperwork and gardening material scattered on top of it. A walk space ran from the door to the desk just wide enough for a person to walk through without feeling too cramped. Six long tables filled the rest of the space in the room, three on each side,

which stretched from this walk space almost up against the side walls. Various pots and planters covered these tables and contained a different type, color, or size of plant, some of which moved within their pots.

From the smile on her face, Gwen had arrived in heaven.

Once in the room, Christian could see the most extraordinary thing about this office ... its location.

It and the two greenhouses sat on shelves that stuck out from the back of the mountain cliff. Through the glass wall behind the desk, Christian could see the top of one of the towers, the gold dormitory he assumed. And, directly above he could see a square shaped shaft coming out of the mountain with a round shaped structure attached at the end. The same round structure he saw from the drive when he first spied the school.

This structure, shaped oddly like an elongated egg, hung over the area just beyond the front of the gold dormitory, although significantly higher for visibility. The most peculiar thing about this structure was that it did not block the sun from any part of the school, especially the greenhouses.

Christian could also see, just beyond the edge of the dormitory tower, three levels of round rooms protruding out of both mountainsides. The rooms overhung the corridors connecting the gold tower and the two other towers.

Christian, so caught up in the view, the architecture, and all of the sensory stimuli offered by this room, hadn't noticed that Professor Gardner had begun explaining Magical Agriculture or Mag Ag as he kept calling it. Christian only caught the closing part of Professor Gardner's explanation.

"This is the type of work we will cover in the classroom study and in the laboratory portion of the class as well. Freshman laboratory sessions are held over here in Greenhouse #1.

"I'm sure you all have a lot more to see, so I won't keep you any longer. Do you have any questions for me?" asked Professor Gardner.

Christian saw Gwen lurch forward slightly, but then decided not to ask whatever question she had on her mind.

"Well, enjoy your weekend. See you on Monday," said Professor Gardner.

Then, he returned to working with the plant as he had when they arrived.

The group returned to the underground passageway via the same stairs they used coming up.

As they walked through the passageway, Christian asked, "Lucy, what were those stacked round rooms coming out the side of the mountain."

"Those are the classrooms. I'll take you up to them, after we meet your last two teachers."

After a short stroll down a different passageway than the one they had used earlier, where they passed yet another tour group, they reached their next destination. The round shape of this office door had Christian wondering if this teacher's width might compare proportionately with his or her height.

"Ms. Caritas Callidus is the Divination teacher. She's still pretty new. She started teaching here the same year I started school."

After that introductory comment, Lucy knocked and asked to enter.

Although nothing extraordinary stood out about this office, this made it extraordinary. All of the furniture, which included shelves, bookcases, a cabinet, and a desk and chair, seemed to blend nicely with each other and also with the rock walls. It all had a very natural feel to it.

The torches in the office gave off less light than any of the other underground offices, but Ms. Callidus moved very gracefully in the semi-darkness. She stepped out from behind her desk to greet everyone, her long blond hair flowing over her shoulders and the back of her pale green robe.

She greeted Christian first, as he stood closest to her desk. He saw, even in the semi-darkness, that she had the bluest eyes he had ever seen and they provided a stark contrast to her pallid, but handsome face.

“Hello. And your name is?” she asked with a lilting, English accent as she greeted Christian.

He immediately felt an intense infatuation for her, but didn’t understand why. After a moment of tongue-tied hesitation, he replied “Christian.”

She greeted each student in that same lilting voice. The last student, the other boy in the group, dropped his notepad as he shook her hand. Christian thought that maybe she had the same effect on this boy.

He snickered at this thought as Ms. Callidus bent down to pick up the boy’s notepad. When she did, her long, blond hair fell slightly forward, briefly revealing her right ear. Based upon where everyone stood in the room, no one else could see this. Ms. Callidus had pointed ears!

Christian, totally captivated by her, couldn’t keep his imagination from running wild. He pictured the different places from which she may have come. First, he imagined she came from another planet, just like characters from one of his favorite science fiction television shows. Then, he started thinking of the different worlds in which they could live, if they married.

His active imagination took him away and, once again, he came back to reality when he heard Ms. Callidus say, “Do any of you have any questions?”

Christian realized he had better pay close attention to the last teacher, so that he would at least know what to expect in three of his six classes come Monday.

After everyone had thanked Ms. Callidus, including an over-exuberant one from Christian causing him to stumble out of the door, they exited back into the passageway headed for the last teacher’s office.

As they walked along, Christian thought that maybe Penny could explain why Ms. Callidus had such an impact on him. He explained the feelings that came over him regarding Ms. Callidus, which caused Penny to get a depressed look on her face. Christian didn’t notice. But, he asked if the fact that she had pointed ears could have anything to do with it.

“Oh, I understand now,” she said initially in a surprised but normal voice, which then turned into a whisper.

“She’s, in some way, elfish. But, elves and humans, magical or otherwise, usually don’t get along. So, I’m surprised that one would be working here at the school. I’d

expect that her elfish heritage is being kept pretty secret. As for your CRUSH, it's believed that elves can cause romantic feelings in humans, but not all of the time. I can't remember what the reason is why some are affected while others aren't though. Would you like me to check with my father?"

"No, that's all right. Now that I know that it's magically related, I'll just try to ignore it," replied Christian.

Even if he couldn't ignore it, he didn't want Penny informing her father that an elf worked here. And, he especially didn't want Penny to tell her father that Ms. Callidus had caused Christian to be infatuated with her.

They had arrived at the final teacher's office. The door, although of normal shape, seemed noticeably larger than any of the others. Christian thought, "We've had a part elf instructor. Maybe this one's part giant."

"This is the office of Ms. Salome Mander, the Magical Creatures instructor. There may be some animals or creatures in the office that you haven't seen before, but don't be alarmed. Ms. Mander will have everything under control."

Lucy knocked and a very husky, woman's voice said, "Come in."

By far the largest of the underground offices they had seen, it extended twice the length of any of the others. Dim light covered the back part of the room. In contrast, Ms. Mander sat at her desk in a well-lit area of the office. She stood up to greet the group. Somewhere over six feet tall, she towered over everyone. Even through her clothes and cloak, and although she appeared slightly overweight, Christian could see her muscularity.

Christian had concerns that she might crush his hand as she greeted each student, but she had a very gentle touch. After greeting each freshman, she addressed the group.

"Feel free to look around, but please don't touch any of the containers or creatures, since you haven't been taught yet which ones are dangerous and which ones are not. Although, no creature is truly dangerous, if you know how to handle it.

"Also, please don't go over into the dimly lit area, since we're trying to keep those creatures from getting excited or agitated. While you're looking, I'll explain what you can expect during your first year classes."

Christian found the strange creatures fascinating, although he knew nothing about any of them. He did, however, make sure he heard everything Ms. Mander said. In summary, the class would consist of some classroom instruction and some hands-on experiences. Final exams would follow suit, with part written and part hands-on, but mid-term would only be a written test.

Soon, they had returned to the passageway and backtracked past Ms. Callidus' office to a junction. A right turn would take them back to the passageway to the red dormitory and the stairs to Professor Gardner's office. However, they proceeded straight for a few more feet and arrived at the bottom of a spiral staircase, much like the one they used to come down initially.

Lucy explained their location as they emerged from the staircase.

"We're currently on the ground level of the gold tower. Follow me and I'll take you to see one of the classrooms."

Lucy led them down a hallway that angled off to the right and headed toward the blue tower. Christian noticed that a similar hallway angled off toward the red tower.

The hallway appeared both as wide and as long as the entry hallway, however it reached only about two stories high. Paintings and tapestries covered the right-hand wall, with statues periodically placed along its length. The entire length of the left-hand side consisted of a short three-foot high wall and an opening the rest of the way up to the ceiling. A pillar stood every so many feet in the opening to hold up the ceiling. Christian imagined how cold it might get walking along here in the winter.

Through the opening, Christian could see an open courtyard with a fountain and sitting area. He could also see the other hallway, which looked just like the one in which they currently walked with regard to design and decorations. And, he could see the backs of three buildings. The larger one he assumed was the dining hall and the other two, which he had no idea of their purpose, each sat between the dining hall and the two hallways.

When they reached a third of the way down the hallway, an arched doorway on the left led to the courtyard. A six to seven-foot wide walk path went directly over to a similar doorway to the other hallway. At the center of this walk path, a narrower one split off to the left, which led to the fountain. Three other walk paths branched off to the right and led toward doors of the three buildings.

Further along, halfway down the hallway, an opening on the right led to some stairs, wide enough for five people to climb together. Lucy led the group up the staircase, which had three flights and allowed one to look down onto the hallway from the landing between the second and third flights.

At the top of the stairs, Christian glanced around. Directly across from the stairwell, he saw a boys and a girls bathroom. To the immediate right, the stairs continued up. And, a narrow, windowless stairway on the right-hand wall, which paralleled the large hallway below, led upward to someplace Christian didn't know. Lastly, a closed door stood to the immediate left of the stairwell where he stood.

Lucy opened this door and led the group into a short hallway. Once inside, the short hallway opened into a fairly large, semi-circular classroom. Christian could see the teacher's platform or stage directly to the left of the short hallway. Four rows of nine stadium-style seats faced the stage. Behind the top row of seats, windows stretched the whole length of the back wall.

As the six freshmen students wandered into the room, Lucy began to talk.

"This is one of the six classrooms that you'll be using for the next six years. This one happens to be the Magical Creatures classroom. Ms. Mander will probably have the whole front of the classroom filled with crates and cages of all sizes on Monday. There are two more classrooms above this one almost exactly like it. Spell Casting's directly above us and Mag Ag is above that. There are three more classrooms mirroring these three on the other side of the mountain face. Alchemy's directly across from us, with World History of Magic above it, and Divination on top."

While Lucy said this, the six freshmen clamored to the back windows.

Once at the windows, the six students could see most of the school's architectural design. Directly across the way, the other three classrooms mushroomed out of the cliff

wall, as Lucy had mentioned. Christian could also see the two hallways diverging from the gold tower from the back of the school to the front and, of course, the main entry hallway connecting the blue and red towers. The entry hallway, which stretched twenty to thirty feet higher than the other two hallways, also had a row of common windows facing the courtyard.

Over the roof of the nearby hallway he could see the top of the dining hall, whose curve-shaped ceiling peaked about ten feet or so below the top of the entry hallway. As Christian spied the top of the building between the nearby hallway and the dining hall, Gwen asked the question that had just come to his mind.

“Lucy, what’s this building right here?” Gwen asked pointing.

“That’s the infirmary. The first floor’s entirely beds and such and the second floor’s for serious injuries and has the nurses’ office. Also, although you can’t see it very well, on the other side of the dining hall is the administration building. It’s where the offices of the school staff, like Mr. and Mrs. Bangar and the others, are.”

Christian could just see the top of the courtyard fountain over the top of the nearby hallway. And, behind the gold tower, he could see greenhouse #1 and part of Professor Gardner’s office.

The amazing thing of all about this whole spectacle was how it all tucked naturally into an opening in the mountain, whose face rose up over almost all of the structures.

Christian asked about one final structure, the most prominent and odd-shaped one of them all, the one that hung over the top of the gold tower.

“Lucy, what’s that other building up there?” he asked.

“That’s the Headmaster’s office. It’s the only part of the school that reaches higher than the cliff walls and, I would assume, gives him a good view of almost everything; to include the front gates and, possibly, a Quodpot tournament.”

“Have you ever been up there?” asked one of the other girls.

“No. In fact, I don’t know any students that have ever been up there. The Headmaster is responsible for overall school administration and communicates with the Witches’ Council. We frequently have visitors from the Witches’ Council who, after a brief tour or appearance at an event, disappear up to the Headmaster’s office for the rest of their time here. But, we, the student body, interact with Mr. Brown, the Assistant Headmaster, on everything that needs administrative oversight. I’m not sure if you can see it, but, do you see those windows in the cliff wall, to the left and slightly lower than greenhouse #1?”

Each of the six freshmen, straining his or her neck, looked and replied, “Yes.”

“That’s Mr. Brown’s office. I’ve been there many times over the years, associated with the many boards and duties I’ve had. But, I suppose I’ll be visiting his office even more frequently this year as the SWC president. Ms. D’Amor has an office in the same location on the other side of the gold tower, although slightly smaller.”

Lucy then signaled for all of them to follow her as she started to leave the classroom. She led them back downstairs and, as they turned back into the ground floor, Lucy began to speak again.

“We have one more place I want to show you and then we’ll return to the Quodpot field for lunch. Do any of you have any questions that I might be able to answer?”

Christian did.

“Lucy, you seemed to have done pretty well here at school. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s your background? I mean, how were you brought up?”

“Do you mean did I have magical parents or not?”

Christian nodded his head.

“Yes, I had two witches for parents. In fact, I didn’t show much affinity for doing magic prior to coming to school. When I came to Bishop, I was one of the weaker magic wielders in my class. But, I still tried my hardest, which I guess is why everyone seemed to like me as a leader. Then, I found that I really liked Mag Ag, because you really didn’t have to be a strong magic wielder to excel in it. So, I decided to put extra effort into my Mag Ag studies and here I am apprenticing in it, under one of the top specialists around.”

“You mean Professor Gardner?” asked Gwen, listening intently to the discussion.

“Oh, yes. He’s the top Mag Ag instructor of the three schools and, I’ve been told, there’s only one other person within the entire witching society that has more experience and, maybe, more skill in Mag Ag and that’s the Director of the Department of Magical Agriculture at the WCA Headquarters.”

“Really?” all of the freshmen asked in chorus.

Gwen beamed with excitement.

They had reached the end of the long hallway and walked through the ground level of the blue tower, as Lucy briefly explained as they transitioned into the main entry hallway. After passing a boys bathroom, they reached the base of a long flight of stairs, just like the one they saw over near the red tower.

Lucy led them up the stairs and began to explain their next, and final, destination.

“We’re heading up to the library. There are books dating back to before the school first opened. Most of the books have been transferred to the school’s computer network. However, they’re still available if anyone should want to use them instead of a computer. Also, some of the very old books couldn’t be transferred. So, if you should find a need for any of them, you’d have to use the book. Also, to ensure that the library wouldn’t go unused, it also was included with the wireless capability that the rest of the school has, so you can go in there to study and do homework, if you want.”

As they reached the top of the staircase, Lucy made some final comments.

“There’s a boys and girls bathroom here ...” she said pointing to the rooms directly in front of the stairs.

“... and the same on the other side of the library.” she concluded.

Then, she led them to a pair of wooden doors on the far side of the stairwell.

“Go on into the library and take a quick look around and we’ll meet back out here in a few minutes.”

The freshmen proceeded toward the library doors. Since Christian led the group, he opened the doors first. He recoiled slightly upon looking in, as he quickly noticed two apparitions. One floated in between the bookshelves and one hovered behind the main desk near the door.

Christian turned to Lucy. “Is the library supposed to be haunted?”

“Oh, yeah. There are ghosts throughout the school, most of them are past students or visiting ghosts that just liked it here and decided to stay. I’m surprised we didn’t encounter any during the rest of the tour, but they know that school isn’t in session yet. The two ghosts in there are the original librarians from when the school was founded. They just liked it here so much that they decided to continue their positions after they died. Although they weren’t too happy when we developed the wireless network, they still decided to stay around anyway.”

After a brief look around, Christian and his classmates met Lucy back out by the stairs. Then, she led them downstairs and out of the main entrance.

“I hope you all enjoyed your tour?” she asked with anticipation.

In one way or another, each one said “Yes, very much. Thank you.”

“I’ll see you around and let me know if I can ever do anything for you,” Lucy said with a wave. Then, she turned to go back into the school, while the six freshmen strolled toward the Quodpot field.

Although their group returned to the field first, the food sat waiting for them on the tables.

Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor stood at the end of one of the tables chatting. When Mr. Brown saw Christian’s group exit from the bleacher tunnel, he stepped toward them.

“Welcome back,” he said to them.

“Grab a seat and help yourself to some food. When you feel you’ve had enough, you’re free to check out the grounds, go into town, or whatever you’d like. Let me just give you two things to remember. One, please don’t go into the school, since the security guards aren’t expecting any new people to be wandering the halls today once the tours are finished. Second, make sure you’re inside the gates by six o’clock, because the gates will close at that time automatically; and, they won’t open for anyone, no matter how hard you plead with them. So, enjoy the food and the day, and we’ll see you back here at six.”

Then, Mr. Brown gestured for them to have some food.

As Christian walked past him, Mr. Brown signaled for him to stop.

“So, did Lucy tell you anything about Mag Ag and her experiences here at school?” Mr. Brown asked.

“Yes sir,” Christian said with a smile. “It did make me feel better about my magical abilities, or lack of them. Maybe I’ll be able to do as well in Mag Ag as Lucy. I promise that I’ll give it my best and show the school that it didn’t make a mistake in allowing me to attend Bishop. It’s GREAT!”

“Yes, it is. I thought Lucy might be able to cheer you up, after what you told me last night. And I have all the confidence in the world that you’ll do marvelously here. Now, go have some food and enjoy the day,” Mr. Brown said, patting Christian on the back.

He then turned to greet the next returning group with the same welcome and reminder speech.

Christian did enjoy the day, more than he probably would have, if he hadn’t talked with Lucy. Although, he liked it mostly because of what Mr. Brown had said.

Christian, Penny, and Gwen ate lunch and ventured into town with the other three students from their tour group. Their names were Ulanda Sagitara, Peter Lionel, and

Monica Weaver. Peter and Monica came from mixed parents, both with a witch father and a non-magical mother. Ulanda had two witches for parents. All three had attended non-magical schools prior to coming to Bishop, which provided several topics for discussion among the group, much to Penny's disappointment.

The six of them went to the coffee shop, where they spent nearly two hours getting to know each other. Ulanda, Peter, and Monica wanted to go down to the Moo-Line Rouge, but Christian wanted more to go back into the school grounds and relax down by the lake. Penny agreed with Christian, and Gwen, who originally wanted to go back to the clothing store, decided that relaxing by the lake sounded great.

The remaining couple of hours Christian found helpful, providing some relaxation after the non-stop excitement over the past couple of days. Penny, after a quick run to the girls' tent and back, showed Gwen and Christian how to play Snip, Snap, Snorem ... a magical card game.

She had brought a small box from the tent, which she set on the ground and lifted off the lid. Inside, she pulled out a deck of cards and, what looked like, a small block of wood. Then, she tapped the block of wood with her wand and said, "Three." The wood began to unfold and continued to do so until it formed a flat, triangular-shaped playing board about two feet wide on each side.

Christian found this pretty cool, but what happened next amazed and puzzled him. A circular pedestal, about six inches in diameter, began to grow out of the center of the board and reached about an inch high when it stopped. Then, an ornately decorated chair began to grow from the top of this pedestal, until it reached about six inches high. Once the chair had completely formed, a man, fancily dressed and wearing a crown appeared, sitting in the chair. Lastly, five little people, about three inches high and dressed in colonial-style clothing, appeared in front of each of the children.

Penny noticed the puzzled look on Christian's face and explained.

"You see, this game was created back in the colonial days, in the seventeen hundreds. So, that's supposed to be King George," she said, pointing toward the man sitting smugly in the ornate chair.

"The board is more like a prop to the real game. It's actually a basic card game. We each get five cards and the first player lays one down. The next player tries to match the card. If they can't, they play a different card and you keep going until someone runs out of cards. Then you deal over.

"The fun part is when you CAN match the player's card though. So, if you have a matching card, you have to play it. When you do, you say 'Snip' and the king will snip away one of the first player's colonists. If the next player can play the same card, they'll play it and say 'Snap.' and the king will snap away two colonist's from the second player. And, if the fourth or next player can play the last match, they'll do so and say 'Snorem.' To this, the king will come up with some original way to take out three of the previous player's colonists.

"The last player to have a colonist still standing is the winner. Shall we play?" Penny asked.

Christian and Gwen nodded enthusiastically. So, they began to play.

The colonists standing around would frequently make comments as the game went on, saying things like, "Well played, sir!" or "That'll show her." And, when someone played a matching card, the colonist who would receive the wrath of the king would say things like "Farewell cruel world!" or "Viva la libertad!"

The king sat smugly in his chair, sniffing at the colonists, especially if they made a comment to one of the players. But, when someone said "Snip," he would pull out two swords, using them like scissors. Then, while grinning, he'd chop off the colonist's head with a 'snipping' sound. Then, he would return to his throne and the colonist's body would disappear.

The one time that Gwen said "Snap," the king leapt off of his throne and, in one swing, smashed two colonists into the playing board with a huge club. When he did this, it made a 'snapping' noise.

Although there was no blood, the actions on the board did provide some gruesome scenes. Which, of course, made the game so much fun.

After a few games, they returned to the Quodpot field for dinner, which turned into another feast. Christian finally concluded that all of the meals would contain a lot of food. So, he didn't stuff himself this time; although, he still had plenty to eat.

After dinner, the students, Mr. Brown, and Ms. D'Amor gathered around a huge bonfire where they heard ghost stories ... from real ghosts.

After a brief announcement from Mr. Brown regarding wakeup at eight o'clock again, the students all ambled back to their respective tents for bed. Christian, thinking about the beginning-of-the-school-year feast the next night, didn't fall asleep right away. However, the food he had eaten at dinner soon tired him and he finally fell asleep.

He, once again, flew on the back of a dragon. This time his mother flew alongside of him on her own dragon. They glided through the sky enjoying the ride and each other's companionship.

Setting The Stage

Christian enjoyed a sound and relaxing sleep and didn't wake up until Mr. Brown woke everyone the next morning.

Mr. Brown reminded the boys, "Pack up your bags and place them onto the baggage cart next to the entrance. We'll have them brought to your respective dorm rooms tonight."

Christian quickly exited his bed and, soon after, exited the tent. When he emerged, he found Penny already seated at one of the breakfast tables. Christian hesitantly joined her, with the encounter from yesterday morning still fresh in his memory. He tried, however, to put that incident out of his mind.

"Good morning, Penny," he said with unnatural enthusiasm.

"Good morning, Christian," she replied with some return enthusiasm, hers being natural.

"Should be a fun day today, don't you think?"

"I suppose so."

"You don't seem all that excited. What is it that you aren't going to enjoy about today? The teams, the clubs, and the groups we join today will help guide us here at school and, probably, the rest of our lives."

"Oh, that makes me feel SO much better," she said sarcastically.

"Well, they should at least be loads of fun to be part of. Besides, we do pretty much have the day to ourselves to do as we want, so that's something to look forward to."

"I suppose so."

Christian realized the losing battle in which he had engaged and decided to give up that line of discussion.

He then noticed the same two girls from the previous day come out of their tent in deep "text" conversation.

"UR my BFF! TYSM! CRBT."

"NP! I LYLAS! But, UGTGUI! IC N XLNT B/F 4U ADN."

"IUSS."

"WYLEI. TMWFI."

"THX!"

"He S a N1."

"A SRS QT! WDYT?"

"ICAM. GFI!"

"YT?!"

The girls had stopped for a long pause, so Christian decided to turn and see what had happened. When he did, Christian saw the two girls looking at him. Just as he started to ask them what they wanted, he heard someone come up behind him.

"EMFBI, but IDTS! GB."

Christian turned to see Gwen standing next to him.

"SRY," Came one of the two girls' responses.

"NBD. CT!" replied Gwen.

"PXT CT?" asked one of the girls.

“S Latin 4 GAAFOFY.

“XLNT! B4N,” concluded one of the girls, as the two began whispering between them.

“What was that all about? And, did I hear something about Latin?” Christian asked.

“Oh, it was nothing important. I said ‘CT’ or ‘Cerca Trova.’ That’s Latin for ‘Seek and you shall find,’” answered Gwen.

“Cerca Trova, I like that,” Christian said, as he sat there pondering over the term.

Penny, having felt left out of this encounter, whispered to Christian, “Are you still feeling any affects from yesterday’s meeting with Ms. Callidus?”

Christian really didn’t want to discuss this embarrassing incident, even though he would like to know more about the relationship between men and elves. The latter of whom he came to realize yesterday, apparently existed. He gave a short response and quickly changed the subject.

“No. You know, I think I might be leaning more towards making Mag Ag my area of specialty. How about you?”

When Christian said this, Penny folded her arms and looked thoroughly disappointed.

“No, I don’t know yet,” she replied abruptly.

At first, Christian didn’t understand why her mood had changed again. But, then it came to him. They both knew that Gwen would specialize in Mag Ag based upon their visit to the magical supplies shop. And, this meant that Christian and Gwen would have even more things in common. Christian found this attitude exasperating. So, he decided to use the rest of the time before breakfast to thumb through his school handbook.

At nine o’clock, Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor came walking through the bleacher tunnel. Mr. Brown, still in stride, waved his wand and the food appeared. Then, they once again joined the students for breakfast.

The adults and freshmen all sat around eating and talking for about an hour. Then, Mr. Brown stood up from the table and made his way up to the platform, where Ms. D’Amor quickly joined him.

Taking his typical pose, leaning on the side of the podium, Mr. Brown began to address the students.

“Today’s your day to take the steps that will allow you to get the most out of your time here at the Bishop School of Witchcraft. We have several booths, stands, and tables set up on the sides of the main path. Each one represents a team, club, or some other group. Feel free to join as many or as few as you desire. It will be through these groups that you will make contacts and gain experiences that will assist you and last throughout your lives. So, please give serious consideration to joining at least one of them.

“Once again, we’ll be meeting here at six o’clock. DO NOT BE LATE! Because, once we’ve gathered, we’ll proceed into the school and into the dining hall ... at which time you’ll be separated into your respective dormitories. The dormitory for which you’re selected will be your home-away-from-home for the next six years and the other students residing there will be your brothers and/or sisters; a relationship that will last you for the rest of your life.

“Once you’re all seated with your new brothers and/or sisters, the headmaster will give a brief address to the students, faculty, and staff. He’ll then conjure up the meal and you’ll see why it’s called The Great Feast. This feast marks the beginning of the school year and, for you, the beginning of a lifetime experience.

“Before we cut you loose for the day, Ms. D’Amor would like to cover some things with you. Let me make a few last reminders: You’re on your own for lunch today; the school, except for the dining hall, will be open this afternoon, so be on your best behavior if you should go in; the Quodpot team’s practice is scheduled here at four o’clock, as I mentioned Friday night; and DO NOT BE LATE for our six o’clock gathering tonight.

“Ms. D’Amor they’re all yours,” Mr. Brown concluded as he turned and motioned for her to come forward.

“Thank you, Assistant Headmaster,” she said walking toward the podium.

She unfolded some papers and placed them on the podium.

“I know that many of you know little or nothing about what to expect your first day of school and what a typical school day is like here. So, I’ll run through this with you, quickly, and then you may go for the day.

“This year and up through your fourth year, or senior year, you’ll all be taking the same classes and be taking them with each other. This will allow you to maintain some inter-dormitory relationships with each other during these four years. For the last two of your six years, your classroom experiences will be tailored toward your area of preference or expertise.

“If you didn’t know prior to yesterday’s school tour, your classes this year will be the beginning levels of Alchemy, World History of Magic, Divination, Magical Agriculture, Spell Casting, and Magical Creatures. This is also the order in which you will have them. Please note that Divination will consist of two studies this year: Numerology the first semester and Palmistry the second.

“Your day will start with breakfast at eight o’clock. Alchemy will begin at nine o’clock sharp and run until ten minutes to ten, thus giving you ten minutes to get to your next class; so, don’t dawdle. Divination will end at ten minutes to twelve followed by lunch at noon. Magical Agriculture, or Mag Ag as everyone calls it, will begin at one o’clock and your last class, Magical Creatures, will end at ten minutes to four. You have free time until six o’clock, at which time dinner will be served. All meals will be held in the dining hall.

“That, in general, is what your schedule will be for this year. Now, I’d like to cover some specifics about a few of your classes. All of your classes will be classroom sessions tomorrow and will be held in that specific class’s room, which you all should have seen during yesterday’s tours. However, for Alchemy and Mag Ag, Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays will normally be laboratory sessions, with Tuesdays and Thursdays as classroom sessions. Please make sure that you find out before Wednesday where the laboratory sessions will be held. Freshman Mag Ag laboratory is typically held in Greenhouse #1 and Alchemy laboratory is in Alchemy Lab #1, across from Professor Turnell’s office. You’ll want to confirm these locations and get directions to them, especially the Alchemy laboratory, which can be tricky to find.

“Are there any questions?” she asked, pausing for any responses.

“Mr. Brown, any last comments?”

Since he had no comments, Mr. Brown dismissed everyone.

As he did, Christian decided to take his vitamin for the day. He remembered what Gwen told him yesterday, but he still considered it the right thing to do, since he had promised his mother. He had just set the juice glass down, when the dishes disappeared into the table.

Some of the students left the field through the open bleachers. Christian, Gwen, and Penny left with the rest through the bleacher tunnel. As he walked, Christian looked back to see Mr. Brown go into the boys tent and Ms. D’Amor go into the girls. A few seconds later they came back out, pointed their wands toward the tents, and the tents appeared to be sucked right into their wands. Christian would have loved to stick around to see how they moved the tables and the platform, but he wanted to go check out the different booths and tables of which Mr. Brown had spoken.

The school had set up over a dozen booth and table arrangements along the main walkway. The booths outnumbered the table set-ups by three-to-one and sat on the lake side of the walkway opposite the tables.

Some of the booths represented clubs you would see at any school, such as music and chess. Others related to the classes taught at the school, such as Mag Ag, Alchemy, and Divination. Still other booths corresponded to organizations outside of school, but definitely related to the magical world, such as the Magical Animal Companions association, the Old Witches Lodge, and the Witches Historical Society.

The tables lined the other side of the path, with noticeable space in-between them. The space allowed for demonstrations. The Quodpot team had one of the table areas, where two or three students would take off into the air on a broom, every so often, and toss around a ball while they zigged and zagged overhead. Another area represented the school’s dueling team, where two students would periodically demonstrate deflecting a spell cast by the other. Yet a third area designated the school’s cheerleading team. A girl, boy, or both would demonstrate a cheering routine, sometimes while shooting things out of the end of their wands.

With a quick “See you guys later,” Gwen shot off toward the Mag Ag club’s booth. Christian turned to Penny and asked, “So Penny, which of the clubs and teams are you interested in?”

“None,” she responded with the same attitude she had when they had talked earlier.

“But why not?” Christian insisted.

“Because I’m just not good at anything,” she blurted out with an unexpected emotion that surprised Christian.

“Well, I’m sure that’s not true, but why don’t you walk along with me and see if anything at least catches your eye?”

After a few moments of consideration, she agreed and they began to walk down the path. They had just passed the first booth, when someone yelled, “Penny? Penny Humblot!”

Christian and Penny both turned. A girl jumped around waving from inside the Magical Animal Companions booth. Christian and Penny started to walk over and, as they came closer, Penny shouted “Judith?” and hurried over to the booth.

The two girls hugged each other over the booth’s counter. Although no easy feat, the other girl stood about six to eight inches taller than Penny, which allowed her to stretch far enough.

“Christian, this is Judith Pallychenko. Our fathers used to work together at the Office of Magical Beasts. We used to play and hang around together at all of the office-related picnics and gatherings that our parents took us to. Judith, this is Christian, one of my new classmates and friend,” Penny said this last word with a bit of a blush.

“Nice to meet you,” they both said, almost simultaneous, while shaking hands.

Penny then continued talking to Judith.

“I didn’t think I’d ever see you again. The last I heard, you had started school two years ago after your father had transferred to the main office out east. How did you end up here, rather than at Eastey?”

“Well, dad got transferred in mid-summer, after all of the school preparations had been completed. So, I had to come here even though my parents live out east. But, I’ve had a great time here. Unfortunately, I’ve probably retired a couple of ravens just from my letters back home. My parents have visited on weekends once in a while, mainly getting here by fireplace, since it’s too long of a way to apparate.”

These words all caught Christian off guard. “Did you say they traveled by fireplace?”

“Well, yes. How else ... oh, you must come from a non-magical family. I’m from a mixed marriage. My dad’s a witch.

“Yes, there’s a way to travel from one location to another by means of using your fireplaces like launch pads. Why else do you suppose the fireplaces in the dormitories are so big? It seems funny that you’re from a non-magical family and Penny’s from a fully magical family. How did you two meet?”

Penny beat Christian to the response. “Derick Foulmoth was harassing me when Christian boarded the bus. He just walked up and made Derick stop, without even pulling out a wand.”

“How very gallant, but very dangerous. Derick’s history’s very well known amongst the sons and daughters of parents who worked for his father, and even to some whose parents were involved, one way or another, in the actual incidents Derick caused. You seem like a nice kid, so please be careful around him,” warned Judith.

“So Penny, what’ve you been up to?” Judith added.

Before Penny could respond, Christian interrupted.

“I see you two have a lot of catching up to do. I’ll see you later Penny. It was nice meeting you Judith,” he said as he turned and proceed on toward the other booths.

Although he would have let Penny go along with him, he didn’t mind this time alone to focus on finding out the details on some of the clubs and groups that he may want to join.

Although impossible, Christian would have loved to join all of them for the magical perspective each one provided. He also knew that if he joined too many, it would impact his ability to put full effort into them and still complete his schoolwork.

Also, he knew he wouldn't do well on some of the teams. For example, Quodpot and dueling required a certain level of magical abilities, which he didn't seem to have. Art and music required a different type of talent, which he also didn't have. Cheerleading and chess simply didn't interest him.

So, he decided he would limit his extracurricular activities to four.

He first investigated the Student Witches Council. Although the student body elected the students for the four SWC positions, the SWC needed a support staff. Christian hoped that they would draw future candidates from the support members. Lucy, the tour guide from the previous day and SWC president, manned the tent with the three dormitory representatives. Christian walked over to her and told her of his interest in working with the SWC. Pleased to see Christian's interest in helping the SWC, Lucy told him she'd try to get him on the student staff.

Along with the SWC, he definitely wanted to join one other club...Mag Ag. He purposefully went to the SWC first, in hopes that Gwen might have moved on to another booth. He merely wanted to allow himself to focus on finding out about the club and what it entailed without any distractions. So, when he saw that Gwen had indeed moved on, he went over to the Mag Ag booth and, after receiving the details on the club, signed up.

After several minutes of getting acclimated to the world of Mag Ag, he wandered among the booths wondering what other two groups he'd like to join. As he looked around, he saw that Penny and Judith still stood talking. Penny held some things in her hands, apparently having joined the Magical Animal Companions. He also saw that Gwen had walked over to the cheerleading team's table. In fact, Christian watched as Gwen proceeded to demonstrate her cheerleading abilities for the team leaders. And, she performed quite well.

Christian decided he would go down to the end closest to the gate and make his way back, thus taking the opportunity to see all of the booths before making a decision on his last two clubs.

The last booth, which had no new students at it, supported something called the Old Witches Lodge or OWL. Their motto, at the bottom of the booth's banner read, "Give a hoot about the OWL." This incited Christian to laugh and led him to investigate it further.

They told him that a home for retired witches rested just north of the school. Members of the support club had established a monthly visit to the facility, sponsored by the school. Once a month, they went to the home to either do some odd jobs or just visit with the residents. Christian thought this sounded like a wonderful idea. So, when they asked him if they could count on him to join the club and visit the OWL each month, he promise he would. He left pleased he had decided to come down to this end of the booths first.

Christian strolled along back up toward the school. He stopped at the alumni booth and picked up a brochure from both the Vipertooths and the Longhorns, since he would live in one or the other dormitory. Then, he continued on all the way to the last booth closest to the school. He hadn't noticed this one when they first started out, which supported the Bishop School 300th Anniversary committee.

Since he hadn't had the opportunity to read through the whole school handbook, he didn't know that exactly two years from now would mark the school's 300th anniversary. In fact, on Halloween in two years, the witching society in the United States would celebrate its 300th anniversary and the three schools would hold their own local celebrations a year later to mark their official 300th anniversary.

Although the school's alumni association committee focused mainly on the society's anniversary, they sought student volunteers and a student lead. As Christian approached, a woman in the booth caught Christian's attention.

"You look like a bright, intelligent young witch. We could sure use your assistance in making this a celebration to remember. And it will be something you'll fondly remember for the rest of your life."

"What exactly would I be doing?" he asked.

"Well, right now we're just looking to set up a student committee that will interface with the alumni committee for the occasion. Once the types of events and ceremonies we'd like to have are determined, the two committees will work to make sure everything is coordinated within and outside of the school. So, right now we don't have many details about what will be involved, but we're just looking to establish the student committee. Can we count on you to help make this the memorable event we hope it to be?"

"Yes, ma'am. Sign me up. I'd be honored."

"With an attitude like that, are you interested in being the student committee chair?"

"Well, I think for now, I'd rather just be on the committee. Since this is my first year and all."

"I'm a pretty good judge of character, based on my years of divination, and I know you'll do better than you think you will. Thank you for volunteering and good luck with your studies. You'll do great."

As she said this last bit, the witch handed Christian a sheet on which he put his name and class year. As she took the sheet back, she handed him a small multi-page pamphlet about the school's origin and history. Christian thanked her and walked away looking through the pamphlet.

He had turned, still reading the pamphlet, and began to walk back down the path toward town, when he bumped into someone. As he looked up, he began to apologize immediately. Then, he stopped suddenly when he saw whom he had bumped into ... Derick Foulmoth.

"You again," he barked at Christian.

"I should have taught you a lesson on the bus, but I'll teach you now to stay out of my way."

Derick reached into his jacket, pulled out his wand, and started to point it at Christian. He had started to say something when, from off to Christian's left he heard someone say something quickly, followed by a red streak that flew through the air. The streak hit Derick in the arm, causing his wand to fly into the air and knocking him to the ground. Before Derick could get up, two of the security Sasquatch, unseen prior to the incident, quickly arrived. They hoisted Derick up between them with his legs dangling and carried him off into the school.

Everything happened so quickly, that Christian hadn't realized who had saved him. It was Penny.

She stood next to the booth with her wand still pointed to where Derick had stood. Judith, mouth agape at what had just happened, erupted into applause and yelled, "WAY TO GO, PENNY!"

Christian walked over, gently lowered Penny's arm, and said, "Thank you. I think you may have just saved my life, based on what you told me about him."

Penny, finally starting to come out of the shock, muttered, "You're welcome."

Just then, another boy came running from across the drive. When he arrived, he spoke mostly to Penny.

"Hi, I'm Chicory Wrathbones, the captain of the school's dueling team, but everyone calls me Chic. We usually come to these orientation weekends to demonstrate to the freshmen, so they can see what it'll be like when they reach their third year and can join the team. Most students hardly know how to hold a wand, until the third year. However, every once in a while, a standout freshman comes along that knows how to handle themselves and a wand. And, I think we just found her, if you're interested."

Penny, almost stammering from a second episode of shock, asked, "You mean you want ME to join the school's dueling team?"

"Absolutely. I saw the whole thing take place. I had started to draw my wand, but you outdrew me. Anyone who can outdraw me and hit with accuracy like that, we NEED on the team. Please say 'yes,'" he pleaded.

"Sure. I guess. If you want me."

"Great. Wait until the rest of the team and Mr. Quazam hear about this. A freshman who's already faster than the team captain!"

Chic ran off laughing excitedly.

Penny still hadn't fully recovered from both of these events when Judith suggested, "Penny, I think the rest of the MAC members can handle things here. Why don't I take you up to my dorm room where you can rest a bit. I think all of this excitement may have been a little much for a shy, young girl from the back woods."

She came out of the booth and took Penny by the left arm to guide her toward the school. Christian began to go with them, but he thought it might hinder Penny's rest to have him present. Plus, he couldn't enter the Fireball tower anyway.

With his mission of selecting four groups to join accomplished, Christian decided he would wander into town. He looked over to see if Gwen might want to go with him, but the cheerleading team had surrounded her and she seemed to enjoy the attention. In fact, none of them, including Gwen, even noticed Penny's magical display. So, Christian proceeded into town alone.

He first stopped at the souvenir shop. There, Christian selected a postcard of a boy waving hello with the school's front door and shield in the background and took it up to the counter.

When the clerk saw the postcard, she asked, "Would you like that personalized?"

"What do you mean?" asked Christian puzzlingly.

The clerk pulled out her wand, tapped Christian on the head and then tapped the post card. After she did this, she showed the card to him. Christian's figure now stood waving back from the card.

"Cool! Thanks," responded Christian.

"And what is your name?" asked the clerk.

"Christian Drewell," he replied.

"And I see that you have a new account at Bullion's," said the clerk looking at a computer screen above the cash register.

"If you would, please tap the tip of your wand to the touch screen," she directed, pointing at a little computer-type screen on the counter.

Christian did so.

The clerk waited a moment, and then said, "Could you do that once more?"

Christian did it again.

The clerk looked puzzled. She looked at the touch screen, tapped it with her wand, and then said, "One more time, if you don't mind?"

Christian did it, this time a little more aggressively.

"There we go. Thank you and come again," concluded the clerk.

A little exasperated, Christian proceeded to the post office. Once there, he filled in his address on a piece of paper and began to write on the card.

He started by saying, "Dear Mother, This card is just a small example of what the magical world holds and what I've seen so far."

Then, he went on to describe the tour of the town and getting his first wand, the amounts of food they had with each meal, the tents they slept in, the tour of the school, and the four clubs he had joined. He even mentioned his nighttime encounter with the walking bush, which turned out to be an actual Sasquatch. He concluded with the pleasant discussion and friendship he had established with Mr. Brown. He didn't, however, include the recent encounter with Derick, so as not to worry her.

He filled every available space on the card, finishing with, "I don't know how often I'll be able to make it into town to drop you a line, but I'll write as often as I can and each weekend as a minimum. Your loving son, Christian."

He took the address and completed post card over to the clerk, whose mouth moved as he read the address. The clerk went to the same window as the other day, where another raven landed on the sill. The clerk said something to the bird and stuck the postcard in its beak. Then, the bird flew out of the window.

When the clerk turned back around, Christian thanked him, turned, and left.

Once outside, he looked at his watch, which read eleven-thirty.

"That's odd ..." he thought, "... but I didn't see any food booths."

However, one thing he had noticed during his short time here, things occurred like clockwork at the school. It seemed likely that they could set up a booth with a flick of a wand and with another flick, have sandwiches or burgers ready to go. They'd most likely do this at exactly noon.

So, he reasoned, he had the choice of eating in town or going back to check out the food stands. He decided to stay in town.

Although Magical Mocha had some food, he decided to avoid any additional embarrassment. He didn't want to eat something that might make him take on another creature's characteristics, as the drinks did. He chose not to eat at Moo-line Rouge either, since he wanted something other than ice cream and candy. He decided he would check out the restaurant next to the Ghostly Inn, called 'The Restaurant Next Door.'

Upon entering he noticed that, as he had expected, it had an entrance inside connecting the restaurant with the inn. In fact, the relationship between the restaurant and the inn gave the restaurant its name.

As the town continued to grow, more people began to stay at the inn. Since it had no kitchen, the clientele could only purchase food at the tavern at the end of the street. Some of the clientele didn't like the tavern, so the town built the restaurant next to the inn. As people asked where to eat, the inn employees would say, "At the restaurant next door."

And thus, the restaurant became so named.

Christian had read all of this from the menu posted just inside the restaurant's front door. He checked out the food and prices and quickly realized that he couldn't afford to eat lunch here. So, he proceeded down the street to the tavern.

Alone, Christian had decided he would sit up at the "counter." So, upon entering the tavern, he walked directly for the tall chairs. After taking a few steps into the tavern, Christian started to feel a warm sensation in his lower chest or upper stomach. He first thought of indigestion, but he hadn't eaten any food yet. Plus, this warm sensation actually gave him more of an uneasy feeling, rather than any queasiness.

No sooner had he sat down than the bartender, wearing possibly the same apron as he had a few days earlier, said to him gruffly, "Hey, no kids at the bar! Take a seat at a table and I'll be with you when I can."

Christian turned to find a table and saw four upperclassmen sitting at one. The tallest one and the one next to him, who had some similar facial features, both had dark brown hair and the other two had black and red hair respectively.

Christian walked over to them and introduced himself.

"Hi, my name's Christian. I'm a freshman this year. Would you guys mind if I sat with you?"

"Nah, that's cool. Pull up a chair," replied one of the boys.

"Did you come in here alone?" asked one of the others.

"Well, yeah," Christian responded.

"Now that takes guts. I'm Jim and that's my brother Pete," replied the first boy, gesturing toward the second boy.

"Those two are Remy and Sergio. Sergio and I are starting our senior year and Pete and Remy are juniors. We've established a pretty good rapport with the bartender, to where he lets us hang out here later than most kids and he'll slip us a mug of beer every once in a while. Sergio and I were just saying that we may have to stop in here for a mug to relax a little before our 'S-80' exams at the end of the year."

"Did you say S-A-T exams? They have those in the magical world too?" asked Christian.

“Let me guess, you either come from a non-magical family or you have a very dominant non-magical parent? Right Remy?” retorted Jim.

“Hey, my father just respects my mother’s opinion on things,” responded Remy.

“That’s because he’s afraid she’ll beat the you-know-what out of him,” quipped Pete.

The four of them started laughing, then Jim responded to Christian’s question.

“What I said was S-8-0 or S-80, not S-A-T. The exam tests how much you’ve learned in your first four years. The school uses the results of the exams to determine what field of study you’re best suited for and should apprentice in during your fifth year.

“Since most of us went to non-magical schools before we came here, we’re all familiar with the SAT test that we’d have had to take in high school. Someone with a sense of humor, some years back, thought our test sounded similar to what the SAT test did in the non-magical world. Plus, you have to score at least 80% in a specialty to be approved to apprentice in it. Thus, the nickname S-80 was born.

“Besides, the real name of the test is the Professional Magic Skills test, but nobody wants to refer to it as the PMS test. You’ll understand why when you’re older.”

“Yeah, I’m hoping to apprentice in Spell Casting, since it leaves me open for numerous job opportunities,” stated Sergio.

“Yeah, but we all know you’d prefer to study under Ms. Callidus,” jibed Jim.

The four boys began to banter amongst themselves and Christian didn’t want to get into a discussion about Ms. Callidus, after the embarrassing encounter he had the previous day.

While the four boys continued their banter, Christian realized that he still had the warm sensation in his chest. The accompanying uneasiness felt as strong as when he first came in. He had just begun to look around the tavern, when he heard Jim say, “What about you, Christian?”

Since he hadn’t heard the question, and hoped that they hadn’t asked him about Ms. Callidus, Christian responded, “I’m sorry, what was the question?”

“Where had you drifted off to?” asked Jim.

“I’ll bet he was thinking about tonight,” stated Pete.

“Yeah, I’ll bet he was thinking about ... the chair,” Jim added in a tone that caused Christian to look concerned.

“What’s ‘the chair?’” asked Christian.

“The chair’s what they use to determine what dorm you’ll reside in. Back in the early fifties, the headmaster at the time was really into non-magical devices like record players, televisions, and the like. He happened upon an old electric chair ... yes, the kind that they used to kill people. He was so fascinated by this device, that he magically modified it to be able to read into a person’s heart and soul. With the WCA’s approval, they began using it to select the students for their dorms.”

“They also use it sometimes to determine guilt or innocence during the disciplinary boards,” added Remy.

“You’d know,” teased Jim, as the four laughed once again.

Jim then continued.

“The way it works is pretty basic. It searches through your heritage as far back as it needs to find the strongest magical link. Based on the person to whom it links you, it

selects the appropriate dorm. For example, my dad's a witch and my mom isn't, so it selected Pete and me as Vipertooths. Remy was the same. Now, Sergio here, he came from two magical parents, but apparently his father's side of the family's the dominant one as far as magic goes; so he's a Vipertooth too."

"So, you're all in the blue dorm or Vipertooths?" asked Christian.

"Yup. Now, I'm assuming you're from two non-magical parents, based on your questions, right?" asked Jim.

Christian nodded in agreement.

"So, the chair will have to search a little further into your heritage to find where your magical abilities originate from. In general, most kids from non-magical parents end up as Longhorns in the gold dorm. But, I've seen a couple of boys with non-magical parents get selected as Vipertooths, because the magical source was a powerful male witch. And, I've seen a few girls with two non-magical parents get selected as Fireballs, because they had a strong female magical source. If the chair finds that a boy's magical origins come from a female or a girl's from a male, whether from a parent or someone further down the lineage, they usually get selected as Longhorns though. Hopefully, it'll find your magical source is a strong great grandfather or something, so you can be a Vipertooth with us.

"I just hope it doesn't have to search too long to find your source though."

"Why?" asked Christian, very interested.

"Well, because of what happened back in, I think it was 1979," said Jim, looking up in the air as if trying to read something on the ceiling. However, Christian didn't notice the elbow Jim gave to Pete.

"Oh, yeah. I'll bet that wasn't pretty," added Pete.

"What happened?" asked Christian, now very, very interested.

"Well, it seems there was this boy who had two non-magical parents. When they hooked him up, the chair started to do its thing. It usually takes the chair less than ten seconds to find the magical source, but with this boy, it went beyond the ten-second mark. When it reached the twenty-second mark, the chair began to vibrate. And, when it reached thirty seconds, somehow the chair returned to its original state and electrocuted the kid right in front of the whole school."

Christian sat there with his mouth open in surprise, while the four boys watched him. After a moment of thought, Christian sat back in his chair and said, "You almost had me going there."

At that, the four boys burst out with laughter, joined by Christian.

Christian ate his lunch and enjoyed talking with the four boys for a few hours.

Then, Sergio jumped up and said, "Oh my gosh, it's quarter to four. We gotta go."

As they all got up from the table, Jim leaned toward Christian.

"Pete and Sergio are on the Quodpot team. Remy and I are floor leaders for our class, so we need to make sure everything's going alright with everyone's arrival."

So, the four of them started toward the door and motioned for Christian to join them. Christian threw his money on the table and turned to follow. The uneasiness grew stronger from the warmth in his chest as he neared the door. He hesitated and looked around. Other than the bartender, he could only see two other men in the

tavern, seated at the bar. As Christian reached for the door, he glanced over in the corner and, for the first time, noticed someone sitting there. The corner's darkness kept him from seeing any of the person's features though.

Christian continued out of the door. And, once outside, the warmth and uneasiness subsided.

The five of them hurried back to the school grounds.

"See you guys later," Pete and Sergio hollered, just before they bolted for the Quodpot field.

"We'll see you tonight. I hope you get selected as a Vipertooth and, I hope your selection doesn't go thirty seconds," Jim said with a grin.

Jim and Remy waved as they walked into the school. Christian waved back, and then turned to look around for Gwen and Penny. He couldn't see Penny anywhere and assumed she still needed more recuperation from the earlier incidents. Gwen had returned to the Mag Ag booth. So, Christian strolled over to ask if she wanted to go watch the Quodpot practice. She hesitated at first, but finally agreed.

As the two of them walked over to the bleachers, Christian noticed that Gwen held a uniform in her arms. Apparently, the cheerleading squad chose her to join.

They climbed the stairs of the bleachers, which took nearly a minute since they had to climb nearly a hundred steps. At the top, they began looking for a good place to sit, when a voice cried out, "Christian, up here."

He turned to see Penny waving from about twelve rows up. So, since most of the bleachers remained empty, they just climbed the seats.

Judith sat with Penny, so Penny introduced her to Gwen. Pleased to see Penny with another friend, Gwen expressed genuine pleasure to meet Judith.

Christian's concerns that they couldn't see the field from these seats soon disappeared, as eleven people came shooting out on brooms from below the bleachers. The uniforms they wore looked like they had padding in them, although not a lot of padding. Regardless, Christian thought they looked more like flying football players than flying soccer players.

One took a position floating directly over a large cauldron sitting atop the platform at the end of the field.

Four others formed a diamond shape. The lowest member floated at just about the level of the first row of the bleachers. Two members hovered twenty to thirty feet higher, the field width apart, and the fourth floated directly above the first, but between thirty to forty feet higher than the middle two players. They formed this diamond about twenty yards in front of the cauldron platform.

About twenty yards in front of the diamond two other people soared back and forth in continuous motion from one side of the field to the other, up and down, every which direction.

Three of the last four, located at about mid-field, created a triangle. The person representing the bottom point of the triangle hovered at about the same height as the bottom person of the diamond. The fourth person in this formation positioned herself in the center of the triangle.

That person shouted something and all of the players began to move.

The person by the cauldron began doing loops around it, diving beneath it, and back above it. The players forming the diamond began shifting positions, reshaping the pattern they formed, but always returned to the shape of the diamond. The three players forming the triangle began making the triangle rotate, like a pinwheel, while moving forward. The player in the middle would jet outside of the triangle forming a smaller triangle with two of the other players in this group. They did this all while tossing the ball, or quod, amongst themselves. Every now and then, one of the two players from the middle positions would shoot through the center of the triangle like a bullet, and then return to the middle area. When the triangle had reached halfway between midfield and the opposite end of the field, one of the mid-fielders shot through the triangle and, this time, they threw the ball to her. She zoomed toward the cauldron at the other end and tossed the ball into it with a splash, as the cauldron apparently held some sort of liquid in it.

Christian watched perplexed by the whole spectacle.

First, to see people actually flying on brooms he found amazing. The players controlled the brooms like part of their bodies. They could float, fly as fast as a bullet, and stop almost immediately. They could do barrel rolls, loop-de-loops, figure eights, and several other maneuvers, while remaining on the brooms.

The practice went on for an hour, all the while changing the formations and the attack runs. Then, they changed and the offensive six tried to score off of the defensive five. Frequently, the offense would make it past the four defensive players, but the skill of the person guarding the cauldron blocked the players from getting the ball into it. In fact, during one of the runs, one of the midfielders zoomed past the cauldron because he didn't have a clear shot at it. On the return pass, he tried a second time, but to no avail. The player realized he wouldn't get a clean shot and didn't have time to pass it to anyone else, so he tossed it into the open air, where it exploded.

When practice ended, the team floated into single file and flew by the bleachers to wave at the spectators. Christian recognized Pete as the male midfielder and Sergio the cauldron or pot tender. As the rest of the team soared into the bleacher tunnel, the team captain waited behind. She floated above the bleachers and shouted, "If anyone's interested in joining the team, we're always looking for new talent. See you all later."

With a quick wave to everyone, she performed a huge loop-de-loop over the bleachers and zoomed toward the bleacher tunnel at the end.

As soon as the captain had disappeared into the tunnel, Judith stood up and said, "You guys enjoy yourselves and I'll see you inside for the feast."

Then, she walked down the bleacher seats and toward the stairs.

Christian, Gwen, and Penny decided to head down to the field rather than sit up in the bleachers for the remaining fifteen minutes or so. It actually took them several minutes to make their way down from the bleachers and onto the field. Once there, Christian kept looking up, picturing all of the maneuvers the Quodpot team had just done overhead.

"So, do you think you'll join the Quodpot team?" asked Gwen, seeing how impressed Christian looked.

“No, I don’t even know how to fly and it looks like these guys have been doing it for years.”

“That may be true, but some of them have only been doing it since they started here. I know that Paula the mid-fielder didn’t even know people could fly on brooms before she started here, and now look at her,” Gwen explained.

“I could teach you,” interjected Penny.

“Well, I could too,” Gwen snapped.

“But I’m not interested right now, ok?” Christian interrupted.

The three stood there in silence for several minutes with the growing crowd of freshmen, until Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor exited from the bleacher tunnel.

“Good evening everyone,” Mr. Brown began.

“Good evening, Mr. Brown,” they replied in chorus.

“Well, at least you’ve proven you can learn quickly,” he said with a grin.

A few nervous chuckles came from the students.

“Is everyone here?” he asked more to Ms. D’Amor, but still facing the students.

“Yes, Assistant Headmaster,” Ms. D’Amor replied in a clear voice.

Then, in a whisper she added, “Except for Derick Foulmoth.”

Mr. Brown acknowledged that he understood.

“Before I leave you in Ms. D’Amor’s hands, I want to make some things clear in your minds. This weekend has been quite casual and relaxing, but once you walk through the doors of the dining hall this evening, you’re required to abide by the rules, regulations, and guidelines established by the school’s administration. Any breaches will result in possible severe penalties, depending on the infraction. I suggest you become intimately familiar with these, if you haven’t already done so. If you have any unanswered questions, now’s the time to ask them?”

If the students hadn’t been nervous before, they definitely felt so after this speech. As a result, no one made a sound.

“Very well, I’ll see you all in the dining hall. Ms. D’Amor, they’re all yours. Prepare them for their journey,” he concluded.

Then, he turned, shot Ms. D’Amor a wink, which caused her to smile, and departed through the bleacher tunnel.

“Everyone, please put these hooded robes on and, if you have any hair decorations, please remove them.”

Each student grabbed one of the robes draped over Ms. D’Amor’s arms.

As Christian put his on, he knew the robe would drape on him as it appeared about five sizes too large. However, once he put it on, the robe began to shrink until it fit perfectly. He glanced over at Gwen, who had grabbed a robe that fit her very snugly and hung a foot too short, but it grew in size until it also fit perfectly.

Once everyone had donned one of the robes, each emblazoned with the school crest on the left breast, Ms. D’Amor gave further instructions.

“We’ll line up in two columns and march up to the front door. When the doors open, we’ll continue inside in those two columns. Once in the front doors the dining hall doors will open. Here is what I want you to do.”

With her wand, she drew three parallel rectangles in the air. They hung there in mid-air as she explained.

“These represent the three dining tables, one for each dormitory,” she said.

Then, she drew dotted paths going from the dining hall entrance through the tables, one column going on each side of the middle table. The dots, on their own, proceeded through the rectangles and formed up in one row at the other end. During this procession of dots, Ms. D’Amor told the students to form up in front of the tables and turn to face the dining hall door in which they had just entered.

“You’ll see the faculty and staff seated at their own table on an upper level of the dining hall behind you. Do NOT turn around to look at them. The ‘Chair of Truth’ will be located on the upper level, in front of the faculty and staff table, facing the student body.

“You’ll be called up, one-by-one in reverse alphabetical order, to sit in the chair. Once the chair has determined in which dormitory you’ll reside, you’ll exit the chair and join your new dormitory brothers and/or sisters at the appropriate table. Are there any questions?”

Again, no one made a sound.

“Then let’s form our two columns. While you’re together in the columns or in the row in front of the student body, I do NOT want any horseplay or fidgeting. Is that clear?”

They replied at once, “Yes, Ms. D’Amor.”

Once they had formed two columns, she stepped in front to lead and shouted, “Hoods up. Follow me.”

They were on their way.

The Night of The Great Feast

Dusk had fallen as they lined up in front of the school's large entrance. They stood there for what seemed like hours, but really just a few minutes. Then, the doors began to open. "Remember split the columns through the tables and line up in front of the tables facing the students. And, no fidgeting or horseplay," Ms. D'Amor said one last time.

She turned and marched them into the school.

They had dimmed the entry hallway lights to almost pitch-blackness. The dining hall doors began to open as Ms. D'Amor drew close.

Loud rumbling noises erupted and streaks of light flashed from within the dining hall. Although the freshmen concentrated on walking through the tables without stumbling over themselves or someone sitting at the tables, they all frequently stared up fascinated by what took place overhead.

The noise they heard came from a thunderstorm that had manifested within the hall up near the ceiling. Dark clouds rolled along about ten feet below the ceiling, while lightening flashed here and there just above them. The lightening lit up the dark clouds below and, every once in a while, would strike down through them. However, it would stop several feet above everyone as if an impenetrable field kept the lightening from reaching the floor. While this light show took place, rumblings of thunder boomed, echoing and reverberating off of the dining hall walls.

These visual and sound effects increased the freshmen's anxiety, already high from the unknown activities that would soon take place.

Christian also tingled from anxiety, but remained fascinated by the spectacle above. As they neared the front of the dining tables, Christian finally looked toward the front of the hall.

Three steps the width of the dining hall led up to a raised level, which took up about one quarter of the whole dining hall. An elongated, arch-shaped table, similar to the shape of a drawer handle, stretched across the back half of the upper level. Over a dozen faculty and staff members sat behind the table. This included most of the people that Mr. Davis had introduced to the freshmen yesterday except Tatu, the six teachers from the tour, Mr. Brown, and Mr. Davis. Mr. Davis sat in the middle seat of the table, with Mr. Brown on his right.

"The empty seat next to Mr. Brown must be for Ms. D'Amor," Christian thought.

Directly in front of Mr. Davis, but just three feet or so from the stairs, a chair loomed over the freshmen. It looked exactly like the pictures of the old style electric chairs with one modification. What looked like a traffic light, turned on its side, lay on top of the chair's back. However, the three colored light bulbs in it were red, yellow, and blue.

Ms. D'Amor climbed the stairs, stood just in front of the chair, and motioned for the freshman to line up along the bottom of the stairs, as she had instructed earlier. Once they had all lined up and facing the students seated at the three long tables, Ms. D'Amor began to speak loudly so that everyone could hear her over the thunder.

"We have new blood wishing to join us at this distinguished academy of knowledge. What say you?"

In chorus, everyone, students and adults, responded, "Let it begin."

Ms. D'Amor then explained to the freshmen, again loud enough for everyone to hear.

"I will call your name and you will come forth to sit in the Chair of Truth. The chair will search into your hearts and souls, and determine which of our illustrious student residences you are worthy to join. The choice of the chair is a sacred and binding decision, that no one can question or change. We call forth, Zimmerman, Patricia...step forward and take your place in the Chair of Truth."

While Ms. D'Amor spoke, Christian had looked around at the rest of the students. They too wore hooded robes with their hoods up. He couldn't see anyone's face, even though they had their heads turned to watch the event. The dimmed wall sconces created shadows that hid the students' faces and these sconces provided the only source of light in the hall other than the periodic flash of lightening.

Christian now watched as his classmate went through the chair process.

Ms. D'Amor lowered the robe's hood, attached the skull cap to the girl's head, and then said aloud, "Chair of truth, reveal!"

As Jim had told Christian in the tavern, it took less than ten seconds. The chair made a chiming sound, similar to the noise a dryer makes when done, and the red light on the traffic light had lit. Once the chair had completed its selection process, Ms. D'Amor unfastened the skullcap and announced, "Ms. Zimmerman, please join your fellow Fireballs."

After saying this, Ms. D'Amor gestured for the girl to take a seat at the Fireball table. While she did, none of the other students at the table moved. They just continued to watch from their hooded darkness.

Christian watched the second student, a boy, go through the process and, this time, the blue light came on with the chime. Once again, the selection process took less than ten seconds. The boy then walked down and joined his fellow Vipertooths at their table.

Christian, fascinated by the thunderstorm overhead, started watching the movement of the clouds. He did this for a minute or two, when he heard Ms. D'Amor say, "We call forth, Torres, Gwenevere...step forward and take your place in the Chair of Truth."

In less than half of a minute, the chair had selected Gwen as a Fireball and she had taken a seat at the table.

Christian thought, "Well, I'll at least have some time away from Gwen when I'm in my dorm."

Then, he thought how he looked forward to living in a bedroom like the one they saw during the tour. He imagined the fun of sharing a room with another boy and becoming great friends. These thoughts and images occupied his mind for a few minutes, until he heard Ms. D'Amor's voice once again.

"We call forth, Humblot, Penelope...step forward and take your place in the Chair of Truth."

Christian watched as Penny walked up and sat down in the chair and Ms. D'Amor, again, fastened the skullcap onto her head. As before, the chair had made its selection within ten seconds. And, shortly thereafter, Penny had taken a seat at the Fireball table across from Gwen.

This result surprised Christian somewhat. He had thought for sure that Penny's magical abilities came from her father. But, apparently, she received them from her mother.

Christian didn't have long to think about this, as Ms. D'Amor's voice soon interrupted his thoughts once again. This time his body also reacted to the interruption, as he heard, "We call forth, Drewell, Christian...step forward and take your place in the Chair of Truth."

As he turned, he glanced at the three remaining girls still standing. He became surprisingly aware of how shaky his legs had become climbing the stairs and how much his anxiety increased as he sat down in the chair.

While Ms. D'Amor fastened the skullcap onto his head, Christian noticed that only one seat remained at the blue table and two spots at each the gold and red tables. That meant he still had the opportunity to be a Vipertooth with the boys from the tavern, although he pretty much expected the chair would select him as a Longhorn.

Christian turned his wrist so that he could follow on his wristwatch how fast the chair made its decision about him. Ms. D'Amor announced, "Chair of Truth, reveal!"

He scanned his watch as five seconds passed and then ten. He looked up and all hoods remained transfixed on him. After fifteen seconds, Christian glanced over at Ms. D'Amor. She looked concerned, but not panicked. He looked at his watch and, just as it reached twenty seconds, the chair began to vibrate. Christian, now with a panicked look on his face, stared up at Ms. D'Amor. She saw his fear and quickly looked up at the faculty and staff table. Before she could do anything, the chime sounded. Christian looked down at his watch. His selection had taken twenty-seven seconds.

He sat in the chair, relieved, basking in the sanctuary of those three seconds. Then, he began to wonder just what would have happened at the thirty-second point.

Several seconds had passed since the chime had sounded and Ms. D'Amor still hadn't unfastened the skullcap. Christian looked up at her and quickly grew concerned.

Ms. D'Amor, with a worried look of her own, kept glancing back and forth from the chair to the faculty and staff table.

Then, Christian looked out at the students. He saw that all of the freshmen either pointed at him, whispered amongst themselves, stared at him, or sat giggling. Some of the other students also pointed or talked excitedly, and some of the boys laughed so hard their hoods fell off of their heads.

Ms. D'Amor began to walk up to the faculty and staff table, when she realized that the skullcap still held Christian into the chair. She quickly unfastened him and then continued her trip up to the table. There, she stood in front of it to talk with Mr. Davis and Mr. Brown.

Christian stood up from the chair and had started to walk down the stairs toward the Longhorn table when he glimpsed the back of the chair and saw what had caused all of the uproar. To his horror, the chair had illuminated the red light.

Christian stood motionless, humiliated. His mind raced.

"How could the chair pick me for the girls' dorm? It must have been a glitch in the chair, which would explain why it had taken so long. They would just have to allow me to do it over."

He waited on the stairs, looking back and forth between the red light and the discussion going on amongst Ms. D'Amor, Mr. Davis, and Mr. Brown. He glanced at the faces of the faculty and staff, which all looked concerned. But, he dared not turn around, knowing that all of the other students still continued to laugh at his predicament.

Christian stood there forever. Or, at least it felt so to him. Finally, Ms. D'Amor turned and walked toward Christian. She stopped just a few feet from him, standing next to the chair. Then, she announced loudly, "Mr. Drewell, please take your seat with your fellow Fireballs."

Christian couldn't believe his ears. He looked at her face and saw her regret, but she still gestured for him to go sit at the Fireball table with the girls.

Christian thought about putting his hood up and closing it tightly around his head, so that only a sliver of view remained for him to see his way down the stairs and to the table. But, instead, he stood tall and turned.

As he turned, he quickly glanced around at the other students. A few of the freshmen continued to whisper and stare at him, and a few of the freshmen girls still giggled. Some of the upper-class students continued to snicker quietly, but they had all either put their hoods back up or quickly did so. The rest of the upper-class students had resumed their positions, hoods up and facing forward in silence.

As Christian trudged toward the Fireball table, he glanced at Gwen and Penny. They looked back with a combination of surprise, concern, and disbelief. Penny held her hands over her mouth, which Christian assumed agape in surprise.

With as much dignity as he could muster, Christian sat down in one of the end seats of the table. Then, he turned toward the stairs to watch the final students selected for their dormitories.

Ms. D'Amor watched Christian with a sympathetic, concerned look. But, when he had taken his seat, she returned to her duties of announcing the next student's name to come forward and sit in the chair.

The Chair of Truth selected the next two girls as Longhorns. The last girl took the last seat across from Christian. Then, Christian remembered Derick's absence from the events.

"The last seat at the Vipertooth table must be reserved for him," reasoned Christian sadly.

With one final glance back at Christian, Ms. D'Amor strode behind the faculty and staff table and took the empty seat next to Mr. Brown.

Mr. Davis stood and, in a loud voice, spoke.

"The Chair of Truth has decided. As it has been for many ages, the decisions are final and shall go unchallenged. Our school has new blood and our student residences have new brothers and sisters. Let us welcome this new life and accept them as our own."

Then, Mr. Davis raised his hands and waved them, as if shooing some bugs away. As he did, the storm overhead ceased, the clouds rolled away, and the ceiling turned into a bright, sunny day. Lastly, a flock of doves flew across the sky and disappeared into the dining hall wall.

At the same time, all of the upperclassmen took off their hoods, stood, and began to sing what could have been mistaken for verses of Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, but turned out to be the school song.

*Bishop school is number one!
It makes magic learning fun!
Halls above to rooms below,
Mixing things and make things grow.
Towers three to make us strong,
Bishop is where we belong.
Witches three founded our schools.
Discipline and Golden Rules.
Seated so to call them all,
Dragon names, they built the walls.
Schools with dual specialty,
Witches Council leads the three.
Salem trials were just wrong.
Proved that we did not belong.
Minimize more consequence,
Sep'rate world just for defense,
Mortals our world won't detect.
Salem victims we respect.*

With the song completed, the upperclassmen left their seats and walked down to the ends of the tables where the freshmen students sat. They either shook hands or patted their new dormitory members on the back and, generally, welcomed all of them...all but one.

The upper-class Fireballs heartily welcomed all of the freshmen girls. Some of them half-heartedly welcomed Christian, either out of concern for him or general politeness, but most of them just turned away.

Christian heard laughter coming from the other tables... and he knew why. But, he ignored the laughter and sat there with as much dignity as he could muster.

Once the congratulations and welcomes for the freshmen had finished, Mr. Davis again addressed everyone.

“The school year has officially begun. To our new freshmen, I would like to say just a few final things: Learn the school’s rules and guidelines well and ensure you follow them; attend all classes and make sure you arrive on time so that you can get the most from each subject; and enjoy your time and experiences here at Bishop by making it something worth remembering.”

He pulled out his wand and declared, “Let the Great Feast begin.”

With a wave of his wand, the tables filled with food. Over the last few days Mr. Brown had done the same out on the Quodpot field, but the larger tables tonight held much more food. Dishes covered the table, frequently overlapping each other. The tables contained every kind of food imaginable: meats, vegetables, fruit, breads, and desserts. Dishes represented various ethnic varieties ranging from spaghetti to curry, from barbecued steak to apple strudel.

Luckily Christian had eaten lunch earlier, because, even with all of this wondrous food, he really had no appetite. A bowl of fried rice sat in front of him, so he dished a spoonful onto his plate, took a bite, and then sat moving it around on his plate with his fork.

He peered up at the faculty and staff table. Mr. Davis stood up, pushed his chair under the table, and leaned over Mr. Brown's chair. Speaking to Mr. Brown, he gestured in Christian's direction and Mr. Brown looked toward Christian too. Mr. Brown nodded his head, as if agreeing to something. Then, Mr. Davis exited the hall using a door in the back left of the room behind the faculty and staff table. Mr. Brown turned and began a deep discussion with Ms. D'Amor, at which time Christian returned to playing with his food.

Just then, from both sides of the table, Gwen and Penny approached.

"Can I get you anything from down the table?" Gwen asked.

"Would you like something to drink?" Penny followed.

Christian shook his head to both.

The two girls squatted down at the end of the table, looking at Christian.

"Everything will work out, I'm sure. You'll see," Gwen consoled.

"We're glad you're in the dorm with us," Penny added with a smile, gesturing toward Gwen.

Christian finally looked over at them, and replied, "Thanks. But, I think I'd like to be alone for the moment."

The girls understood and, hesitantly, returned to their seats.

Christian sat there making faces, shapes, and designs with his food, while running the evenings events over and over in his mind. After about an hour of feasting, Mr. Brown walked forward to the edge of the top step. He stood directly in front of the Longhorn table, just about where the Chair Of Truth had sat earlier that now rested against the right-hand wall.

"May I have your attention?" he began.

Once the ruckus and din of the over two hundred students' voices had subsided, he continued.

"Now that we have enjoyed this great meal together, it's time for you to go to your dormitories, get settled in, and get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow morning will come around quickly and we don't want to have any tardies on our first da," he said with a grin.

"Freshmen please follow your dormitory representatives. They will instruct you on the process of entering the dormitory and familiarize you with where everything is and how to get around. Enjoy the school year."

The representatives, who sat at the far end of the tables, stood up and walked down toward the freshmen. Christian started to get up, when he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Mr. Brown standing behind him, having stepped down the stairs.

"Christian, could Ms. D'Amor and I have a word with you?" Mr. Brown asked, as he gestured toward the back, corner door through which Mr. Davis had exited.

Christian followed Mr. Brown, as the rest of the students departed through the main doors. All of the faculty and staff members had already left their table, some exiting

through the main doors with the students, others through one of the doors in the two corners behind the faculty and staff table.

Christian followed Mr. Brown through the same door that Mr. Davis had used, which opened into an entry room. The right wall had a door leading out to the courtyard and, opposite that door, stairs led down to the stone passageways below. A few bulletin boards hung on the walls with some old announcements for cheerleading practice (the girl in the picture of the announcement kept performing a cartwheel) and for Quodpot practice (the student in this picture kept zooming in and out of the picture on her broom).

Ms. D'Amor sat waiting in one of three chairs in the middle of the room. Apparently, she had conjured them here for this meeting. Mr. Brown gestured for Christian to take one of the seats, so that he would face the two adults.

After they had both taken seats, Mr. Brown began.

"Christian, we want to discuss what happened tonight, of course. We wanted you to know that this has never happened before. We've been using the chair for over fifty years now, and it has never had a glitch or fault like this."

"We mainly want to make sure you understand that what happened is no fault of yours and makes no disparaging statement about you," added Ms. D'Amor.

"Can you explain that to the rest of the students?" asked Christian half joking and half serious, but with a grin.

"I knew you'd handle this very well. Just from the short time I've known you, I've learned that you're a strong young man," boasted Mr. Brown.

"However, we need to be clear about one important thing though. The chair's decision, whether by mistake or not, is final," Mr. Brown added.

And, once he had said it, he could easily see the disappointment in Christian's face.

"I AM sorry Christian. But, when the Witches Council approved the use of the chair back those many years ago, all of the members agreed that the chair's decision would be final and couldn't be questioned," Mr. Brown explained.

"The unfortunate thing is that we currently don't have any accommodations for a boy in the girls' dormitory. But we do, however, think we have a solution," Ms. D'Amor added precariously.

"It would have to be for the full year, until we could look into any possible reconstruction of the tower's floor design; something which would have to wait until summer, when there are no students around," continued Mr. Brown.

"We hope that you agree to it, because ..." Ms. D'Amor started to say and looked at Mr. Brown.

He, scratching his head, finished the statement, "... we don't have any other ideas."

So, the three of them returned to the dining hall, now void of people and food, and proceeded to the Fireball dormitory.

Once they arrived at the dormitory, Ms. D'Amor nearly started to perform the same procedure as Lucy did during the school tour to open the portal, but stopped. Instead she turned to Christian and said, "You should learn this, since you'll need to do it from now on."

She showed him where to tap his wand on the wall, how many times to tap, and what to say. Then, she stepped back and watched.

Christian tapped the wall and said, “apere dicho Ben Franklin.”

The portal appeared and the three of them entered.

Christian started to walk up the stairs, but realized that Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor didn’t follow him.

“We’re not going upstairs?” asked Christian.

“You do have access to the freshman common room. However, we cannot allow you to have access to the girls’ sleeping quarters. So, we’ll be putting up an anti-boy barrier at the two doorways from the common room,” responded Mr. Brown.

“So, where will I be staying?” asked Christian.

“Here,” replied Ms. D’Amor, pointing to the room to the right of the stairs.

“The linen closet?” asked Christian, with a little bit of concern and confusion in his voice.

“Give us five minutes,” posed Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor went into the linen closet, while Christian waited by the still open portal. Then, Christian started hearing popping or cracking noises coming from out in the corridor. He peered through the portal and saw two long shelves filled with linen sitting there, along with a dirty linen cart, and a mop and bucket. Several other things appeared while he stared out at the corridor.

Then, after a minute, nothing else appeared. So, Christian went back over next to the spiral staircase.

After another minute or two, Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor emerged looking tired.

“What do you think?” asked Mr. Brown gesturing toward the linen closet, as Ms. D’Amor stood by the open door.

As Christian stepped in, his eyes widened in amazement.

Without using any spatial expansion spells, the room appeared to be about two-thirds the size of the two-person rooms on the other floors. A canopied bed lay with its headboard against the right-side wall. It looked similar to the ones in the bedrooms above, but possibly a little wider. A nightstand flanked each side of the bed. A corner-styled desk sat in the far-right corner, thereby making this desk almost twice the size as those in the other bedrooms. The room also included the same large wardrobe as the other bedrooms, but next to the wardrobe sat a trunk larger than the ones in the other rooms. Lastly, the standard set of dresser drawers, stood next to the nightstand on the other side of the bed. One last difference, the desk and both nightstands had a lamp on them, mainly due to the room’s one disadvantage.

Very little light filled the room normally. The room contained only one, single-bulb light fixture, which hung directly in the center of the room. A window flanked each side of the corner desk, but measured about a third the size of the windows in the upstairs bedrooms and sat up near the ceiling. This last feature, which meant he had no view outside, gave Christian the impression of a dungeon.

Mr. Brown saw Christian looking at the windows with disappointment. He walked over by and pointed Christian toward a small, fluffy, round rug on the floor underneath the window opposite the door.

"I thought you may want to get some fresh air or look out of the window, during your down time, so I came up with this to help," explained Mr. Brown.

"It's better if you sit, rather than stand, because it may be a little too unstable to stand on," he further explained.

Once Christian had sat down on the rug, with his legs crossed, Mr. Brown gave him one last instruction. "Now say, 'up'."

Christian did so, and the rug began to rise.

"When it gets to where you can see out of the window clearly, just say, 'stop,'" Mr. Brown added.

Christian did and the rug stopped in mid-air, and held fairly steady. Christian could see that this window overlooked the end of the lake and he could just make out the main walk path in the moonlight. Based on the location of the other window, it must look directly out along the front of the school and toward the Quodpot stadium.

Mr. Brown gave one final piece of instruction.

"When you want to come down, just say, 'down'."

Christian did and floated back to the ground.

"So, what do you think?" asked Mr. Brown.

"Excellent," replied Christian, with a genuine smile on his face.

"Before you make a final decision, let me give one downside," warned Mr. Brown.

"You'll have to use the boys bathroom in the entry hallway or upstairs outside of the library and, unfortunately, the boys bathroom in the entry hallway's over by the blue tower. And, the hallways can get rather chilly during the winter. Now, what do you say?"

"I think I'll be able to survive," Christian replied, still smiling.

"Good...good," exclaimed Mr. Brown. "We'll have your bags to you shortly."

As Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor turned toward the door, Mr. Brown turned back toward Christian.

"One other thing, and this is for both of you. During lunch periods, the dining hall gets rearranged into circular table seating. Each faculty and staff member is given eighteen students, six from each dormitory with three from each grade, with whom they have lunch every day. This allows the students to pick the brains of the faculty or staff member during a relaxed period and it allows the faculty or staff member to help guide the students outside of the classroom atmosphere," explained Mr. Brown.

Then, he added something, more toward Ms. D'Amor.

"I was wondering if my three freshmen could be Christian and his two friends. And, they would also be three of the six Fireballs at my table. Do you think we can arrange that?"

She nodded, as Mr. Brown turned toward Christian and said, "If you wouldn't mind."

"It'd be an honor, sir," replied Christian.

"Very well. I'll see you at lunch tomorrow then," exclaimed Mr. Brown.

He and Ms. D'Amor proceeded out of the room and through the portal. Christian heard Ms. D'Amor close it by saying "claude dicho Ben Franklin."

Christian leapt onto his bed and, lying there with his arms behind his head, he began to think.

He had so looked forward to sharing a room with a fellow freshman, getting to know him, and becoming best of friends, since he had never had a best friend of his own age. However, he liked the room.

The ridicule that he would have to endure remained his biggest concern. But, he made a resolution. "I'll become the best witch that ever came through this school. That'll show everyone!"

He appreciated the trouble that Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor had gone through to put this room together and accommodate him. But, in the back of his mind, he wondered if they did it all for nothing. Would he pass all of his classes due to his lack of magical ability? He thought that maybe his weak magical abilities caused the chair's glitch. Maybe the chair couldn't determine what to do with him because of the weakness of his magical origins.

These thoughts started to depress him some. But then, he looked around the room and at the wonders created by magic. He climbed out of bed and sat down onto his floating rug.

"Up," he said.

The rug floated up and when it reached where Christian could see out of the window, he commanded it to stop. He sat there looking at the tremendous view as the last glimmers of sunlight glistened off of the lake.

Christian jerked when a knock came from the door and he fell off of the rug. Luckily, he landed partially on his feet, but stumbled back onto his bottom. With a quick rub to soothe the pain, he walked over and opened the door. Outside sat his bags, which immediately floated into his room on their own. He couldn't tell if they floated by magic or if carried by a ghost. But, both alternatives seemed possible here.

Christian closed the door and unpacked his bags. As he did, he thought about the events over the last two days. He recalled something Gwen had told him this morning, "Cerca Trova is Latin for 'Seek and you shall find.'"

Christian grabbed a piece of paper and wrote, as stylishly as he could, 'Cerca Trova' on it. Then, he set it aside and planned to hang it on the wall once he bought something with which to do so.

He got up from his desk and prepared for bed.

After climbing into bed, he turned on one of the nightstand lamps and began to read through the school handbook. By the time he reached three-fourths of the way through it, his eyes grew too heavy to continue. He turned off the light and then realized he could hear the waterfall outside. Just before the sound of the waterfall put him to sleep, he thought about all of the things he had to tell his mother when he sent his next letter.

An Adventurous First Day

Christian woke abruptly. He had another, very vivid dream. This time, he could only remember flashes of red and green light coming from multiple directions, zipping past his head. He assumed the incident yesterday with Derick Foulmoth caused this dream.

Christian looked at his watch, which read between five and five-thirty. He had his alarm set for seven to ensure he made it to breakfast on time. But, he really didn't know how long it would take him to make his way to one of the bathrooms, get showered, and get dressed. So, he decided to just get up.

Christian grabbed his toiletries, towel, and school clothes, threw on his robe, slipped on his slippers, and plodded out of the dormitory to the bathroom, yawning as he went. He rather easily opened the portal and, luckily remembering what Ms. D'Amor had said last night, closed it behind him.

He walked out into the entry hallway and trudged to the stairs leading up to the library level. Still a little tired, Christian decided to continue over to the bathroom by the blue tower rather than climb up the triple-length flight of stairs.

While he walked along, with not a sound around him, Christian became nervous. Although Mr. Brown instructed him to use the bathrooms in the corridors, the guilt of somehow breaking the rules by being out of the dormitory gnawed at him.

As Christian neared the main entrance, he thought he heard someone say something to him. He would have brushed it off as being tired, but then he heard voices approaching from within the dining hall. Instinctively, mainly because of the thoughts he had just had about breaking the rules, he ducked behind the large statue of Mandrakon.

The elderly man in the picture behind him asked, "Are you supposed to be out of your room?"

Christian shushed the man, who seemed offended by the shushing.

As the dining hall doors opened, Christian could hear a discussion by two men, as they walked across the entry hallway to the front entrance.

"I expect and rely on you to make this happen, Davis. It could be a major step in changing how things operate between the two societies. You can count on my support with your upcoming Council election, IF you keep things running smoothly. I'm sure you know that having me on your side is definitely a benefit. Oh, by the way, nice...uh, school you have here. If you need any more modernizations, just let me know."

Christian peaked out from around the statue and thought the man standing there with Mr. Davis looked familiar. Unfortunately, Christian didn't have time to see him very well before he left through the main entrance. Then, Mr. Davis turned and returned to the dining hall, closing the doors behind him.

Christian stepped out from behind the statue and continued on his way. He tried to remember from where he had seen the man's face, but couldn't recall.

When he finally reached the bathroom, Christian smiled to see that it contained two showers. He thought for sure he'd have to wash in a sink.

Within thirty minutes, he had finished and returned to his room. Once there, Christian gathered his computer and school supplies and placed them into his backpack.

He decided that, from now on, he would take his vitamin here in his room to avoid any discussions with the girls about whether he needed to take it or not.

Gwen and Penny joined Christian at the Fireball table for breakfast.

“So, tell us. Where are you living?” asked Gwen.

“I’m in the Fireball dorm.” Christian replied, with a smirk.

“But we didn’t see you on our floor. Are you on one of the other floors?” Penny continued the questioning.

“You might say so,” taunted Christian.

“Oh, just tell us,” blurted Gwen with a mixture of frustration and anxiety.

“Do you remember the most important room in the dorm, from what Lucy told us during our tour?” he posed.

The girls both shook their heads.

“I’m staying in the linen closet,” he said, now his smirk had changed into a large grin.

The girls both mouthed “The linen closet?” with confused looks on their faces.

“I’ll show you after classes this afternoon. It really is a great setup,” he said, now showing a full smile.

His enjoyment only lasted briefly, as a few Vipertooth boys walked past and asked loudly, “Hey Drewell, how come you’re not wearing a skirt today?”

Behind them, the four boys from the tavern overheard. Jim stepped forward and chastised the other boys, telling them to shut up and get moving. Jim gave Christian a wink, which helped him recover much more easily from the ridiculing.

Once Christian had finished eating more food than he should have, he looked up at the faculty and staff table and noticed Mr. Davis’ absence. Soon after, Mr. Brown stood up and walked to the top of the stairs in front of the students’ tables.

“Let me wish you well on your endeavors this year at our great school. We hope to see exceptional performances from our new students and continued exceptional performances from our returning ones. Let me just remind you all to please check the bulletin boards daily for announcements, extra-curricular activities’ schedules, and any general information that needs disseminating to everyone. This includes the bulletin boards in your dormitories, for dorm-related information, and the main bulletin boards in the entry hallway, for school-related information. Since it’s now, ten minutes until nine o’clock ... off with you to your classes.”

He said this while waving his fingers like whiskbrooms dusting the air.

As the freshmen entered the Alchemy classroom, they noticed that someone had darkened the windows so that hardly any light shone inside. Lights on the walls allowed everyone to see quite well though.

Christian saw that Professor Turnell sat waiting at the front of the room. He looked much better than he did during the tour, so Christian thought he may have guessed correctly and the professor had now overcome his illness.

Once the students had all taken a seat, Professor Turnell began.

“Alchemy of old, in which the search for the elixir of life and wealth beyond imagination, is gone. Today, it is an exact science. Magical ... yes; but a science.

“Some one hundred years prior to the opening of this school, a group of alchemists decided to make a change. Amidst fantastic rumors that someone had actually accomplished the feat on which the old Alchemy was built, these pioneering Alchemists turned their talents toward a more useful, and profitable, venture. This enterprise comprised a significantly advanced form of apothecary work. Where an apothecary may mix various potions and compounds together to make salves and elixirs for everyday use, these visionaries developed techniques for the advancement of magical chemistry; it was science for the sake of magic.

“Their techniques didn’t spread quickly. It really didn’t proliferate until witches had traversed the seas to North America. Once here, because of the lack of magical apothecaries, the witches in the new world fully embraced this new form of Alchemy. By the time the three American schools were founded, this new Alchemy had become the fully developed, exact science that it is today. The exactness can be seen in how the slightest things can ruin a mixture, change results, or turn disastrous.

“I’m sure you’ve noticed the room’s darkened state. Sunlight can be one of those catalysts that could cause disastrous results, as we will demonstrate. Let’s see, I need a volunteer.”

Christian had taken a seat on the end of the first row ... an unfortunate location.

“How about you, uh?” he pointed at Christian, waiting for Christian to reply.

“Drewell, sir. Christian Drewell.”

“Very good, Mr. Drewell. Please step forward. Mr. Drewell...”

“Please, call me Christian, sir,” Christian politely interrupted.

“As you wish. Christian, please put on these gloves,” Professor Turnell instructed, handing Christian a pair of arm-length gloves.

“Now, take these tongs, and the substance held in them, to the back of the room next to that corner window.”

Christian took the three-foot long tongs and carried them to the back of the room.

Professor Turnell then pointed his wand at the window and a hole, about the size of a dime, appeared in the darkened window; thus, allowing full sunlight to shine in through this hole.

“Now, using one hand, extend the tongs to arms’ length and cover your face with your other hand,” instructed Professor Turnell.

Christian complied.

“Now, move the tongs slowly toward the beam of sunlight, while continuing to cover your face.”

Once the substance hit the sunlight, it ignited into a fireball the size of a golf ball. Then, it blew up with a very loud bang. The intensity of the explosion left a mark on the wall and Christian could feel the heat through the glove, although it didn’t burn him.

“Thank you. You may return the tongs back to me, Christian,” said Professor Turnell.

Then, to the class he gave one final warning.

“This is just an example of how dangerous Alchemy can be, if you aren’t on your guard at all times as to the amounts and types of substances you use and the environment in which you work. If it hadn’t been for these dragon skin gloves, I’m afraid we’d be rushing Christian here to the infirmary.”

The rest of the class didn't maintain the level of excitement as the beginning, since it consisted of just getting to know the students and explaining how the class would operate, starting tomorrow. For classroom work, Professor Turnell would create various mixtures, while the students took notes. During the laboratory class, students would attempt to replicate the mixture the Professor had created the previous day.

They would follow this pattern Tuesday through Friday. On Monday's, they would have a catch-up laboratory, where students would try again to create the mixtures they may have had problems with creating the previous week. Anyone who had succeeded in the laboratory sessions the previous week could assist the other students in creating a successful mixture.

This sounded wonderful to Christian, because it reminded him of the precision he associated with Mathematics, where you add x and y to get z . Also, Alchemy didn't seem to require much in the way of magical abilities, which he could appreciate.

World History of Magic had no surprise starts, as Alchemy. Once the students had gone around the room introducing themselves, Ms. Sheyant began instructing them. She started with the first recorded magical rituals and persona of ancient times.

To Christian, this class seemed like just another social studies or history class, in which they would memorize dates, places, and names. The fact that the history covered real witches and magical events and places made it somewhat more interesting though.

After World History of Magic, the class made their way up to the Divination classroom. Christian had mixed emotions about this class. He looked forward to learning about Numerology, but the possibility of having another emotional encounter with Ms. Callidus worried him. The feelings that he developed the day of the tour quickly diminished, but Christian feared that sitting in the room with her would set them off again and that he would go through this cycle of infatuation every day.

As the freshmen entered the classroom, Christian pushed Gwen and Penny toward the seats in the back of the room. Christian noticed that these tables and chairs seemed temporary, as if they could easily be removed. Once everyone had taken a seat, Ms. Callidus entered.

Christian prepared himself for the feeling of infatuation, but it never came. He assumed it must have something to do with their proximity to each other and, possibly, Ms. Callidus' state of mind. He would have checked with Penny, but Christian thought it better not to bring it up at all since he felt nothing this time.

After the students had all introduced themselves once again, Ms. Callidus began.

"During our first semester, we will cover Numerology. The semester will conclude with a final exam, which will take place after the Christmas break. We will then transition to Palmistry with the beginning of the second semester, concluding that class with a final exam at the end of the school year.

"Numerology has been used by witches for more than two thousand years to help people analyze and develop their strengths and talents, overcome obstacles, and chart their future paths. One of the most widely used numerological systems involves extracting three key numbers from a person's name. These three numbers are called the Character Number, the Heart Number, and the Social Number.

“This system is based upon an advancement in numerology made a few hundred years earlier by the Greek sage Pythagoras. He developed the concept that each of the numbers between one and nine has a unique meaning that can contribute to the understanding of all things. We still use the numerology system Pythagoras developed.”

This information immediately caught Christian’s attention, because he particularly enjoyed geometry at his old school. He especially liked triangles and their relationships with the Pythagorean Theorem.

From that point on, he knew he would enjoy the class this semester.

After class, the children made their way to the dining hall.

“So, how have you liked your first morning of magic learning?” Gwen asked Christian.

“It was excellent! I enjoyed these classes even more than I would have enjoyed the class-year equivalent ones at a non-magical school. I also think I’m ready for lunch ... I’m starved!”

As they entered the dining hall, the new design of the dining hall surprised Christian. Round tables had replaced both the long, rectangular tables on the lower level and the arched table on the upper level. Then, Christian remembered.

“I forgot to tell you that we’ll be eating lunch at Mr. Brown’s table.”

“Yes, we know. Lucy told us this morning in the common room. They also posted a list on the common room bulletin board, showing which faculty or staff member each student would be having lunch with,” Penny replied.

Since they would lunch with Mr. Brown, their table sat in the center back of the upper level of the dining hall. As they approached the table, Christian recognized some of the other fifteen students already seated at the table. The four Student Witches Council members, Lucy, Daniel Chin, Clair Daez, and Allen Kahest, sat to Mr. Brown’s right. Chic, the dueling team captain, sat next to the head cheerleader, to whom Gwen gave a quick wave. Christian didn’t recognize the other students.

Mr. Brown signaled for them to take the three remaining seats at the table. As they sat down, Mr. Brown began introductions.

“Now, I know that you three have already met our four SWC members from the tours the other day, but let me introduce you to the rest of the group.”

Mr. Brown then commenced to present the remaining eleven students at the table. Christian had a difficult time keeping everyone straight, but he understood that they all captained or led various teams or groups in the school. Christian suddenly realized the prestige that accompanied sitting at this table.

Once Mr. Brown had finished introducing the other students, he announced that they had the advantage of three freshmen Fireballs joining them at the lunch table this year.

“First, we have Penelope Humblot, who goes by Penny. She has two magical parents, both graduates of our fine school. Her father’s an expert in magical creatures and worked for the Office of Magical Beasts. But now he runs his own business where he helps people with pesky beasts. And, her mother’s exceptional in magical agriculture. They home-schooled Penny on both the non-magical and magical worlds, until she came here to Bishop. So, she’s pretty good at wand use already for someone her age.”

Penny blushed.

“Next, we have Gwenevere Torres, who goes by Gwen. Her mother’s a witch, specializing in magical biology; more specifically, dragons. Her father’s non-magical and works for the Howard Corporation, managing a chemical engineering division. She spent most of her life in Los Angeles, but moved away just in time to be selected to attend our school. She’s better in Mag Ag than most students her age and some older than her; present company excluded Lucy.”

Mr. Brown surprised Gwen with how much he knew.

“Last, but not least, we have Christian ... well, let’s just call him Christian. Both parents are non-magical, although he never knew his real father. He lives with and grew up with his mother and stepfather, who’s also non-magical. He’s a ravenous learner, especially when he enjoys the subject. So, I think we’ll see many good things from Christian. He’s leaning toward specializing in Mag Ag, although Alchemy may be in the running too. Either way Christian, we have the two best in both subjects right here at the table, with Lucy and Allen.”

Christian sat perplexed and amazed at how much Mr. Brown knew, especially since he’d just considered specializing in Alchemy less than three hours ago.

Mr. Brown summoned the food for their table, as the other faculty and staff members had done for their tables already.

While they ate, Mr. Brown tried to get the conversation going.

“So, anyone have any good stories or questions we can discuss?”

“Sir, I heard that there would be a Witches Council election soon. Is that true and is Mr. Davis running for office?” asked Christian.

The question surprised Mr. Brown, especially coming from a freshman and specifically from Christian, who hardly knew the Witches Council existed a few days ago.

“Well, you ARE a quick study,” Mr. Brown replied with amusement.

“Christian, you’re correct. There will be an election next year, but it will only be for the Presidency. The reason for the election is that the current President has decided to make next year his last. In fact, he just made the announcement this morning.

“As for whether Mr. Davis will be running, well of that I’m not sure. He’s been working hard for the council for several years, to put himself in position for an opening. However, I think it more likely that he’d apply for a regional representative position when it should come open. But, that was a very good question.”

The rest of the lunch discussion consisted of how everyone had settled into his or her new dormitory rooms. Christian, with Mr. Brown’s assistance, avoided the discussion.

Soon, lunch concluded and the students left for their next classes.

When the children arrived in the Mag Ag classroom, Professor Gardner had, figuratively speaking, turned it into a greenhouse. Unlike the greenhouses, which held multiple copies of all varieties or types of plant, the professor kept only one copy of many of the varieties here in the classroom. However, having just one copy still filled the front half of the classroom. This only left visibility of his desk and a table in front of it, which had some small plants sitting on it, too.

Gwen wanted to sit in front of the class, but Christian talked her into sitting in the second row, after he saw a six-foot tall plant snap at one of the other students.

Professor Gardner welcomed everyone, and then had each student introduce himself or herself. When Gwen's turn came, Professor Gardner mentioned that he had heard some good things about her knowledge and abilities with regard to Mag Ag.

Gwen's recognition made Christian feel somewhat inadequate, since he hoped to make Mag Ag his specialty too. Although, with Gwen as his friend, he had access to one of the best tutors he could find.

Then, Professor Gardner explained the organization of the course and how he would run it.

"Tomorrow will be your first real Mag Ag class. I will demonstrate in the classroom the proper techniques and methods of handling and caring for a specific plant. You will then be required to repeat these same techniques and handling methods during the laboratory periods, using the same type of plant. This classroom and laboratory process is what we will follow throughout the year, with Tuesday and Thursday as classroom sessions and Wednesday, Friday, and Monday as your laboratory sessions.

"First, we will learn the basics of working with the magical plants. During Wednesday's laboratory, I will give you each a small potted plant. You will follow the procedures and techniques I demonstrate tomorrow to transfer it to a larger pot and aid it in growing. On Friday, you will tend to your plant and prepare it for Monday. During Monday's session, you will prune your plants and prepare the pruned pieces for storage. This is what I will teach you in Thursday's classroom.

"Are there any questions on the basic flow and procedures we will follow throughout the year?" Professor Gardner asked.

When he received no questions, he continued.

"As I had mentioned during your orientation tours, this is your freshmen year and we will only be working with Level I plants. The plants won't be poisonous or animated and will be quite docile, unlike our friend over here," he said pointing at the snapping plant Christian had seen earlier.

Some of the students moaned in disappointment. Gwen moaned the loudest.

"Now, now, you will get to those types of plants soon enough in later years. You must establish a good, sound approach to interacting with and caring for the plants, before you start working with the more dangerous ones. That's what the first year is designed to do.

"Next year, you will work with the more animated plants and some plants with stronger abilities. However, they won't be poisonous or dangerous, and these are referred to as Level II plants. Junior year we will get to Level III plants, which are poisonous. Senior year we'll deal with severely poisonous or dangerous ones, like our friend here. These are the Level IV plants."

After these opening remarks, the rest of the day's class consisted of Professor Gardner describing and showing the students many of the plants they would work with during freshman year. Although Gwen looked barely interested, Penny and Christian both thought they would enjoy Mag Ag or, at least, find it interesting.

When class had ended, the three friends began to walk toward the exit. As they did, Professor Gardner signaled for Gwen to come over.

"I'll meet you in the next class. Save me a seat," Gwen said, as she hurried over to the professor's desk.

The classes up to this point had all focused on ways to understand the magical world or how the students can use the world around them to make or grow something that could aid in creating magic. However, none of these classes appeared to require the student to physically perform magic. Christian still had mixed feelings about the next class though.

Mr. Quazam, during their school tour a few days earlier, had explained that the first year of Spell Casting consisted only of learning a form of basic Latin. However, Christian still had butterflies in his stomach, because he might have to demonstrate an ability to wield magic to the class. More precisely, he'd demonstrate his lack of that ability.

Christian also feared that his inability to wield magic might cause him to fail this class. He had never had this concern before in school and the idea turned his stomach.

Mr. Quazam's area of the classroom looked about as tidy, or untidy, as his office. He had books stacked haphazardly around the floor by his desk, along with various containers, boxes, and chests. And, various papers, books, and objects lay strewn across his desk. He stood in front of the desk during the class, because if he went behind it, especially to sit down, no one would see him.

Gwen entered the room just as Mr. Quazam started introductions. Afterward, Mr. Quazam explained what they would do in class this year.

"I know that some of you are expecting us to immediately take out our wands and start moving, changing, and conjuring various things. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but that would be the worst thing for you; and possibly for all of us. I know that I wouldn't want to have to put out a fire burning on top of your head, when all you were trying to do was make yourself sing," he said with a chuckle, trailed by some chuckles and giggles from the students as well.

"You may ask, 'How could this happen?' Well, because you didn't know the proper way to say or conjugate the verb in the spell. In other words, you'd say 'incino' to make yourself sing."

As he said this, he pointed his wand at a boy in the front row.

The boy immediately started to sing a little ditty. And as he sang, he kept feeling the top of his head.

Then, with another wave of his wand, Mr. Quazam made the boy stop.

"Now if I would have said 'incindo' ..."

As he said this, he pointed his wand toward the rubbish can. Immediately, the paper in the can burst into flames.

"... Mr. Stewart would have had something different to sing about."

Again, chuckles and giggles broke out in the class, except for the boy, Bob Stewart, in the front row.

With another wave of his wand, the flames went out, leaving a small trail of smoke rising from the can.

"This is why you must learn the origins and pronunciation of spells, before you try to use them. Dropping a letter, adding a letter, picking the wrong spell, mispronouncing a word, even emphasizing the wrong syllable, could lead to disaster!

“Now, I’m sure some of you’ve been casting spells for years. Most of the time I’m sure your spells worked, but who here hasn’t had one fail. Go on raise your hands.”

Only Derick Foulmoth dared to raise his hand.

“We won’t even go there, Mr. Foulmoth. The point I am trying to make is, even those of you who’ve been doing magic haven’t always succeeded one hundred percent of the time; and that was using the same handful of spells. But, you’ll be learning hundreds, even thousands of new spells, while you’re here at Bishop. Therefore, for a spell to result in the proper, and more importantly, the exact way you want it to work, you must first understand what the spell will do and how to say it correctly.

“So, this year, we’ll be studying a form of basic Latin. It’s an old dialect of Latin, used in the early formulation of magical spells and writings. You’ll notice that there’s a slight difference between Latin and magical Latin, so don’t rely on modern Latin dictionaries. Always ensure you are using the magical dialect.

“Once in a while, throughout the year, I may allow one or two of you to attempt a spell using your wand. However, these will be far and few between, for the safety of Mr. Stewart.”

The class chuckled and giggled again, including the boy in the front row. The anxiety in Christian’s stomach that had significantly diminished increased slightly.

After the spell casting introductory speech, Mr. Quazam transitioned to teaching a few Latin verbs, demonstrating how combining each with various other words created different spells using the same conjugation of that verb.

Christian left the class smiling. He seemed pretty confident that he could pass the class after all, since they’d learn only the basics and not actually perform magic spells. He just hoped that Mr. Quazam wouldn’t select him to demonstrate casting any during the year.

Penny and Gwen entered their last class very excited about learning and interacting with the magical creatures. Christian, on the other hand, approached the class with some nervousness, having never interacted with any magical creatures prior to the pet store a few days earlier. Plus, he doubted they would deal in school with animals as docile as pet store creatures.

Ms. Mander stood bent looking into one of the small crates she had in front of the room as the students filed in. Once the students had taken their seats, she stood up and, excitedly, started to describe where she had picked up the creatures she had in the crate. She had talked for about three minutes, but stopped suddenly.

“Oh dear, I nearly forgot to find out who you all are. Let’s start here and make our way around to the back.”

Each student announced his or her name, where they grew up, and in which dormitory they lived, as they had done before in all of the other classes. Then, Ms. Mander told them some similar information, such as when she graduated from Bishop and the various jobs she’d had over the years.

With each job, she went into great detail about where the job took her, the magical animal encounters she experienced, and the people with whom she’d worked, to include Penny’s father. She described many other details and some side stories

associated with these jobs. Before they knew it, she had talked for nearly the whole class period, leaving only five minutes left.

"Oh my, how the time has flown!" she exclaimed to a class of students, two-thirds of whom had fallen asleep or fought to stay awake.

"Quickly, let me tell you how class will progress through the year. Starting tomorrow, since I've unexpectedly run out of time today, we will begin with our first Level I magical creature. I won't tell you what it is, so as not to spoil the surprise. We'll only be studying Level I creatures this year, so sorry for all of you gung-ho animal tamers, hoping to be working with Griffons or Manticores.

"During this first semester, we will be studying those Level I creatures that are indigenous to the United States. During our second semester, we will study those creatures here in the United States that have resulted from magical experimentation.

"The class will consist of me showing you the way to handle or care for the creature. Then, you will all come up front to our worktable here and, either on your own or in pairs or groups, demonstrate what I've shown you.

"Any questions? Ok, see you all tomorrow."

Christian thought, "This could be either a very interesting class or quite a waste of time, if she gets off on her side stories too often."

On their way out of the classroom, Ms. Mander asked Penny to stay after.

"I'll meet you two in the common room at ten to six," Penny said quickly as she made her way to the front of the classroom.

As Christian walked along, he realized that he actually had enjoyed classes and the day's experiences. He finally believed that maybe he really did belong here, and maybe he would learn to use and grow into his magical abilities.

"Meet you in the common room at ten to six," Christian said to Gwen.

Then, he waved goodbye, hurried out of the main entrance, and continued into town, so that he could send his mother a letter describing all of the things that had happened over the past twenty-four hours.

When he arrived in town, he grabbed a seat outside of the coffee shop. He pulled out some paper and a pen from his backpack, and began writing. He included the Quodpot practice and the events from the Great Feast ... even the chair's decision to place him into the girls' dormitory. He included a bit about his bedroom and how it helped, a little, in making up for the chair's selection. Christian described the things he had learned today and his expectations for the rest of the year. By the time he had finished, Christian had written four pages.

He proceeded into the post office, purchased an envelope, and sent his letter off to his mother. Once the raven had flown away, he hurried back to the school to prepare for dinner.

As soon as he had stepped through the main entrance doors, a senior Vipertooth came walking by.

"Aren't you the freshman who got picked for the girls' dorm?" he said with a smirk.

"Yes, what about it?" retorted Christian.

"Well, I have a question for you," the boy replied.

Christian waited for some taunting question about his dormitory selection. But, the question he received caught him by surprise.

“Where are the results of all disciplinary boards posted?”

After an initial moment of confusion, Christian understood the situation. The boy, testing Christian’s knowledge of the school handbook, planned to cast a spell on him if he didn’t answer the question correctly.

He thought about it for several seconds, while the boy chanted, “Time’s running out.”

Just as the boy reached to pull out his wand, Christian remembered the exact quote from the handbook.

“The Assistant Headmaster shall rule on the matter and shall post his ruling in the designated Discipline Board Results section of the display case in the main entry hallway. Over there,” Christian responded, pointing toward the glass-encased bulletin board to the right of the dining hall.

In a huff, the boy stormed off toward the blue tower. Christian gave him a silent raspberry as he went.

Christian returned to his room at just about five thirty. After emptying out his backpack, he decided to head upstairs to the common room. When he arrived, a couple of girls sat at one of the tables chatting. They immediately stopped when Christian entered the room. They gave him somewhat of a disgusted look and left.

Christian thought to himself, “It’s not my fault I’m here, but I am. So, deal with it.”

He checked out the bulletin board located on the narrow walls between the two entryways from the stairway landing. The girls had mostly hung personal notes on the board. One of the girls had lost her makeup brush, which she last saw dancing off of one of the sinks in the south bathroom. Another had put up a note requesting that talking in the common room should cease by ten o’clock. On this note, someone had drawn a mouth and a tongue, which continuously waggled rudely up and down. Someone had also hung a small poster of some young guy singing into a microphone and, although Christian heard nothing, the guy in the picture mouthed a song and danced around in the poster.

The board held only three actual notices. One, which quickly caught Christian’s attention, announced that flying lessons would be provided every Tuesday and Thursday night at seven o’clock for the next two months for those interested. Christian considered signing up, but decided he would wait and possibly take the lessons later, since he really didn’t know how much homework he would have these first few months. However, in the back of his mind, the thought of flying on a broom scared him a little.

Another one requested volunteers to represent the dormitory on the school’s 300th Anniversary committee. The notice had lines on the bottom for people to write in their names, although no one had volunteered as of yet. Since Christian had already signed up to be on the student committee, he thought he would sign up to represent the dormitory at the same time. But, the notice had no pen for him to use. Then, he noticed at the bottom it said, ‘Touch here if interested.’ So, using his index finger, he touched the notice and his name began to print itself on one of the lines, as if someone was writing it.

The last notice asked for nominations for the dormitory representative on the SWC and the floor or class leader. Christian thought about the floor leader position momentarily. But, he quickly reconsidered, since he didn't even have access to most of the dormitory floor. However, this did remind him that Lucy, the SWC president, said that she would try to get him on her student staff. Something he had forgotten about at lunch today, but about which he would have to remember to ask her.

Penny joined him in the room just a few moments later. He told her about the Vipertooth senior testing him, so they quizzed each other on various aspects of the handbook. Christian impressed Penny by the way he could remember whole verses and phrases.

At nine minutes until six o'clock, Gwen finally arrived and they started down the stairs.

"Oh, would you like to see my linen closet?" he asked them with a smirk.

"Yeah!" they both replied enthusiastically.

When they arrived at the bottom of the stairs, Christian said, "Ok, close your eyes and picture a linen closet in your mind."

As they did this, he guided them into his room. Once inside, he said, "Ok, open your eyes."

For a moment, the two girls could only utter 'Whoa' and 'Wow.'

Then, Gwen said smartly, "This isn't fair, I want this room."

She said it with a chuckle, but Christian and Penny knew her comment held a bit of truth and jealousy.

Christian decided not to show them the floating rug just yet. It would probably make Gwen more jealous and maybe even Penny a little envious too. He did offer to store stuff in his closet or trunk if they wished. Gwen quickly took him up on this, as she explained how all of her stuff just wouldn't fit into the storage the school provided.

Although not nearly as extravagant a meal as the Great Feast the night before, they had an outstanding dinner with food aplenty. The downside included some additional teasing from various directions as Christian sat at the Fireball table for dinner. The teasing would continue at meals and in corridors for the next couple of weeks, but Christian simply ignored his tormentors. After that, the novelty wore off and the taunting subsided for the most part.

After dinner Christian, Penny, and Gwen adjourned to the common room to discuss the day's classes and what they each expected tomorrow. Then, they played a few hands of Snip, Snap, Snorem. Finally, Christian bid Penny and Gwen goodnight and told them he'd see them at breakfast.

After a quick trip to the boys bathroom, dodging a few seniors in route to avoid more questions on the handbook, Christian returned to his room. Although he had no homework, he wanted to link into the school's computer network to see if he could read ahead on some subjects.

He took his computer out of his backpack and turned it on. While it warmed up, he decided to go check out his view of the lake. He sat on his rug, told it to rise, and, a few

moments later, to stop. Then, he sat there, arms on the windowsill, looking out over the glimmering lake.

“This is the life.” he said almost in a sigh.

He sat transfixed by the kaleidoscope of colors that streaked across the sky as the sun, fully hidden by trees, set in the west. He watched as a flock of geese flew over, heading south. Once they had passed, one lone bird soared high in the sky, circling the lake. Then, it dove directly for the water. Christian anticipated seeing it grab a fish, but it leveled off about three feet above the surface. So enthralled by the event, Christian hadn’t realized the bird now flew directly at him.

As it came closer and closer, Christian wondered if it planned to fly right into the window. At twelve feet from the window the bird flapped its wings to slow itself down. Unfortunately for Christian, he had already tried to duck out of the way. With a thud, he fell off of the rug and onto the floor.

He stood up rubbing his backside and, as he adjusted his glasses, looked up to see the bird now perched on the windowsill. He started to call for the rug to lower, so that he could fly up to see the bird, but it flew down and landed on his dresser.

The beautiful hawk, around a foot and a half in height, steadied itself on his dresser. It had the usual dark brown wings and white specks or bars covered a brownish-tan body, except for the head. The top and back of the head, along with its shoulders, had a scarlet colored plumage. As Christian examined the hawk, it examined him through unblinking eyes.

“Hello. Are you hungry?” Christian asked.

He had brought a sandwich and banana back from dinner as a snack for later. He took the meat out from between the bread and, carefully, reached out toward the bird. It gently took the meat in its beak, bent down holding the meat with one claw, and tore off a piece. The hawk continued doing this until all of it had been consumed.

Then, Christian carefully walked over to the bird, with his hand stretched out open. The hawk watched, but made no ill movement toward him. Christian stroked its head and the hawk let out a sound mixed between a low, sharp screech and a coo. As Christian stepped forward, the hawk lifted its left leg, which startled him at first. Then, he realized that the bird wanted to stand on his arm. He hesitated thinking how one wrong move could mean the bird’s talons would dig into his arm, but he decided to chance it.

The hawk gently stepped onto his arm and rubbed its head against his shoulder. After Christian petted it on the head for several minutes the hawk lifted its leg again and Christian set it back onto the dresser. When Christian stepped back, the bird leapt up into the air and landed on the windowsill. It looked back once, and then leapt out of the window. Christian thought about jumping on his rug, but decided the hawk would have flown out of site by the time he got up to the window.

He sat on his bed, thinking about the encounter.

“Everything’s just magical about this place.” he thought.

After a few minutes of reminiscing, he sat down at his desk and surfed the school’s network. He found the network easy to navigate, but couldn’t find much material to read ahead or at least that he would have understood. So, he closed up his computer.

He changed for bed, grabbed his handbook, and sat in bed reading from it. Sleep soon approached, so he set the book down, removed his glasses, and turned out the light.

His last thought, as he closed his eyes, "Who knows, maybe I'll dream about soaring through the sky on the back of a giant hawk."

Routines, Predictions, and A Hawk

Christian didn't remember anything about his dream when he awoke the next morning, this time to his seven o'clock alarm. He gathered up his things and hustled out to the bathroom. To avoid a possible encounter with any upperclassmen, he decided he would start using the one on the library level.

He returned to his room, gulped down a vitamin, packed his backpack, and departed for the dining hall. On his way to the dining hall, after dodging some students rolling down the hall on their wheel-heeled shoes, he stopped to look on the announcement boards in the entry hallway. There, he found the two he sought.

The Mag Ag club would conduct its first meeting Wednesday evening at seven in Greenhouse #2. The second announced that the OWL support group would visit the OWL on the last Saturday of the month and students should gather in the dining hall for a two o'clock departure.

As Christian turned to go into the dining hall, he met up with Penny. Gwen joined them a few minutes later.

During breakfast, he told them about his encounter with the hawk. They both thought that having a hawk fly into his window sounded exciting, but odd.

Then, he asked a question that had slipped his mind yesterday.

"So, what are your roommates like?" he asked them both.

"You're looking at her," replied Gwen, nodding her head toward Penny.

"You two are roommates?" Christian chuckled more strongly than he had meant to.

"Yes," Penny replied, almost sighing the word in acquiescence.

"That's excellent," Christian said trying to stop laughing.

"Yes, we'll either become best of friends or we'll kill each other," stated Gwen, also sounding resigned to the situation.

Christian stuck a muffin in his mouth to keep from letting out a very audible guffaw.

Christian found Alchemy class very interesting and couldn't wait until tomorrow when he would get the opportunity to make Mallowase, the compound that Professor Turnell had demonstrated.

World History of Magic continued where the lesson the day before ended. And, although Christian liked learning about the ancient aspects of magic, the class did seem to drag along.

Christian found Numerology intriguing. Ms. Callidus showed them how to calculate the three numbers based on a person's name, using Pythagoras' method, as she had explained the day before. She had each student calculate his or her numbers and, using the school's computer network, determine what these numbers meant.

Christian used his current full name of Christian Drewell. The numbers he calculated fit him in some aspects, but not in others. Then, he tried using just the name Christian. These numbers also didn't seem to describe him completely. He looked at all of them together and thought, "Well, I guess if I throw in enough numbers, I can come up with any description. I wonder if Pythagoras knew as much about this stuff as he did geometry."

As class drew to a close, Ms. Callidus explained that for the next two weeks, the class together would examine the numbers generated for each student. She said they would go in alphabetical order, which Christian calculated to mean he would do his tomorrow. He hoped that maybe, then, she would help clarify his confusion.

After class, Christian, Gwen, and Penny made their way to the dining hall and took their seats for lunch. Once all of the students had arrived, Mr. Brown conjured up the food and asked if anyone had any interesting experiences or questions. They all looked at Christian, but he had none today. So, the conversations dealt mainly with plans for the various clubs and teams and school life in general, as expected during the lunch sessions.

After lunch, Christian briefly talked with Lucy about joining her SWC staff. She said she seemed confident she'd get an approval to bring him on board, but she had to check to see what responsibilities he'd have and would let him know soon.

In Mag Ag, Professor Gardner demonstrated the proper technique of repotting, and the associated watering and fertilizing required, for Elf Leaf. The students would have the challenge to perform these techniques tomorrow in the laboratory and Christian thought for sure he could do it.

Christian entered Spell Casting with less trepidation than he had the day before, knowing now that the first year would require more intellectual ability than magical. This allowed him to relax and enjoy the class more, learning the proper pronunciation and conjugation of the Latin verbs for 'to see' and 'to move.'

Magical Creatures class turned out much more interesting than the previous day. The freshmen could immediately tell a difference from the moment they walked into the classroom.

A black cat sat on the edge of Ms. Mander's desk watching the students as they filed in, especially if one of them moved suddenly.

"I'd like to introduce our first animal to study...this is Balderdash, my cat," explained Ms. Mander, as most of the class let out a loud noise of disappointment and others laughed.

"Now, now, none of that. How many of you have had or currently have a cat at home?" Ms. Mander asked.

All but four students, which included Christian, raised their hand in response.

"Ok. Now how many of you know that cats can be used to deliver mail and messages to neighboring witches?" she asked.

Almost everyone raised their hands, some of them adding a sigh of boredom.

Ms. Mander had stepped next to her desk and began to stroke the cat as she asked the next question. "How many of you know that a cat can aide a witch to perform a spell, make a potion, or grow a plant more successfully by adding their own magical qualities with those of the witch; thus, increasing the overall magical abilities of the witch?"

Only about ten students raised their hand.

Christian leaned toward Penny and whispered, "Too bad I can't keep a cat here at school with me. It might help me."

They both snickered, as Ms. Mander asked one final question.

“How many of you know that a cat can help detect and ward off vampires?”

None of the students raised a hand. Some of the students even let out soft responses of “What?”

“That’s correct. And, black cats have shown to provide significantly more assistance in these aspects than other cats,” replied Ms. Mander to the students’ responses.

“This is the type of information which I will impart to you this week. I will teach you all of the largely unknown things about cats and the roles that cats, and the beliefs about them, played in history. Balderdash here will help me demonstrate a cat’s reaction to certain activities, creatures, and personalities. Next week, I will bring in some other cats for you all to work with.”

The interest and the attitudes of the students for the class had changed significantly by the end of Ms. Mander’s introduction.

After classes, Christian decided he didn’t have a lot to tell his mother since yesterday’s letter, so he would wait until tomorrow to send his next one. Then, he could tell her about his endeavors in Alchemy and Mag Ag laboratories.

So, he went to his room, powered up his computer, and began his homework. He had some reading to do for all of his classes, except Divination, and he had to conjugate the Latin verb for ‘to hear’ for Spell Casting. He finished all of the reading within ninety minutes, but didn’t have enough time to do the conjugating prior to meeting Gwen and Penny for dinner. So, he decided to check out the library on the school’s network.

He came across a book entitled ‘The Beginnings of Magic in North America’ which sounded interesting. He read about Percival Pollywog, the first witch to travel to North America.

Percival came over on the Mayflower ‘for the adventure of it.’ Unfamiliar with non-magical ways, he exhibited several instances of magic on the voyage. This inevitably led to everyone linking him to the devil and, shortly after spotting land, they gathered together to apprehend him. He immediately cast a petrification spell on his would-be captors and cast a memory spell clearing him entirely from their memories. Then, magically, he guided and anchored the ship safely near a large rock. He left moments before the petrification spell wore off, leaving no record of him ever having been on the ship.

Christian only had time to read this one story, so he placed a shortcut for the book on his desktop and turned off his computer.

On the way to dinner, Christian and Gwen chatted about the Mag Ag club meeting the next day. As a result, he didn’t see the four Vipertooth seniors standing in the entry hallway, apparently waiting for him. When Christian walked by them, one of the boys said, “Drewell, I have a question for you.”

“Yes, sir,” Christian responded, exasperated.

However, he did have some concerns, since he had only read through the handbook once.

“If a student accumulates two unexcused absence days during the school year for a particular class, what are the two things that could happen to him?” the senior queried.

Christian sifted through his memory for that specific part of the handbook. Then, he remembered that Mr. Davis covered this in his orientation speech. Again, just as the senior began to pull out his wand, Christian responded.

“If a student accumulates, during the school year, two unexcused absence days for a particular class, the student shall serve Saturday morning detention for two consecutive Saturdays or some other form of detention at the discretion of the Assistant Headmaster.”

The senior put away his wand and the group of boys just turned and walked away. Pleased that he had caught at least that part of Mr. Davis’ speech, Christian led the girls quickly into the dining hall.

“Good job. That makes it Christian two, Vipertooshs zero!” exclaimed Gwen, as they sat down at their table.

During dinner, Christian noticed that tonight made the second night in a row that Mr. Davis didn’t eat dinner with them, although most of the other staff members did. He hadn’t eaten breakfast with them yet either, however a few other faculty or staff members had skipped breakfast these first few days too. And, school policy excused the Headmaster from having a lunch table. Christian just assumed that the business associated with the start of the school year might have kept him from participating in the meals.

After dinner, Christian, Gwen, and Penny adjourned to the common room to relax, play some Snip, Snap, Snorem, and get to know each other better. Christian told them about the school and the classes he had in his previous six years, all of which Penny found fascinating. Gwen recalled a little bit about her life in Los Angeles, which Christian and Penny both found interesting. And Penny regaled them, or at least Christian, with stories of the house in which she grew up and the many magical things that she did on a daily basis.

Christian suggested they come visit him and his mother some time. The idea of visiting a non-magical house thrilled Penny.

Discussions then turned to their homework, which Gwen and Penny hadn’t really started yet, so they decided to call it a night.

Once Christian returned to his room, he hurried over to his flying rug and floated up to the window. He looked around for the hawk from the previous night, but saw no sign of it. While enjoying the view, he heard some noise coming from the front of the school. So, he floated down to the floor, and then floated back up to the other window.

He saw some students flying around inside the Quodpot stadium. Each broom held two people. Christian assumed that the instructing student sat in back of the one learning to fly. He really couldn’t see anything clearly, but every so often one of the brooms would quickly dip, as if falling, until the instructor would pull the broom right.

He stayed floating on his rug and watching the aerobatics for several minutes. Then, he got down and finished his homework. Once completed, Christian prepared for bed.

After he had climbed into bed, he pulled out his school handbook and pressed to read through it once again. He even highlighted some important areas and placed marks next to the things on which the seniors had already quizzed him. He would be

more than ready for their next encounter and he had a strange feeling that the encounters would occur frequently.

Christian didn't have to wait long for his next test.

After completing, in record time, his morning ritual of bathing, dressing, and returning to his room for his vitamin and backpack, Christian departed for breakfast by seven forty. He thought he would check the bulletin board for any new postings of interest. He had no sooner turned to look at the notices, when two Vipertooth seniors approached him. Christian recognized one of them as the boy who questioned him at the main entrance on Monday, the same boy who had questioned him the evening before. Christian later found out the boy's name: Sean Geoffreys.

Sean walked up and said, "Drewell, I have a question for you?"

"Yes, sir," replied Christian, this time fully prepared and wearing a smirk.

"What is the DRB and who comprises it?" quizzed Sean.

This time Sean held a piece of paper, apparently with the answer on it, to ensure Christian answered it exactly.

Christian's response, although not immediate, came much faster than the answer he gave during their previous two encounters. He quoted the entire paragraph.

"The Disciplinary Review Board (DRB) is a joint administration and student body chosen in the same manner as the Honor Committee. The purpose of the DRB is to recommend punishment for serious disciplinary matters. The DRB is comprised of two administration members appointed by the Director of Discipline, the Director of Discipline, and four students, typically the student council members. Final authority rests with the Director of Discipline."

Sean and the other boy stood for a moment with a look of surprise on their faces. Surprise quickly turned to frustration and anger and the two boys stomped away into the dining hall.

Christian thought it safer to go into the dining hall, rather than stand out in the entry hallway like a target. He waved to Penny's friend Judith, who sat a short distance down the table with a few of her classmates, as he took a seat. Penny and Gwen soon joined him. Once they did, he told them of his latest handbook test.

"It seems like they have it out for you," commented Gwen.

"Unfortunately, you can't go around trying to avoid all of the seniors. We'll just have to help you keep an eye out and try to avoid as many as possible, especially the Vipertooths," added Penny.

"Thanks," Christian said sincerely.

Several of the freshmen, including Christian, Penny, and Gwen, grouped together and followed one of the other freshmen who said she knew how to get to Alchemy Lab #1; even though Professor Turnell had given them all directions the previous day. The laboratory definitely lay off of the main passageway of the lower level, so much so that the girl they followed even made a wrong turn. She rapidly corrected her mistake and they all arrived on time.

With a quick thanks to the girl, they all grabbed seats at the tables and set up their cauldrons. Christian sat next to Penny and across from Gwen. Another Fireball named Melody Moody, who seemed quite nervous, joined them.

Professor Turnell came in and, without hesitation, commanded, "Using the notes from yesterday, please begin making Mallowase."

He stood in front of the room and watched, periodically walking amongst the tables to get a closer look and instructing a student about to make a vital mistake.

Christian finished in thirty minutes and had completed the task perfectly. When Professor Turnell saw that he had finished so soon and how well he did, he commented audibly for everyone to hear.

"Well done, Christian. It looks like you may have as strong of a knack for making magical compounds as you do for blowing them up."

He said this with a smile, as he patted Christian on the shoulder.

Christian smiled back and continued smiling as he assisted Melody. Gwen and Penny had almost finished, whereas Melody almost added mandrake root rather than ginger root.

After class the students, once again, followed each other like a train back to the main passageway and on to history class. And, once they had completed another tedious history lesson, they proceeded up to divination class.

Christian looked forward to hearing what Ms. Callidus had to say about his numerology interpretations. However, this also meant that she would have to stand in close proximity to him, which could cause another infatuation incident. He knew he couldn't avoid this for the rest of his student life. He would somehow have to learn to overcome his susceptibility.

The first two students described the numbers they had calculated, which Ms. Callidus acknowledged as correct. Then, she had them explain what they thought the numbers had meant. Pleased with their results, Ms. Callidus had only minor corrections to their interpretations.

The third student had miscalculated one of her numbers and, therefore, misinterpreted their meaning. Ms. Callidus corrected the numbers and gave the class a full interpretation of the girl, which seemed to fit her quite well based on what little everyone knew about her.

Now came Christian's turn.

He described the results of using his full name and explained how the numbers and associated interpretations didn't seem to properly describe him. Then, he explained how he did the same with just his first name, as he preferred people to call him, and that it too didn't seem to fully describe him.

"How are they both wrong or are they both right?" questioned Christian.

Ms. Callidus gave him the answer, which included more than he expected.

"Based on how you feel regarding your stepfather, we should not trust in the heart number derived from using his last name. In your mind and actions, your heart number is the one from your first name. This is what drives you to do well in all that you do. The amazing thing is that your social number is the same as your heart number, which

means you do not try to hide who you are. Instead, you want people to accept you for the person you are.

“However, we cannot completely disassociate you from the life you have lived with your stepfather, no matter how dreadful you may consider it, because it has influenced you in one way or another. His influence in your social behavior is why you are the bright, hardworking, and scholarly person that you are. Furthermore, the period of your life associated with this relationship also has had an influence into your magical abilities.

“The most direct impact this relationship has on you, though, is through your character. Any relationship that has such a significant influence on you will be part of what builds your character, whether it is negative or positive. It is from this relationship that you have developed the desire to dedicate yourself to benefiting others, doing this tirelessly as an inspiration to others. There is another part of your character that has developed outside of this relationship too, which is why you are a sweet natured and loyal person, seeking fairness for all.

“All in all, you have commendable traits that you have developed from all of the influencing relationships you have had in your life. But I give you one warning. I see that there is yet another relationship that will have a great influence on you; so great, that it could completely change you. That is all I can see.”

Christian sat proudly listening to Ms. Callidus, up until that last comment.

As they left the class, Christian walked silently thinking about this unknown relationship and when he might encounter it. He probably would have wandered the halls the next hour, if Penny hadn't grabbed his arm as they approached the dining hall.

Christian didn't participate in any of the discussions during lunch, still thinking about this unknown relationship; even when Mr. Brown asked him directly, “So, Christian, how are things going?”

He could only muster “Fine, sir.”

He couldn't even remember eating anything, even though he had three sandwiches and a piece of cherry pie.

Christian finally snapped out of his deep thoughts on the way to Mag Ag laboratory. He realized that Gwen, who led the way for the three of them, headed toward the left side classrooms.

“Gwen, are we having the lab in the classroom today?” Christian asked.

“No, this is the way to get to the greenhouses without going through the underground passages, which actually takes you into Professor Gardner's office. There's a stairway over here that connects to Greenhouse #1. There's also a hallway above the stairs that connects the greenhouse with the floor of the Mag Ag classroom. Makes it more convenient to get back and forth. There's a stairway on the other side of school too leading up to Greenhouse #2.”

They soon entered the greenhouse. Most of the students had already arrived and sat or stood around the tables. Penny and Christian sat down in two of the high chairs across from each other at one of the tables. Gwen, however, went and stood down by the door to Professor Gardner's office.

Once all of the students had taken a seat, Gwen knocked on the professor's office door. A few moments later, Professor Gardner entered the greenhouse.

“Good afternoon, and welcome to your first laboratory session,” he proclaimed.

“I’d like to make one quick announcement before we begin. Ms. Torres will be my assistant this year, since her knowledge and experience put her somewhere in the second or third-year level of Magical Agriculture. So, please accept her assistance as if it were mine. Now, using the notes you took and the techniques you saw me use for the proper repotting of Elf Leaf, please begin.”

Every summer, Christian would help his mother work in the yard. Although this past summer he hadn’t, Christian knew the proper care of plants ... or so he thought. He took the Elf Leaf in front of him and properly removed it from a small pot and transferred it to a larger pot, filling the open space with soil and adding the right mixture of water and fertilizer per his notes.

As he did this, Christian noted audibly to Penny, “You know, this plant looks and smells like Lavender.”

“That’s because Elf Leaf is another name for Lavender.” Penny replied.

“Oh, I see. My mother uses Lavender all over the house. She puts it in drawers, washes clothes with it, and she even puts it in food.”

Penny nodded that she understood, but Christian could tell that her focus had returned to the task at hand.

Once finished, Christian saw Penny measuring the amount of fertilizer for her plant. So, Christian stepped around the table to see if he could help. When he came around he looked into the new pot where Penny had just dumped the fertilizer, without patting it down around the outside of the transferred dirt. As he started to reach in to do this for her, he saw that the fertilizer and dirt began moving. As he continued to watch, he observed that the roots of her Lavender plant actually pulled the fertilizer and dirt around itself.

“How are you making it do that?” asked Christian.

“Do what?” Penny asked back.

“Making the plant move to help distribute the dirt.”

“I’m not sure what you mean. I’m not doing anything to the plant, it’s moving the dirt by itself.”

“I understand that the plants are alive, but your plant’s animated?”

“All magical plants are.”

“But mine didn’t make a move at all as I transferred it.”

Upon saying this, they both walked around to Christian’s plant and, as he had explained, they saw no movement within his pot. So, they signaled for Gwen to come over.

When Gwen came over they explained how Christian’s Lavender plant had shown no sign of animation during his transfer process. Gwen looked at the plant from several different angles and, as she did this, told Penny she should go finish her transfer process before class time ran out. Although Gwen said this in a calm, instructor-like manner, Penny turned in a huff and returned to complete her work.

Gwen had Christian explain everything he did, step by step.

“And at no time did your plant show any movement?” she asked.

“No,” replied Christian.

"It's possible that you have a dead one on your hands."

Gwen reached into the pot and gently held onto the plant's root with her thumb and forefinger.

"I can feel its life pulse just fine," she said.

As she began to move her hand away, one of the leaves stroked her hand.

"There, you see, everything's just fine," she announced.

"I hate to tell you this Christian, but I think the plant recognized your ..."

Gwen hesitated, afraid of hurting Christian's feelings, but then completed her statement. "... lack of magical abilities."

After a moment's pause, she continued.

"You see, the plants respond to the magic that a witch emits. This is why a plant such as thyme may be just a simple herb for cooking to a non-magical person. However, it's a vital, living part of the witching world. Some plants provide protection, luck, or various other benefits just by being near it. They are also important ingredients in potions, elixirs, and stuff we witches make in Alchemy. I think your Elf Leaf acted as it would to a non-magical person, because it doesn't detect enough magic in you.

"I'm sorry, Christian. I wish I could do something to help, but" Gwen looked at Christian apologetically and didn't finish her sentence.

Christian looked devastated. He had hoped to specialize in Mag Ag for his magical career. But, it now appeared that he didn't have enough magical abilities for it.

Gwen tried to cheer him up.

"You know, it could have just been this instance. Let's see how your Elf Leaf has done over the next few days. It may still work out. Plus, things may get better as you get more involved with and used to doing magic."

Gwen's attempt to cheer Christian worked well enough. Although still glum, the chance that things might still work out kept Christian's spirits alive.

At least Christian performed well in his other classes. Spell Casting and Magical Creatures went fine, although Christian didn't enjoy them as much. What had happened in Mag Ag preoccupied his mind. However, at least the events in Mag Ag helped him to temporarily forget about the prediction that Ms. Callidus had provided earlier.

After Magical Creatures, and making plans to meet Gwen and Penny in the common room before dinner, Christian set off into town to send his mother another letter. In the letter, he explained how classes had gone, especially Mag Ag. He also remembered the prediction, but decided not to mention it. It could create another thing for his mother to worry about.

After sending the letter, Christian went back to his room. Upon opening the door, he saw that the hawk had returned. It stood on his dresser top looking at him. As Christian entered the room, it flew up to the windowsill. And, as he walked further into the room watching the hawk, it returned his gaze.

"Don't be afraid. I won't hurt you," Christian said, as he held out his arm, giving the bird a place to land.

The hawk moved suddenly, making Christian think it either would fly over to land on his arm or fly over to tear his arm off. But, instead the hawk turned and leapt out of the window.

Christian shrugged, hoping that it would visit him again soon. Then, he sat down and finished up most of his homework for the day. They had less homework today, since they had laboratory sessions in two of the classes. Christian left only the conjugation of the Latin verb for 'to drink' unfinished as he journeyed upstairs to wait for Penny and Gwen.

Penny soon joined him in the common room with an excited look on her face.

"Christian, when I entered the common room after classes this afternoon, Lucy, Clair, who's our dorm rep on the SWC from last year, and all of the freshmen girls were waiting in here for me. They told me that I'd been selected as the floor leader! Any problems or issues that come up on our floor are my responsibility to resolve or raise up to Clair or whoever becomes our dorm rep this year. I think they may have selected me because of the incident with Derick at orientation the other day. When Lucy told me she said, 'Anyone who can resolve a situation involving Derick Foulmoth that quickly can handle anything.' Then they all clapped!" Penny exclaimed with a blush.

She had just finished explaining all of this when Gwen came in.

"Gwen, Penny just told me that she was selected as our floor leader."

"I know," said Gwen. "I was the one who recommended her. Congrats Penny!"

Penny didn't know what to say. But, the three of them left the room for the first time feeling like true friends.

They had just exited the dormitory portal, when Gwen asked.

"Were you able to send a letter to your mother?"

"Yeah, not a problem," replied Christian.

"Have you heard from her?" asked Penny.

"No, but I'm sure she hasn't quite gotten the hang of sending things by raven yet. I'm sure one of these times when I send her a letter, she'll send one back with the same raven. Speaking of birds, the hawk visited me again this afternoon."

"Really?" the girls said in unison.

"Yeah. When I came back from town, it was standing on top of my dresser. Then, it flew up to the window sill and flew away."

"Christian, what do you keep on top of your dresser?" asked Penny.

"My toiletries container, my comb, my vitamins, and maybe a pen or two."

"Was the hawk near your comb?" Penny asked with a ruffled brow.

"Yeah. Why?" Christian asked puzzled.

"Well, ..." Penny hesitated.

Then, showing real concern, she continued.

"I don't want to worry you, but there are ways to control a person by using things from their body, like a fingernail, a tooth, or a piece of hair. Also, some witches can control the actions of animals, like a hawk, and many witches have the ability to change themselves into animals. I don't see how or why anyone would be after you, but I would be careful with this hawk from now on. And don't leave your comb out on your dresser."

Although some of the joviality they had when they left the common room had gone, they still enjoyed dinner together. Throughout dinner, Christian continued to think about why a witch would want to control him. Then, he remembered his mother's concerns about the people connected with his real father.

Could his father have been magical? Could the people he dealt with have been magical too and could they now be trying to control him for some reason? The school would provide safety from this, but Christian would have to take care when he ventured into town from now on.

After dinner, Christian and Gwen waved goodbye to Penny as they set off for their first Mag Ag club meeting.

Christian and Gwen made their way to Greenhouse #2, and upon entering, some of the upper-classmen greeted Gwen. They had heard that Professor Gardner had selected Gwen as his assistant in the freshman class.

About sixty or seventy students filled the greenhouse, with about fifteen to twenty of them freshmen. They all stood around in groups, primarily based upon their class-year.

As the upper-classmen continued greeting Gwen, they ended up engulfing her. So, Christian merged with a group of other freshmen. They all had some sort of story or affinity for Mag Ag and intensely discussed their experiences. So, since Christian had none, he ventured to another group of freshmen. But, he only found that they too had some sort of experience with Mag Ag prior to coming to the school.

Professor Gardner entered the greenhouse from his office, followed by a half dozen other students, including Lucy. He walked around to several of the groups, chatting with each for a few moments before moving on to the next. He lingered longer with the group in which Gwen had merged. Professor Gardner shook Gwen's hand and patted her on the shoulder.

After making the rounds, Professor Gardner signaled for everyone to quiet down. He started the meeting by describing a recent discovery on the most optimal way of structuring a plant's roots to get the most use of room in a pot to give the roots the greatest access to dirt and water. Everyone took detailed notes and even re-drew the root structure in their notebooks, which Professor Gardner had magically drawn on one of the windows.

Christian realized two unfortunate things. One, he really didn't find much of this interesting. And two, he hadn't brought a notebook.

Discussions and questions on this new root structure went on for nearly two hours. Then, Professor Gardner wished them all 'Good Night' and the meeting began to break up.

Christian waited for Gwen, who hung back to talk with a few other students. Lucy came up to him while he waited.

"So, how did you like your first Mag Ag club meeting?" she asked.

"Great," replied Christian with feigned enthusiasm. Lucy picked up on it.

"Well, I'm not sure how you're going to resolve your dilemma, but you may have to give up some of your spare time."

Christian looked at her puzzled.

“Well, I’m going to need a lot of your time to help me with SWC matters, since you’re officially part of my student staff,” she said with a grin.

Christian immediately reacted to her grin with a very large smile of his own.

“You’ll be the SWC’s interface with the OWL and the OWL support group, since I heard that you had an interest there. Most importantly, you’ll be the SWC’s link to the 300th Anniversary Committee, which will increase in responsibility as the year progresses. Do you think you can handle all of this?” she asked.

“You bet,” Christian said excitedly.

“I’ll be in touch,” Lucy said, as she exited the greenhouse.

Christian considered withdrawing from the Mag Ag club immediately, but decided to stick it out, since he had never quit anything before.

When Friday’s Mag Ag laboratory rolled around, Christian’s Lavender plant hadn’t grown at all. Everyone else’s had grown to twice the original size since Wednesday. Everyone transferred their plants into bigger pots. Christian did as well, although his plant really had no need for repotting.

At Monday’s Mag Ag laboratory, the class pruned the plants and prepared the pruned pieces for storage and later use in potions and mixtures. Christian’s Lavender still hadn’t grown much, but he attempted to prune it as instructed. Professor Gardner noted to Christian that he used the proper technique, but his plant hadn’t reached the right maturity for pruning. The professor told Christian that he would receive a lower score for not getting his plant to grow properly and pruning it too soon.

As a result, Christian decided that maybe he should drop out of the Mag Ag club after all.

Visiting The OWL

The first month flew by pretty quickly, once the routine of school took hold. Christian found World History of Magic and Spell Casting, which had initially concerned him, a breeze. He just had plain fun in Magical Creatures, so Christian did well in it too. He had become one of Ms. Callidus' favorite students after the reading she gave him the second day and, as a result, Christian started to have a legitimate, non-magical crush on her because of the attention. Alchemy had become his forte, since the class required no real magic. Mag Ag, which Christian had planned to make his subject of preference, had become his worst class.

During the Mag Ag laboratories, Gwen would help Christian with establishing the initial connection between the witch and plant, so that the plant would detect the magic within the student and react accordingly. This helped Christian to at least get his plant to grow fast enough to prune and harvest at the same time as the rest of the class, but his plants always turned out to be the smallest of everyone's. This assistance enabled Christian to pass, but feel woefully inadequate during every Mag Ag laboratory.

Christian had anticipated the trip to the OWL the last Saturday of the month. The three initial Saturdays had begun to follow a set routine.

Christian would wake up at half past seven (an extra half-hour of sleep), meet Gwen and Penny in the common room, go down for breakfast around half past eight, and finish before nine. Then, Christian and Gwen would watch Penny's dueling practice for an hour. The practice kept the bystanders on their toes, since a blocked spell would shoot off in various directions based on how the blocker waved his or her wand.

After dueling practice, the three of them would watch the last hour of Quodpot practice, which actually started at nine. Then, Christian and Penny would watch Gwen's cheerleading practice for another hour on the Quodpot field. Lastly, they would have lunch in the dining hall and go into town for the afternoon, during which Christian would send off a letter to his mother.

This Saturday, they cancelled their afternoon trip into town, because of the trip to the OWL. However, after lunch, Christian briefly trekked into town to send a letter home.

After he had given the letter to the postal attendant, he turned to leave when the attendant told him he'd received a package. The attendant brought out a package, about the size of a large book, from the back room and handed it to Christian. As soon as Christian took the package he knew it felt far too light for a book. When he opened it, he found a pair of winter gloves, a neck scarf, a new container of vitamins, and a letter.

In the letter, Christian's mother told him about the few things that had happened since he left, but nothing real interesting. Then, she explained the items in the package.

"I sent the gloves, scarf, and vitamins to make sure you stay healthy," Christian read.

He still hadn't explained to her that witches stay healthy magically and deemed it unimportant, since it would give her some comfort thinking she still took care of him. Besides, he thought, having an extra pair of gloves and scarf probably wouldn't hurt when winter set in.

Christian had tried to talk Penny and Gwen into going with him to the OWL, but they both came up with an excuse of having to practice something for dueling or cheerleading, respectively. Just before two o'clock, Christian walked into the dining hall to find a group of only nine other students, with Christian as the only freshman.

A few minutes later, Ms. D'Amor walked into the dining hall. At first, she looked quite disappointed, but she quickly changed to a more upbeat demeanor.

"Good afternoon everyone and THANK YOU for volunteering to assist at the OWL," she said with sincere gratitude.

"I see we only have one freshman with us today."

Christian smiled.

"Well, a special thanks to you for signing up without even knowing much at all about the OWL. Today, everyone, we'll be going to the OWL for a meet and greet. On some of our subsequent trips we may do some handy work around the lodge, which we'll find out about today as well. Once we get there, feel free to mingle with as many of the residents as you'd like. They'll all appreciate the time you spend with them. We have a bit of a walk, so please follow me and keep up. Most especially, stay close once we get into the woods."

Ms. D'Amor then turned and exited the school, followed by the ten students.

The walk took them out of the school's main gate, past the main entrance to town, and over to the walk path on the west side of town. The path ran behind the town's housing section, the B&B, and Targ's Tavern, flanked by thick woods on the left the whole length of the path. Once beyond the tavern, the path proceeded through the woods almost due east, but slightly north.

Christian gained his first taste of the woods that surrounded the town and school grounds. Although near the peak of day, the path contained little light from the thick tree cover overhead. Off the walk path, the light grew ever scarcer until ten yards into the woods darkness consumed everything. Christian could swear that he saw movement within the trees and, periodically, luminescent eyes peering out at him. He just chalked this up to his imagination when Ms. D'Amor warned, "Please stay on the path and you'll be safe."

With that instruction, the group of students closed ranks with Ms. D'Amor very quickly.

After a long, five-minute walk through the woods, the path opened up into a glade dominated by a four-story mansion. Two rows of houses, eight on each side, led up to it. Although, each house had two stories, the mansion dwarfed them all. The closest houses seemed about the size of Christian's home. The two closest to the mansion appeared larger than the others, yet still comparatively smaller.

"Ms. D'Amor, whose houses are these?" Christian asked as they approached.

"These are the teachers' and administrators' houses."

Pointing to each one, starting on the right then going back and forth from side to side, she identified each resident.

"That one there is Mr. And Mrs. Bangar's; note all of the broomsticks along the side. That one is vacant, because Mrs. Bangar lived there before she married Mr. Bangar. These two houses are where the Sanatores' and Turtledoves' live. The one with the

'Danger...beware of...' sign is Ms. Mander's house and, if I were you, I'd heed the sign. Over here is Ms. Sheyant's house. Next, is Mr. Quazam's house, which I would be careful upon approaching, since he likes to set humorous booby-traps for visitors. Here's Ms. Callidus' house, but I'm not sure if I've ever seen her in it or, at least, seen any lights on in it. Same with Professor Turnell's over there, although he always keeps his shades drawn; I guess he likes his privacy. I probably don't have to tell you whose house this is, just look how nice Professor Gardner keeps his yard. This one is Ms. Hardcase's. The one with all the antennas and wiring is Mr. Bindwath's. This last smaller house on the right is reserved for our Administrator of Special Projects, but I've never met the person or seen anyone living in this house. And, the last smaller house on the left is mine, which, I suppose, could use a little work. The larger house next to mine is Mr. Brown's and the other larger one is Mr. Davis'."

As they approached the steps to the mansion, Mrs. Turtledove stepped out onto the porch to greet them.

"Good afternoon everyone. Thank you for spending some time with our aging witches. Some of them may not know how to express their appreciation, but I assure you they truly do. For any new visitors, follow me and I'll show you around."

Ms. D'Amor added, "We will meet back here, on the porch, at five o'clock."

Then, they all proceeded into the mansion.

Ms. D'Amor and all of the other students split off and went to the left, while Christian followed Mrs. Turtledove to the right. When Mrs. Turtledove turned to address those following her, she saw Christian standing there alone.

"Oh my, are you the only new student to our lodge?" she asked.

"I guess so, ma'am," Christian replied.

"Are you a freshman?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Well, it is very commendable to see a young man, such as yourself, taking the time to bring some youthful perspectives and vigor into the lives of our aging witches. Come, let me show you around."

She showed Christian the visitors' bathrooms near the front entrance. Then, she led him into a very large kitchen, which they either seldom used or maintained in a spotless condition. Should he get thirsty, Mrs. Turtledove invited Christian to help himself to drinks from the refrigerator, which held several types of juice.

From the kitchen, she took him into the dining room, which consisted of one long table almost the entire length of the back of the house, with candelabras spaced periodically along the top. Halfway down the length of this room, she led him through a door into the recreational room.

Although bright and sunny from the glass window that made up the entire west wall, the room still seemed gloomy. However, the activity stirred by the young visitors made it less so.

This room took up almost half the space of the whole first floor. About twenty-five or thirty of the residents of various nationalities, shapes, and sizes clustered in different areas around the room. Christian grouped the residents into three categories: those that looked younger than the others but acted old, those that looked old and acted old,

and those that looked old but acted younger. The majority of the residents in the room fell into this last category.

A large group of about a dozen, who fell into the old-but-act-young category, sat in one area telling stories to three of the other students with whom Christian had come. Periodically, they would use magical visual aids.

One other student sat talking with two other residents, who fell into the young-but-acted-old category, and another student interacted with a third, small group of residents who fell into the last category.

“Are these all of the residents in the house?” Christian asked.

“My no. There’s a large sunroom and deck that takes up most of the top floor, which is where the majority of our residents like to spend their time when they’re not in their rooms. That’s also where the rest of your fellow students are. We have about eighty residents in total and their individual living quarters are located on the second and third floors.”

It surprised Christian to hear that so many residents lived here. He thought that ten students wouldn’t really go very far in providing friendship to eighty people.

He looked around at the rest of the residents in the room. A few read books and a few played chess. One man sat with his back to the glass wall with his eyes closed. He fell into the looked old category, but Christian couldn’t tell whether he acted old or young. However, Christian could tell that the man wasn’t asleep, even though he had his eyes closed.

“Mrs. Turtledove, who’s that man over there?” Christian asked pointing.

“That’s Professor Slipswich. He was the school’s Alchemy teacher many years ago. In fact, he retired before I went through school and that was ... well, that’s not important. He’s been here longer than I have, although it doesn’t seem that he aged much over those years. So, I really don’t know just how old he is.

“During his tenure at school, an accident occurred in his lab one night during an experiment. It caused him to lose his eyesight and, oddly, magic couldn’t repair the damage. He continued teaching for a few years after the accident, but thought that he could no longer teach to the best of his abilities. When Professor Slipswich told the school of his plan to retire, the school then hired Professor Turnell to replace him. He’s lived here ever since.

“The curious thing, which no one seems to know, is how he can still recognize people. It may be a combination of their voices or some other audible means, but he claims he can recognize people by the magical auras they emit. We don’t know if he always had the ability and just never relied on it or if it resulted from the accident.”

Christian thought, “He’ll never recognize me, no matter how many times I come back, since I don’t emit magical powers much at all.”

“Would you like me to introduce you to him? I’m sure he’d enjoy having a visitor,” proposed Mrs. Turtledove.

Christian agreed.

Professor Slipswich spoke out when Mrs. Turtledove and Christian came within about six feet of him.

“Yes, Florence and who is this you have with you?”

“His name is Christian and he’s a freshman at the school,” she replied.

“Welcome Christian. Let’s see now, you would have just completed your first month. Do you have an affinity toward any specific subject yet?”

“Yes sir. Alchemy.”

Although the truth, Christian didn’t mention that he had originally considered Mag Ag as his calling. He also knew that by saying ‘Alchemy’ he would establish a basis for conversation. The professor immediately responded.

“Alchemy! Well, I can tell you some things that you wouldn’t believe can be done in Alchemy.”

Christian listened intently while Professor Slipswich talked. He could tell that the professor appreciated having someone to listen to his stories. The professor could tell that Christian truly listened too, since he periodically asked a question to clarify something the professor had said.

Christian found the things Professor Slipswich told him quite interesting and informative, though much of it he couldn’t use for a few years. To have befriended such a source of Alchemy knowledge pleased Christian, but he mostly enjoyed making a new friend. Plus, the professor seemed to have as few friends as Christian did. The delight he saw in Professor Slipswich’s face while he imparted his knowledge and tales to Christian truly made the trip worthwhile.

Before Christian knew it, Ms. D’Amor stepped into the room and told the students to meet out on the porch. The time had come for them to leave.

“Thank you, sir, for such a wonderful afternoon,” said Christian, grabbing Professor Slipswich’s hand to shake it.

“No, thank YOU my boy,” replied the professor, displaying a large and sincere smile.

“I’ll see you next month,” said Christian as he turned to leave.

“Looking forward to it,” replied the professor, almost yelling across the room.

“I’ll tell you about my first Alchemy explosion in my second year at school,” he added, as Christian reached the front door.

“Please stay close and remain on the path. It will be darker on the path now than when we came, so watch your step,” Ms. D’Amor instructed, once they had all gathered on the porch.

After they had begun walking, Christian asked, “Ms. D’Amor, is there any way we can generate more interest among the students for coming here? With eighty residents, ten students just can’t interact with many of them.”

“I wish we could Christian, but most students just don’t find this as exciting as watching Quodpot and bopping around the town on a Saturday afternoon. If you can come up with some way of generating more interest, that would be wonderful. And in your new capacity as SWC interface for the OWL, that could be the venue for you to do so.”

Her comments left Christian with something to think about for the rest of the walk back to the school. He didn’t even notice that, as they began walking back through the woods, the movement in the trees seemed much closer. Even the warm sensation in his chest didn’t snap him out of his deep thoughts. He remained this way until Ms. D’Amor

broke his train of thought when she yelled “Lumos” and the tip of her wand glowed brightly, causing several of the shadows to move further back into the darkened woods.

Upon arriving at the school, Ms. D’Amor thanked the ten students once more. As she turned to go into the dining hall, she told them she’d see them at dinner.

Christian returned to his room, once again wondering how he could generate interest in the OWL. He lay on his bed pondering the issue and came up with several ideas, but they all seemed to have some issue hindering their implementation. He would have lain there thinking all night, had his stomach not growled. Christian looked at his watch and realized that dinner would start any minute now. So, he hurried down to the dining hall.

He arrived just as Mr. Brown stepped forward and made the food appear. He sat down and, once the food appeared, filled his plate. Then, he started telling the girls about his experience. Christian got them to promise to go with him from now on, or at least the next time, guaranteeing that they would find it worthwhile.

Although pleased with getting the two girls to visit the OWL, he’d have to find more than just two additional visitors.

Christian and the two girls left the dining hall in deep discussion about getting more interest in the OWL. As a result, they didn’t notice Sean Geoffreys waiting in the entry hallway to question Christian once again.

Over the past month, the Vipertooth seniors had tried to catch Christian off guard several times. The first week had been fairly light, except for the Friday of that week. The Vipertooths had confronted Christian three times and a Longhorn senior did so as well. During the second and third weeks, the Vipertooth seniors had stopped him at least once a day and once each week a Longhorn senior had stopped him. However, at each of the confrontations, Christian always knew the answer.

Sean either personally initiated or instigated all of the Vipertooth confrontations.

However, over the previous week, only two encounters had occurred; both times initiated by Sean. It appeared as if the other seniors had given up. Sean had confronted all of the freshman boys, and a few girls, and Christian remained the only one Sean hadn’t yet cursed with Elephant Ears, his favorite of the two curses the seniors could cast upon receiving a wrong answer.

Christian found the question Sean asked this time an easy one. He quickly gave the correct answer. Then, out of frustration, he said to Sean, “If that’s the best you can do, you may as well give up like the rest of your class.”

Sean had planned on doing just that, until Christian said this to him. Sean stormed off, vowing to get Christian before the end of the school year.

Halloween Treats...

The month of October also flew by quickly. Although the weather had become gradually colder, snow had still not made an appearance. Everyone started wearing their school blazers instead of their vests. However, no one had donned his or her winter cloak yet.

During his second month, Christian's confidence in his Alchemy abilities blossomed, assuring his choice to make it his specialty. He did exceptionally well, to the point where Professor Turnell gave him more freedom to assist the other students at times. His other classes had also gone very well, except for Mag Ag laboratory. He now had both Penny and Gwen helping him to establish the initial "bonding" with the plants, since Gwen had become busier assisting everyone else.

During the month, he had also attended the first meeting for the 300th Anniversary celebration. The committee had just begun the initial planning stage, so they had decided to meet only monthly for now. Christian learned that each of the three schools planned its own celebration events and that a member of the Witches Council attended each school meeting as the overall Anniversary coordinator. The availability of this WCA member drove the monthly meeting schedule and kept them from holding meetings more frequently.

Christian also attended his first SWC meeting. They held these meetings weekly, or more frequently if required. Christian hadn't attended any of the meetings in September, because Lucy told him to take the first month to get acclimated to the school routine. She said that he could start attending the meetings regularly after that. Besides, he would have had nothing to report at the September meetings anyway.

At his first SWC meeting, Christian reported about the first trip to the OWL and how they needed to generate interest in the monthly trips. The council came up with an idea that each person would get ten merits for each visit to the OWL, as opposed to only one merit per hour now. This proposal, of course, would require Mr. Brown's approval. Although, Christian felt confident they would get his approval; and they did.

At the second SWC meeting, Christian reported on the 300th Anniversary meeting he attended. He described who attended and what details he could provide, pointing out that he really had nothing yet to report, since the committee had only preliminarily determined the types of events for the celebration.

Also during the month, Christian continued writing to his mother, although it had now become once a week. As school progressed, so did the amount of homework. Christian found that he had little time during the week to make it into town. Plus, he only had enough new information to fill one letter a week anyway. So, mailing his weekly letter home became part of the routine of the Saturday afternoon trip into town.

One other thing that occurred during the month: Sean's pursuit of Christian intensified. For the first three weeks, he had confronted Christian at least three times each week. The number of confrontations overall had grown fewer in total, but Sean now took added steps to try to catch Christian unprepared. He would confront him in the boys' bathroom, either coming out of the shower or doing other things. He would confront him in the dining hall, when Christian had food in his mouth. He even caught

Christian running late to a class, purposely taking his time asking his question in order to frustrate Christian about being tardy to the class. However, no matter what Sean tried, Christian always answered correctly.

The last Saturday of the month rolled around, which meant an afternoon trip to the OWL. After their usual morning events, Christian made a quick trip into town to send a letter home, since they wouldn't venture into town that afternoon. It appeared as if his mother had established her own routine for the last Saturday of the month, since Christian had another package from home waiting at the post office. This time, along with his monthly allotment of vitamins, his mother had included two-dozen homemade cookies.

Receiving the cookies brought a big smile to his face. However, it also caused him to miss his mother very much. But, he decided to take the cookies to the OWL and share them with the residents, which then brought a smile back to his face.

He returned to the school and met up with Gwen and Penny, since they had agreed to go to the OWL with him this time. They noted to him their hesitancy about going every month, but they had promised Christian they'd go this one time to check it out.

When the three of them arrived in the dining hall around two, delight beamed from Christian to see the large turnout, now that the trip earned ten merits per student. The number of volunteers had almost tripled from last month's trip, which also pleased Ms. D'Amor immensely. She entered the room and, after the initial shock of seeing the turnout, immediately smiled at all the students; saving a large smile and wink at Christian.

No sounds or movements emanated from the woods during the trip to and from the OWL, apparently due to the number of students and the associated din they created as they followed the path. Christian pointed out the faculty and staff members' houses to Gwen and Penny as they passed them in route to the OWL. All of the houses, or at least the ones with active residents, had Halloween decorations on or around them. Ms. Mander's looked like a giant spider web, decorated with jack-o-lanterns that changed expressions and skeletons that danced dangling from the web.

As the group approached, they noticed that the OWL had Halloween decorations as well. Long spider webs draped the outside of the house and jack-o-lanterns of all shapes and sizes sat scattered across the porch, several of which shouted "Boo!" at the students when they approach.

As the group began to climb the stairs of the OWL, Mrs. Sanatore stepped onto the porch dressed as a pirate. She carried a large bowl overflowing with candy.

"Welcome aboard, mateys," she growled in her best pirate voice.

Then, after a short snicker, she said in her normal voice, "Help yourselves to some candy. If there are any newcomers to the OWL, please stay behind and I'll give you a brief tour of our facility."

Christian took Gwen and Penny inside with him and gave them a quick tour of the first floor. Then, the three of them wound their way up the stairs to the fourth floor. At the top of the stairs, they entered the sunroom through the propped open door. They went around the room greeting the residents and offered each one a cookie. Most of

the residents smiled and greeted them, noting how very much they appreciated the offer of a snack. Only a few, however, took them up on the offer.

One of the residents took an immediate liking to Penny and asked if she'd sit a while. Penny quickly agreed.

Christian and Gwen continued around to the rest of the residents. Afterward, Gwen leaned toward Christian.

"Thank you for bringing us here. This is wonderful," she whispered.

Then, she gave him a peck on the cheek and walked over to a woman who sat near a window watching the wind blow through the trees. When Gwen sat next to her, the two greeted each other and immediately began to talk; about what Christian couldn't hear.

Christian returned to the first floor, still with over half of his cookies left. So, he went around greeting the rest of the residents and ended with Professor Slipswich. They shared the last few cookies together and spent the rest of the afternoon talking.

Halloween fell on a Friday. A weeklong party atmosphere led up to it, making it difficult for the students to concentrate in classes. It helped that most of the teachers got into the spirit as well.

For example, in Professor Gardner's Mag Ag laboratory, he had the students plant pumpkin seeds on Monday. By Wednesday, everyone had budding sprouts or very small pumpkins; except Christian, who could just barely see his sprout breaking the soil's surface. By Friday, everyone else's pumpkin had grown slightly larger than a soccer ball. Christian's, however, had only grown to softball size, while Gwen's reached the size of a beach ball. Professor Gardner had each student harvest his or her pumpkin and carve it into a jack-o-lantern. He placed the best one, Gwen's of course, in front of the faculty and staff table in the dining hall.

By the Monday before Halloween, the whole school contained decorations for the weeklong festivities.

Along with other various decorations in the Fireball freshmen common room, a skeleton hung to the side of the fireplace. Christian found this particular decoration quite an intelligent, uh, thing, as it loved to chitchat with anyone who passed by.

The hallways contained Halloween decorations too, including the people and settings within the paintings. Someone had also magically altered the statues in the hallways with ghoulish heads and bodies; except for the statue of Mandrakon, which remained untouched. Floating jack-o-lanterns, however, dominated the hallway decorations.

They hovered about ten feet in the air, spaced out every twenty feet or so, in a continuous row throughout the triangular main hallways. During the day, the jack-o-lanterns glowed dimly; but as day transformed to night, they became gradually brighter. These jack-o-lanterns became the primary means of light for the hallways at night, thus making a walk through them much eerier ... and much more fun.

Throughout the hallways, and many of the classrooms, hung huge spider webs. The rumor buzzed that Ms. Mander had a pet acromantila that she had brought around during the night to spin all of the webs.

An increase in ghostly activity, especially in the hallways, became very noticeable. Typically, the librarians remained the only resident ghosts in the school, with an occasional specter just visiting or passing through. During Halloween week, the students had to watch where they walked and look before turning corners. Otherwise they could easily bump into, or more precisely walk through, a ghost. Walking through a ghost felt like very cold spider webs going through one's body, as Christian found out one afternoon. More than once did a student, rolling through a hallway on his or her wheel-heeled shoes, crash into a wall trying to avoid a ghost or after having passed through one.

The dining hall, the focal point for most of the week's festivities, received the most decorations of the school. The color of the tapestries that hung on the walls between the windows now alternated with black and orange. Beast-like talons had replaced the ornate electrical sconces that usually hung on the walls and each held a jack-o-lantern that eerily illuminated the room. For additional light, jack-o-lanterns floated strategically over the tables, to allow people to see what they ate more clearly. All in all, these changes kept the school darker than usual in the evenings.

During breakfast and lunch, no special events took place, other than each lunch table had an additional setting. During lunch, one of the visiting ghosts joined a table to regale the students with their exploits during life or the means by which they met an untimely demise. Their presence and stories created lively lunch discussions. Even though, once in a while the stories became a little too gruesome and would set a student or two off from eating.

Evening meals, however, surged with Halloween spirit. The jack-o-lanterns' eerie smiles lit the room with a spooky glow. The ceiling resembled stormy skies, as it did on the night of the great feast, but much less tumultuous. However, periodically thunder shook the room and lightning lit the hall.

Below the stormy ceiling, a different airborne creature filled the imitation sky each night. On Monday, bats filled the sky and looked so real that a few live bats joined them. The staff immediately removed the bats from the hall before they soiled anything or anyone. Jack-o-lanterns soared in and out of the pretend storm clouds on Tuesday night. Wednesday found the imitation sky filled with the translucent glow of simulated ghosts, which incited the visiting ones to join in, swooping all over the dining hall. On Thursday night, witches streaked across the stormy sky on broomsticks, causing several students to try to recognize them. Periodically, one of the students would yell out, "Hey, that's my mom!" or "That one there's my dad!" or "Isn't that Mr. Brown?"

Each night, during the last half of dinner, one of the ghosts would float up onto center stage and tell an honest-to-goodness ghost story. They all considered this a prestigious thing to do, so arguments broke out amongst the ghosts every night as to who would have the honor of delivering the evening's story. Each story elaborated on how the ghost met his or her death or something exceptionally gruesome they had encountered either during their life or death. Whatever the topic, these stories topped the evening.

But everyone looked forward with great anticipation to Friday ... Halloween.

Many of the students rushed into town after classes had ended that day. Christian asked Penny and Gwen, "What's the rush to town all about?"

"Supplies," they answered simultaneously.

Gwen saw the puzzled look on Christian's face and tried to explain.

"You see, Halloween's like New Year's Eve to the witching world."

"You mean because it's All Hallows Eve," Christian added, having remembered reading or hearing about it a few years ago.

"Right," Gwen responded.

Then, she continued.

"The festivities tonight in the dining hall will last until midnight, the Witching Hour. Then, everyone will adjourn to their dorms, where the festivities usually continue. It's the only night that the school will allow parties to last beyond ten o'clock."

Penny then chimed in.

"The supplies are for the dorm party. We took up a collection during the week from everyone. Sorry we forgot to mention it to you. The party will be held in the freshman common room, so that everyone in the dorm can partake. Some of the students plan to break from the dining hall early, so that they can start the party early. But, we can do whatever we want, either stay in the dining hall or come to the dorm at any time after dinner."

"This sounds like it's gonna be loads of fun!" exclaimed Christian.

"It will be," answered the two girls in unison again.

As they entered the dormitory's portal, Penny said, "Meet us up in the common room in an hour."

Christian waved and went into his room.

He placed his backpack on the bed and pulled out his pathetic little jack-o-lantern from Mag Ag laboratory. It had small triangular eyes and nose and a narrow slit for a mouth, since his pumpkin could only accommodate small features. He then pulled out a small tea candle that they use to warm their beakers in Alchemy and stuck it inside the jack-o-lantern. Realizing he had no matches, Christian pulled out his wand, took a deep breath, stuck the tip of his wand as close as he could to the candle's wick, and said, "Incindo."

A small flame shot out of the end of his wand and onto the wick.

Christian shouted, "Yes!" as he pumped his arm backward and even did a little victory dance. Then, he took his jack-o-lantern, climbed onto his rug, and floated up to the window. He had kept his window shut the last couple of weeks to keep it warmer in his room, since the fall weather had set in. However, the last few days had been warmer, so he decided to leave it open tonight. He set his jack-o-lantern on the open windowsill and just sat to admire the view, watch the sun set, and think about how much he enjoyed school. Even with the tribulations he had to endure, he'd had a wonderful two months.

Soon came the time for him to meet the girls in the common room. He decided to leave his jack-o-lantern on the sill, which stared feebly at him as he walked across the room and out the door.

As Christian entered the common room, it looked like the party had already begun. A few girls stood together drinking some punch, served by the skeleton.

Lucy, one of those girls, shouted, "Christian, have a glass of punch!"

As he walked over he saw that cakes and candies, probably from Moo-line Rouge, covered the round table. One of the long tables had several dozen bottles of sodas and juices, the only opened bottle appeared to have frost on it; probably magically chilled by one of the upperclassman. The other long table, at which Lucy and some other girls stood, had two large punch bowls on it with several stacks of small, plastic punch glasses. The skeleton, somehow standing on its own, filled one of the glasses and handed it to Christian.

"Enjoy, sir," said the skeleton.

As Christian turned from the skeleton toward Lucy, she handed something to him.

"Here. You get one of these too. It's a tradition that everyone wears one on Halloween."

Christian accepted a pointed black hat, the type witches reportedly had worn. When he first came in, he noticed that they all wore one, but he assumed they were merely dressing up in costume.

Lucy noticed his hesitation, so she leaned over and whispered, "All of the boys will be wearing one."

Although he felt silly doing so, he went ahead and put it on.

While Christian stood talking with Lucy, Penny and Gwen soon joined him. They also wore pointed black hats.

"I see you got yours too," said Gwen, pointing at his hat.

Christian smiled and shrugged.

By half past five, students had filled the room, everyone sporting a black pointed hat. The girls clumped together in small groups throughout the room. Christian noticed that a few groups of girls kept looking at him and gesturing in his direction.

He immediately thought that the attention resulted from his hat, but he would soon learn otherwise.

"Quiet everyone," shouted Lucy.

"Since this is our first real party of the year, I'd like to officially welcome the freshman to our dorm. And wish everyone a Happy Halloween."

A chorus of 'Happy Halloween' erupted from everyone.

Then, one of the girls shouted, "We don't welcome ALL of the freshman."

"Yeah, what's HE doing here?" another added.

"HE didn't even contribute to the refreshments," came a third.

All the happiness and enjoyment immediately drained from Christian.

"Christian is one of us whether you like it or not," Lucy chastised.

"Well, we don't," responded one of the girls.

Lucy started to continue, when Christian spoke up.

"It's ok. I understand."

He turned and exited down the stairs, quickly followed by Penny and Gwen.

"Don't pay any attention to them. They're a very small minority in the dorm," consoled Gwen.

“Yes. There’s only been one complaint from any of the freshman about whether you really had to be in the dorm with us,” Penny added.

Her attempt to console Christian only made things worse. Now he knew that one of his own classmates felt that way.

The three friends decided to go down to wait in the dining hall, since the school festivities would begin in less than twenty minutes. They exited the portal and walked down the hallway in uncomfortable silence. Suddenly, startling all three of them, Sean stepped out from behind one of the, now grotesquely shaped, statues.

After the initial start from the surprise appearance, Christian grabbed the hat off of his head and growled, “Not now, Sean.”

“Oh yes, now,” Sean retorted.

“Describe, in detail, the emblem of the school,” Sean demanded.

Christian, through gritted teeth, complied. He explained, in detail, the triangle, the three colors and their shapes, the location of each color, and the large B in the center. He even told him what year they created the emblem.

Christian, still showing anger in his voice, parried back.

“I’ll bet you don’t even know what the symbol represents, do you?”

“Of course I do. It represents the dormitories and their locations in the triangular shaped school of Bishop,” came Sean’s reply.

“Wrong!” rebuked Christian, the anger showing in his voice.

“It represents the three schools here in the United States. The schools also form a triangle with each other. Bishop is represented by gold, because our two specialties are Mag Ag and Alchemy, which are the most valuable to our society’s survival. Hence, the reason we have professors as the instructors for these two areas of study.

“The west school is blue, due to its two specialties of Divination and Spell Casting, because these two are ethereal in nature. And the east school is red, because its two specialties are Magical History and Magical Creatures, both associated with the blood of both witch and creature.”

Christian, having found this information on the school’s computer network, spouted it off as if reading it from a book. It didn’t surprise the girls, but it did surprise Sean.

“I, I didn’t know all that,” Sean stammered.

Before anyone could blink, Penny whipped out her wand and said, “Densus Longus.”

Immediately, Sean’s two top, front teeth grew to a foot long.

He turned and ran away toward the blue tower.

“Penny, what did you do?” asked Gwen, with a tone of shock and humor in her voice.

“He had it coming. I just wish I knew the Elephant Ear curse, since that seems to be his favorite,” Penny quipped.

“I don’t know what repercussions that may bring on you, Penny, but thanks. And, I think we should get into the dining hall now,” recommended Christian.

The girls agreed and the three of them ran to the dining hall.

The jack-o-lanterns glowed at full eeriness as they entered. The ceiling sky loomed the gloomiest of all the nights this week, causing a false moon to appear and disappear behind false clouds. Not just one or two, but all four of the flying entities of the previous four nights zoomed above the revelers. Witches on broomsticks zipped and

zagged around the ghosts, bats, and jack-o-lanterns with which they shared the false sky.

The three long dining tables had disappeared. Instead, narrower tables lined every wall space on the lower level of the dining hall. Every kind of meat, vegetable, fruit, cake, and candy that could be eaten from a standing position covered these tables, in addition to many kinds and flavors of drinks. The upper level of the dining hall contained nothing. The school's teachers and administrators, and some other visiting adults, stood in groups talking amongst themselves and with some of the students. The remaining students either stood around in groups talking or sat on the stairs talking. And, everyone wore a black, pointed hat. All of the adults, and some older students, also wore black capes or cloaks.

Most everyone had already grabbed some food, so Christian, Penny, and Gwen grabbed their favorite foods and met up on the stairs. As Christian sat there enjoying a piece of cream-filled chocolate cake, he noticed a new decoration hanging on the wall above the entry doors. A large clock with a second, minute, and hour hand hung there with none of its hands moving. Curiously, the clock had numbers only on the left-hand side running from six to twelve.

While he sat staring at it, the clock began to chime loudly and on the sixth chime, the second hand began to move. Christian looked at his watch and it had just turned six o'clock. Finally, it came to him. The clock provides a countdown to midnight.

Penny got up and walked over to the fresh vegetables table. While she browsed over them, Christian noticed one of the Vipertoos that usually hung around with Sean came in and said something to Ms. D'Amor. Then, Ms. D'Amor followed the boy out of the room. Christian had a bad feeling, but said nothing to Penny when she returned to her seat on the stairs.

Students continued to file into the dining hall at their leisure, since tonight's dinner had no formal starting time. As the room grew more crowded, it became a maze to get through to the tables for food and drinks. The black hats, with their two-inch brims, made the room especially crowded and difficult to navigate.

From his vantage point on the stairs, Christian could still see people as they came through the dining hall door. Ms. D'Amor returned a short time after she had left and approached Mr. Brown.

While talking with a group of students and adults, Mr. Brown leaned toward Ms. D'Amor as she drew near and she whispered something to him. Mr. Brown turned and looked in Christian's direction. Christian knew what to expect next.

Then, after saying something to the group with whom he had been talking, Mr. Brown turned and walked directly at him.

"May I speak with you three up here a moment?" Mr. Brown said, gesturing toward the upper level of the dining hall.

He led the three students up the stairs.

"Ms. D'Amor just told me that she had to cast the counter for a Rabbit Tooth curse on one of the senior Vipertoos. Would you know anything about this?" asked Mr. Brown, already knowing the answer.

"Yes, sir. I did it," confessed Penny.

"But it was my fault, sir," proclaimed Christian.

"And I didn't try to stop her," added Gwen, almost snickering.

"Well, let me hear the whole story," requested Mr. Brown.

The three of them, taking turns, explained what took place in their dormitory and how it had depressed Christian. They described how Sean confronted them and how he had hounded Christian for two months. They finished with how Christian questioned Sean and, when Sean didn't know the answer, all of the heightened emotions overcame Penny.

"I see," said Mr. Brown, unconsciously stroking his bearded chin.

"This type of action typically would require you to go before the Disciplinary Board and would result in several demerits or worse."

Penny's heart sank. Christian and Gwen looked concerned.

"However, in light of the situation and circumstances, I think I can work this out off-line with Mr. Bangar. I think five demerits should be sufficient and, of course, we will have to place your name on the Disciplinary list on the bulletin board, identifying that you were disciplined accordingly for your actions. Any comments?" Mr. Brown said with a grin.

Christian, Gwen, and Penny, however, all smiled and shook their heads with respect to Mr. Brown's question.

"Now go and enjoy the evening. Oh, and Ms. Humblot ..." Mr. Brown hesitated to make sure Penny heard him, "... please watch that temper of yours."

His last comment came with a full smile.

"Yes, sir," Penny replied.

The three friends followed as direct of a path as they could to the drink table to wash down the, still noticeable, lumps in their throats.

Mr. Brown, however, walked to the edge of the steps and shouted, "May I have your attention, please?"

Once the discussions had quieted or ceased, Mr. Brown spoke again.

"I would like to tell you what our agenda is for this evening, which I know you've all been waiting to hear."

"This year, they tried to keep the agenda as secret as possible, to make it a surprise for everyone," Penny whispered to Christian and Gwen.

"Once you have supped sufficiently, I would like to invite you all to partake in the evenings events. First, we will all be gathering in the Quodpot field bleachers at seven. At which time, the Quodpot team's players will demonstrate their skills with some acrobatics and trick shots. Skills we hope which will lead us to victory at the Tri-School Competition this year," Mr. Brown said with a raised eyebrow toward a group of students, most of them members of the Quodpot team.

"Then, at eight, we will have a special demonstration from our dueling team out on the Quodpot field. The six-person team will be split into two groups of three. The two groups or teams will then compete against each other on a mock battlefield. The objective will be to avoid getting hit with a coloring curse cast by the opponents while attempting to reach your opponents' end of the field. The team that's able to light the

jack-o-lantern located at the end of the opposing team's side of the field will be declared the winner."

Christian turned to Penny with a humorous, surprised look on his face.

"Like I said, they wanted to keep everything about tonight a secret," Penny quipped. Christian smiled. "Sounds a lot like paintball."

"Paintball?" Penny asked confused.

"You don't want to know. But, it sounds like loads of fun," remarked Gwen.

"I think it will be. Mr. Quazam told us just this morning that this would be the final event of the dueling matches at the Tri-School Competition this year. They've named it Taggleduel. So, I imagine that we'll be training for this event pretty intensely from now on. But, tonight, I think it'll be a lot of fun," Penny squeaked excitedly.

Mr. Brown continued with the agenda for the rest of the evening while the three friends talked. Christian kept an open ear to what he said.

"There will be dancing from nine to eleven on the upper level of the dining hall. The dancing's mainly for the visiting ghosts, but the living are invited to participate too. A ghostly trio called the Grave Diggers will perform the music. And, from eleven to midnight, the ghosts will regale everyone with more stories until the last chime of the clock at midnight, when they will all return to their resting places.

"One final thing. For those interested, Ms. Callidus will be reading futures, specifically romantic futures, in a tent just outside of the front doors from now until midnight," chimed Mr. Brown with a wink to the crowd.

Displaying a wide grin on his face, he concluded, "Now, enjoy yourselves this evening and we'll see everyone in the morning ... later than usual."

Penny and Gwen each grabbed one of Christian's arms. They no longer tugged and fought over him, but almost seemed to share him. This pleased and worried Christian at the same time.

"Let's go and see what Ms. Callidus has to say about our romantic futures," proposed Gwen.

"Yeah. It should be fun to hear what she has to say," added Penny.

Christian, gently removed the grasp that each girl had on his arms.

"Why don't the two of you go and you can tell me what she has to say. I'll meet you in the Quodpot bleachers just before seven."

The two girls shrugged and left the dining hall chatting excitedly.

Christian grabbed some more food, but when he returned to the stairs, someone had taken his spot. However, the four boys he had met in the tavern during orientation stood near the drink table. Although the few encounters he had with them since the first weekend seemed friendly, his relationship with the Vipertoos didn't seem on the best of terms. Hesitantly, he decided to approach them, wondering what type of welcome, if any, he would receive. He got an answer immediately.

"Christian, we haven't seen hide nor hair of you at the tavern over the past two months. We were wondering if you ever came out of your harem other than to go to classes," Jim said jovially.

Then, he added, "I'd invite you to have a seat with us, but how about having a stand with us instead."

They welcomed Christian into the group once again. That they didn't hold a grudge against him for living in the red dormitory or because of the antagonism with Sean added to Christian's improving mood. In fact, when he inadvertently commented snidely about one of the encounters over the past two months, it brought a chorus of comments about Sean.

The boys' comments about Sean so delighted Christian that he decided to tell them about the encounter earlier that evening. When he finished telling them about it, the four boys nearly fell on the floor laughing. Once they could actually speak without choking, they toasted Christian and Penny.

Between laughs, Jim commented, "They should give you guys school awards for that."

"Or at least Penny," chortled Pete.

These comments lifted Christian's spirits even more. He appreciated the boys' camaraderie.

After a few more minutes of Sean-bashing and other banter, they all went outside and walked toward the Quodpot field. Pete and Sergio headed for the bleacher tunnel while Christian, Jim, and Remy climbed the stairs to the bleachers.

Gwen and Penny stood in line for slightly longer than thirty minutes. In order to conserve time, they had decided to go in to talk with Ms. Callidus together.

The inside of the tent resembled and felt like the interior of a cave, with the surroundings looking and feeling natural. Ms. Callidus sat on a very low stool behind an open fire in the middle of the cave. A skillet and a pot of boiling water rested on a spit over the fire.

"Please have a seat," invited Ms. Callidus, gesturing toward some large pillows on the near side of the fire.

First to Gwen, she asked, "What is your favorite cooked food?"

After a few moments, Gwen replied, "I suppose a nice, lean steak."

Ms. Callidus turned and grabbed a container from which she pulled what looked like a cow's entrails and tossed them into the skillet, which began to sizzle immediately.

"And you my dear?" she asked, looking at Penny.

"I suppose, boiled cabbage."

At which, Ms. Callidus reached around, grabbed a full head of cabbage, and broke it in half. This surprised both girls, knowing that a normal person cannot break a head of cabbage in half like that. Ms. Callidus then tossed half of the cabbage into the pot with a splash, as the water continued to boil.

After a couple of minutes, she leaned over the skillet and addressed Gwen.

"I see two males, very different, but both handsome. One has dark hair and the other light. Seeing two could mean that you will have a very important decision point in your life and the path you choose will determine which of these two men will be your love. Or, it could mean that you will end up having two loves for one reason or another. I did, however, sense love and happiness associated with both."

Then, she turned to the boiling pot of cabbage and addressed Penny.

“For you, I also see two, but the images are blurred. I think that both images may have light hair and the facial features give the appearance of handsomeness. One thing I do sense is a strong loving bond with both men, but one will bring you happiness and one will not.”

With that, Ms. Callidus thanked the girls and told them to enjoy the evening’s festivities.

Gwen and Penny, both in a fog due to the mixture of emotions running through their minds, thanked Ms. Callidus and exited the tent. They started to walk toward the school’s main entrance, but remembered that they had agreed to meet Christian in the Quodpot bleachers. So, they turned and meandered in that direction. They didn’t say a word to each other the whole way, as they mulled over the predictions.

Christian finished climbing the long stairs to the bleachers a few minutes before the start of the Quodpot demonstration. Several people had already taken seats in the bleachers, but plenty of good seats remained untaken.

As he walked toward some open seats, Christian stopped to watch the action below on the field. Ms. Hardcase stood on the opposite side of the field with Tatu, while the other three Sasquatch of the security team came walking through the path between the bleachers. Two of them had a good-sized boulder under one arm and a tree stump, which looked like they had just pulled it out of the ground, under the other. The third carried two thick, long logs, one under each arm.

Ms. Hardcase, through Tatu, had the three Sasquatch place these things strategically on the field, so that they had positioned a boulder, log, and tree stump on each half of the field. She then bowed her head to Tatu and he left, leading the other three Sasquatch out of the stadium through the path between the bleachers. Ms. Hardcase examined the field. Then, she conjured two bushes, one on each half. With a smile and look of satisfaction, she departed.

Christian recognized that they made these changes for the dueling exhibition, because now it REALLY reminded him of a paintball stadium. With the activity on the field complete, he finally joined Jim and Remy in the bleachers.

Gwen and Penny joined him a little later. And, as they took their seats, Christian started to introduce them to Jim and Remy, when he noticed the serious looks on their faces.

“Are you two alright?” he asked with concern.

“Yeah. Fine,” they both replied zombie-like, still thinking about their future relationships.

Christian, although concerned, didn’t question them further since the girls appeared unwilling or unable to discuss what had happened. He also decided he’d better wait for a better time to introduce them and, instead, continued watching the Quodpot team zooming around the stadium.

After watching the Quodpot team’s acrobatics for about thirty minutes, Christian finally broke Penny’s distant thoughts.

“Hey Penny, what time are you supposed to meet up with the dueling team?”

Penny gave a gasp, then quickly jumped up and ran down the bleachers to the stairs.

Gwen remained bedazzled, so Christian continued watching the Quodpot team perform trick shots.

When the Quodpot team had finished, they zoomed down toward the bleacher tunnel and out of site.

Suddenly, a large image of Mr. Brown's head appeared over the center of the field. Then, as if just speaking aloud, the head commented, "I do so hate how I look when I do this."

Christian looked over toward the box-seat section and saw that Mr. Brown had arrived about halfway through the team's demonstration and had joined the other adults there. However, now he stood amongst them with his wand pointed toward his head. And, as he spoke, so did the large head over the field.

"Everyone, I recommend that you move forward to the bleacher railing for the dueling team's demonstration. Please let the smaller students in front, so that everyone can see. Thank you."

Then, Mr. Brown lowered his wand and the head over the field disappeared. Once he put his wand away, Mr. Brown gestured for the visiting adults to move forward to the front of the box seat section as well.

"Come on!" Christian said to Gwen, as he, Jim, and Remy hurried down the bleachers. Gwen remained sitting there, dreamily looking forward. So, Christian shrugged and rushed to the railing.

Moments later, two files of three students emerged from the bleacher tunnel. The two files split and each marched to opposite ends of the field. They all wore gold colored, hip-length, silk tunics and matching knee-length capes, which waved in the wind a bit behind them as they walked. The lead student in each file carried a jack-o-lantern about the size of a basketball and placed it onto a three-foot high pedestal at the end of the field.

Once at the end of the field, the three students stood in a row in front of their pedestal with their wands in front of their faces and pointed toward the sky. Christian could see now that the tunics they wore had a large 'B' on the front.

Mr. Brown, as soon as he saw the six students in position, raised his wand. A spark flew out of the wand into the air over the center of the field, where it exploded into a large, green burst of light.

Instantly, all six students ran forward and dove behind one of the objects placed onto the field earlier. Penny flattened herself behind the log, while her two teammates hid behind the boulder. Two of the players on the other team started shooting spells that left a purple streak through the air, something Christian had never seen before. When these spells hit something, like the boulder and log behind which Penny and her teammates hid, they just dissipated. All in all, Christian thought it looked quite pretty.

While two of the opponents shot these spells, the third one stood and began to take careful aim. He apparently planned a long shot to try and hit his opposing team's jack-o-lantern from his end of the field with a lighting spell.

Finally, he attempted his shot. It missed and luckily hit the pedestal, which couldn't catch fire.

Penny saw the spell hit just below her jack-o-lantern and, decided she needed to take action. She glanced over the top of the log and saw the boy taking aim once again. So, rolling like a log herself, she moved to the end of her cover and shot a purple spell at the boy before he took his next shot. It hit him square in the chest, causing him to stumble backward and hit the ground with a thud. When he stood, his tunic had turned black.

A voice shouted, "Johnson, you're out."

Christian looked down along the sidelines, nearest him, to see Mr. Quazam. He, apparently, had followed the students out of the tunnel and now acted as the referee.

The two remaining opposing players, who both had taken cover behind the boulder, split. One dove behind the log and the other dashed up behind the tree stump. At the same time, Penny's two teammates also made their moves. One dove behind their tree stump and the other decided to run for the bush ... quite a long run from the boulder. Penny's teammate had just about reached the bush when a purple spell caught him in the side, knocking him to the ground and turning his tunic black.

"Smith, you're out," shouted Mr. Quazam, as the boy left the field.

Penny's other teammate motioned for Penny to move up to the bush, since the opposing players wouldn't have a clear shot at her from their current positions. However, as he motioned, one of the opposing players moved again.

The one behind the log jumped up and ran toward her side's bush, shooting at Penny as she did. The other opponent remained behind her stump, also shooting at Penny, as best she could. Penny's teammate began shooting at the girl running toward the bush, causing the girl to dive to the ground to avoid getting hit. Unfortunately, in the process of giving cover fire, Penny's teammate left himself open to the girl behind the stump. The purple spell hit him on the shoulder and his tunic turned black.

"Wrathbones, you're out," shouted Mr. Quazam.

While Chic began to leave the field, Penny dove behind her bush and, very agilely, rolled and popped up onto one knee. She took aim at the opponent who had fallen to the ground. Then, as the girl began to get up, Penny hit her in her side, knocking her back to the ground and turning her tunic black.

"Morgan, you're out too," added Mr. Quazam.

The duel now included Penny, behind her bush, and an opposing girl, behind her tree stump.

Penny started to make a run toward the opposing team's bush. But, she quickly retreated back behind her own, as a purple spell shot past her. Quietly, Penny peeked through the bush and saw that her opponent lay prone on the ground, almost fully covered by the tree stump, and had settled into a permanent position ready to fire. Worse, she had a clear view all around Penny's bush. Penny knew that since her opponent had taken a permanent defensive mode, she would have to take the offensive. But, what should she do?

Penny remembered the time she helped her dad on one of his jobs capturing Gnomes in a garden. He had her go into the bushes and make noise to chase the Gnomes toward him. That's it! Penny needed to cause a diversion, so that she could make her move.

She thought about it for a minute. Then, she broke off a large branch from the bush and took another quick peek through it to confirm that the girl still held her defensive position.

Penny took a few steps back. Then, she took a quick step to her right and fired a quick spell at the opposing girl. The girl responded with a quick shot at Penny, before ducking behind the stump. Immediately, Penny tossed the branch into the air to the right of her bush, in the direction of the opposing teams bush, and then ran to her left. As the girl returned to her defensive position, the branch's movement caught her eye first. She immediately shot a spell toward the movement. Then, realizing Penny's strategy, the girl quickly turned to fire in the other direction.

As the girl shot at the branch, Penny performed another dive and roll, again popping up on one knee. And, before her opponent could turn in her direction, Penny had hit her in the side.

"Charles, you're out," Mr. Quazam shouted as the stadium erupted in cheers and applause.

Penny, exhaustedly, walked up to the opposing team's jack-o-lantern and lit the candle inside.

"The winner!" Mr. Quazam announced.

Gwen apparently had snapped out of her dream state to watch the dueling competition, because when Christian arrived at the bottom of the bleacher stairs, she stood waiting for him.

"Penny was amazing, wasn't she?" Gwen exclaimed.

"Awesome!" agreed Christian.

While they waited at the bottom of the stairs for Penny to come out of the bleacher tunnel, they recalled each play of the competition.

A few minutes later, Penny exited the tunnel with her other five teammates, with a few of them still patting her on the back.

Christian and Gwen heard Chic comment, "Penny, if you can make those kinds of moves at the Tri-School Competition, we've got the dueling medals in the bag."

As the group drew close to Christian and Gwen, Penny said goodbye to her teammates and walked over to them.

Gwen gave Penny a friendly hug as she said, "Penny, that was fantastic. Did you learn those moves from your dad?"

Penny, blushing, replied, "Most of them, yeah. You have to be able to move quicker than the creatures you're trying to capture and, as small as some of them are, you've gotta be pretty accurate."

Christian patted her on the shoulder and said, "Way to go, Penny. I wish I had just a small percentage of the skills with a wand that you have."

"Thanks," Penny said, blushing even more and turning a darker red.

When the three of them entered the school, the girls turned toward their dormitory, but Christian hesitated.

"What's the matter, Christian? I'm sure the dorm party's just getting started," said Gwen.

“Yeah. And I’m sure it’s really going to get lively when Naomi tells them that it was a Fireball that won the dueling demonstration this evening,” added Penny.

She noticed that Gwen and Christian had puzzled looks on their faces.

“Naomi Charles, the last girl I was up against there at the end, is a senior Fireball,” she added.

Gwen and Christian both nodded their heads, gesturing that they now understood.

“Um, I think I’ll go check out the ghost dancing and maybe listen to a few of the ghost stories before I call it a night,” Christian finally responded.

“Christian, you’re not concerned about the girls in the dorm not wanting you to participate, are you?” asked Gwen.

“No, that’s not it. I find the ghosts really fascinating. You know, having come from a non-magical family, seeing them like this is really cool,” Christian replied with faked enthusiasm.

Both girls shrugged and waved good night to him. Then, they continued on to the dormitory.

Christian hated lying to anyone, but sometimes he found it necessary to avoid hurting someone. He’d have loved joining them in the common room for the party, but he’d feel uncomfortable and wouldn’t enjoy it. He assumed that as an end result, he’d cause the girls concern and they wouldn’t have any fun either. So, he thought a lie at least would allow his friends to enjoy their evening.

Christian went into the dining hall and sat at the end of the stairs watching the ghost pairs shimmering in the false moonlight, as they danced to the music of the ghostly trio. Surprisingly, the trio played pretty well. One played drums and percussion, another harpsichord and wind instruments, and the third played stringed instruments, like guitar, mandolin, and the like. However, the music seemed to date back to the late 1700’s or early 1800’s when most of the ghosts had lived.

Mr. Brown and Ms. D’Amor joined in the dancing for one of the songs, but most of the time the ghosts held the floor.

As Christian sat watching the ghosts, he heard someone speak behind him.

“Christian, why aren’t you upstairs enjoying the festivities with your dorm-mates?”

Christian turned and jumped to his feet, as he found Mr. Brown standing there.

“Oh, hello sir. I, uh, find the ghosts really fascinating. I hardly knew they actually existed until a few months ago. And now, here’s a large group of them right in front of me.”

It wasn’t really a lie. Christian did find the ghosts very perplexing, but he knew in his heart why he hadn’t joined the girls from his dormitory.

“You know, I’ve come to take their existence for granted. But, I guess their existence really is a bit amazing,” Mr. Brown commented.

“Sir, how are they here? I mean, are these people who’ve lost their way to the other side?”

“You mean like all of the ghost stories you’ve heard or read about growing up?”

Christian nodded.

“Well, I guess the short answer is, ‘No’. But, there’s a lot more to that answer, if you want to hear it.”

“Yes sir,” Christian replied with enthusiasm.

Mr. Brown bent down and sat with his back against the top stair.

“First, these ghosts here aren’t the everyday ghosts from the non-magical world, as you’ve heard and read about. Those ones resulted from the non-magical person who died being confused or scared about something that keeps them connected with this world. Put simply, they usually aren’t here by choice. Although, there are some of them that DO stick around by choice, we won’t go into that whole discussion.

“The non-magical ghosts are basically just pure energy and will never join with their corporeal body again. And, if they ever ‘find their way’ to the other side, they will use their remaining energy to do so. If for some reason they should lose that energy, they will just fade away and never make that final connection with the other side.”

Mr. Brown paused and looked to make sure Christian understood and still showed interest in the information. The look Christian returned energized Mr. Brown to continue.

“Now our friends here, are quite different from those non-magical ghosts. You see, all of these ghosts are previous witches or magical beings of some sort. What that means is that they aren’t just beings of energy, but they’re beings of magic. And, they’re all here by choice, having decided to stick around before their bodies joined them.”

Christian gave him a confused look for that last comment.

“We’ll save that explanation for some other time as well,” Mr. Brown suggested.

Christian nodded in agreement.

“So, to conclude, our friends here will remain with us in this world, until they decide to rejoin with their body and move on to the magical world beyond.”

“So, that explains why they’re so much more lifelike and ... interactive.”

Mr. Brown smiled and nodded.

“Cool,” Christian said, turning back toward the reveling specters.

“Yes. Very,” Mr. Brown replied with a smile, as he turned to look back at the dancing ghosts.

Then, with a final touch to Christian’s shoulder, Mr. Brown left Christian alone, to enjoy his emersion into the ghostly activities.

After another half of an hour, Christian decided he’d had enough. He considered waiting around for the ghost stories, but the disappointment of not participating in the dormitory party finally got to him.

He trudged down to the dormitory and opened the portal. Before he could even step through, he could hear the music, laughter, and frivolity coming from the common room upstairs. After closing the portal, he hung his head low and shuffled toward his room.

As he reached for the doorknob, something on the door caught his eye. A note, written on a full piece of paper, hung there. A hand-drawn witch at the bottom of the paper caught his eye first. The witch zoomed across the page on a broom from right to left and off the left-hand side of the paper, only to reemerge again on the right. The note, short and simple, read: ‘We really hope that you’ll join us upstairs.’

Although the invitation improved Christian's mood, something else caused his heart to leap. The note had signatures on it, or more precisely, all over the paper. He quickly counted nearly sixty signatures on the note.

Christian pulled the note off of the door, folded it nicely, and stuck it into his pants pocket. Then, he ran up the stairs. When he emerged from the stairway landing into the common room, the welcome rang out enthusiastically by nearly everyone.

Christian looked around and saw Penny and Gwen talking with Lucy. As he approached, the three of them raised a glass of punch to toast his arrival.

"Glad you could make it Christian," said Lucy, loud enough so Christian, Penny, and Gwen could hear her over the music from someone's laptop, which boomed magically louder than normal.

"Thanks for the note," Christian replied, so that all three of them could hear.

"Note? What note could he be talking about?" Lucy said to Gwen and Penny, loud enough for Christian to hear.

Both Penny and Gwen shrugged and replied, "I don't know."

The three of them just smiled at Christian and handed him a cup of punch, a small cake, and a napkin.

Everyone enjoyed the rest of the evening dancing, bobbing for apples, telling ghost stories, and just having a good time. And, when midnight rolled around and the festivities in the dining hall finished up, they partied on.

... And Tricks

Christian woke suddenly around three thirty in the morning, having only slept for a few hours at most. This time neither a dream nor a noise caused his abrupt awakening. No, the gallon, or so, of soda and punch he drank during the party caused it. He quickly threw on some slippers and a robe and hurried out of the portal to the bathroom upstairs by the library.

Once he emerged from the bathroom, with less urgency on his mind, he noticed that voices from the library echoed throughout the upstairs.

Christian remembered the unexpected encounter his first night in the school with Mr. Davis and the other man. So, he decided to investigate the late-night gathering more closely.

As he approached the library doors, he noticed that the doors stood slightly ajar, mainly because they couldn't close together very tightly any more. This allowed him to see a very narrow path into the library without having to open the door.

Through this narrow opening, he saw Mr. Davis and the same man. However, this time some others had joined them. But, Christian couldn't see the other men's faces.

As he arrived, he heard the man speak to Mr. Davis.

"Why does that ghost-woman keep 'shushing' me?"

"Because you keep speaking too loudly. As long as you don't mess up their books or speak loudly, the ghosts will not even note that you are here," replied Mr. Davis.

"That's good, because I don't want any unwelcome parties in on our conversations. Now, how are the operations going?"

"Everything's on schedule. In fact, shipments are actually ahead of schedule. I do have one piece of bad news though."

"Oh? And what's that?"

"Well, we're going to need some replacements in a few of the specialty areas. A few of our current assets are getting too tired from overuse."

"Well, go and get replacements. Just don't let production slow down. Speaking of assets, have you ensured that there's no way that the disappearance of your assets can be traced back to you?"

"Or the Witches Council?" added one of the men Christian couldn't see.

"Absolutely," replied Mr. Davis.

"If anyone tries to establish a link to these disappearances, it will lead them to the school and Brown. Then HE will have to deal with whatever the repercussions might be. It wouldn't be any loss to the magical world if something were to happen to Brown ... no matter what it was," Mr. Davis added with an evil grin.

After hearing that, Christian had to see if he knew any of the other men.

He leaned in every direction, trying to eke a little more visibility into the library. He could just make out two men that he saw last night in the dining hall, who had mingled with Mr. Brown. He leaned a little too far and the door moved with a squeak, just like one would expect from an old wooden door.

"What was that?" nervously asked the man who had been leading the conversation with Mr. Davis.

“Go check it out,” Mr. Davis ordered to one of the other men that Christian couldn’t see.

As this man stood up and turned, Christian quickly looked for some place to hide. He first thought of running to the bathroom, but he hadn’t enough time to make it that far before the man emerged from the library.

Then, Christian noticed that one of the webs Ms. Mander had created hung nearby, draped between the wall and the floor. Although fairly thick, it still only had the consistency of a spider web. Located in a darkened corner, it offered the only place to hide within time. Christian ducked behind the web and wished hard that he could simply disappear.

As the man emerged into the hallway, Christian either felt something crawling on him or just his skin crawling ... he hoped the latter. However, he didn’t move. The man looked around, pulled out a wand, and said “Lumos.”

When the end of his wand lit up, Christian thought the man would surely see him. Apparently, however, the web must have given enough cover to keep the corner in darkness, because the witch looked directly at the web and didn’t see Christian. So, he walked toward the bathrooms, glancing down the stairs as he went.

The man, or witch, entered the boys bathroom and, after several long minutes for Christian, he finally emerged. Then, he went into the girls bathroom, which told Christian that the witch held no formalities for decency and would treat anyone he found with the same malice.

The witch exited the girls bathroom and walked back toward the library, looking down the stairs once more. He even glanced toward the web one more time, again not seeing Christian. Finally, the witch returned to the library.

Christian could hear Mr. Davis ask from inside the library, “Well, did you find anything?”

“No. It must have just been the old door creaking.”

Christian quietly stepped out from behind the web and frantically began to brush off his body. He saw nothing drop, so he cautiously approached the library door and heard the lead man speaking.

“Let’s end this meeting. Davis, if you want my assistance in getting elected, make sure operations continue on schedule, no matter what you have to do or how many assets you need to ‘make disappear’.”

“If I can count on you, you can count on me,” replied Mr. Davis.

“I’m glad we understand each other, Davis. Lead us out of here.”

Christian took this as a sign and dashed towards the bathroom. Once inside, he left the door slightly ajar.

Christian could hear the squeak of the library’s wooden door in the silence, but didn’t see the men emerge. He realized that they had exited through the other library door. He first considered dashing down the stairs and back to the dormitory. However, he thought they might possibly see him down in the main entry hallway. So instead, he slowly crept down the stairs and crouched behind one of the statues, which had changed back from the grotesque figure it resembled for Halloween.

The men emerged from the bottom of the other library staircase and proceeded to the front entrance. The lead man and one other, that Christian hadn't seen in the library, left through the front door. The remaining three men Christian assumed were witches, since they all wore traveling cloaks and included the witch who had searched upstairs earlier. The three of them exited into the dining hall with Mr. Davis.

Once it looked as if they had all gone, Christian stood up and began to walk toward his dormitory, continuing to watch the front entrance area. After he had taken three steps, he ran into something big, hard, and fuzzy.

"I wonder if you might be Mr. Drewell?" asked Tatu politely.

"Ye-yes, I am," replied Christian, startled by the encounter and that it, or he, would know his name.

"Mr. Brown and Ms. Hardcase told me that we may encounter you once in a while and that this would be permissible. Is everything alright? You seem to be very anxious."

"I-I just wasn't expecting to run into you, figuratively or literally."

"Very good play on words. We like to do that as well."

"You and your security squad?"

"Yes and no ... I meant we Sasquatch in general. One of our pastimes is to sit around and play word games, which for us can be very difficult."

"Why's that?"

"Because we first have to determine which language is being used, before we can figure out the puzzle or twist of the word."

"What do you mean by 'which language,' like English versus Sasquatch?"

"Well, yes and no. Those are two, although Sasquatch is not really our language or our original name, but one of the more pleasant names given to us by the human world. Hmmm, I think at last count, aside from our ancestral language, we could speak sixty-three different human languages or dialects and seventy-two non-human languages."

"SIXTY-THREE languages?"

"Oh yes. When our ancestors came across from Asia to North America, they brought many of the Asian languages with them. For centuries after that, other ancestors learned many of the native languages spanning from northern Canada to northern South America. Then, of course, when the Europeans came to the Americas, we learned several of those languages, and the various dialects that have grown from them. I personally think the most liting dialect here in the Americas is the Cajun French."

"How do you learn these languages? I mean, being familiar with the non-magical world, I don't believe you'd be accepted in the schooling systems."

Tatu laughed, which boomed off of the walls and concerned Christian that Mr. Davis and the other witches might hear.

"You are quite right. No, we listen and learn. Our basic, lifelong responsibility is to learn. Thereby improving our knowledge and ability to understand and speak languages. Then, during the times that we get together as groups, similar to what you humans call family gatherings, we pass on what we have learned. This has been done for generation upon generation. Thus, how we are able to speak and understand so many languages."

“To be able to listen to people speaking these languages, you must have to get pretty close to them. Is this why your kind have been spotted so frequently over the years?”

“No, no. We can actually hear quite well and can remain a few hundred feet from someone speaking and hear everything they say. No, unfortunately, during our gatherings we like to do one other thing ... drink intoxicating beverages. Anything from wine to other less known organically created concoctions. It is while we are under the influence of these drinks that we have sometimes wandered into human camps or crossed roads in front of cars. When not under the influence, we are very capable of avoiding detection because we can hear so well, and of course, our ability to blend in with our surroundings.”

Christian enjoyed the conversation and would have loved to learn more about the Sasquatch. Yet, he thought that since they could hear so well, maybe Tatu could shed some light on the goings on between Mr. Davis and the others. However, he needed to take care, since he didn't know whether Tatu supported Mr. Davis in his efforts or not.

“As I was coming out of the bathroom, I thought I heard voices coming from the library upstairs. I guess I'm still a little sleepy and wondered if the librarian spirits may have still been celebrating Halloween or something. Do you know whose voices it might have been?”

“That would probably have been Mr. Davis and his visitors.”

“Really? They seemed to be talking quite loudly. I'm surprised that the librarians didn't kick them out of the library. Any idea what they would have been talking about so enthusiastically?”

“No, I am afraid not. Mr. Davis told us himself not to interfere or get involved with anything associated with his late night, or early morning, meetings. He only informed us so that when the gentleman in the big, black automobile arrives at the main gate and makes his way to the front door, we do not attempt to intercept him. Especially, since he IS non-magical. You see non-magicals are not supposed to be allowed into our grounds. In fact, they are not supposed to be able to even see the grounds. So, I would assume Mr. Davis has modified the protective spells of the school to allow this gentleman to enter.”

“It was very nice talking with you ... do you really not mind being called Tatu?”

“Not at all. It is better than being addressed as beast man or skunk-ape, since my real name is very difficult for a human to say.”

Christian thought back to orientation day and Mr. Davis' introductions.

“It has been a pleasure Tatshenshini. I hope we can talk again sometime.”

Christian hoped he had pronounced the name correctly.

“I see that you listen and learn well too, Christian. I would be honored.”

Christian reached out to shake Tatshenshini's hand, who reached out and, gently, grabbed Christian's whole forearm.

They departed with a wave and Christian returned to his dormitory room.

Now wide-awake, Christian knew he wouldn't fall asleep very easily. Luckily, he could sleep in late, if he desired.

He sat on his bed staring at the door as he ran through the things he heard this morning:

"I don't want any unwelcome parties in on our conversations. Now, how are the operations going?"

"Everything's on schedule. In fact, shipments are actually ahead of schedule."

"A few of our current assets are getting too tired from overuse."

"If anyone tries to establish a link to these disappearances, it will lead them to the school and Brown. Then HE will have to deal with whatever the repercussions might be. It wouldn't be any loss to the magical world if something were to happen to Brown ... no matter what it was."

"Davis, if you want my assistance in getting elected make sure operations continue on schedule, no matter what you have to do or how many assets you need to 'make disappear'."

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Christian knew he had stumbled onto something that could get him into serious trouble, one way or another. But, he realized he couldn't just sit by and let anything happen to the school or Mr. Brown, who has done so much to make him feel at home here at Bishop.

He paced toward the door then turned and paced back past his bed. His concentration broke when he noticed that his jack-o-lantern, as pathetic as it had been, now lay on the floor in pieces. Christian picked up the pieces and the candle, which had luckily burned completely out before it fell. But what caused it to fall?

As he walked over to throw the pieces into the trashcan next to his dresser, he saw the telltale evidence. A feather partially stuck out from under his dresser. Christian picked it up and, with only a brief examination, concluded that the hawk had visited once again.

Thanksgiving Enlightenment

At breakfast, Christian didn't tell Gwen and Penny about the hawk's visit. He felt sure the hawk meant him no harm. However, he did tell them about the meeting he overheard and the discussion with Tatu.

"The fact that Mr. Davis met with a non-magical person isn't too out of the ordinary. Since the current WCA president took over, the magical world has been working more closely with the non-magical world. In fact, this is why my dad left the WCA," explained Penny.

"Did he give you any specifics as to why he left?" asked Christian.

"Only that he thought that they were becoming too involved in the non-magical world and that they were letting the non-magical world know too much about ours. He was around when they first started computerizing the WCA offices and the schools. He always had some concerns about whether the benefits outweighed the possible problems this relationship could cause. Then, he heard about something else involving the association with the non-magical world that really concerned him. He voiced his concerns, but when they didn't listen to him, well ... that's when he quit."

"Did he ever say what it was?" asked Gwen.

"No. I think he was worried that letting too many people know about it may not be a good thing for me and mom."

"You mean he thought someone might try and hurt you!" exclaimed Christian.

Penny just shrugged, although in her heart, she thought she knew the answer.

They pressed on with their Saturday activities while shouldering this burdensome secret. Since they had no proof, they couldn't tell anyone about the perilous dealings of Mr. Davis.

November brought the first snow of the year, which melted by mid-month. The month also brought Thanksgiving, a chance for family to visit the school. The school decorated for the occasion, too.

Fall-colored banners and tapestries draped the hallways, common rooms, and dining hall. The statues in the hallways now sported Pilgrim attire and the people in the paintings decorated and dressed for the occasion as well. Some paintings didn't have to dress up though, since they already wore attire from that era.

On Thanksgiving Day, the school held no classes. Students' families would arrive in the morning for an early afternoon feast in the dining hall, followed by a Quodpot demonstration later in the afternoon.

Christian had written home to his mother earlier in the month to see if she wanted to attend the feast, but she declined. She said that she wouldn't know how to get to the school or how to afford the travel. Christian tried to explain that he could work out a way to get her to the school and back, but she didn't seem to understand his explanation. He assumed, "Magic's still new to her, so she doesn't feel comfortable around it yet." So, he didn't press her to attend.

Gwen's parents had prior commitments that would keep them from attending too. Her mother had already departed for a month-long research trip to Hawaii and her father had to work on Thanksgiving.

Penny's dad and mom, however, planned to attend.

After breakfast on Thanksgiving, the children returned to their dormitory rooms to tidy themselves up for Penny's parents' arrival. During the time in his room, for several minutes Christian floated up to his window, opened it, and enjoyed the extraordinarily warm day. Then, he spent the rest of the morning researching on the school's network for homework and to gather information on the school's history. He researched the history mainly for curiosity, but also to possibly provide some background into Mr. Davis' plans.

Penny had asked Christian to come up to the common room at eleven o'clock to meet her parents. So, when the time grew near he turned off his computer, tidied himself up to ensure he looked his best, and proceeded up to the common room. When he entered, he looked confused to see Gwen and Penny, but no sign of Penny's parents.

"I knew you would get here at exactly eleven, so I told my parents to arrive one minute after," said Penny.

The even more confused look on Christian's face led Penny to explain.

"I wanted you to be here, because I thought you'd enjoy this."

Then, she pointed toward the fireplace.

No sooner had she pointed than a great, greenish-blue flame erupted in it. A split second after the flame erupted, a man and woman appeared within it holding hands. Then, with only a brief hesitation, they stepped out of the flame and into the room. The moment they did, the greenish-blue flame disappeared.

Their slender bodies allowed them to fit into the fireplace together. The man had brown hair and sported a mustache and long side-burns. The woman had blond, shoulder length hair and very pretty facial features.

They both began to wave a wand over their bodies, removing the spots of soot from their clothes. As the man did this, he exclaimed, "Hello Penny dear. Are we on time?"

"Perfect timing dad," she responded, snickering at the shocked look on Christian's face.

"I see your plan worked," Mr. Humblot added, also snickering at the look on Christian's face.

"I told my parents that you had never traveled by fireplace or ever seen anyone do it, so I asked them to come after you got here. That way, you could see it firsthand," Penny explained to Christian.

"Marvelous way to travel. Clears the sinuses better than inhaling burning coltsfoot," exclaimed Mr. Humblot.

"Dad, Mom, I'd like you to meet my friend Christian. And, this is my friend and roommate Gwen."

"Absolutely wonderful to meet both of you. We were concerned that Penny may not make any friends right away, since she really didn't have the opportunity to meet many children her age back home," added Mr. Humblot.

"Dad!" exclaimed Penny, turning red from embarrassment.

“So, how does it feel to be the only rooster in the hen house?” joked Mr. Humblot, as he patted Christian on the shoulder.

“Jeffrey!” shouted Mrs. Humblot, with her left hand on her hip and right index finger shaking furiously at Mr. Humblot.

Penny turned from red to magenta.

Christian waited in the common room as the others took a quick tour of the girls’ room. After the tour, they all departed the dormitory and, with the two adults in the lead, the five of them strolled down the hallway toward the gold tower.

“I see nothing much has changed since we left,” stated Mr. Humblot.

“And I’m glad,” added Mrs. Humblot.

“It’s nice that some things are staying the same in our world, to allow us to remember the good times we had,” she concluded.

As she said it, Mrs. Humblot reached for her husband’s hand.

Christian and Gwen smiled at the gesture, while Penny’s face again turned red.

As they turned to go out into the courtyard, Mr. Humblot began to address Christian and Gwen.

“I don’t know if Penny told you, but the two of us went to school here too. I was a Vipertooth and Betty was a Fireball. We hung around in a small group that included your Assistant Headmaster, although he was much more of a radical than a headmaster back then. And, he was my roommate and best friend.

“We were pleased, but very surprised, when we heard a few years back that Abe, I mean Mr. Brown, had been selected for the Assistant Headmaster position. We’ve kept in touch over the years and it’ll be nice to catch up on things with him while we’re here.”

“Yes. It’s a shame that he and Bellamy never became serious enough to get married,” commented Mrs. Humblot.

“It just wasn’t meant to be. They both knew that a lasting relationship wouldn’t work. After graduation, she wanted to work for the WCA, but she knew Abe wanted to stay away from the WCA,” Mr. Humblot explained.

“Love can be cruel sometimes,” Mrs. Humblot added.

“Why don’t we make our way to the dining hall, where it’s a little warmer? Maybe Mr. Brown will be there,” suggested Penny, attempting to move things along so that the flush from embarrassment would finally leave her face.

“In time, in time. I’d like to visit the greenhouses first,” commented Mrs. Humblot.

They continued toward the hallway connecting the blue and gold towers and the stairs leading up to the classrooms, as Mr. Humblot continued.

“Betty was aces at Mag Ag. She makes her own potions, charms, salves ... you name it. She spent a lot of her spare time in these greenhouses working with the Mag Ag professor then. Oh, what was his name? Professor ... Arborovick, wasn’t it Betty?”

“Yes, very talented man. For a few years, he headed up the Mag Ag Department of the WCA, but now he’s traveling the world. He taught me everything I know. The only thing I had a problem with, and still do, was being forceful with some of the tougher plants,” responded Mrs. Humblot.

"I know what you mean. I can show you what I've learned to do with some of them, if you're interested," Gwen suggested to Mrs. Humblot.

The two adults looked slightly surprised.

"Gwen's the teacher's aide in our class. Her knowledge is closer to a junior level," Penny explained.

The look of surprise turned to a look of amazement.

"I'd love to hear your recommendation," Mrs. Humblot said, holding her arm out signaling for Gwen to walk with her.

As the two of them talked together, leading the group toward the greenhouses, Christian took the opportunity to talk with Mr. Humblot.

"Mr. Humblot sir, was Mr. Davis Headmaster when you went to school?"

"No, he became the Assistant Headmaster while we were here and a right ambitious one at that. Back then he had his immediate sights on the Headmaster position. Apparently, his long-term plan must have been to use the Headmaster position as a launching pad for his run for the WCA Presidency, since he's one of the names up for consideration in the election next year."

Christian and Penny looked at each other, acknowledging the information.

"Over the summer before our Journeyman year, Davis instituted the use of the computer system here at school. Thank goodness Betty came from a non-magical family and they knew how to use them, otherwise I don't think I'd have made it through that last year.

"Davis instituted this change without getting the Headmaster's approval. But, he'd been working directly with some members of the WCA. As you could imagine, this didn't go over well with the Headmaster. Davis didn't care. By heading up this major change, he set himself up for the Headmaster position and had made strong ties with some high-level people in the WCA.

"We found out that this was the first significant step linking us to the non-magical world since the late nineteen fifties. Back then, they instituted the requirement for children to attend non-magical schools during the years prior to attending one of the three magical schools at the age of twelve. Well, I can tell you that my grandparents, who are both witches, weren't too thrilled about that change back then. They never sent my dad to school, but home schooled him in magic. And, my dad did the same with me. Although we did the same to Penny, I'm thinking that it may have been a mistake for her."

Christian looked over at Penny, who looked oddly at her father. Mr. Humblot must have seen the look too.

"Penny, your mother and I just think that we may have done you a disservice by not allowing you to be with and learn with children your own age; especially in light of the need for being computer savvy these days. I remember my first year working for the WCA. That was when they transitioned to using computers there, but that time I didn't have your mother to help me. I struggled learning how to use them. Everyone I worked with was in the same boat. You, on the other hand, will be struggling to learn how to use computers, while your fellow students can use them with their eyes closed."

“But Dad, I enjoyed spending the time learning with you and mom. I wouldn’t trade it for anything. As for using computers, it isn’t too hard to learn, and Christian’s a whiz about them and has been helping me along,” Penny responded, with tears welling in her eyes.

She stepped forward and hugged her father.

Mr. Humblot looked at Christian and smiled. Christian understood and returned the smile.

Penny let go of her father and they continued following the two chatting females up the long staircase from the Magical Creatures classroom level to Greenhouse #1. When they arrived, Gwen took Mrs. Humblot over to one of the tables where they began discussing one of the plants. The other three remained at the door, as Mr. Humblot continued his recap of the past.

“You know, when Davis established the use of computers at the schools, it worsened an already intense discord of beliefs throughout our society. When they made the change in the late fifties, the Conservatives believed it was a mistake, while the Liberals thought it was a needed change. The Conservatives ensured this remained the only link between the magical and non-magical worlds for over three decades.

“Then, behind the backs of the Conservatives, the Liberals instituted the change to computers. This intensified the mistrust and dislike between the two groups. The Conservatives demanded that computerization permanently linked us to the non-magical world and would create the downfall of our society. They felt this so strongly that they considered splitting from the Liberals and establishing their own isolated society here in the States.

“Although the split never took place, the feelings remained. Our unity was tested once again when Davis, the instigator of it all, was selected as Headmaster for the school. To relieve the tensions that rose from this appointment, the WCA agreed to have Abe, I mean Mr. Brown, become the Assistant Headmaster.

“You see, during our years here at school, Mr. Brown really WAS a radical, always bucking the system. More specifically, he bucked the system that Davis kept trying to create here at school as the Assistant Headmaster.

“When Davis implemented the computers, Abe, I mean Mr. Brown, led a protest against the change. He and his group, to include yours truly and my lovely girlfriend at the time, would demonstrate in front of the school, hold sit-ins in various locations throughout the school, and sometimes cause disruptions in the school’s computer operations. These actions became very public and were simultaneously rebuked by the Liberals and lauded by the Conservatives.

“Although he didn’t want to be a part of the Liberal-dominated WCA, the Conservatives pleaded with Abe, I mean Mr. Brown, to accept the appointment. In the end, he finally agreed to do it. So, six years after our graduation, Davis was selected as Headmaster and Abe, I mean Mr. Brown, became Assistant Headmaster.”

“Dad, I think you can say Abe and we’ll understand that you mean Mr. Brown,” commented Penny.

“Oh, thanks,” replied Mr. Humblot.

Just as he said this, Mrs. Humblot and Gwen came walking up.

"We should probably go to the dining hall," proposed Mrs. Humblot.

As they walked back down to the main floor and the dining hall, once again with Mrs. Humblot and Gwen chatting in the lead, Christian continued the discussion.

"Sir, would you say that the relationship between the two groups is still pretty fragile?"

"Yes indeed. I think it could weather some minor infractions by the Liberals, although they wouldn't help. But, any major breaches could be the last straw."

"What if the Conservatives were caught doing, or were blamed for, something that would be more in line with the Liberals' point of view?"

"Well, I'm not sure how that would ever happen, but I suppose it would totally undermine the Conservatives and the Liberals would pretty much take over. Why do you ask?"

"Just curious," replied Christian.

He looked over at Penny and recognized that they had both come to the same conclusion.

As they rounded the corner and transitioned from the blue tower to the main entry hallway, Christian asked, "Sir, one other question. I understand that the relationship between Mr. Davis and Mr. Brown is one of convenience, but is there anything else about their relationship that, well, may go deeper?"

"You are a very astute young man and I probably shouldn't be telling you things about members of the school's administration. But, why stop now," Mr. Humblot said with a chuckle.

After a brief pause, as the chuckle had become contagious, Mr. Humblot continued.

"As you can imagine, all of the things that Abe did as a student made Davis' job much more difficult. Then, when he was offered and finally accepted the appointment as his assistant, Davis was furious. He accepted the WCA's decision, but only grudgingly.

"To add to this tension, Abe held Davis in contempt for his liberal activities, especially in the schools. Plus, Davis had originally been implicated in the disappearance of Bellamy, the girl from our class that Abe had feelings for. Her body was never found, so no formal charges were ever brought against Davis. And, even though Davis was cleared, Abe held some hatred against Davis for this.

"I'm not sure Abe ever fully got over this hatred, but they had to overcome the mutual dislike to make their working relationship work. It also probably helped that Abe found a new love in his life."

They had reached the dining hall, which now contained wall-to-wall tables, figuratively speaking. The bottom portion of the hall now had four long dining tables and the upper level also had four long dining tables, although shorter than the ones on the lower level. At a glance, Christian calculated that the number of people that currently had gathered in the hall would fill about two-thirds of the new seating capacity.

Many people sat at the tables talking, while others stood around mingling. Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor stood chatting on the upper level when Mr. and Mrs. Humblot entered the hall. Mr. Brown, gesturing to Ms. D'Amor to follow, immediately came down to greet the couple. After a hearty handshake with Mr. Humblot and a long hug

with Mrs. Humblot, Mr. Brown introduced Ms. D'Amor to them. The four of them caught up on things, while Christian and Penny filled Gwen in on the enlightenment provided by Mr. Humblot.

They shared an extraordinary Thanksgiving feast. It included every traditional favorite, such as turkey and ham, dressing, mashed and sweet potatoes with gravy, cranberries and cranberry sauce, and pumpkin pie. However, the tables held far more than just traditional Thanksgiving fare.

After the meal, the Quodpot demonstration turned into a challenge match between the school's current team and parents who had played on previous school teams. The match ended in a nine to seven victory by the school's current team. The match would have turned out very one-sided if Mr. Bangar and a good friend of his hadn't played on the parents' team. Mr. Bangar's friend happened to play on one of the regional professional teams.

As expected during the match, with everyone all bundled up in his or her winter cloaks on such a warm day and their stomachs filled with food, many of the spectators fell sound asleep. A few snored loud enough to make the players think the referee had signaled.

After the match ended, everyone returned to the dining hall. There, Mr. Brown announced, "I, the staff, and the administration would like to thank the parents and family members for coming today and showing their loving interest in their children, our students."

After a round of applause, he continued.

"For those of you who will be returning home today, have a safe trip, no matter what travel method you may use. For those of you who will be spending the weekend with us, we look forward to seeing you during classes tomorrow and possibly mingling with you on Saturday and Sunday. Happy Thanksgiving."

Many people stayed in the dining hall and chatted, while others immediately left.

Mr. And Mrs. Humblot debated on whether to pop home for the night and return in the morning or spend the night in town. Mr. Brown resolved their decision by inviting them to stay at his house. Mr. Humblot voiced a concern about breaking school rules on appearances of favoritism, to which Mr. Brown replied, "Since you've known me, when have I held to following the rules?"

He said this not expecting it to reach the ears of the students, but Mr. Humblot couldn't resist passing it on to Penny and her friends.

Christian and Gwen spent the rest of the afternoon visiting the stores in town with the Humblots. The townsfolk, knowing that they would have several visitors in town for the holiday, had decorated appropriately for the occasion and most of them even dressed in Pilgrim period outfits. As it approached seven o'clock, Mr. Humblot gathered everyone together.

"Mr. Brown's expecting us at seven for dinner, so we need to get over there."

"Follow me, I know the way," Christian suggested, as he started to walk toward the alleyway between Targ's tavern and Bevius' bed and breakfast.

“And walk through THOSE woods, no sir. I want you kids to promise me you won’t ever go walking through those woods without proper adult supervision,” Mr. Humblot insisted.

Then, he took hold of one of Christian’s hands and one of Penny’s. Mrs. Humblot also took Penny’s other hand and one of Gwen’s. Before Christian could ask why they had done this, Mr. Humblot tightened his grip on Christian’s hand and nodded to his wife.

The feeling reminded Christian of an amusement park ride he had gone on once. They strapped him into a seat inside of a cage and, by the method of dropping a counter weight, shot the cage straight up into the air on a track. After a certain number of feet up the track, brakes engaged until the cage came to a gradual stop.

This time he had no seat, no strap, and no cage, just the sense of being shot into the air and the sensation that his stomach had dropped out of his back end. Everything went black and then, after a few seconds, the sensation reminded Christian of having just jumped off of a short ladder and landing on the ground. As the real world rematerialized, Christian saw that they now stood directly in front of Mr. Brown’s house in the shadows of the OWL.

They walked, or in Christian’s case wobbled, up onto the porch. Mr. Humblot knocked and moments later Mr. Brown opened the door.

“Welcome, welcome, come on in,” Mr. Brown said, holding the door open.

As they stepped onto the porch, Mr. Brown shook hands with and patted the shoulder of Mr. Humblot. Then, he gave Mrs. Humblot a quick peck on the lips. Ms. D’Amor waited inside and greeted everyone as they entered, taking their cloaks while she did.

“OK, who wants a tour of the house?” Mr. Brown asked once everyone had entered.

They all followed him upstairs, where he showed them the master bedroom. Christian gauged it as bigger than even Doug’s back home. The master bath rivaled Doug’s as well.

“You know Abe, I think your bedroom’s bigger than the whole top floor of our house,” Mr. Humblot teased.

They all laughed, although Penny had a look on her face as if to say, “He’s right.”

The visitor’s bedroom, although not as big, looked just as nice.

“Here’s your room. I’m sure it’s bigger than your bedroom back home. So, if you decide to stay longer than the weekend, I’ll have to charge you rent,” Mr. Brown said with a grin.

They all laughed again and returned to the main floor, where Mr. Brown continued the tour.

The size of the kitchen would have made any good chef envious. Several dishes sat on the stove and in the oven cooking. Spoons in two of the pots stirred the contents by themselves and a basting spoon poured the juice from the dish in the oven over the cooking roast. All of this activity brought another comment from Mr. Humblot.

“YOU COOK?”

"I had to learn sometime or else I'd have starved. You forget, I didn't have this position right out of school and I couldn't afford to eat out every night. Besides, my Little Eva helped."

"Only if everyone likes the food. If they don't, then YOU made it all," chimed Ms. D'Amor.

"I like this girl, Abe. Don't lose her," added Mr. Humblot with a chuckle.

"I do too ... and don't get pushy," replied Mr. Brown.

They all laughed yet again.

The dining room could have easily accommodated ten people, twelve in a pinch. Elegantly decorated with fine china and candles, the table currently held place settings for seven.

They concluded the tour in the living room, where everyone took a seat either on one of the two sofas or in one of two matching chairs.

As the adults continued to chitchat, Christian took in his surroundings. He noticed one thing that looked out of place in the room. A full-length mirror hung on the wall next to the fireplace, just this side of the archway that separated the dining room and the living room. He knew the mirror didn't conceal a closet because it had no handle. But even if it did conceal a closet, the full-length mirror seemed more appropriate for a bedroom than in the living room next to the fireplace.

The spectacle of the mirror held Christian's gaze so much that it took an elbow in the ribs from Gwen to break him away from his staring. It took a moment for him to realize that Mr. Brown had asked a question.

"I'm sorry sir, I didn't hear the question," apologized Christian.

"You seemed very interested in the mirror. It's from the previous Assistant Headmaster. When I took over the house, I just never did anything with it, even though it's mostly an eye-sore down here," Mr. Brown said.

Then, quietly to the Humblots, he added, "Davis must be as vein as he is arrogant."

"I had asked how your accommodations in the dorm were? Neither Ms. D'Amor nor I have had the chance to ask you away from other students if you were still satisfied with them," Mr. Brown said, repeating the question Christian hadn't heard the first time.

"They're excellent. Thank you sir," Christian replied.

Mr. Brown recalled the events of the night of the great feast, how for some reason the chair had selected Christian as a Fireball and how they modified the linen closet for him.

Just as he finished the story, which Penny had apparently already rendered to her parents in one way or another, a chime sounded from the kitchen.

"Sounds like dinner's ready. Why don't you all take a seat in the dining room and Eva and I'll bring the food in," responded Mr. Brown to the chime.

Mr. Brown, followed by Ms. D'Amor, made his way to the kitchen via the dining room. He lit the candles on the table with a wave of his wand as he walked by them.

A few moments later, Ms. D'Amor entered the room levitating three bowls and placed them gently on the table. Mr. Brown followed, levitating a large serving plate, another bowl, and a breadbasket. After he had these dishes situated on the table, he asked, "What would everyone like to drink?"

After they all responded, with seven flicks of his wand, glasses appeared in front of everyone with their desired drink. This stimulated Christian's curiosity, which led to a question for Mr. Brown.

"Sir, why did you make the food here, when you can conjure a dining hall full of food in an instant?"

"Well, first it sounds like I may have to clear up a misconception you have about how the food for school meals is created. When I make the food appear on the tables, I'm not conjuring it out of nothing. I'm actually transporting it from the kitchen, which is located under the dining hall. It does, however, take a great deal of concentration to make sure that the various foods are properly transported to the tables. So, when I do 'conjure' the food it takes a lot of energy to accomplish, exhausting me for several minutes afterward. Eating immediately afterward helps me regain my energy.

"Now, I could have had the kitchen staff make this meal for me, but I believe cooking for someone shows you care to take the time and effort to make it special. And for friends, I'm always willing to spend the time and effort."

"Here, here," added Mr. Humblot, who lifted his glass in a toast to Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor.

After toasting, they commenced the meal. The intimate setting brought a nice change from the dining hall meals with the whole school.

Christian really enjoyed the meal, even though he couldn't spend Thanksgiving with his mother. The most enjoyable aspect of the meal ... it fit Christian's vision of an actual family gathering. Mr. and Mrs. Humblot played the role of parents doling out the food with Mrs. Humblot chastising Penny for reaching. Penny and Gwen acting the role of his sisters and Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor as an aunt and uncle. Christian had never experienced a family gathering like this before and, like a warm blanket, the experience enveloped him.

After a short relaxation period after dinner, Mr. Brown noted the time.

"We need to get you children back to school. Now, what's the best way to do this? I'd prefer not to leave guests here alone. I wouldn't want to be rude."

Mr. Brown and Mr. Humblot smirked at each other.

"I suppose Penny could stay here with her parents and Eva could take Christian and Gwen back the same way you all got here, but then we'd have to take Penny back earlier in the morning so that she could get ready for classes."

Mr. Brown stood there with his hand stroking his beard, pondering the options.

"Why don't we fly back?" suggested Ms. D'Amor.

"Splendid idea, Eva. Let's see now, Christian I'm guessing you can't fly yet, right?" asked Mr. Brown.

"I don't think so sir. I've never tried," replied Christian.

"Well, we'll let you fly back with Ms. D'Amor," stated Mr. Brown.

Christian gave a big smile.

"Penny, I'm sure you can fly, but what about Gwen?" asked Mr. Brown.

"I'm afraid it's been awhile and I may be quite rusty," Gwen replied.

"No matter, you can double up with Penny. Here let me get you all a couple of brooms."

Upon saying that, Mr. Brown exited the room toward the foyer. A few moments later, he entered the room holding a broom in each hand and said, "These are two well-seasoned flyers and should respond immediately."

"Have a good night's sleep and we'll see you in the morning," said Mrs. Humblot to Penny, giving her a hug and a kiss.

"We love you sweetheart," said Mr. Humblot to Penny, also hugging her and pecking her on the cheek.

"It was nice spending the day with you, Mr. And Mrs. Humblot," Christian said as he stepped into the foyer, where Ms. D'Amor waited with their cloaks.

"The pleasure was ours, Christian. You and Gwen have a good night too."

They waved goodbye as the three children proceeded outside. Ms. D'Amor followed, carrying a broom in each hand.

Ms. D'Amor handed one to Penny and then she momentarily stood holding the other broom straight out in front of her. Afterward, she quickly straddled it and turned toward Christian.

So caught up in watching Ms. D'Amor, Christian didn't see if Penny did the same. He only saw Penny straddling the broom and Gwen climb on behind her.

"Climb onto the broom in front of me, so that I can make sure you don't slip off," Ms. D'Amor said to Christian.

Following her instructions, Christian straddled the broom in front of Ms. D'Amor.

"Hold on tight to the broom," she said.

As soon as he did, the broom lifted off of the ground and gradually began to climb. Christian kept sliding back on the slippery broom handle, although he only slid a few inches before he bumped into Ms. D'Amor. Then, he would pull himself forward, only to slide back again. This continued until they leveled off about twenty feet above the treetops. Christian could then relax, although continuing a tight grip, and look around.

Penny and Gwen zigged and zagged to his left, giggling as they went. They even did a loop around him and Ms. D'Amor, until she told them to settle down. Christian, a little nervous about looking down, did so anyway.

He noticed that the distance between the glade where the faculty and staff members' houses sat and the end of the Quodpot field stretched only about a hundred yards. However, those one hundred yards traversed through dense woods.

Christian also noticed two long glass greenhouses near the closer end of the Quodpot stadium. He hadn't noticed them before, because they sat tucked away from the school, with woods on two sides and the cliffs on another. Apparently, the Mag Ag department used them as a secondary location for growing and storing many of the plants and Mag Ag stuff.

"We're going to start downward, so hold on tight again," warned Ms. D'Amor. She gripped Christian around the waist with one arm while she steered the broom with the other.

They descended gradually, until Christian's feet touched the ground just to the side of the main entrance's stoop. There, he climbed off just in time to see Penny and Gwen begin a dive toward them from about fifty feet up. Penny quickly pulled the nose of the

broom straight up into the air causing it to stall two feet above the ground. This allowed Gwen to easily slide off, as Penny floated the remaining two feet and jumped off herself.

Penny handed the broom to Ms. D'Amor as they all bid each other 'Good night.' Ms. D'Amor, with one hand on her broom and the other holding Penny's broom, shot straight up into the air, much faster than she did with Christian on with her. She rose quickly over the trees and out of sight.

The three students proceeded into the school. And, they had just stepped through the door when Penny gestured as if she remembered something.

"We forgot to talk to Mr. Brown about what's going on with Mr. Davis."

"We still don't have any proof, yet. Even if we did tell Mr. Brown, he wouldn't be able to take any action because it would just be his word against Mr. Davis'. And, the only thing to back Mr. Brown is something a student thought he heard, specifically me, the first boy selected to be in a girls' dorm. I think my opinion may not hold very much weight with anyone."

They continued on into the dormitory and, as the girls started up the stairs, Christian added a final comment.

"We'll have to come up with some way of getting the proof we need. It's the least we can do for Mr. Brown and the school."

Classes the next day followed a different pattern than a routine class session, as many of the freshmen's parents stayed for the weekend. The teachers made the classroom sessions much more lively than usual, mainly performing subject-related demonstrations for the parents. The professors followed suit in the laboratory sessions, genuinely impressing some of the parents.

For Friday's meals, the dining hall remained as arranged for the Thanksgiving feast, although a majority of the visiting family members had returned home Thursday night. The freshmen's families, the majority of the remaining visitors, still required the additional tables though.

After dinner, Penny, Christian, and Gwen, said goodbye to the Humblots. They all agreed to meet in the dining hall at nine o'clock the next morning.

After the children had finished eating breakfast the next morning, the Humblots arrived in the dining hall a few minutes before nine and even helped arrange the room for Penny's dueling practice. Mr. And Mrs. Humblot watched Penny with pride.

At least twice, Christian heard Mr. Humblot boasting to someone, "That's my daughter, Penny. Isn't her agility and accuracy amazing?"

After dueling practice, the five of them watched the Quodpot practice. Christian and the Humblots remained to watch Gwen's cheerleading practice too. After Gwen's practice, Mr. Humblot, having learned from Penny that Christian sent his mother a weekly letter, offered to take them all into town for lunch.

They ventured into town, where they briefly stopped at the post office. Christian came out holding a bottle of vitamins, which he quickly tucked into his jacket pocket, and a box of cupcakes. He opened the cupcake box to share, but Mrs. Humblot recommended they wait until after they'd eaten lunch.

After lunch, and a few cupcakes each, they all returned to the school and the Humblots joined the group on the trip to the OWL. They had a lower student turnout for the trip to the OWL this month than the previous one, probably due to the holiday weekend. However, the number of parents accompanying the group compensated for the lack of students.

The Humblots really enjoyed themselves. They visited with many of the residents who had lived at the OWL during their student life and who they had come to know from their monthly trips back then. Also, they visited with a few of the residents they knew as members of the school administration back when they had attended, who had subsequently retired.

Once the OWL visit had ended, the Humblots said their final farewells to Penny, and to Christian and Gwen. They planned to spend a little time with Mr. Brown at his house, and then return home via his fireplace. Penny, though sad to see them go, smiled from the pleasure of having her parents spend a few days with her and her new friends.

Holiday Anxieties

The Friday after Thanksgiving weekend, Penny received a notice that she had a letter at the post office. After classes, Christian and Gwen joined Penny on a trip into town, rather than wait until their weekly trip into town the next afternoon. Christian gave Penny a quick rundown on how the post office worked, which she took graciously, while Gwen shook her head at his bravado.

They adjourned to the coffee shop across the street where Penny could open her letter and the three of them could enjoy sipping some drinks ... slowly.

Penny set her cup down and cleared her throat.

"It's from my mom and dad," Penny announced and began to read the letter aloud.

"Dearest Penny ... We had a wonderful time visiting with you. We're both very proud of you and everything you've accomplished in the few months you've been there at Bishop. We think you've made two wonderful friends and we're pleased to see that, in that same short period, the three of you have become as close as you have. This proves that you've selected and were selected by two very exceptional people as friends. This is the type of friendship that will last beyond the six years of school, so cherish them.

"The time we spent there was wonderful. We enjoyed, extremely, spending time with Abe (Mr. Brown) and we think his new love, Eva, is an exceptional choice for him. We also had a lovely time at the OWL. We really enjoyed seeing some of our older friends and some of the old administration members, especially Mr. Lucern. We always wondered what had happened to him when Mr. Davis took his place as Headmaster.

"Thank you again for making our trip there so wonderful. Please pass our thanks and best wishes on to Christian and Gwen as well.

"See you at Christmas! Love, Mom and Dad."

Penny's happiness, from receiving the letter, kept her from noticing her friends. Christian had stopped in mid-drink, still holding the cup to his lips, and Gwen nearly spat her drink out. Penny then looked up from the letter and saw her two companions' faces.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Didn't you catch what they said?" prodded Gwen.

"What who said?" Penny questioned, still not understanding what had happened.

"In the letter, your parents said that Mr. Lucern was Mr. Davis' predecessor; the previous Headmaster."

"And we might be able to get some inside information on Mr. Davis from him," Penny concluded, finally understanding.

Christian still sat holding the cup to his mouth, staring into space.

"What's the matter, Christian?" asked Gwen.

"We need to be careful how we approach Mr. Lucern. If we let him know that we're investigating Mr. Davis, he might help us out, since I'm sure there's no love lost between the two of them. However, he could take the stance that 'it's inappropriate for students to try to undermine the Headmaster of the school' and refuse to help us, or even turn us in.

“No, we need to plan the best way to approach him. Plus, we’re only going to get one chance at this if we hope to do anything to help Mr. Brown this year, since the next trip to the OWL isn’t until the end of January. If we’re not successful with the January visit, I think the February visit will be too late. We’re going to need time to use the information we get from Mr. Lucern to gather the evidence we need, and I think we’re going to need those full four months to do it. If we can’t find some way to help this year, I think it will be too late for Mr. Brown and, possibly, for the school.”

As the school year rolled into December, everyone’s thoughts turned to the Christmas holidays, including Christian’s. Although, he intermixed them with thoughts on how to come up with the proof he needed to help Mr. Brown. And, snowstorms only heightened everyone’s anticipation for the holidays.

The lessons intensified the last two weeks of school, as teachers tried to get as much out of these last few learning sessions of the semester. The first week after the holiday break, the teachers would review everything from the previous semester to prepare for mid-year exams at the end of the week. Because of this increased intensity in the classes and associated homework prior to the holiday break, the students remained focused on schoolwork and not much else.

At some point during these last two weeks, the school had decorated for the holidays. Wreaths with candles in their centers hung along the outer hallway walls. Garland draped between them, connecting them into one long chain around the three hallways. All of the statues now wore Santa Claus outfits and the paintings, and the people and scenes within them, dressed for the holidays too. Frequently, one of the people in a painting would wish the students ‘Happy Holidays’ as they walked by.

Wreaths and garland also hung around the dining hall. Christmas trees filled all of the corners and the available spaces along the walls. Additionally, one huge tree sat in the center of the upper level.

All of the trees had been decorated with garland, colored balls, and clear balls with blinking lights within them. Each tree also had a star on top that twinkled brightly, so much so that they provided all of the light needed during dinner. The trees also had patches of snow, magically added and bewitched so it didn’t melt. These snow patches complimented the false snow that continuously fell from the sky in the upper part of the ceiling.

Wreaths and garland had also been hung around the common rooms and a Christmas tree stood in the center of the room. The tree had similar decorations to those in the dining hall and stretched within an inch of the ceiling. This tree differed from those in the dining hall in one way; it had fewer ornaments on it. This allowed each student on the floor to add an ornament of her, or his, own.

Christian knew nothing of this ornament hanging responsibility. In fact, he hadn’t really had the opportunity to notice many of the decorations throughout the school until the last Friday before holiday break.

Once classes ended, everyone went straight to their rooms and packed for the eight o’clock school bus departure the next morning.

After packing, Christian could finally relax and enjoy the break, which had officially begun. He walked upstairs to the common room to collapse on the comfy couch in front of the fireplace. While he sat allowing the fire to warm his extremities, one of his fellow freshmen came in and hung an ornament on the tree and then returned to her room.

Christian walked over to the tree and began looking at the various personal ornaments when he realized his remission in providing an ornament of his own. He quickly retreated to his bedroom and looked around for an ornament or anything he could use as one. He could only find one thing that he could possibly use ... one of the cupcakes his mother had sent at the end of the previous month, still sitting in the box, petrified.

Using a paperclip, from an unused box that sat in his desk, Christian formed a hook. He had a difficult time getting the paperclip into the cupcake, but finally succeeded. Then, holding his finger out, he tested his creation and it actually worked, suspended from his finger. He then took the "ornament" up to the common room.

While he stood by the tree hanging it, some of the girls walked by and remarked how real it looked. Christian told them how it reminded him of the real thing his mother baked. They smiled, commenting on the sweetness of his gesture. Christian's smile gradually turned into a smirk once the girls had gone.

After Christian hung his "ornament," he sat back down on the couch and stared into the fire. Once again, he began thinking about the dilemma regarding the school and Mr. Brown. Penny and Gwen soon came in with the same idea of relaxing in front of the fire. The three, exhausted from the last two weeks of school, didn't say a word for several minutes.

"I guess we should go down for dinner," Christian said, breaking the relaxing silence. They stood up like zombies and slogged down to the dining hall.

After dinner, no one really hung around in any of the common rooms. They all planned an early bedtime and early rise for the early departure the next morning.

Christian went back to his room and added a few last things to his backpack. He planned to keep it more lightly packed than when he arrived. However, since he didn't plan to take his duffel home, he had it quite full, stuffed with a few of his favorite clothes and some items he purchased in town during his weekend trips. And, although he thought about leaving his computer, Christian decided to take it with him in case he wanted to use it over the holidays.

Once packed, Christian used his floating rug to look out of the window. It took several swipes with his sleeve to clear enough frost off of the window to see out. He hadn't taken the opportunity to look out since it had snowed, but now he finally had the chance to see the spectacular scene outside.

The lake had frozen over. Snow covered it, except for a few spots where the wind had blown the snow away exposing the ice. Christian imagined himself out skating along the lake; racing along for a mile and then racing back. Then, he began making figure eights near the school wall, which transitioned into making circles that stretched closer and closer to the waterfall. Suddenly, he fell through. He struggled to get out of the icy water, but kept slipping on the ice. He had begun to succumb to the cold, when a hand reached into the icy water and grabbed him.

Christian woke up startled. He had fallen asleep staring out of the window. He lowered the rug to the floor and immediately went to bed. Apparently, the exhaustion from the past two weeks had taken its toll on him.

He woke the next morning when his watch alarm went off at half past six and, without delay, he set out to the bathroom to get ready. He encountered a few students walking through the hallway, ready for the bus's departure. Much to Christian's pleasure, he didn't meet up with any seniors, especially Sean Geoffreys. In fact, neither Sean nor any other seniors had confronted him since Halloween.

Christian soon finished in the bathroom and returned to his room, where he completed his morning routine. He grabbed his backpack and headed to the dining hall for breakfast, not quite sure what he would do with his pack once there. However, the luggage carts sat in the entry hallway by the main door, already with many bags on them.

After stowing his backpack on a cart, Christian went into the dining hall and found that Penny and Gwen had already begun eating breakfast. So, Christian quickly joined them and they all ate much more quickly than usual, concerned about missing the bus.

The three friends departed the school several minutes before the bus's arrival, so they decided to grab some hot drinks in the coffee shop to keep warm. They had to squeeze into the very crowded shop, due to the cold morning and the shop's proximity to the bus stop. Gwen weaved her way to the counter and had just purchased the drinks as the bus pulled up. The shop quickly emptied with the three of them near the end of the pack.

With some difficulty, they snatched up their bags and got in line to board the bus. Penny, who only had her one duffle-like bag, held Christian's drink, while he slung his backpack onto his back and wrestled Gwen's large suitcase onto the bus. Gwen, who just had to bring all of her luggage back with her, carried her drink, a small carry-on piece of luggage and a medium suitcase.

They had no choice but to take the last sofa on the bus, as all of the others had at least one other person sitting in them. Christian tossed his backpack onto the sofa and, while Penny saved the seat, Christian helped Gwen stow her luggage in her locker. Then, Gwen saved the seat, while Christian and Penny stowed their bags in their lockers. Once back at the sofa, they all collapsed there exhausted.

"Whew. Now, that wasn't so hard," commented Gwen.

Christian and Penny began to shoot her an exasperated look, when they saw she had a smirk on her face. Then, they all burst into laughter instead.

"Thanks for the help, Christian," Gwen said appreciatively.

"Not a problem," replied Christian.

"So, Penny, what are your plans for the holidays?"

"Well, my parents are meeting me at the bus stop and then we're going to visit my dad's parents on the east coast. It's been a few years since we visited, mainly to allow my dad's business to get established."

"That sounds great," exclaimed Christian. "I never knew any of my grandparents. Both of my mom's parents died before I was born and I don't know anything about my

dad, but my mom said his parents are dead too. My stepfather never speaks to his parents, so I'm not sure they know I even exist."

"I'm sorry," both Gwen and Penny said softly, one touching Christian's arm and the other touching the opposite shoulder.

Just then the bus driver yelled out, "First stop. Everybody departing please do so."

They watched as a group of kids, from all of the grades, departed the bus. As soon as the group stepped off, the bus departed at the speed of magic.

"What are your plans for the holidays?" Gwen asked Christian.

"I'm guessing it'll be me and my mom just spending time together, sharing the experiences we've had over the last four months. We'll give each other a present or two on Christmas and watch some Christmas movies. Pretty much a typical, non-magical Christmas, except for the present I got her from the souvenir shop in town. I think she'll find it amazing. What are your plans?"

Before she could answer, the bus driver yelled, "Second stop."

In response, another group of students gathered to depart.

"Well, my mom gets back tomorrow from her research trip. We'll then fly, non-magically, down to Mexico City to spend Christmas with my dad's extended family. We'll fly back home after Christmas and pop up, magically, to my mom's parents' house somewhere in Idaho, I think, for New Years. We'll then pop back home the day before I have to come back to school."

"Wow, sounds like you're going on a world tour."

"That's our typical holiday routine. I wouldn't mind just staying at home for the holidays one of these years. The traveling gets tedious."

No sooner had she said this than the bus driver yelled out, "Third stop."

The three friends sipped their drinks as they watched more of the students depart the bus.

A minute or so later, as they finished their drinks, the bus stopped again. Once the bus began to move again, Christian got up to throw their cups away.

"Gwen, why don't we grab our bags now, so that we don't get caught in the rush when we get to our stop?" Christian suggested.

Gwen agreed.

They pulled the bags out of the lockers and dragged them over to the sofa.

"How are you getting home from the bus stop?" asked Gwen.

"I'm supposed to call my mom and she'll come pick me up in a taxi," Christian replied.

"You know, I could give you a ride home. We can call your mom and tell her. I'm sure she won't mind."

"Excellent idea! You can even come in and meet her when we get to the house."

"Sounds great!"

As Gwen said this, the bus came to a stop.

"See you in a couple of weeks," Christian said to Penny, as he waved goodbye, dragging Gwen's large suitcase behind him.

Christian and Gwen, so anxious to get off of the bus before the rush, didn't notice the expression on Penny's face. The look of total disappointment resulted from Christian and Gwen's last conversation.

Once the students had exited the bus, it pulled away at normal speed. Then, as soon as it turned the next corner, it disappeared.

Gwen pointed Christian toward the black limousine. Christian recognized the driver as the same one who had dropped her off. As the driver loaded Gwen and Christian's bags into the trunk of the car, Gwen pulled her cell phone out of her purse and handed it to Christian.

Gwen couldn't hear what Christian said on the phone, as he had stepped away from the street, mainly to find a spot with less background noise. He walked back after a few minutes.

"She said it'd be okay to catch a ride from you and to ask you if you'd like to come in for lunch."

He didn't mention the hesitation in his mother's voice.

"Super!" replied Gwen, as she and Christian climbed into the limousine.

Once the car had begun to move, Gwen told Christian to give the driver directions to his house. Once he had, the two children sat back and relaxed.

The first ten to fifteen minutes of the drive, Gwen showed Christian the limousine's gadgets and how they worked, since Christian seemed fascinated by them. Then, they sat for several minutes just looking out of the window, admiring the difference between bus travel and how they could actually see the scenery now. Gwen then pulled her portable music player out from her purse.

"So, do you listen to that while you study at school?" asked Christian.

"No. It doesn't work there. In fact, I think our computers are the only electrical stuff that does work there. The first morning I looked all over the place for a plug for my hairdryer, but there weren't any. I had to go that day without styling my hair. Later, I met one of the seniors who does a great job of magically styling her hair. Her stylings last for a week before you need a new one. She did this one. What do you think?"

Christian nodded blankly.

"You know, I tried to find a plug for my computer, but never did. I was concerned that I'd run out of battery power, but it stayed fully charged the whole semester. I guess they must have something that emits a continuous power source or something."

"It's more likely that they have a charm cast on the school to allow computers to operate within the school automatically."

"A charm?"

"Yeah. A charm's like the opposite of a curse. It's a spell that's cast on an object or person, but is done for a positive purpose."

"Well, I think when Penny made Sean Geoffreys' teeth grow, it was a charm, since it definitely had a positive purpose ... to keep him off my back. And, it worked!"

They both laughed, at the comment and imitating how Sean's teeth grew on Halloween night.

Christian returned to looking out of the window, while Gwen donned her earphones. A short time later, Christian dozed off for a while. When he awoke, he saw that Gwen

had her eyes closed too. Looking out of the window, he recognized that they had arrived in town near where he lived. The driver had closed the window between him and his passengers immediately after Christian gave him directions earlier, so Christian knocked on the window.

The driver opened the window and said "Yes, sir. What can I do for you?"

"I just wanted to know if you understood my directions all right or if you wanted me to guide you through town."

"Well, if you don't mind, I could use a little guidance."

"Sure. You'll want to take this next exit."

"Yes, sir."

As the car entered the exit ramp, Christian said, "You'll want to turn right at the top of the ramp."

"Yes, sir."

"We'll be on this street for about six miles, I think it's like ten traffic lights."

"Yes, sir."

Christian sat there for a few minutes. Then, he decided to break the ice.

"My name's Christian, by the way."

"Leewood, sir. At your service."

"Nice to meet you, Leewood. Do you work for the Torres family?"

"Yes, sir. Just over a year, now."

"Do you like it?"

"If you mean working for the Torres family, they're great. They all treat me well, which is pretty much all that matters to me. The Mrs. can be a little odd from time to time though.

"If you mean the job ... yes, I've been doing it now for about ten years. I retired from my previous job and plan to do this until I feel like REALLY retiring."

"What do you plan on doing when you REALLY retire?"

"I'm planning to buy a little house out by a lake somewhere, where I can sleep when I'm not fishing and fish when I'm not sleeping," Leewood said with a chuckle.

Christian responded with a chuckle of his own.

"You'll want to turn left at the next light," he then added.

"Yes, sir."

"You can call me Christian."

"Thank you, sir, I appreciate that. However, it would be inappropriate for me to address my employers or any of their associates on a first name basis."

After they had gone about five blocks, Christian said, "Turn left when you come to the stop sign in front of that school."

Christian looked at the school as the car came up to it, but then he turned away. Just over half of a year ago, he had walked through the halls in that building, finishing up his grade school education and anticipating when he would start junior high ... never expecting the BIG change that would take his life in a whole different direction.

Moments later, Christian said, "Turn left at the next street, then follow the curve of the road around."

As the car came around the curve, Christian gave his final instruction.

"It's the house on the left, there, with the white fence."

Christian then sat back onto the seat and gently shook Gwen. She opened her eyes and took off her earphones.

"We're here." Christian said.

"Oh. Okay," Gwen replied as she put her portable music player into her purse, pulled out a compact, looked at herself in the mirror taking a close look at her hair and face from several angles, and returned the compact to her purse. She finished just in time for Leewood to open the door.

Once Christian had stepped out of the car, Leewood closed the door and retrieved Christian's bags from the already opened trunk.

"Thank you, Leewood," Christian said.

"You are most welcome, sir," Leewood replied.

"How did you know his name?" asked Gwen.

"Magic," Christian replied with a grin.

Katy stood waiting at the door as the children walked up. She gave Christian a long, strong hug, during which Christian struggled to talk.

"Mother, I'd like you to meet my friend Gwenevere Torres."

"Nice to meet you Mrs. ... Drewell," Gwen said with hesitation, knowing that Christian hated the last name.

"It's very nice to meet you, Gwen isn't it? If I remember correctly from Christian's letters."

"Yes, ma'am," Gwen replied.

She smiled at Christian, just realizing that he had included her in his letters to his mother. The enjoyment didn't last due to Katy's next question.

"What about your other friend, Penny?" Katy asked Christian.

"Her stop on the bus is different from ours. Probably somewhere a couple of states north of here," replied Christian.

"Where do you live Gwen?" asked Katy, as she guided them into the kitchen, where she had the breakfast table nicely arranged and set for three.

"We live just across the state border south of here."

"Her father's a top executive for the Howard Corporation. That's his limousine we came in," Christian said somewhat bragging for Gwen, though Gwen looked uncomfortable about it.

"Really? My husband works in a local office of the Howard Corporation. I wonder if they've ever met."

Gwen shrugged, still feeling uncomfortable talking about her father and their wealth, while Christian and his mother lived meager lives here. She quickly changed the subject.

"Can I help you make lunch?" Gwen asked Katy.

"No, no. You two sit there and relax. We're having hamburgers and baked country-style fries. Then, for dessert, I baked a banana torte."

Katy walked over to the stove and began to fry the hamburgers.

"Mother, while you cook, I'm going to show Gwen around."

They exited into the dining room and in just a few minutes had returned to the kitchen.

"I'll take you down and show you my room," Christian said to Gwen.

"Leave the door open," Katy said aloud.

Christian looked puzzled and shrugged.

A minute or two later, they came up the stairs back into the kitchen.

"It isn't much, but I call it home," Christian said proudly.

"It's lovely," Gwen replied genuinely.

"Before you leave, I'll take you out and show you the garden. It really IS lovely. My mother's a whiz at gardening too, but on the non-magical side."

Christian devoured lunch, while Gwen ate as a well-mannered girl would. Christian found it humorous, since he had seen her wolf food down faster than him a couple of times at school. However, he knew Gwen just wanted to act polite in front of his mother.

Katy watched the two of them eat the torte. Then, she began clearing the table.

Gwen began to help her, when Katy said, "That's okay dear, thank you. Christian, why don't you go show Gwen the yard, like you promised."

So, the two children went outside through the back door and Christian started showing Gwen around the yard. When Gwen bent down toward the plants, they reacted toward her, just like the plants back at school. Although he really shouldn't, Christian found it odd to see this happen away from school and, more specifically, in his own back yard.

"Your mother really does know what she's doing. These are some of the healthiest plants I've seen without magical assistance; especially at this time of year," Gwen replied honestly.

Then, she got a concerned look on her face.

Pride surged in Christian from the comment, knowing the extent of Gwen's expertise. Then, he saw her look.

"What's the matter?" Christian asked.

"Oh, it's nothing. Just that, well, the way the yard is organized."

Christian looked confused.

"Well, like the four trees, at each corner of the house. You don't typically see a Cypress, Birch, Rowan, and Elder in the same yard. And then there's the variety of plants growing on all four sides of the house. How very different they are, such as a tropical Ti bush sitting next to an arid Cactus next to a Holly bush. But, then again, how alike they are."

Gwen paused and had planned to continue, but Christian jumped in.

"Yeah, I think my mother just likes the variety. Plus, she seems to know how to make them grow well. I think it all adds to the look of the yard. Don't you?"

Gwen nodded and decided to drop what she had planned to say.

They walked around the yard, talking as they went. Gwen suggested that she come back by to pick Christian up, for the return trip to school and he agreed. They also agreed to make this permanent, whenever they came from and went to school.

They entered the house through the kitchen's back door and Gwen immediately commented, "Your garden is wonderful, Mrs. Drewell."

“Thank you. It gives me something to do with all of the time I have on my hands,” Katy replied.

“Mother, that’s a big complement coming from Gwen. I predict she’s going to be the best Magical Agriculturist ever, when she’s done with school.”

Christian couldn’t recall ever seeing Gwen blush before.

“Would it be ok if I used your powder room?” asked Gwen.

“Certainly, dear. It’s back here by the kitchen,” replied Katy, pointing Gwen toward the bathroom.

“I need to grab something from the car first. I’ll be back in a moment.”

Gwen politely excused herself and left the kitchen for the front door. She stayed outside for several minutes and then returned. When she came back in, she went directly into the bathroom. After another few minutes, she rejoined Christian and his mother.

“I think I’d better get going. Thank you very much for the lunch, Mrs. Drewell.”

“My pleasure.”

They all left the kitchen and proceeded out the front door.

“Thank you again. And Christian, I’ll see you around six thirty the day of the return trip,” Gwen said as she stepped outside.

“Happy Holidays!” she added with a wave and then continued down the front walk.

“See you later, Gwen. Happy Holidays to you and your parents,” Christian shouted behind her.

Gwen got into the car and Leewood closed the door behind her. As he turned to get into the car himself, he tipped his hat toward Christian. Then, they drove away.

“I like her. She seems to be a very nice girl,” Katy noted to Christian.

“Yeah, but she can sometimes be a little possessive and vane,” Christian added.

“So, you don’t like her?” quizzed Katy.

“No, I like her. She’s a good friend,” replied Christian.

“I see,” said Katy nonchalantly, although Christian couldn’t see the furrow that appeared on her brow.

When they returned inside, Christian grew sorry he said that about Gwen. They found two new presents under the tree. Upon closer inspection, he saw each had a tag.

The tag on the first read ‘From Gwen To Christian’ and she had written below it ‘What are friends for.’ On the second package, the tag read ‘From Gwen To Mrs. D’ and below that she wrote ‘Thank you for the hospitality.’

“This doesn’t look like the work of a possessive and vane person to me,” commented Katy.

“I think you’re right,” agreed Christian, sounding apologetic.

Christian decided to place his present for his mother under the tree too. But, when he opened his backpack, he found two additional presents inside. The smaller of the two had a tag that read ‘To Christian From Penny’ and the other said ‘To The Drewells From The Humblots.’

Christian tried to think when Penny would have had the opportunity to put gifts in his bag. The only time would have been while he helped Gwen load her luggage into the

bus lockers, but that really didn't take very long. He then came to a conclusion; "Penny really IS pretty good with her wand."

Christian and Katy spent the days leading up to Christmas pretty much the same as they had done as far back as Christian could remember. They watched movies, played games, and they even went Christmas shopping. But, something had changed. Neither knew whether to attribute it to the new life Christian had embraced or not. Regardless, he decided he would NOT sit on Santa's lap this year at the department store.

During the periods when they didn't spend time together, Christian would adjourn to his room and turn on his computer. He had begun making a list of the people and events related to the assumed dire situation at school. It all added up to something; something that he couldn't just sit by and let happen to either the school, a home-away-from-home in his new and wondrous life, or to a man who befriended him the first time they met.

The anxiety and urgency to get back to school and address the situation only added to Christian's and Katy's sense of separation. Despite the emotional distance, they still had an enjoyable Christmas.

Katy loved the present Christian gave her ... a magical snow globe of the school with a Christian figure inside experiencing the four seasons. Christian loved the sweater his mother had knitted for him with the very nicely embroidered school shield she added to its left breast.

They each received books from Gwen. Christian's was entitled 'Quodpot for the Novice.' The book really didn't have much text, but rather filled with illustrations that vocally explained and physically demonstrated how to do things. Even more fascinating, the illustrations also responded to questions. The book Katy received was entitled 'Mag Ag And You.' It amazed Christian that Gwen somehow knew of his mother's interest in plants. She either guessed extraordinarily well at what book to buy or she conjured it up during the short time she stepped away from them during her visit.

Christian also enjoyed the present from Penny. Although less expensive than Gwen's, its simplicity expressed its thoughtfulness. She too gave Christian a book, really more of a handbook, entitled 'Surviving Magical Foods and Drinks.' It explained the different side effects one would encounter with various popular magical food and drinks. Christian and his mother both loved the picture frame they received from the Humblots. The frame had a note.

'We hope you enjoy this. You can place any non-magical picture in this frame and it will bring the picture to life. We highly recommend you take a picture of the two of you doing something wonderful together, so that you will have a physically moving memory of the event. We hope you have a wonderful holiday season and we look forward to seeing you again, Christian, and the opportunity to meet you Mrs. Drewell. Best Wishes, Jeff, Betty, and Penny Humblot.'

With a smile on her face, Katy commented, "That really is kind of them ... of all of them."

"They're all really nice people and really great friends," reasoned Christian.

New Years passed uneventfully, as it always had, and the day for Christian to return to school arrived. After a fine breakfast, which they finished just before half past six, Christian went down to his room to collect his backpack and bring it up to the front door. Katy met him there with a small brown sack.

"Here's a snack for the road," Katy said, handing the sack to Christian.

Christian opened it and saw that she had included a large piece of banana bread, two cupcakes, and, yes, another bottle of vitamins.

"Thanks, mother," Christian said as he hugged her.

She hugged back and, once again, it seemed like she didn't want to let go. When she did, Christian threw his backpack over his shoulder. Katy opened the door and as Christian stepped outside, he saw Gwen just reaching to open the gate. So instead, Gwen stood at the gate and waved to Katy, who waved back.

"I'll write to you. I love you," said Christian, just before he headed down the walk.

"I love you too. Stay safe," replied Katy.

When Christian reached the gate, Gwen opened it for him. Christian handed his pack to Leewood, who stood waiting next to the car and then he waved to his mother one last time before climbing into the car. As soon as Gwen got in, Leewood shut the door and they soon drove away.

Katy waited in the door with a saddened look on her face, until the car had left her sight. Then, she went in, closing the door softly behind her.

Christian and Gwen stowed their bags in the bus lockers and began to make their way to the seat where Penny sat waiting. They encountered Derick Foulmoth on the way. He glared at Christian, but quickly looked over his shoulder to where Penny sat. Since she had her back to them, Derick shoved Christian out of the way and hurried up the stairs to the next level of the bus. Christian got up laughing, walked over, and sat next to Penny.

"I was wondering why we hadn't seen much of Derick outside of classes and now I know."

Penny and Gwen both looked at him puzzled.

"He's afraid of you," Christian said to Penny, gasping for air from the laughter.

"Me? Really?" Penny responded, joining in with a chuckle.

The subdued atmosphere on the bus, compared to the trip a little over a week earlier, revealed everyone's displeasure and anxiety for the upcoming week and the exams that would follow.

Christian reached down and picked up the snack bag his mother had given him off of the bus floor, where he had placed it earlier.

"Since you sneaks didn't say anything about giving each other Christmas presents ..."
Christian hesitated as the two girls snickered. "... Merry Belated Christmas."

From inside the snack bag, Christian pulled out a small, cube-shaped Christmas gift and handed it to Gwen. Then, he reached into his winter cloak, pulled out a flat, square gift, and handed it to Penny.

Gwen unwrapped hers and found a small, plastic terrarium with a small sprout growing inside of it.

"I had my mom help me get it started," Christian explained.

"It's a sprout of thyme," he added.

Gwen looked pleased, but Christian could see a bit of confusion too.

"You remember our first Mag Ag lab, you explained my lack of magic using thyme as an example. I thought you could show me firsthand how this thyme sprig makes the transition from non-magical to magical."

Christian snickered, wondering if Gwen thought the gift as lame as he did now.

Gwen smiled widely and said, "That's so sweet. Thank you!"

Penny opened her present, a CD of Scottish songs played on a lyre by someone none of them knew.

"You can put that into the drive in your laptop to listen to it. I thought you might like hearing some non-magical folks playing the lyre and maybe play along. And, maybe let us hear too," Christian explained.

Penny, blushing, said, "Thank you, Christian. I don't know if I'm good enough to play in front of anyone though."

"Yeah, she is. I've heard her. And, I think you'd enjoy it too," added Gwen.

"That's settled. You'll have to play for us some time," concluded Christian.

As the girls inspected their presents, Christian looked around to make sure no one would hear what he had to say next. Then, in a whisper, he said, "I've come up with a plan of how to approach Mr. Lucern on our next visit to the OWL."

The girls listened intently and then, after a few minutes, both nodded their heads in agreement. The plan was set.

A Headmaster's Tale

The mid-year exams went off quite smoothly, thanks to the study sessions that Christian led for the three of them. Since the mid-year exams only consisted of written tests, Christian even did well in Mag Ag. However, he didn't expect to do as well in the final exam, which would have a laboratory portion.

With the beginning of the second semester, some changes to the classes' curricula occurred. Minor changes took place in four of the classes. The smallest change, unfortunately, took place in History of Magic. In Alchemy, Mag Ag, and Spell Casting, making compounds became more complex, plants required more attention, and verbs became harder to conjugate, respectively.

The big changes took place in Divination and Magical Creatures. As Ms. Callidus had said at the beginning of the school year, she began to instruct the students in Palmistry. Ms. Mander, after having taught the students all the unknown characteristics of most of the day-to-day magical creatures like cats, bats, ravens, crups, and kneazles during the first semester, she now began teaching the students about a different group of creatures.

On the first class of the second semester, Ms. Mander stood holding an animal, stroking its long ears between which sprouted a set of short antlers. Once the students had settled in, she began to instruct them.

"Most of the creatures in American folklore, you will see, truly do exist. Many of them resulted from magical experimentation by witches, which is now banned internationally. However, most of these experiments were done prior to the ban and several have been around for ages. And, they truly are magical creatures.

"A good example of a folklore creature that did not result from experimentation is our security personnel. Non-magicals consider the Sasquatch to be a creature that only exists in folklore. However, we know that in reality they are beings, not creatures, and are part of the magical world. It is magic that aids them in their ability to make themselves unseen by non-magicals through their great stealthiness and speed.

"Our friend here, however, is an example of the created magical creatures from folklore. And, it will be these types of creatures from folklore that we will study this semester. So, without any further ado, let me show you the proper way of handling the jackalope."

She demonstrated the proper way to hold the half rabbit and half deer creature. Then, everyone had the opportunity to hold one, as she pulled several more from a large cage behind her desk. Most everyone did it properly, except Derick, who mistreated his and received a proper whack in the head from the jackalope's large feet.

With the exams behind them and the second semester under way, Christian, Penny, and Gwen focused on the upcoming OWL trip at the end of the month.

Mrs. Turtledove greeted Ms. D'Amor and the large group of students at the entrance to the OWL. She once again asked all new visitors to follow her and she would give them a quick tour of the facilities. However, no one new had joined the group. This worked out well for Christian, Penny, and Gwen.

“Mrs. Turtledove, we would like to visit with Mr. Lucern, to pass on a ‘Hello’ from Penny’s parents,” Christian told the nurse.

“Well, let’s see if we can find him for you,” she replied, signaling for them to follow her.

She looked into the recreational room and shook her head. Then, she led them up to the top floor’s sunroom. With a quick glance around, she did not see him there either.

Then, she turned to the children and said, “It appears that Mr. Lucern is in his room. I’m sorry, but we try not to disturb the residents when they’re in their rooms. But, please feel free to visit with any of the other residents.”

“But Mrs. Turtledove, I promised my parents that I’d pass on their message to Mr. Lucern,” pleaded Penny.

“I’m sorry my dear, but”

“We promise to be on our best behavior,” Christian quickly added.

After a long hesitation, as she examined the three students’ faces, Mrs. Turtledove replied, “Well, we can check to see if he is amenable to having guests. But, if he’s asleep or busy, then you WILL have to wait until next time.”

She led the three students to the third floor. A hallway surrounded the stairwell, and the outer wall of the hallway consisted of nothing but doors; fifty to be exact. Mrs. Turtledove took them to the eleventh door on the left and knocked. After several seconds, they heard footsteps echoing from the other side of the door. Then, the door opened and a somewhat portly man of medium height stepped into the doorway.

Christian recognized him from his first visit to the OWL as one of the group of residents who fell into the ‘looked old, but acted young’ category. In fact, Christian remembered him as the one using magical visual aids to tell a story in the recreational room that day.

In a jovial and melodic manner, Mr. Lucern said, “Hello Flo. Whadaya know?” to Mrs. Turtledove.

Turning to the children she whispered, “He says that to me every time, because my first name is Florence.”

Turning back to Mr. Lucern, she replied, “Sorry to bother you, but these children wanted to speak to you, if you aren’t busy.”

“I’m always available for students of Bishop’s School of Witchcraft. As Benjamin Franklin once said, ‘Hide not your talents, until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.’”

The three students gave Mrs. Turtledove a puzzled look.

Again, she turned and whispered, “He has a tendency to get sayings mixed up.”

Holding the door open and backing up into the room, Mr. Lucern said, “Come in, come in.”

Surprise shown on the three students’ faces as they entered. They didn’t enter a room, but a mansion within the mansion.

The foyer reached two stories high and big enough that they could hold a classroom session in it, hence the echoing of the footsteps as Mr. Lucern approached the door. A marble staircase curved upstairs directly opposite the entrance, ending onto a second-floor landing that overlooked the foyer. Also, an open doorway sat to the immediate left of the main entrance.

Once the three students had entered into the foyer, Mr. Lucern shut the door.

"You caught me in the middle of a little project up in my lab, so I'd like to check on it if you all wouldn't mind following me."

He led the way up the marble staircase. And, at the top of the stairs, Mr. Lucern turned right and walked through an open doorway.

His laboratory compared in size to the Alchemy laboratory. The back of the room, opposite the doorway, consisted entirely of glass from floor to ceiling. And, part of the ceiling also consisted of glass, basically forming an abbreviated greenhouse.

A few tables and low shelves sat against that wall filled with several plants of different shapes, sizes, and colors. Mr. Lucern had recently moved a group of potted plants from one of the shelves onto a long table in the center of the room, as the vacant spots on the shelves suggested. And, several stacks of books and various beakers, jars, and vials sat on the table too.

A laboratory table sat to the right of the door, which is the direction that Mr. Lucern had stepped. On this table, a few jars sat open, a couple of beakers and vials heated over a small burner, and a cauldron boiled and steamed over a larger burner. Mr. Lucern stirred the cauldron's contents, as he glanced down at an open notebook.

"That should tide things over for about an hour. Besides, 'A watched pot is worth two in the bush.' Thank you for your patience. Why don't we adjourn to my parlor, where we can sit comfortably," he said shutting his notebook.

He turned toward the three students, just as Christian took two steps toward a closed door to the left of the laboratory doorway.

"No, no. That's my bedroom. You don't want to go in there ... it's a mess. The parlor's downstairs."

He led them back down the marble staircase and into the room through the open doorway. The parlor looked very homey. A large, soft sofa sat against the left wall, along with a few large potted planters and a small table. The furniture against the back wall mirrored the left. And, two large cushiony armchairs, with a small table in between, sat in the center of the room facing the two sofas.

"I suppose we could each take our own sofa or chair, but why don't you three sit on that sofa and I'll sit here in this chair."

Then, he guided the children toward the sofa.

As Christian took his seat, he took in the rest of the room. A large fireplace protruded from and took up most of the wall to the immediate right of the foyer doorway. And, another doorway, flanked on both sides by large potted plants, led to a library or den in the room's remaining wall.

"So, what can I do for you fine students?"

"Sir, my name's Penelope Humblot, and my parents wanted me to tell you 'Hello' and how wonderful it was to see you over the Thanksgiving weekend."

"It's wonderful to meet you, Penelope. Jeffrey and Betty are two wonderful people. They were marvelous students and became two superb witches. If there's anything I can ever do for you, you just let me know."

"Well, sir, we were hoping you could give us some pointers on making the best out of our time here at Bishop. As freshmen, we could use all the help we can get."

“Well, I think I can help you there. Do you have any specific areas you’d like to know about?”

“Well, sir, my name’s Gwenevere Torres.”

“Torres, Torres. You wouldn’t be Roberto Torres’ daughter, would you?”

“No, sorry. My father’s a non-magical, but my mother’s a witch. You may remember my mother, Tabitha Chenault.”

“You know, I believe I do remember her. She went to Good out west and did quite well with animals, if I remember correctly.”

“Yes, that’s her. Well, sir, I’m the same as my mother, but with plants. I know you specialized in Mag Ag and, based on your laboratory, it looks like you’ve been maintaining your skills. Do you have any information or pointers you can give me?”

Mr. Lucern went into a dissertation on Mag Ag, which then led into a story, lasting SEVERAL minutes. Gwen listened fast to every word Mr. Lucern uttered. Penny seemed ambivalent about the story. Christian anxiously awaited his chance to get Mr. Lucern’s attention. Then, the time finally came.

“... and that’s what will happen if you try to magically cross the two plants.”

“Thank you, sir. That was immensely enlightening,” Gwen said gratefully.

“Is there anything else you’d like to know?”

“My name’s Christian, sir. Both of my parents are non-magical, so I’m starting off with a clean slate as far as the magical world’s concerned. I’m currently considering a focus in Alchemy, but I have an overall interest in the school’s history, how the school system works, how the Witches Council works, and pretty much anything I can learn about the witching society.”

“Well, that’s a mighty wide range of topics to cover. Is there anything more specific that I could address?”

“Well, sir, maybe you could tell us about how you became Headmaster and what your goals were for the position.”

“I think I can do that. First, let me welcome you to this side of the magical barrier. I use the word barrier purposefully, because it’s almost as if there IS a barrier or veil between the two worlds.”

“I first became Assistant Headmaster about seventy years ago. At the time, we had no bonds what so ever to the non-magical world, as it had been for nearly two-and-a-half centuries. I held that position when the Witches Council made the decision, in nineteen fifty-seven, to have all children attend non-magical schools prior to their attendance in magical schools. A few, select non-magicals were allowed to know, but for the most part, we kept our world secret...on the other side of the barrier.

“However, this little bit of openness to the non-magical world seemed to weaken the barrier. It may have just been a perceived weakening, but many of the Conservatives in our society felt it left us open for the non-magicals to discover our world. Many of us who were around for the transition opposed it, but the Witches Council told us that everything would be fine.

“Some of us went along with it and, for the most part, everything did seem fine. Others, however, couldn’t stand by and ‘wait and see.’ Many of them held prominent

positions, so they resigned in protest. One of them was Bishop's Headmaster at the time. When he resigned I received the appointment to Headmaster.

"When I was Assistant Headmaster, I focused on the students and that continued as my focus after my promotion. So, the Witches Council selected an Assistant Headmaster who complemented me well, a relationship that lasted for over thirty years. Together, we improved the facilities, curriculum, and overall student life at Bishop. Most of the improvements we made still exist today. She and I would split duties between running the school and interfacing with the Witches Council. That way, we could both spend some time with the students either during meals or functions.

"Then, without any warning or reason for the change, the Witches Council replaced her with Davis. Well, actually they had a reason, or more precisely an agenda.

"Apparently, Davis had held the position of Special Projects lead for the school, a position I didn't even know really existed. He had been working on something for the Witches Council for a few years. Once they selected him as the Assistant Headmaster, they named him as the lead for implementing the computer systems in the schools.

"The only positive thing about the situation was that it kept him away from the school for most of the school year, as he met frequently with the Witches Council. Since he preferred to handle the administrative aspects of the school with regard to the Witches Council, it allowed me to continue working with the students. When he was around, I could always retreat to the solitude of my office. Many times I would change the password for my office elevator to a full sentence or several words, so that I could curse at Davis and operate the elevator at the same time.

"Sorry, that was probably inappropriate for me to say in front of you. But, Davis' approach to everything ran counter to all that I held important. He had no concern for the students or the school and his agenda was apparent ... a Witches Council ladder-climber. Davis let nothing get in his way of what he wanted.

"When they finally implemented the computer systems in the schools, I believed that the barrier between the two worlds grew significantly thinner. For over two years, I voiced my concerns to the Witches Council, explaining and pleading my point; but to no avail.

"I, like my predecessor, could remain a part of the Witches Council administration no longer. So, I gave notice that I planned to resign. I'm sure they had planned that from the start, because when I announced my resignation, they announced Davis would become the Headmaster.

"My fear then, as it still is today, was that with Davis in the position of Headmaster, the school and that thinning veil between the two worlds would be in jeopardy. So, the one thing I achieved before I left was to use all of the influence and contacts I had throughout our society to have Abraham Brown selected as the Assistant Headmaster. That took a few years, but I wouldn't leave the position of Headmaster until Abe accepted the position.

"I'm sure you heard that Abe was a bit of a trouble-maker in his time here at school. It's true, but his protests were aimed at maintaining the old ways. He would protest against the Witches Council's 'progressive' initiatives. That Abe graduated from Bishops with top honors, rather than at the top of the detention list, was my doing. I kept going

to bat for that boy, because he had the guts to do the things that most of us only thought about doing. I was proud of him. I'm even prouder now, seeing what he's done in the position.

"It took a lot of persuasion to get Abe to agree. He harbored some deep feelings against Davis. The deepest was Davis' implication to the disappearance of Abe's old sweetheart from school. She had close ties to the Witches Council and had been expected to be the next President. Abe just knew that Davis had something to do with her disappearance, especially when they detected signs of magical foul play at her home.

"Abe and I keep in touch quite a bit, but I seldom venture over to the school, unless I know for sure that Davis won't be around. I did go over one time to visit, a few years after I left, to see how things were going. I was impressed with everything Abe had done in the short time he had been in the position; although, it didn't surprise me. I even visited Davis while I was there and do you know that vain bundimum had a full-length mirror put into the Headmaster's office.

"Now, I hear that Davis is running for the Presidency of the Witches Council. Even with all of his contacts in the Council, I think his past will be his downfall. I mean, he may have been acquitted from the charges that he had any doings regarding the disappearance of Bellamy, but the only reason for his acquittal was that her body was never found. Many assumed that maybe the body had been removed for security purposes, but most Conservatives felt that it had been removed to keep Davis' record clean.

"If he should get elected, I think it will be the undoing of our society. I think he will implement too many reforms that may cause the final blow to that barrier. And the worst part about it is that I don't think he has a clue as to what he's doing, in general, but specifically to that barrier. Plus, the Conservatives in our society have long memories ... and I'm not sure just how they will react if Davis gets elected President.

"Well, I guess with all that, what I'm trying to say is do the best you can at school and make a name for yourself by your magical expertise and your favorable deeds. This is the only way to be the best you can and to be able to look at yourself proudly in the mirror. Apparently, something Davis cannot do even in the full length one in his office."

Mr. Lucern let out a loud laugh, which actually startled the children as they sat totally enraptured in the story. Then, they all feigned laughter.

"Well, is there anything else I can answer for you?" asked Mr. Lucern.

"Nothing more for me," replied Christian.

All of the important information they had just heard showed from the large smile on his face.

Penny and Gwen both shook their heads.

"Christian, since you're interested in the history of our society and the school, I have a book that I think you may find interesting. I know you're computer savvy and probably don't read many books, but you might be willing to take a chance and read this one."

He said all of this while getting up from his chair and walking into his den, with the words gradually getting fainter.

"Here we are," Mr. Lucern said reentering the parlor.

He handed Christian what looked more like a notebook than a textbook.

Christian looked at the title, 'Memoirs of Professor Tutelafeld.'

Seeing the puzzled look on Christian's face, Mr. Lucern explained.

"He was the first Headmaster of the Bishop School of Witchcraft."

"Thank you, very much, sir!"

Mr. Lucern recognized the honest excitement in Christian's voice.

"Well, 'All good things makes the heart grow fonder.' Feel free to stop by any time if you should have any other questions you think I could answer. Penny, tell your parents I said 'Hello.' It was nice seeing them last month too. And Gwen, tell your mother that Mr. Lucern said 'Hello.'"

He said this as he led the children to the door.

"Thank you sir," the three students almost said in unison, as they walked out of the door.

They had visited with Mr. Lucern for about an hour, which left a few hours remaining in the OWL visit. So, Christian, Penny, and Gwen split up. Christian visited with Professor Slipswich, but couldn't concentrate on the professor's story and the professor recognized Christian's preoccupation.

"Something on your mind, my boy?"

"No sir, just preoccupied with school stuff."

"Well, that reminds me of the time ..." the professor began and about all of the new story that Christian heard, as his mind strayed once again to the visit with Mr. Lucern.

Back at school, the three friends met in Christian's room. He began to sum things up, pacing back and forth, like a general speaking to his troops.

"We now know that Mr. Davis is working on something on behalf of the WCA, which explains why the other witches were in the library on Halloween night. But, we still don't know what it is.

"We do know that whatever it is, it will inevitably be detrimental to the witching society. It will either make us too visible to the non-magical world or create such a rift between the political sides that it'll mean the end of the witching society, as we know it. More close-to-home, it will, as a minimum, force Mr. Brown out of the Assistant Headmaster position, one way or another. But, we don't know how, because we don't know what it is that Mr. Davis is working on.

"Somehow, we have to find out specifically what he's up to. Unfortunately, this means we'll have to catch him red handed, which could be dangerous. He could expel us from school or worse, take the matter into his own hands and do something to us. I'm sure he wouldn't hesitate to do so, since he has the backing of the WCA.

"One piece of new information is that there's an elevator to the Headmaster's office. If we could somehow get the password to that elevator, maybe we could search Mr. Davis' office and find the evidence we need. Tonight, I'll do some reconnaissance to see if I can find where the elevator's located and I'll let you both know what I find. If you don't see me at breakfast tomorrow morning, ask around to see if I was caught and expelled ... or worse."

“Good luck,” said Gwen, seriously.

“Be careful,” added Penny, even more seriously.

“Okay. Let’s get something to eat. It’s going to be early to bed and very early to rise for me tonight.”

The three of them left the room and walked in silence down to the dining hall.

The Light At The End Of The Tunnel

Christian's watch alarm went off at two o'clock and he awoke, surprised that he had actually fallen asleep. Earlier, he had lain there for what seemed like an hour, tossing and turning with anticipation.

He sat up in bed and put on his shoes, since he went to sleep already dressed. Then, he snuck out of the portal, making sure no one saw him. Although he hadn't been in all of the buildings within the school's complex, Christian had a strong sense that he'd find the entrance to the Headmaster's elevator somewhere in the underground passageways. So, he snuck to the stairs and started down.

At the bottom of the staircase, he looked and listened to check for any teachers or security. Listening worked better, since the school kept the oil sconces in the passageways turned down low to reinforce the message that no one should wander down there at night.

He waited a few moments at the bottom of the stairs, but detected no one. So, knowing that the entrance had to be near the back of the school, Christian crept down the long passageway toward the gold tower, feeling his way along the cold, stone wall. He shivered as he went, due to a combination of the cold air, the touch of the cold stone, and extreme nervousness.

He came to the opening that wound its way to the Alchemy laboratories and Professor Turnell's office. Oddly for the time of day, he heard noises coming from down this passage. Christian assumed he heard Professor Turnell doing some late night, or early morning, laboratory or paper work.

Just as he began to cross the opening to the Alchemy passage, Christian heard heavy footsteps coming from behind him. Quietly, but quickly, he ducked down the passage toward the Alchemy laboratory, found the darkest spot on the wall, and froze as flat against the wall as he could.

Moments later, a large figure came into view. At first, Christian thought he recognized the figure as Tatu. But, once he could see it more clearly, as it entered the dim lighting at the mouth of the Alchemy passage, Christian didn't recognize this Sasquatch.

It turned and started to come toward Christian. If the Sasquatch couldn't see him, it would surely bump into him, since its shoulders practically touched both walls as it walked down this corridor. However, just as it started to approach, Professor Turnell made another noise in his laboratory or office. The Sasquatch stopped and quickly retreated back into the main passageway, continually glancing back toward the location of the noise. Then, in a flash, it disappeared into the darkness of the main passageway.

Christian thought it curious that a security guard would fear a noise in the dark. But, he had no complaints about the situation, since it saved him from getting into serious trouble.

Christian slowly slunk back to the main passageway, peeking around the corner to make sure the Sasquatch had truly gone. Although he heard and saw nothing, he continued on with some increased anxiety due the fact that he had to travel in the same direction as the Sasquatch.

He eased his way out into the main passageway, once again feeling his way along the wall while watching the approaching patches of dim light ahead of him.

He soon came upon Ms. Sheyant's office on the opposite wall. As he approached, he held his breath to listen, but he heard no sound coming from within. So, he continued forward.

A few moments later, Christian arrived at Mr. Quazam's office against his wall. Again, holding his breath, he listened. The eerily quietness of the passageway made his heart beat faster and sound even louder. However, from within Mr. Quazam's office Christian heard nothing and passed by it.

He finally reached the junction with the gold tower's staircase and the stairs to Professor Gardner's office. Christian decided to continue hugging the wall to stay within the shadows as he kept his eyes on the stairs to Professor Gardner's office. Suddenly, the wall ended and he fell to floor, emitting a loud "Ooof."

Christian sat there, not moving or making a sound. He again held his breath as he listened for approaching footsteps responding to the noise he had just made. He sat there for nearly a solid minute, just waiting. Finally, he slowly and quietly got up.

Now, with no immediate concern, he noticed why the wall had ended. He stood at the base of a set of stairs. Christian had only ventured down this way once during the freshmen orientation tour to go to Professor Gardner's office and hadn't noticed these stairs at the time.

Since he didn't know where these steps led, he decided to take a chance and explore them. He thought it doubtful that the Headmaster's office could be so accessible, but he decided that checking it out couldn't hurt.

The stairs switched back two times and covered the height of three floors. They ended on a good-sized landing with two two-person seats and a small table that formed an "L" against two of the walls.

To the right of the stairs stood a door, currently closed. A plate attached to the door read, 'Ms. Eva D'Amor, Director of Student Life'. A little plaque hung from the bottom of the plate that read 'Out'.

Since the stairs provided no outlet, Christian quietly followed them back down.

Once at the foot of the stairs, he quickly crossed to the short wall between the two long passageways. This allowed him to keep his back against a wall, somewhat in the shadows, and watch the exit of the gold tower staircase.

When he reached the end of the short wall, he glanced around the corner to make sure he didn't see anyone coming. Then, Christian quickly crossed and hugged the outside wall of the other long passageway, so that he could now see up the stairwell of the gold tower and down this other passageway toward the blue tower.

Christian kept an eye on the staircase, but didn't hug this wall as tightly as he had against the other; and, a good thing too. The wall ended, once again, at the base of a different set of stairs.

Quietly, Christian climbed them and found himself on another landing. This landing, larger than the previous one, contained two three-person seats and a small table. The plate on this door read 'Mr. Abraham Brown, Assistant Headmaster'. The plaque

hanging from this plate read 'Lucky for you, I'm out' with a smiley face that winked every few seconds. Christian started to snicker, but quickly stopped himself.

He turned and crept back down the stairs. But, when he reached the bottom, Christian wondered where to look next.

He decided to check and see if, maybe, the gold tower stairs continued down another level somehow. If they didn't, he'd continue along the long passageway on this side, heading back toward the blue tower. Perhaps he might find another corridor, doorway, or something else along there that might lead him to the Headmaster's office.

He hugged the wall, staying in the shadows, which allowed him to look straight down the long passageway toward the blue tower and sneak up to the gold tower's spiral staircase. When Christian came to the corner where he would transition to the wall that led to the staircase, he surprisingly continued on THROUGH the wall.

He quickly retreated a few steps and looked closely at the wall. Although the lighting illuminated the corner less than usual, Christian could tell that even if the light were at full brightness, he wouldn't have noticed this deliberately concealed opening. They had cut the stone with great craftsmanship, so that it created the illusion of a solid wall. Even someone coming down from Mr. Brown's office wouldn't notice the opening.

Christian slowly entered.

Once inside the passage behind the wall, it turned right toward the gold tower's staircase. Unfortunately, the passage had no wall sconces and Christian found himself in pitch-blackness.

Stretching out his arms, he could just barely touch the passage's two walls. He inched forward, checking the footing in front of him with his toes, all the while listening for footsteps. Christian continued this process for about five or six feet, when his left hand no longer touched a wall. He inched forward a few more feet, until he bumped into another wall. Since he had a wall on his right and in front of him, Christian assumed he would find stairs to his left. The question he had at the moment, "Did they lead up or down?"

He turned left and inched his way forward again. Quickly, he found that the steps went down.

Rather than trying to touch each wall as he managed this staircase, Christian decided to hug one side. That way, if he stumbled he wouldn't fall forward, on his face, down the stairs.

Creeping down the stairs, he counted the number of steps so that he would know how many he would have coming back up. After the tenth step, he came to a landing. He felt his way around and found more stairs. After managing ten more steps, he came to another landing, which led to yet another set of stairs. He saw a slight illumination at the bottom of this third flight though.

Carefully continuing his way down, he covered these stairs slightly faster. When he reached the bottom, Christian saw that the illumination came from an open doorway a few feet in front of him, which opened to his left.

With his back against the wall next to the doorway, Christian slowly peeked around the corner. Thankfully, he saw no one.

The doorway opened into a hallway about six feet wide, eight feet tall, and much longer than Christian would have liked. Carved through the mountain's stone, it looked even more like a tunnel than the passageways above. Although brightly lit at the other end, Christian couldn't see a doorway, stairs, or anything else down there. So, he considered his options.

If he entered the hallway and someone came down the stairs, he had no escape or place to hide and the brightness at the other end surely didn't allow for any shadows. If he entered the hallway and someone came out of a door or from a set of stairs at the other end, he would have a long way to run before he reached darkness.

It seemed that no matter what, he had a high chance of getting caught. But, he had to press on.

Christian walked quickly down the hallway. And, when he reached the other end, he found an area several feet wider and a few feet taller than the rest of the hallway. Then, after a short period of searching, he realized that the increased height accommodated a tall, stone door directly at the end of the hallway.

Christian could hardly tell that a door existed, because it had no doorknob or latches. Plus, the cut of the stone made it difficult for him to discern the outline of the door. Even running his hand from the door to the jam, he could just barely feel the separation.

Based upon the larger volume of space and the four sconces providing the abundant light, Christian concluded that this must be a waiting area. He ran his hand around the door jam, but found no latches or levers. Regardless of how it opened, Christian knew he had either found the way to get to the Headmaster's elevator or found the entrance to the elevator itself. Although he had no proof of what lay behind the door, Christian believed he had accomplished his mission.

The proof then came.

No sooner had Christian turned to go back down the hallway, when a noise, like a heavy rock scraping against rock, reverberated off of all the walls. Christian turned toward the door, saw it slowly rising off of the floor, and immediately turned around and broke into a full sprint.

Christian couldn't remember the last time he had to run the fifty-yard dash, but he did remember that he had done it fairly quickly. He just hoped he still could do it as fast.

Just beyond halfway down the hallway, Christian looked back to see that the door had almost completely opened, but no one stood behind it. Then, he saw a platform coming down from above inside of the rock doorway and two legs stood on the platform. Seeing the legs provided a new shot of fear, which added a quick burst of speed as he sprinted beyond the darkened doorway.

He stopped, gasping for a moment and then held his breath briefly. As expected, he heard footsteps coming towards him from the hallway.

Using his hands and feet, Christian spidered up the stairs until he reached the top passage. He stopped to listen and heard footsteps echoing up the stairwell. Christian quickly felt his way along the wall until he reached the passage opening.

Instinctively, he sought the closest hiding place and ran up the stairs toward Mr. Brown's office. If his unknown pursuer turned out to be Mr. Brown planning to come up to his office, then Christian's adventure would come to a quick end.

He hurried, quietly, up the stairs, but stopped before the ceiling of the stairs completely blocked his view. This way, he would still be able to see when the person emerged from the hidden passage.

A few seconds later, two legs appeared.

Christian held his breath once again, only this time to prepare for his capture. He let it out with relief when he saw the person turn away from the stairs where he stood.

Christian quickly, and quietly, snuck to the bottom of the stairs. And when he arrived, although he saw no one, he could hear footsteps going up the gold tower's staircase. So, Christian quietly followed.

When he reached the top of the stairs, he peeked around the corner, but saw no one. Worse, he also heard no footsteps. He slid out of the stairwell and, almost running, hurried over to the hallway that led to the red tower. Christian, about to turn into the corridor, froze in his tracks and stepped back. Then, he peeked back around the corner. There, with his foot up on the wall brushing some dust off of his shoe stood Mr. Davis. Once the shine had returned to his shoe, Mr. Davis continued into the courtyard and toward the back entrance to the dining hall.

As Mr. Davis walked toward the dining hall door, Christian slowly entered the hallway. And, as soon as Mr. Davis stepped through the door, Christian broke into a full run. Given the early hour, Christian knew that Mr. Davis must have plans to meet with someone and he wanted to find out who and why.

Once he reached the corner to the entry hallway, Christian paused to make a quick check for people or Sasquatch. With the coast clear, he bolted down toward the dining hall, until he reached the trophy case. He leaned against the case gasping for breath, until he heard the dining hall door open. Trying not to breathe too loudly, Christian peeked around the edge of the trophy case and watched as Mr. Davis traversed the width of the hallway and exited through the school's main entrance.

Christian wanted to follow Mr. Davis, but thought the clothes he wore insufficient for the weather outside. Plus, a security Sasquatch would surely catch him out there, if he did. However, desperate to catch Mr. Davis doing something that could help build the case against him, Christian believed he had to take the risk.

As quietly as he could with a twelve-foot high, old, wooden door, Christian opened the school's main entrance and slowly stuck his head out. As he did, Christian saw Mr. Davis navigating the turn of the walk path. So, he stepped outside, closed the door, and began to follow Mr. Davis.

In his rushed decision to follow Mr. Davis, Christian hadn't considered the snow. It covered everything and, unfortunately, would cause Christian to clearly stand out against the white backdrop the whole length of the walk path. To make things worse, they had only cleared a three-foot wide swath of snow off of the path, and most likely, all the way to the gate. So, Christian had no place to run if anyone came along.

He hurried down the path as quickly as he could without breaking into a clomping run. He had just reached the turn of the path when he saw the entrance gate swinging

open and Mr. Davis exit toward town. Just as he navigated the path's turn and began to dash toward the gate, he saw the head of a Sasquatch about to emerge from behind the snow-covered bushes that flanked the path.

Christian dove to the ground with his back up against the cold, wet snow, just wishing he could somehow blend in with it. He could hear the heavy footsteps approaching. And as they grew near, he shut his eyes, as if closing his eyes would help him hide, and awaited the inevitable. Although he continued to wish that the Sasquatch wouldn't see him, Christian opened one eye. When he did, he saw the Sasquatch, some thirty feet closer to the school, step over the three-foot wide swath and continue on his way toward the lake area.

Christian couldn't believe his luck. Unfortunately, he now wore cold and wet clothes and he couldn't go back into the school, otherwise the same Sasquatch would definitely see him. So, he got to his feet and started to sneak toward the gate. He had taken two steps when he realized the gate had begun to close. Security or not, Christian decided he only had one option; he would have to sprint and try to make it through the gate before it shut completely.

With each clomping step, the gate opening grew smaller and smaller. Finally, Christian had reached the gate and had begun to dash through the opening when his, now heavily wet, sweatshirt snagged on one of the bushes. He tugged once but nothing happened. Then, he tugged a second time with all of his remaining strength and broke the branch, falling backward through the narrowing gate and nearly had his foot caught by it. But, he pulled it out of the way, just a split second before the gate clanged shut.

Now tired, scratched, wet, and cold, Christian resolved himself to catch Mr. Davis in the act. He pulled himself up off of the ground and hurried to the end of the town's street just in time to see Mr. Davis turn the corner by the bank. Christian broke into a run, reasoning that he wouldn't encounter anyone else at this time of the morning.

As he ran, he became concerned that Mr. Davis may plan to walk to his house through the woods. If so, Christian would have to reconsider following him.

He reached the bank corner, just as Mr. Davis turned the corner of the grocery store, as if to enter the town's housing area. Christian again ran down to the corner and peeked around it. There, he saw Mr. Davis climbing the steps to Bivius' B & B.

Christian dared not follow Mr. Davis inside, but he couldn't just stand out in the cold waiting either. Then, he noticed that Targ's had a window that faced out toward the B & B. Christian didn't know if the tavern stayed open this late or not. But, he walked over and tried the door.

It opened.

He glanced in and saw a table with three men, all talking very loudly to the bartender, who stood near the table. Christian slipped into the tavern unnoticed by any of them and sat down at the darkened, corner table next to the window.

After scrubbing the window with his sweatshirt several times, he cleared an opening so that he could see the B & B's front stairs. He sat looking through the window, periodically glancing over at the men in the bar to ensure he still went unnoticed. Christian continued this for about an hour, until the warmth of the bar began to affect his tired, wet, and cold body.

“Hey, wake up! Whatta ya doin here? This ain’t no kiddy nursery! Off with you!” shouted the bartender.

Christian leapt up and out of the chair. After he got his bearings, he left the tavern ... furious with himself for having gone through all that he had endured this evening only to fall asleep and let Mr. Davis get away. Christian wondered if he could find out whom Mr. Davis had visited at the B & B somehow. But frustrated, he realized that he had no way to do that.

The time now approached six o’clock in the morning, however Christian had no idea when the school’s main gate would open. He thought about hanging out at the Inn, but remembered what the ghost manager had told them the last time he and the girls did that. So, he went down to the end of the street and waited by the coffee shop, watching the gate.

While he stood there, Christian heard activity in the shop and the door opened a few minutes later.

“Well, I don’t ever remember having one of the students in need of a coffee fix this early before,” said the shopkeeper with a laugh.

“Come on in. What can I get you?” he asked Christian.

Christian ordered a hot drink and sat in the warmth of the coffee shop, periodically glancing out at the gate. At exactly six o’clock, the school’s main gate opened.

Holding the drink in both hands, to keep them warm, Christian walked up the path to the main entrance and back to his room.

After a nice hot shower and some dry, warm clothes, he completed his typical morning rituals and went up to the common room where he waited for Gwen and Penny. He thought that if he waited in his room, he might fall asleep, miss breakfast, and give the two girls concern that something had happened to him.

He thought about lying down on the sofa or sitting in one of the lounge chairs in the common room, but decided to sit at the round table, to ensure the girls spotted him. Even though he found the chair uncomfortable, he fell asleep anyway.

The next thing he remembered, he received a much nicer awakening than he had received at the tavern.

Gwen and Penny stood over him, after having gently shaken him awake.

“Are you all right?”

As soon as Christian shook the cobwebs from his head, he replied.

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just a little tired from the workout I had.”

The girls looked at him puzzled, so he explained the whole night’s events. He of course told them the good news about finding the elevator to the Headmaster’s office. He also mentioned that he had a plan on how to get into the Headmaster’s office, which he would explain after breakfast.

Hearing Is Believing

February started with a surprise for Christian and Gwen. At breakfast on the first Monday of the month, Lucy and Deadora Tailen, or Dee as she preferred to be called, approached them. Dee, who sat at Mr. Brown's table during lunch, captained the school's trivia team for the Tri-School Competition.

"I hope you don't mind a brief interruption, but we have an offer for each of you," stated Lucy.

"What kind of offer?" Christian asked.

"I'm sure you're both aware of the Tri-School Competition at the end of the year, right?"

Christian and Gwen nodded.

"Well, a few select freshmen are asked to join the teams, either as first string members or as alternates. We typically wait until the results of the mid-year exams to see how well the freshman demonstrates his or her abilities.

"Gwen, as the captain of the Mag Ag team, I'd like to offer you a spot on the team. Whadda ya say?" Lucy asked.

"I'd love it! Thanks!" exclaimed Gwen.

"Christian, as you probably know, I'm the captain of the school's trivia team," Dee said.

"Yes, but I always wondered what exactly is the trivia team?" he asked.

"Well, there's a team, or panel, of five students from one school who go up against five students from another school. The competition consists of the teams having to answer questions about anything ranging from course related material to history of the Witches Council. We have strong expertise in the school course materials, but we're lacking someone with a good grasp of school disciplines and history. We've heard you have a reputation for knowing the answers to the senior quizzes on the handbook, especially how you turned one against Sean Geoffreys. You see, I'm a senior too. Are you interested?"

"If you really think you can use me, count me in!"

"Great! I'll help you with a list of books to research and we'll be getting together twice a week for the next three months. The Competition's at the end of the first full week in May. Any questions right now?"

Although overwhelmed by all of this, Christian did have another question.

"How does a team win the competition?"

"The team that wins two head-to-head competitions is the overall champion. The only other result that can occur is a three-way tie. If that occurs, then each team will have the opportunity to pick one person from one of the other teams for one final round. The three people chosen will be asked one question. The first person to answer it correctly, wins the competition. They usually pull the question from way in the bowels of obscurity. So, if no one answers it, then it remains a tie. A win's worth ten points, whereas a tie's only worth two."

"Thanks guys!" said Lucy, as she and Dee walked away chatting excitedly.

With schoolwork and preparing for the Tri-School Competition, Christian, Gwen, and Penny stayed very busy. They did, however, find a positive aspect of their busy lives. It kept them from getting anxious about when they would get a chance to implement their plan.

The first weekend of February, someone had decorated the school for Valentine's Day. Christian thought they looked kind of odd, but what else would a boy of twelve think. And, whether related to the decorations or not, the school had planned a Valentine's Day event for the following Saturday afternoon as a break from the hard studies.

Friday morning at breakfast, Mr. Brown made the announcement.

"May I have your attention? As a Valentine's Day treat, we are planning a mixer tomorrow afternoon. We'll serve lunch buffet-style tomorrow and have music 'piped in' for dancing here on the upper part of the dining hall. The mixer will end around five o'clock to allow us to clean up and get the hall ready for normal dinner procedures.

"I also have the pleasure to announce that the Eastern Regional Representative, Mr. Steven Alexander, and our very own Headmaster have agreed to officially chaperone the mixer. We will have the pleasure of hosting Mr. Alexander at dinner tonight, so please be on your best behavior at both gatherings. Now, have a good day in class and ensure you are all here for dinner tonight ON TIME," Mr. Brown concluded, emphasizing the last two words.

As soon as Mr. Brown had finished talking, even before he had the chance to sit back down, Christian whirled around toward Penny and Gwen. By reading their faces, Christian could tell they had come to the same conclusion. He said it anyway.

"Tonight's the night."

Christian couldn't concentrate during his classes. During Alchemy, when he switched the amounts of elecampane and snake tongues a loud hissing sound erupted from his cauldron, which earned him a look of concern from Professor Turnell.

Even at lunch, he had no desire to eat anything. So contrary to his typical lunch-time behavior, it caused Mr. Brown to ask, "Christian are you not feeling well or is something bothering you today?"

Christian looked at Penny and Gwen. They had only nibbled at their food too, but this wouldn't look too out of the ordinary for them. They both looked back at him, wondering how he would reply.

He considered telling everyone about the situation with Mr. Davis, but he knew that they wouldn't believe him, unless he had some proof. So, he responded, "Just a little tired, sir."

He just knew they'd find the evidence they needed in Mr. Davis' office. Then, they could finally let everyone know what they knew.

That evening, as the three friends walked down to the dining hall for dinner, Christian's concentration had returned, accompanied by heightened anxiety.

"Let's run over the plan once more," Christian said, slowing the pace as they passed one of the statues, now decorated with red, heart-shaped garland.

"Once I leave the dining hall, what will you two do?"

“We’ll keep an eye on Mr. Davis and Mr. Alexander, as well as Sean,” started Penny.

“We’ll make our way around to the side of the faculty and staff table and pretend to discuss something,” added Gwen.

“As soon as it looks like the two men are getting ready to leave, we’ll intercept them,” Penny continued.

“I’ll first approach them and ask them what they think our chances are in the upcoming Tri-School Competition and lead the discussion toward Mag Ag, since Mr. Alexander is also a Mag Ag specialist,” Gwen said.

“While she’s doing that, I’ll keep an eye on Sean to determine whether I’ll need to continue the interception of the two men,” Penny included.

“No matter what, we need to keep them busy at least ten minutes after Sean leaves the dining hall,” concluded Gwen.

“Very good,” replied Christian

They finished their discussion just as they reached the dining hall doors.

As directed, the students had taken their seats for dinner a few minutes before six. And, at exactly six, the faculty and staff began to file into the dining hall from the back entrance leading to the courtyard.

As soon as they had all taken their seats, Mr. Davis entered from the same door, followed by a tall, slender man wearing a suit and a long, black cloak. He had a slender face, to match his body, even more elongated by his goatee beard. Mr. Davis and the slender man took the two remaining seats at the center of the faculty and staff table. But, before Mr. Davis took his seat, he waved his wand and the food appeared on the tables.

Students kept their discussions at a more subdued level than usual, done almost at a whisper. Although, every once in a while, someone would let out with a loud laugh or chuckle.

At the faculty and staff table, Mr. Alexander did most of the talking as the faculty and staff asked him questions about various topics.

Christian ate as much as he felt like eating and, after about fifteen minutes, slipped out of the door. The two girls waited until it appeared that the adults had finished eating and then walked up to the left side wall by the faculty and staff table. They stood discussing everything from their room decorations to weekend homework to the Tri-School Competition, while they kept an eye on Mr. Davis and Mr. Alexander.

At the same time, they both watched the Vipertooth table, where Sean still sat talking with a few of his friends. The boys continued to nibble, grabbing food from various plates, as they talked. It didn’t look like Sean planned to leave any time in the next few minutes.

Although the faculty and staff had finished eating, they continued to ask Mr. Alexander questions. The question and answer session went on for about ten more minutes, at which time Mr. Davis stood up and announced that he and Mr. Alexander needed to leave.

Gwen walked directly toward the two men, intercepting them about five feet from the back door. She smoothly went into her planned delaying discussions, while Penny remained in earshot of the discussion and kept an eye on Sean.

After about ten minutes, Penny could hear that Gwen's discussions had started to lose steam, especially with Mr. Davis trying to get her to finish. Just as Penny started to step forward to relieve Gwen, she saw Sean and his friends finally finish and get up to leave. Penny quickly stepped into the discussion with Mr. Alexander.

Christian had waited anxiously outside of the dining hall, where he perked up each time that a student came out. Then, he'd relax again when he saw that it wasn't Sean. Finally, Sean and his friends emerged from the dining hall doors. Immediately, Christian stepped forward, right in front of Sean.

"So, I see your teeth aren't as long as they were last time we met face to face."

Christian said this with a chuckle, more from nervousness than from humor. He continued the taunt, even though Sean attempted to ignore him.

"Looks like you're going to have to end your senior year with one target unmarked. And, that would be me. Hey, I'll give you another chance right now. Go ahead, ask me a question."

Sean hesitated, but then decided to continue on with his friends to their dormitory. Christian followed and, although he didn't like doing it, hit Sean with the ultimate taunt.

"Looks like you're afraid to challenge me. Looks like you may be CHICKEN."

Sean stopped but didn't turn.

Christian had one last taunt before he would have to attempt a confrontation with physical contact.

"No, you're not chicken ... you're just a malimage."

Penny had told Christian that witches considered this a serious insult. She apparently meant it, because she turned red from embarrassment and would only whisper it to him while they discussed their plan. Regardless, the taunt did its trick.

Sean turned with his wand already in his hand.

"If I didn't know how much trouble I'd get into, I'd curse you right now without any reason. But I will ask you a question. You know, I'd thought about whether I'd actually seek you out to ask you this question and now you've delivered yourself to me.

"It's actually a pretty simple question ... if you know the answer. Who was the first Headmaster of the Bishop School and how old was he when he started in the position?"

A smirk grew on Sean's face.

"Wait a second. That isn't in the school handbook," complained Christian.

"That may be true, but the rules of the game say 'All topics within the School Handbook.' And one of the topics within the handbook is 'School History,' which the question clearly falls under," added Sean, his smirk having turned into a grin.

Christian threw a worried look toward Sean. But, Sean didn't know that Christian only acted worried. While true that Christian wouldn't have found the answer to the question in the school handbook, he did know it from the book Mr. Lucern had given him.

Christian waited, looking as though in deep thought.

"Answer within the next ten seconds or you'll be considered wrong. And I have witness," Sean taunted.

Christian, answered with false hesitation.

“Well, I know that Professor Tutelafield was the first Headmaster of Bishop’s, but his age”

Christian hesitated again.

Sean looked concerned that Christian would recall the answer as he had done in all of their other encounters.

Christian finally finished his answer.

“Fifty-six.”

“WRONG!” shouted Sean. “Try one hundred and six!”

Christian knew the right answer and tried to prepare himself the moment he gave the wrong one.

With his eyes closed he heard Sean shout, “Auris grandis.”

Christian immediately experienced a twofold sensation. First, his head now felt almost twice as heavy as normal. Second, he could hear every little noise around him from the creak of the wooden front door in the cold wind to the deafening laughter coming from Sean and his friends.

Luckily, only the outer part of the ear grew, which allowed Christian’s glasses to remain attached to the normal sized canal portion. Although, this odd connection of the enlarged outer ear to the normal sized stem or canal caused the noticeable discomfort.

Instinctively, Christian turned and ran from the roar of laughter in his ears. He could easily hear Sean yell behind him.

“Look at the little baby elephant run away!”

After a few moments, Christian had run far enough away from the laughing boys that he regained his senses and recognized his surroundings. He had gone just beyond halfway between the dining hall doors and the red tower. So, he began to run at full speed toward his dormitory. Christian no longer ran to get away from the noise, but did so with a purpose.

He hurried to the dormitory’s portal, each slap of his shoe against the floor made a deafening noise in his enlarged ears. Each word he uttered to open the portal hurt as well. Christian dashed into his room and back out just as quickly. He ran out of the portal, closing it behind him and wincing with each word. Then, as fast as he could, Christian ran down the spiral stairs to the underground and sprinted down the passageway toward the gold tower.

When he reached the end, he heard student voices, probably some Longhorns returning to their dormitory via the underground passageway. Christian quickly ducked into the stairwell to Ms. D’Amor’s office and waited for them to pass. Little did he know that it would take longer than he thought, since the voices had come from down the passageway almost at the blue tower.

Penny had gone into one of her long, run-on-sentence stories about how she had met Mr. Alexander at a work picnic to which her father had taken her. Then, she transitioned to the dueling team’s training and prospects for a win at the Tri-School Competition. She had just started to go into detail of some of their strategies, when Mr. Davis interrupted.

“ENOUGH! Mr. Alexander and I have some important business to discuss. Either return to your table or return to your dormitory.”

Then, he escorted Mr. Alexander out of the back door, apologizing as they went.

Penny gave Gwen a concerned look, not knowing whether they had given Christian enough time.

Mr. Davis led Mr. Alexander through the courtyard and into the hallway between the blue and gold towers, talking as they went. Mr. Davis complained agonizingly about chatty girls and how they need to understand that the two men’s time is far more important than some silly stories about the lives or concerns of two students.

Mr. Davis led the way down the gold tower’s spiral stairs and, once at the bottom, looked around to make sure no one could see them. Then, they continued into the passage behind the wall, where Mr. Davis pulled out his wand and gave it a flick. The tip glowed brightly, giving them enough light to safely make their way down the stairs. When the men reached the bottom of the stairs, he waved his wand once again and the light went out. Then, he slipped the wand back inside his suit.

The two men walked side-by-side down the long hallway to the elevator. When they arrived, Mr. Davis hesitated and looked back down the hallway. He did it for so long that Mr. Alexander asked, “Is there something wrong?”

“I have the strangest feeling that we’re being followed,” replied Mr. Davis.

Then, he pulled his wand back out and flicked it down the long hallway. A ball of flame shot out of the wand.

“That makes me feel better,” quipped Mr. Davis.

He turned toward the elevator and, holding his hand out to the door, said, “Letium y excidium.”

The rock door began to slowly rise, until it reached the top of the doorway. The men stepped onto the elevator platform and it began to ascend.

Just as the door began to lower again, a whisper came from the ceiling, “Down.”

Christian, sitting atop his floating rug, drifted toward the floor. As soon as he had lowered enough, he jumped off of the rug, grabbed it, and dove through the closing elevator door. He sat up and pulled his knees to his chest, just as the door closed completely with a rock-on-rock, thundering ‘crack.’

Christian sat in pitch-blackness. He felt around in the darkness and, as he had suspected, found that he sat in a cylinder-shaped shaft the same size as the elevator platform. He found no tunnel offshoots and no cubbyholes in which to duck or hide. So, if the platform came down right now and the door didn’t open, the platform would flatten him.

He put the rug on the floor, sat on it, and whispered, “Up.”

He could hear that the elevator had stopped and the two men had exited. Christian could even hear their discussion.

“Davis, the President and I are concerned that things aren’t going very well at the site. We’ve heard rumors from others on our side, that you’re having problems with some of the creatures. We’ve heard that some are refusing to cooperate to their own detriment and others are just getting used up. If we need new ones, then you should

take steps to get new ones. The important thing is to keep the operations going, so that we maintain the output expected by our customer and benefactor.

“As you know, the timing of the President’s resignation is critical for us to maintain a hold on the council. We’ve known that the Conservatives had planned to force his resignation, once they had gathered enough evidence on him. He’s doing it now so that the opposition won’t have the chance to bring in a strong candidate to vie for the position. If you want the job, you’ll need to earn it by keeping the operation on track. If we lose HIS support, we will lose the Presidency and the council; which is something we will NOT tolerate!

“Therefore, I’m not here on any social purpose, as everyone else believes. I’m here to assess the situation at the site and determine whether you can maintain operations. So, take me there. I’ll report back to the President and let him know whether we can proceed or whether we need to make other plans.”

“I assure you, Steven, everything is going just fine. We did have some troublesome workers, but we took care of them. In fact, we have already replaced them. Operations are going just fine and you WILL see it, first hand.”

Christian heard one of the men walk over to something and then heard the shuffling of papers, when all of a sudden Christian hit his head. Apparently, he had reached the top, or more precisely the bottom of the elevator platform and the rug kept trying to rise, pushing Christian against the platform.

He whispered, “Stop.”

The rug stopped, but it squeezed Christian uncomfortably against the platform. So, he whispered “Down” and a moment later “Stop.”

He could now sit upright. And, with his head tilted to one side so that one of his enormous ears pointed toward Mr. Davis’ office, Christian could hear much better the goings on of the two men.

He heard more movement, followed by Mr. Davis saying, “Well, I think I have everything. Shall we?”

Christian heard two sets of feet move a short distance and stop. Then, Mr. Davis said, “Scopo Transeo.”

In response, Christian heard a sucking noise, like a vacuum he thought, followed by a sharp ‘crack.’ Then, he heard nothing but silence.

Christian sat for several minutes in silence, waiting for some sort of noise, but none came. He assumed the two men must have disappeared somehow.

This, unfortunately, meant a long and lonely wait in the dark for Christian.

“Down,” Christian whispered.

The rug responded and, once he reached the bottom of the shaft, Christian stepped off of the rug and rolled it up. Then, he sat down on the cold floor, leaned against the cold wall, and waited.

The thunderous roar of the stone door of the elevator shaft startled Christian awake. This, of course, meant that the elevator had begun to come down. Christian thought that as soon as the door opened enough for him to squeeze through he would jump out and blast down the hallway.

Moments later, he leapt through the doorway, but came to an abrupt stop. He now saw that the ball of flame that Mr. Davis had shot from his wand had turned into a wall of fire blocking his escape.

Christian immediately dropped his rug, sat on it, and said, "Up."

He had hoped to run down the hallway to avoid getting caught. However, that conclusion now seemed inevitable. He felt sure that the moment Mr. Davis stepped out of the elevator he would spot Christian floating above him. But, since he didn't need to really hear anything, Christian floated the rug up as far as it could go to give himself the best chance. And, although the rug once again squished him uncomfortably against the ceiling, he stayed in that position.

Mr. Davis and Mr. Alexander exited the elevator. Then, as soon as the two men stepped through the door, Mr. Davis pulled out his wand.

Christian prepared for a stunning spell or something worse. But, Mr. Davis pointed his wand down the hallway. Christian couldn't see what had happened, but relaxed from the relief that Mr. Davis had not spotted him.

As the two men walked away, Christian heard Mr. Alexander speaking to Mr. Davis.

"I'll let the President know that you have everything under control and that the rumors are just that. I'm sure they were started by one of the other members of our party who had hoped to get the nod for the Presidency. I'll also assure Mr. Howard that he has nothing to worry about."

The two men said nothing more as they climbed the stairs. After a few more minutes, Christian heard nothing more from them and determined he could safely come down from the ceiling.

Once he had landed, Christian smiled in relief when he saw that Mr. Davis had removed the wall of fire and, more importantly, that he hadn't blocked the hallway with another one. He stepped off of his rug, picked it up, and started back to his dormitory.

Christian looked at his watch, which showed the time as almost two in the morning. He had sat waiting in the elevator shaft for nearly seven hours. The lengthy time in the cold explained the body aches and tiredness that consumed him.

Christian thought he might encounter a security Sasquatch on his way back. But, in his tired state, he didn't care. Besides, he would hear them coming from a long way off.

Christian, however, didn't meet anyone on the way back to his dormitory, which relieved him immensely. And, the warmth and comfort of his bed felt wonderful. Not even the uncomfortable feeling of his large ears would keep him awake.

Christian dreamt again about flying. This time, he didn't ride on a dragon, but flew by ear power. Reality had crept into his dream world. He landed atop the school, at which time, his ears went back to normal and he again dodged the flashes of green and red coming at him.

Christian bolted up in bed from the sound of knocking on his bedroom door. He slowly got out of bed, struggling to lift his heavy head, and plodded to the door. Then, he opened it a crack. Gwen and Penny stood in the doorway, each holding a dish with a number of breakfast foods. So, he opened the door wider to let them in.

As the girls came in, their expressions changed and they let out audible sounds upon seeing Christian's enlarged ears. They put the food on his desk and explained how they

assumed he either had a late night or just didn't want to come to breakfast because of his ears. Whatever the reason, they thought he could use some food.

Gwen recommended that Christian go see Mr. Brown or Ms. D'Amor to get the counter curse for his ears. Christian refused saying that he would follow the rules and wait until dinner to receive the counter curse.

Both Gwen and Penny looked very disappointed. They had hoped that Christian would go to the mixer with them. However, they didn't mention their disappointment to him. They knew he needed the rest and that he had a lot on his mind, especially after he explained everything that had taken place the previous night.

When he reached the part where Mr. Davis and Mr. Alexander seemed to disappear, he asked the girls something he had wondered all night.

"Do either of you know if people can, what was the word you used Penny, 'applerate?' I mean can anyone pop in and out of the school as they wish?"

"You mean 'apparate.' I don't think so. I know my parents had to coordinate with the school to come here by fireplace."

"I would imagine that all of the members of the school administration can, because I've never seen any of them walking into school," Gwen added.

Christian continued the questioning.

"What about out of the school?"

"I would guess the same rules apply either direction, in or out," Penny replied.

"My guess is that there's some sort of spell cast on the school that creates a barrier to keep anyone other than the faculty and staff from traveling in or out of the school. Why do you ask?" said Gwen.

"Well, they somehow disappeared from his office and the last thing Mr. Davis said was 'Scopo Transeo.' So, I assumed he said it in order to apparate. Though, he couldn't take Mr. Alexander with him, if our assumptions are correct."

"Christian, for an adult to apparate, they don't have to say anything. They just do it," Penny stated.

"That sounds more like some sort of password," Gwen added.

"A password," Christian said this looking at the top of the bed, but really looking past it. "But, a password to what?" he added aloud, but not directed at either of the girls.

To this last question, they all shrugged.

Christian pointed out their success in completing Phase One of their plan.

"We now know that whatever Mr. Davis is up to, it has to do with poorly treated laborers and they are doing it in coordination with the Howard Corporation, or more specifically, for Mr. Howard himself. More importantly, I now know how to access the elevator to Mr. Davis' office. I think it's time we implemented Phase Two of our plan ... sneaking into his office.

"Up until now, we haven't seriously breached the school rules, mainly just wandering the school after hours. But, getting caught breaking into Mr. Davis' office would result in expulsion. Or if Mr. Davis catches us, he may do physical harm. So, I'm willing to do this alone, if you don't want to take the chance."

Christian said this almost as a question. And, he definitely got an answer.

Both girls looked at him so crossly that Christian actually sat further back on his bed.

“We’ve sat on the sidelines long enough. If you’re going to do this, then we’re going along too. And don’t you try to stop us,” demanded Gwen.

“Besides, you’re bound to need our help in some way on this, since ...”

Penny hesitated, because she didn’t want to hurt Christian’s feelings. However, what she wanted to say had to be said.

“... since you don’t really have any magical abilities.”

Penny, at first, thought she really had offended Christian. He looked down at his hands, and then back up at the girls.

“You’re right,” he concluded.

During a minute of silence, they thought about what to do next.

“What we need is to find a time when we’ll know exactly where Mr. Davis will be and for how long. That will give us the safest time to make our move,” Christian said, breaking the silence.

Frustrated, the three friends feared that they might never get that opportunity.

They decided to leave well enough alone for now and only hoped that they’d get lucky enough to find a chance to sneak into Mr. Davis’ office.

Christian told the girls that he’d see them at dinner, which again brought looks of disappointment as the girls left his room.

Christian decided to spend the afternoon prepping for the trivia competition. After studying for several hours, he shut off his computer and read some more from the *Memoirs of Professor Tutelafeld*. Before he knew it, dinnertime had arrived.

At first, Christian wanted so badly to do something to Sean, because he taunted Christian upon entering the dining hall. And, even though many students laughed at and teased him as he walked in with his large ears, it didn’t matter. Christian knew how good it would feel to have his ears back to normal.

The Final Plan

For those students on any of the Tri-School Competition teams, the rest of February and all of March became very intense. Schoolwork maintained its normal pace, but the contestants had the added burden of studying and practicing for the Competition.

This burden hit Christian harder than some, due to his other extracurricular activities. During this period, he could only attend two of the weekly SWC meetings, just so he could report back the outcome of the two monthly meetings of the 300th Anniversary committee. He had quite a bit to tell everyone, since the committee had determined what events would take place at Bishop for the celebration. And, the WCA representative at the committee meeting stated that he, of course, would coordinate these events with the plans for the other two schools' activities and the activities that the WCA Headquarters would hold as well.

Christian did, however, make both monthly visits to the OWL. Although, he visited only in body, as his mind kept drifting back to either schoolwork or the Competition. And, the scarce time even affected his weekly letters home in that the length of them had become only half as long as his previous ones.

When April arrived, changes came too.

The spring weather allowed the students to venture outside during breaks and to study after classes. Also, beginning the last few weeks of the month, the teachers cut back on the amount of homework, which allowed the students more time to prepare for the Competition. That is, of course, except for the freshmen.

Since Competition teams seldom had freshmen, the homework maintained a normal, exasperating level. And, as three of the four total freshmen on the Competition teams, Christian, Gwen, and Penny had only each other in which to share the misery brought on by loads of homework and endless training.

Added to the misery, or at least to Christian's, Palmistry turned out more difficult than expected. The difficulty resulted not from the complexity of the course, but from the subjectivity. Christian frequently interpreted a line as long, but Ms. Callidus would explain to him its shortness, and vice versa.

Christian had to miss the OWL visit at the end of April. Mr. Brown held a meeting with all of the members of the school's Competition teams on Saturday afternoon in the dining hall to discuss and explain the plans for the Competition.

"Okay, everyone settle down, settle down. Just two weeks from today, is the big two-day event. Next weekend, I'll be at Eastey planning the following weekend's events, as they're hosting the competition this year. So, I expect you all to be on your best behavior the weekend we're there. You are ambassadors of Bishop, so anything you do will represent our school. This includes any time spent between competitions in their nearby town.

"The bus will pick us up Friday night at seven. So, bring your overnight bags with you to dinner that night and we'll have the bags loaded onto the bus as we eat.

"Upon arrival at Eastey, we'll enter their school and go into the dining hall for a short welcoming ceremony. We'll then adjourn back outside to our respective school's lodging tent.

“Breakfast on Saturday and Sunday, as well as dinner on Saturday, will be served in our lodging tent. Breakfast will start at seven each morning, with competitions beginning at eight. And, dinner on Saturday will be at six, after the day’s competitions.

“You’ll have a choice for lunch on the two days between either grabbing something from one of the food booths that they’ll have set up around campus or eating at a restaurant in town. Note that you’ll have to pay for the restaurant food.

“Please make sure you have your overnight bags packed before breakfast on Sunday, because they’ll load them onto the bus during Sunday’s competitions. The bus will depart Eastey at six, so make sure you’re on time; otherwise, you’ll have to find your own way back here.

“At five on Sunday, following the day’s competitions, Eastey will host an awards ceremony in their dining hall. At this ceremony, the winner of each competition will be announced, individual outstanding performances will be awarded, and ... WE WILL WIN THE SALEM’S CUP! RIGHT?” Mr. Brown said in a cheering manner.

The group responded with a loud roar of cheers and whistles, to which Mr. Brown joined in.

“Yes! That’s what I wanted to hear!

“We’ll return to Bishop victorious and end the weekend with a celebratory feast here at seven with the rest of the school. Are there any questions on the general flow of the weekend?”

Several discussions began amongst the students, but no one had any questions.

“Very well. I have the schedule of competitions here.”

As Mr. Brown said this, he floated a piece of paper into the air. As it floated, he tapped it with his wand and it grew to the size of a projector screen, so that everyone could read it. While the students read the schedule, Mr. Brown continued with some additional information.

“Faculty and staff from the three schools will monitor the results of each individual competition and will feed those results to the overall Competition judges. We’ve finally received confirmation that the judges for this year’s Competition will, once again, be the Headmasters of the three schools. So, Mr. Davis will attend the Competition with us over the weekend.

“Now, I’d like to hear how things are going with each team from the respective team Captains. Lucy, why don’t you start?”

Christian didn’t hear what Lucy had to say. His focus now lay on what Mr. Brown had just said, ‘Mr. Davis will attend the Competition with us over the weekend.’

Christian leaned toward Penny and Gwen, both still studying the schedule, and whispered to them, “Did you catch what Mr. Brown just said?”

The girls didn’t know to which part of Mr. Brown’s speech he meant.

“He just said that Mr. Davis will be at Eastey all day Saturday and Sunday. This is our chance. We actually know the whereabouts of Mr. Davis in advance.”

“But Christian, we’re in competitions. We can’t skip the competitions or we’d be letting down our teams and our school,” commented Gwen.

“We won’t have to skip anything.” rebutted Christian.

He turned toward the competition schedule, but continued whispering to the girls.

“Gwen, your Mag Ag competition starts at eight Saturday morning, runs all day, and concludes at six. My competition starts at one and concludes at three. So, by the end of Saturday’s events, Gwen and I are finished with our competitions. Gwen, are you going to have to cheerlead at the Quodpot competition Sunday afternoon?”

“No. They’re going to give me a reprieve because I’m in the Mag Ag competition all day Saturday. Plus, I’m just a freshman,” she explained.

“Good. Now Penny, your dueling matches go from ten to twelve Saturday and then your Taggleduel matches start at two and end at five. So, you’ll also have finished your competitions by Saturday evening, right?”

“Unless we’re in a tie at the end of the Taggleduel matches. Then, we’ll have to go into a sudden death match on Sunday morning.”

“There can be a sudden death match for you too?”

“Yeah. It’s similar to the sudden death match you’d have to go through on the trivia team. One person from each of the schools that tie competes in the tiebreaker. It could end up either a two-person or even a three-person match.”

“That sounds pretty cool, but I hope it doesn’t happen. I think we need to plan on returning to school Sunday morning after breakfast and make our move to sneak into Mr. Davis’ office. That’ll give us time to get back before the day is over. Penny, if you do end up in a sudden death match, I think Gwen and I’ll need to do it without you.”

Penny looked disappointed, but nodded her head in agreement.

“Let’s finish making our plans in my room after the meeting,” concluded Christian.

They sat and listened to the last few team captains giving Mr. Brown the status of their respective teams. Then, Mr. Brown addressed them all one last time.

“Sounds like we have some super teams this year and it should be a great Competition. You only have two more weeks to hone your skills, so make every minute count. Have a great weekend and I’ll see you all on the bus two Fridays from now!”

The students gradually departed the dining hall and returned to their dormitories. Christian, Gwen, and Penny hurried back to Christian’s room.

Christian took up his pacing routine as he began to think out loud, more to himself, but loud enough so that the girls could hear.

“If we leave Eastey right after breakfast, no one will notice we’re missing for about nine hours. That should give us time to get back to Eastey in plenty of time, barring any problems we may encounter in getting back. If we don’t make it back there within those nine hours, we’ll officially be in trouble, scholastically. So, if either of you want to change your mind”

Christian didn’t even get the chance to finish his sentence before the two girls gave him that same stern look he had received back in February.

“Okay, okay, I won’t ask again. Now, with nine hours, we should have plenty of time to make our way back here and back to Eastey. The big question, though, is how are we going to get back here? None of us can apparate, so what other methods of travel are there?”

“Broom?” suggested Gwen.

“I think that traveling by broom, in the middle of the day where non-magical people can see us may get us into more serious trouble than we already plan on doing.”

“Fireplace?” proposed Penny.

“But we know we can’t use that method to get into the school unless we coordinate it with a staff member, which wouldn’t work either. Are there any other means of traveling magically?” Christian asked, almost pleading.

The two girls sat thinking for several minutes. Then, Gwen perked up and said, “Wait a minute, fireplace.”

“We already covered that one.” retorted Christian.

“Yes, but who says we need to travel directly here to school. What about traveling back to someplace nearby, like to Mr. Brown’s house. He’ll be at Eastey, so we know he won’t be home.”

“Great idea Gwen!” Christian said excitedly.

Then, he got a puzzled look on his face.

“What is it?” asked Penny.

“Are the faculty and staff members’ houses, and for that matter the OWL too, considered part of the school? Or, the school property?”

With a bit of disappointment in her voice, Gwen responded.

“I see what you mean. They could have the same protective spell as the school.”

“Hold on, you may still have had a great idea,” Christian added.

He stood there for a moment, and then finished his thought.

“I’ll bet the town isn’t under any protective spell, so that visitors can travel there unimpeded. More specifically, I’ll bet we could use the Ghostly Inn as our target. You remember the large fireplace in the lobby? I’ll bet they get witches traveling into the lobby that way all the time. So, it wouldn’t be anything special either.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. But, where will we start from? I’d imagine that Eastey has the same type of charm on it that our school has,” noted Penny.

They all thought quietly for a moment. Then, Christian remembered something else from the meeting earlier.

“Mr. Brown said that Eastey had a town nearby, just like Bishop, right?”

The girls nodded.

“I wonder”

He walked over to his desk and turned on his computer. Gwen and Penny came and looked over his shoulder.

He accessed the school’s homepage on the network. There, along with links to several WCA sites, he found the two links he thought he had remembered seeing: one for Bishop Town and one for the Eastey School of Witchcraft.

First, he clicked on the Bishop Town link. Once it had connected, a delightful female voice spoke.

“Welcome to Bishop Town. Please choose from one of our outstanding merchants, restaurants, or lodgings.”

Christian clicked on lodgings, then on the Ghostly Inn link. The voice continued, as pictures from within the inn flashed on and off of the screen.

“Welcome to the Ghostly Inn, where you will be pampered by poltergeists and spoiled by specters. From students’ non-magical parents to the Witches Council

President, all are welcome and all treated with the same amount of respect and courtesy. Reservations are required, but feel free to arrive any way you wish.”

While the voice spoke this last sentence, the pictures showed a man appear out of nowhere right in front of the lobby desk and a couple stepping out of the lobby fireplace.

“Perfect,” exclaimed Christian.

He returned to the Bishop homepage. Then, he clicked on the link for the Eastey School of Witchcraft. Melodic music played as the school’s WCA Magic-web site emerged. It contained links to the school’s library and other parts of the school life and personnel. It also had external links to the other two schools and one other link, which Christian had hoped he’d find. He clicked on the link to Eastey Town.

As the WCA Magic-web site for Eastey Town emerged, the same voice used for Bishop Town gave the same welcome. Christian clicked on the lodgings link and it listed two inns: The Peak Inn and The Valley View Inn. Christian clicked each link, watched, and listened to the advertisement for each. Both had fireplaces in the lobby for people to use for travel. The Peak Inn sat at the northern part of town, closest to the school ground gate, and the Valley View Inn sat at the southern end of town.

“Excellent!” Christian cried enthusiastically.

“We can travel from one of the hotels in Eastey Town to the Ghostly Inn, make our way into the school and into Mr. Davis’ office, and return to Eastey the same way. But, what’ll we need for fireplace traveling?” he asked.

“All we need is some hearth ash from a fireplace where the fire was magically started,” Penny answered.

“You mean like from the fireplace in our common room?”

“Exactly.”

“Cool. Over the next week, you two gather up as much of the ash as we need and we’ll be all set.”

As the girls left to go upstairs, all three of them seemed happy with their plan, yet even more nervous than before about possibility pulling it off.

The Annual Tri-School Competition

With regard to the onslaught of schoolwork, the next two weeks seemed to just drag on. In contrast, with regard to the Tri-School Competition, the two weeks flew by. Regardless, the Friday before the competition finally arrived.

After classes, Christian quickly ran into town to mail his weekly letter home, telling his mother of his nervousness and, yet, how he felt ready for the competition. He also thanked her, once again, for his monthly care package the previous weekend.

When Christian returned to his room, he threw a jacket into his already filled backpack. Then, he met Gwen and Penny at the bottom of the stairs. Penny, of course, had her duffle-like bag and Gwen lugged her medium-sized suitcase.

“Only the medium-sized case? I thought for sure you’d have the large one,” Christian said with a smirk.

Penny snickered as Gwen swatted the air toward Christian.

They made their way down to the dining hall and, after setting their bags on the baggage cart by the front entrance, went into the dining hall for dinner. Rather than immediately serving the food, Mr. Brown stood at the top of the stairs and addressed everyone.

“Tonight we eat and drink in honor of our competitors who, for the next two days, will take their physical and mental abilities to their maximum limits in honor of our school. No matter what this weekend’s outcome may hold, we are proud of you! And, you should be proud of yourselves!”

He toasted the students and then made the food appear.

After dinner, everyone filed out of the dining hall toward the bus stop in town. Christian hadn’t really thought much about it, but a majority of the student body and almost all of the faculty and staff joined them for moral support and a show of school pride. However, not many freshmen came along for the weekend, leaving plenty of seats for the faculty and staff on the first floor of the bus.

In no time, the bus had arrived at the entrance to the Eastey School of Witchcraft. The bus sat facing the town entrance, which gave Christian a quick glance at the Peak Inn before he departed the bus.

A tall and slender woman, a slightly shorter and barrel-shaped man, and a much shorter and plump woman stood at the entrance gate waiting for everyone to exit from the bus. Once everyone had done so, the tall woman stepped forward.

And, after shaking hands with Mr. Brown, she addressed the rest of the group.

“Welcome to the Eastey School of Witchcraft. I am the school’s Headmistress, Ms. Houghsnoot.”

She introduced the other two people as Mr. Berebly, the Assistant Headmaster, who stepped forward and waved, and Mrs. Wydbottom, Director of Student Life, who did a quick curtsy from where she stood.

“We want to ensure that your time here at the Eastey School of Witchcraft is as enjoyable as possible. If you should need anything, please contact one of us and we will try to take care of it immediately.

“The opening ceremony, along with the following social, will all be held in our dining hall. The ceremony will commence as soon as the Good contingent arrives. After which, we will begin the social. So, if you would please follow us.”

The three Eastey administration members led the Bishop group through the gates, flanked on each side by security Sasquatch. Christian came to the assumption that, apparently, they used Sasquatch for security at all three schools, and possibly, throughout the WCA.

The group continued into the school grounds where Christian immediately noticed that, although the same tall bushes lined the first portion of the path as at Bishop, this path didn't curve. Instead, the school stood directly ahead and the path went straight up a short hill to the school's front entrance.

The design of the school stunned Christian. From this angle, the school looked exactly like Bishop to include the large shield emblem over the door. The only difference, an “E” replaced the “B” in the center of the shield.

As they walked toward the front entrance, Christian noticed one other significant difference ... the school's location. Rather than building the school into a mountain, they had built Eastey atop a mountain; or more precisely, a cliff.

Additionally, a lake, although significantly smaller, sat on the right of the school. However, it had two noticeable differences from Bishop's lake, it had no waterfall that created the lake and it didn't stretch away from the school as far. Christian could not tell what the source fed this lake, but it appeared to disappear down the backside of the mountain, most likely creating its own waterfall back there.

Beyond the school, Christian could see mountains and woods in the distance. He could only imagine the view behind the school.

Also like Bishop, the Quodpot stadium lay in front of the school off to the left. Two large tents, about twice the size as those used for freshman orientation weekend, stood in the open ground between the path and the stadium. And, another large tent overshadowed the lake on the right-hand side of the path.

Upon reaching the front entrance, the three Eastey administration members stopped and faced the Bishop group.

“Once the opening ceremony is concluded, feel free to depart the school at any time during the social. Those of you who will compete in the weekend's events may adjourn to one of the tents over there,” Ms. Housnoot said, gesturing toward the two tents.

“Yours is the one with the large “B” over the entrance. And, those of you who are here to support your competitors will stay in the tent over here by the lake,” she concluded.

Then, the three administration members turned and entered the school's front entrance. Mr. Berebly and Mrs. Wydbottom held the main entrance doors open, while Ms. Housnoot led everyone across the entry hallway and through the already opened dining hall doors.

Christian noticed that the design inside of the school, or at least what he could see, also looked exactly the same as at Bishop. Only some of the decorations differed and Christian recognized the two most notable differences.

A trophy, which stood as tall as Christian, rested atop the pedestal to the right of the dining hall door. The trophy consisted of a three-sided base, about three feet high. On top of the base sat an ornately decorated, large golden chalice. Magically engraved and inlaid in luminescent gold, the words "Salem's Cup" beamed from the side of the cup. And, a golden glow emanated from its mouth.

He could also see two of the base's sides. Metal plates attached to the sides had engravings too. One read 'BISHOP' and the other 'EASTEY' with years dating back to 1712 engraved below them. Apparently, Bishop had won the very first Salem's Cup.

The second notable difference ... the large statue nearest the front door resembled an Asian woman rather than a man. Christian only saw it at a glance, since the Salem's Cup had caught his attention the most. She still wore the pointed hat, but held a staff in her left hand. She held her wand in her right hand, which rested against her stomach with the wand pointed to her left.

Christian took a brief, hesitated step to see the name on the statue. It read 'Long Funu'.

The dining hall looked exactly the same as Bishop too. Although, they had removed the dining tables and had replaced them with a dozen thinner tables resting against the walls, filled with various drinks and snacks.

It appeared that the entire Eastey student body, stood around chatting and waiting in the dining hall. And, as the Bishop crowd entered, the Eastey students, faculty, and staff applauded. Once everyone from Bishop had finally entered, the applause gradually subsided.

Many of the Bishop competitors, especially the repeat ones, broke off and began mingling with some of the Eastey students. The two groups of faculty and staff members did the same.

Christian, Gwen, and Penny grabbed some food and drinks and walked to the upper level of the dining hall. There, they took up a position against the wall, just at the top the stairs.

From what Christian could see, this looked like a very friendly competition. Unlike many of the sporting events he attended back in non-magical school.

As he continued to look around at the crowd, he noticed a boy about his age standing a little further down the wall and toward the back of the dining hall, almost in the dark. Christian walked down and held out his hand to the boy.

"Hi. My name's Christian. I'm a freshman at Bishop and I'm competing in the trivia competition."

The boy almost seemed startled at having someone approach him. After, Christian introduced himself, the boy seemed to come at ease, and shook Christian's hand.

"Reginald. I...I'm also a freshman, but here at Eastey. I'm on the chess team."

"Chess. You know, I've always wanted to learn chess. I'm fascinated by the intense strategy that it requires."

"That's what I like about it too! I've played since I was old enough to understand it."

"It's been nice to meet you. Good luck in the competition, I'm sure you'll do great."

"Thanks. Good luck to you too."

Christian walked back to Gwen and Penny. Once he did, he glanced back at Reginald, who now stood up straighter and had moved more into the light of the room. Best of all, he stood there smiling, which made Christian feel good.

Penny rewarded him with a friendly pat on the shoulder, having seen it all.

Moments later, the dining hall erupted into applause again, as another crowd of students and adults entered. Apparently, the contingent from the Good School of Witchcraft had arrived.

Once all of the members of the Good crowd had all joined them in the dining hall, Ms. Hougnsnoot, Mr. Berebly, and Mrs. Wydbottom made their way to the upper level of the dining hall. After motioning for all of the people on the upper level to move down to the lower level, Ms. Hougnsnoot addressed the crowd.

"I would like to, once again, welcome everyone to the Eastey School of Witchcraft. It is our GREAT pleasure to host the Tri-School Competition this year. It is an even greater pleasure to announce that we have a special guest here to lead the opening ceremony, the leader of the Witches Council of America, President Jay Buckanon."

Once again, the hall erupted into applause as President Buckanon entered, parting the crowd in route to the upper level. A red carpet magically unrolled in front of him as he walked. Oddly, yet not a surprise to Christian, Mr. Davis followed close behind.

Once at the top of the stairs, the President raised his arms to quiet the crowd. And, as the applause ceased, Mr. Buckanon, in the voice of a town crier, shouted, "BRING FORTH THE SALEM'S CUP."

With his wand, he shot a spark into the air over the crowd. And, when it reached its peak, it exploded. However, rather than a 'boom,' the explosion set off a heraldic flourish of trumpets, which continued throughout the upcoming procession.

The dining hall doors, which had closed after the President's entrance, swung open. First, an older boy entered, carrying a red banner. The banner displayed the shield emblem used for the three schools with an "E" in the center of the shield. Next, came Lucy, carrying a gold banner with the same shield and a "B" in the center. And, behind her, followed another older boy, carrying a blue banner with a "G" in the center of the shield. Lastly, Mr. Berebly entered levitating the trophy.

The three banner carriers, whom Christian assumed were the three SWC presidents, formed a semi-circle around President Buckanon. And once they did, their respective headmasters joined them. Finally, Mr. Berebly set the trophy directly in front of the President, so that now it looked as though he stood behind a podium.

"Let me also welcome you all here to this great school for this very special event. It is my pleasure and honor to open the annual Tri-School Competition. As you can see from this trophy, this Competition is as old as our society here in America. This Competition isn't about who wins or loses, but is a way to improve the skills and knowledge of our young witches to make them the best that they can be. Let us begin this competition as brothers and sisters in magic, learning from each other and from the overall experience. Let the Competition begin."

President Buckanon pointed his wand into the wide mouth of the golden chalice and a loud 'GONG' rang out. Once again, the hall erupted into applause and cheers.

All of the faculty and staff members from the three schools stepped to the upper level to shake the President's hand and thank him.

After a while, the President departed through the back door, along with Mr. Davis. The other faculty and staff members remained on the upper level shaking hands, hugging, and chatting with each other.

Some of the students also intermingled, although the majority tended to keep to groups from their respective schools. Christian, Gwen, and Penny decided to make their way to the tent, to ensure they got enough rest before tomorrow's competitions.

This time, Christian anticipated what to expect upon entering the tent. And the experience didn't disappoint him.

The inside of the tent appeared just shy of twice the dimensions as the tents used for the orientation weekend. The first floor consisted of three long dining tables and a boys and a girls bathroom straight at the back of the tent. In the back corners, even with the space taken for the bathrooms, two sets of metal, spiral stairs led up. One set had a sign that read "Girls" and the other "Boys".

Their bags sat just inside the tent entrance. So, Christian grabbed his pack, said goodnight, and went up the stairs. He exited onto the second floor and could soon hear the girls' footsteps on the floor above him.

The room mainly held beds. Ten against each wall with two more rows down the center. The two rows in the center had the heads of the beds up against each other, which allowed aisles between the beds in the center and the ones against the wall.

Christian decided to take one of the beds furthest from the stairs, so that the other students wouldn't disturb him when they entered. As he unpacked his backpack, he recalled that he had thought about bringing his computer to continue to prepare for the competition. But, he decided he'd prepared well enough not to need it. Instead, he brought the *Memoirs of Professor Tutelafeld* as something to read and pass the time.

Once in his pajamas, he grabbed the book and sat in bed to read. But, after reading for just a while, the sound of the rain outside began to make his eyelids heavy with sleep. So, he decided to call it a night.

Other students coming into the room periodically awakened him, but he quickly fell back asleep each time.

The next morning, Mr. Brown actually came into the room to personally wake everyone.

"Wake up, wake up. Everyone needs to meet at the breakfast table at seven sharp. Riley, would you shake Dennis? I don't think he can hear me over his own snoring. See you all downstairs."

After a hurried venture in the bathroom, everyone began to file down the stairs at pretty much the same time. Aside from a few lollygaggers of both genders, everyone had taken seats at the tables several minutes before seven. Much to Christian's surprise, the lollygaggers didn't include Gwen.

As Christian took a seat next to Gwen he asked, "Nervous?"

"Why else would I be out here this soon?" she quipped.

They chuckled at the comment, more out of nervousness rather than finding it that funny.

"You'll do fine. You're a natural," Christian responded.

"How's the fastest wand in the Midwest?" he said to Penny.

"Feeling more like the shakiest wand in the Midwest," she replied.

The three of them also met her attempt at humor with a nervous chuckle.

"You'll do great. With your skills, these east coast guys won't know what hit them ... literally."

Just then Mr. Brown stood up from the head of their table and cleared his throat.

"The sun has decided to shine this morning, but it doesn't matter. Today's your day to shine and you'll shine brighter than any sun. We're proud of you and, this day, you'll make us even prouder."

As he sat back down, breakfast appeared on the tables.

After breakfast, Christian and Penny accompanied Gwen to her Mag Ag competition, which took place in one of the school's greenhouses. They entered the school and turned toward the blue tower. At the corner they turned toward the gold tower and walked a short way down that hallway. Through a doorway on the outside wall of the hallway, whose door had been propped open, they entered a short hallway. At its end, they exited through another door to the greenhouse outside.

Once in the greenhouse, Christian marveled at the view. The greenhouse sat near the edge of the cliff. He could see mountains miles away with rolling hills and valleys in between.

Christian couldn't tell, but wondered if the lake atop the cliff possibly fed into or was the source of a river. Because, he could see it flowing out from below the cliff off to his left, where it disappeared behind a thick set of woods in the distance.

Christian, so caught up in the view, almost missed the start of the competition. He would have, too, if Penny hadn't elbowed him in the arm.

The event actually consisted of three competitions in one. Each school provided two teams of two members. Each two-person team competed against another two-person team from one of the other schools. Each team received a specific type of plant with which to work. The team with the healthiest plant at the end of the competition won the match. At the end of the competition, the team that won two matches received ten points. Otherwise, the competition would end in a three-way tie. In the case of a tie, the judges would determine the overall winner based on the skills of the team members. And, a team with younger members received bonus points.

Christian and Penny watched the activity for about an hour. However, Christian became bored, comparing the event to watching grass grow ... literally. He talked Penny into leaving, since her dueling matches would start within the hour. So, the next time they saw Gwen look up at them, they waved goodbye and signaled 'Good Luck' to her.

The dueling matches, just like at Bishop, took place in the dining hall. They had cleared all of the tables away; however, everything had been arranged differently than at Bishop. Bleachers sat on both sides of the dining hall doorway facing the upper level. The dueling area stretched the width of the dining hall and situated between the

bleachers and the upper level. On the upper level, a table for the judges sat near the edge of the stairs to oversee the matches.

One of the judges stepped into the dueling area, pulled out his wand, and waved his arm in an arch. Then, he shot a spell in the direction of the bleachers, startling a few spectators, and did the same toward the upper level and the ceiling. Each time the spell hit something and dissipated. Christian concluded that the judge must have put up a barrier to catch any deflected spells from the dueling matches. It essentially formed a large tunnel in which the dueling matches would take place.

Christian found the dueling matches much more fun than the Mag Ag competition, even if the first set didn't include Penny. As he watched, Christian came to understand the basic flow of the competition.

Once the duelers get the signal to start, one of them begins bombarding his or her opponent with offensive spells and the person on the defensive either deflected or evaded the spells. When the person on defense had an opportunity, he or she then went on the offensive and bombarded the other person.

After the first set had concluded, Eastey had won four out of the six matches.

During the second set, Christian noticed that most of the Bishop team went for the deflecting method, which meant that they had fewer chances to find an opening to go on the offensive. In fact, this caused their downfall. When they would attempt to go on the offensive, they would drop their guard and leave themselves open.

Penny, on the other hand, preferred evading the spells, which she did very well. They had scheduled her last of the six Bishop duelers in their first set of matches against Eastey. Up until then, Bishop had suffered four defeats with one win. The one win only happened because the opponent dropped his wand.

Penny's opponent looked like an apprentice or journeyman level student from Eastey, and he seemed very confident in his abilities. As soon as the match began, he went on the offensive.

He rapidly shot off two spells at Penny, the first one low and the second one higher. This would force her to block low, but not raise her wand fast enough to block the high one. Penny, almost instinctively, knew what her opponent had planned and also knew that he would go low on his third shot. So, she blocked the first low spell, evaded the high one, and got off her own spell aimed at his wand arm knowing what he would attempt. As Penny had hoped, her opponent hadn't expected the evasion and quick counter, since the rest of the Bishop team didn't evade well at all. So, he had assumed Penny would follow suit, especially with this as her first time in a competition. As a result, the boy's wand went flying from his hand, leaving him open for a final shot to the chest by Penny. The match had ended in five seconds.

Penny's match took less time than any other of the day. They found out later that it ranked the second fastest on record. The only faster match took three seconds during a match in 1883, when Roger Bloodshot misread a feigned low spell from Thomas Lightfoot and took a high hit in the face.

In the third and final set, Bishop went up against Good. However, Bishop had changed its strategy and put Penny up first, in hopes to lead the team to a victory. This match pitted Penny against a senior, known for his evading abilities.

This time, Penny's match didn't end quickly, but played out extraordinarily.

The senior began shooting at Penny from all angles. Penny's adeptness amazed and surprised Christian. She seemed in control of her deflections and evasions for every spell. The senior, in an attempt to trick Penny sent two spells to the same spot. However, his strategy backfired, giving Penny an opening to go on the offensive. She, too, began to send spells at the boy from every direction. He handled them all, but didn't seem in as much control as Penny.

Her opponent took a chance, which worked to give him an opening and he let off a circular pattern of ten to twelve spells. Penny's reaction not only amazed Christian and most of the other spectators, it amazed her opponent as well.

As a response to the circular pattern Penny saw coming at her, she leapt into the air and performed a barrel roll in mid-air and in the center of the barrage. Simultaneously, she sent three spells at her opponent. Her acrobatics so surprised her opponent that he stood motionless watching. Two of her three spells hit him in the leg and chest.

The spectators gave the match a standing ovation, which seemed to catch Penny off guard. Once the confusion had passed, she turned the darkest red Christian had seen on her face yet. Regardless, she stepped forward to shake her opponent's hand. And, while they shook hands, he must have complemented her too, since whatever he said caused her to blush even darker.

After several congratulatory comments and pats on the back from her teammates, and a tremendous "Hazaah!" from Mr. Quazam, Penny bounded up the bleachers to watch the rest of the team's matches with Christian.

"That ... was extraordinary! Right out of the Matrix!" Christian exclaimed.

To the first comment, Penny showed discomfort. Her expression changed to confusion with respect to the second one though.

Christian recognized her discomfort, so he didn't say anything more.

They sat and watched the remaining matches. Unfortunately, the rest concluded with Penny's as the only one that Bishop won.

The teams received a point for each match they won, so the morning ended with Eastey receiving eight points, Good with seven points, and Bishop with three.

Since the dueling matches ended earlier than planned, Christian and Penny had plenty of time to get some food. So, they proceeded outside and went to the nearest food booth. While they sat on the slightly damp grass to eat, people kept coming up to Penny to congratulate her on her dueling performance. And, each time someone said something, she would uncomfortably reply, "Thank you."

"You'd better get used to it, Penny. You've now made a name for yourself," Christian said, trying to make her realize the situation.

"But I really wasn't trying to do anything special. I just reacted how I thought would be the best way I could think of at the moment."

"That's called 'being in the zone' and it only happens to someone who has the skills to command that particular ability. You're good at dueling Penny. Accept the compliments as they're meant, which is to make you feel good about yourself and don't think that you're not worthy of them. YOU ARE!"

She smiled and her eyes began to water. But, a moment later, someone else came up and congratulated her. This time, when she smiled and thanked the person, the smile remained after they left.

The time for Christian's trivia competition had finally arrived. So, he and Penny made their way back into the dining hall.

The bleachers still faced the upper level, but now sat forward very near the stairs to the upper level. And, in front of the bleachers on the lower level, Mr. Berebly sat at a small, one-person table shuffling what looked like a deck of cards.

On the upper level, two long, narrow, counter-like tables faced Mr. Berebly, but angled some to face each other. A glass globe, about the size of a beach ball, sat atop a stone pedestal equidistant between the two counter-like tables and at the top of the stairs. Christian looked quizzically at the globe, thinking it looked out of place.

Penny took a seat in the bleachers, while Christian met up with his teammates behind the right-hand table on the upper level.

Still sitting at his table, Mr. Berebly spoke loudly, so that everyone in the hall could hear.

"Our first match today will pit the Good School of Witchcraft against the Bishop School of Witchcraft. Will the teams please take their places at the tables."

While the two teams made their way up the stairs and situated themselves, Mr. Berebly continued his instructions.

"The match will consist of as many questions as we can cover within a thirty-minute time limit. I will read each one aloud. When one of our competitors knows the answer, whether I have completed reading the question or not, they will point their wand toward the glass sphere. It will recognize from which direction the first wand to point at it is located and will turn the appropriate color. If the sphere turns blue, then someone from Good drew first. It will turn gold if the first wand to point at it is from a Bishop member.

"Competitors, please just point your wands at the sphere and do NOT send a spell toward it. It will recognize the magic in your wand from the short distance between it and you. We don't want to have to take the time to replace a broken sphere.

"Once the sphere selects the first responding team, that team will have five seconds to give the answer. If they give an incorrect answer or fail to answer within five seconds, the opposing team is then given five seconds to respond to the question. If no one answers correctly, the question is nullified and we move onto the next one. During the five seconds, the team may converse amongst themselves, but please remember your time limit.

"Each team will have one fifteen-second time out that they may use any time between questions during the match. A time out may not be used to extend the five-second response time. The team with the most correct answers at the end of the thirty minutes wins the match.

"Are there any questions?"

During most of Mr. Berebly's directions, the concern showed noticeably on Christian's face. No one had told him about the sphere or the process of it recognizing the magic of the wand pointed at it. However, he could do nothing about it now and

could only hope that the sensitivity of the sphere would recognize what little magic he and his wand would emit.

"Very well. Let's begin," concluded Mr. Berebly.

The first question covered some magical creature called a Nundu, of which Christian had never heard before. However, the second question asked, 'Who is the father of Numerology?'

Christian knew this one and immediately raised his wand. The girl across from him also raised her wand. But, although Christian could have sworn that he beat her, the sphere turned blue. This didn't concern him too much, because it seemed possible that she could have beaten him. Even though he didn't think she did.

He would find out, though, five questions later.

"In what year and location did the founders begin the magical society in America?" asked Mr. Berebly.

Christian immediately raised his wand. This time, he easily beat everyone, however the sphere didn't turn gold. A moment later, the sphere turned blue. A boy on the Good's team responded "Salem, 1711."

Mr. Berebly, replied, "More specific, please."

The boy looked confused and discussed it with his team. They all seemed confused and at the last second of the five, the same boy responded, "Spring of 1711?"

"Bishop what is your answer?" stated Mr. Berebly.

"Salem village, 1711," answered Christian.

"That is correct," stated Mr. Berebly.

Although pleased that he got the answer correct, only concern showed on Christian's face. Apparently, the sphere couldn't recognize his wand, as he had feared. In addition, his correct answer totaled only the third point for Bishop out of the first ten questions asked.

However, by the time Mr. Berebly announced the halfway point, the Bishop team had closed the score deficit to within two points. During those first fifteen minutes, four other questions came up in the area of Christian's specialty. He knew the answers for all of them and drew his wand first, but the sphere continued to not recognize it. Dee, the team captain, hadn't noticed the problem during the first question. But, by the time the half ended, she could clearly see the situation.

The first question asked after the halfway point covered Christian's area of expertise and, once again, his magic failed him. After the Good team answered the question, Dee immediately took action.

"Bishop requests a time out," Dee said to Mr. Berebly.

"Granted," responded Mr. Berebly.

Dee walked over to Christian and, in a low voice, asked, "Christian, are you having a problem with your wand?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess," he replied.

He didn't lie completely. He indeed had a problem with the wand ... he couldn't make it work most of the time; or, any magic for that matter.

"I've noticed that you beat their school history expert every time to the answer, but the sphere isn't recognizing your wand. So, here's what I'm going to do. I'll raise my

wand every time there's a school history question, but I'll let you answer the question. If you have a problem with the answer, we'll put our heads together and try to come up with one. How does that sound?" Dee asked.

"That's a great idea," said Christian.

However, they never had to form a group answer. Over the next nine minutes, there came a total of eight more school history questions and Christian answered every one correctly.

With Christian's correct answers and a number of others from the rest of the team, Bishop took the lead by one point with less than thirty seconds left in the match. Then, the Good team won the next point to tie with Bishop. Everyone assumed that only one final question remained in the match.

Mr. Berebly began to ask the question and had only read halfway through it when the team captain for the Good team raised his wand. He had clearly planned to take a chance and guess the full question rather than wait until Mr. Berebly finished asking it. It turned out as a well-played risk, because they answered the question correctly.

As everyone had assumed, once the Good team answered the question, Mr. Berebly set the cards down.

"That concludes our thirty-minute round. It was a wonderful and very close competition between two excellent teams. Bishop finished with ninety-eight points and Good with ninety-nine. The Good School of Witchcraft wins the match."

The joviality and applause that echoed throughout the hall didn't change Christian's and his teammates' disappointment. However, they crossed over to the Good table and congratulated their opponents nonetheless.

As the Bishop team walked down from the upper level of the hall, Mr. Berebly made an announcement.

"Our next match will be between the Good School of Witchcraft and the Eastey School of Witchcraft. Would the Eastey team please take their place at the open table?"

The Bishop team adjourned to the bleachers and Christian took a seat next to Penny.

"You did really well, once you guys figured out a way to overcome your ... situation." Penny said consolingly.

"So, you could tell what was happening?"

"Only because I know what the situation is. I didn't know that it would come into play with a trivia competition, though."

"Neither did I, since no one bothered to tell me about the magical sphere."

Penny wanted to help Christian through his depression, but she thought it better to let him come to grips with it on his own. So, they sat there in silence and watched the start of the next match.

Soon after the match started, Penny tugged on Christian's arm.

"I'm going to have to miss your next match," she said with a disappointed look.

"How come?" he asked.

"Chic wants us to watch the first Taggeduel match between Eastey and Good and he wants us there before it starts so that we don't miss anything. He thinks watching the match will make us better prepared to go up against them in our matches," she said rolling her eyes upward.

“These battles are always situational and you just have to react to what the other team does. Although, there’s a chance that they may try to follow the same attack plans, so that’s why Chic wants us to watch the first match,” she added.

“I understand,” replied Christian honestly.

“Good luck, and I’ll see you after my two matches,” Penny said, as she stood up and made her way down the bleachers.

“Good luck to you too. I’ll be watching and rooting you on,” Christian replied in a loud whisper.

Once the second trivia match had ended, Christian made his way down the bleachers to join his teammates. Eastey had beaten Good in the second match, so Bishop remained the only winless team.

Dee planned to continue the strategy of automatically raising her wand to the sphere any time a school trivia question came up, at least giving Christian the opportunity to answer the question. And, she had confidence that he would answer the questions, which would relieve some tension from the rest of the team and allow them to address their own. This strategy had seemed to work the second half of their first match and Dee hoped it would work again.

The strategy did work, and luckily it did. Of the two hundred and one questions asked, twenty-eight school history questions came up and Christian answered them all correctly. The strategy couldn’t have worked out better than Dee had planned. With Christian’s situation resolved, the other members concentrated on their own areas better. As a result, the match ended with a score of one hundred and five to ninety-six in favor of Bishop.

At the end of match play the competition had a three-way tie. This meant the single-question sudden death round would have to determine the winner.

“We will take a five-minute break, before we have a final, single-question match between all three schools. During those five minutes, Good will determine which member of the Bishop team will compete, Eastey will pick the member from Good, and Bishop will pick the member of Eastey,” announced Mr. Berebly.

During the five minutes, Mr. Berebly conjured an additional table and placed it on the upper level. Then, with a few waves of his wand, he rearranged the three tables, so that they formed three sides of a hexagon shape around the sphere.

After the five minutes had passed, Mr. Berebly addressed the teams and the crowd.

“Will our teams please take their positions behind the three tables?”

After all of the teams’ members had taken their positions behind their respective tables, Mr. Berebly spoke directly to the team leaders.

“Bishop, which member of Eastey have you picked?”

They had noted the Mag Ag expert as the weakest member of the Eastey team in both rounds of match play.

“Member number three,” Dee replied.

This number referred to where the student stood behind the Eastey table.

Eastey picked the Good school trivia expert, due to her poor performance during their match and, for the same reason, Good picked Christian as the participant from Bishop.

“Will the three participants please step forward and form a semi-circle around the sphere, facing me. Please make sure you are within arms-length of the sphere, because I will ask our final question and the first one of you to touch the sphere will get the first opportunity to answer it.

“If you answer it correctly, the competition is over. If answered incorrectly, the other two participants will have an opportunity. The first person to answer the question correctly, wins the competition for his or her team. If no one provides the correct answer, the competition will end in a tie.

“Are there any questions?”

The three participants, who had taken their positions surrounding the sphere, stood in silence. Christian stood directly behind it, waiting anxiously.

“Very well. Here is your question. ‘A Headmaster of one of our three schools was very fond of a drink that he or she developed and he or she frequently drank during times of relaxation. Give the Headmaster’s name and the type of drink.’”

Just as Mr. Berebly finished the question, the Good team member touched the sphere. The disappointment hit Christian hard, because this time he didn’t even have the opportunity to move his hand.

From the spectators’ view, directly in front of the sphere, the lower right third of the sphere lit with a blue glow; which represented the location of the Good member. Mr. Berebly responded to the light.

“The Good School of Witchcraft, what is your answer?”

The girl stood there with a look of terror on her face. Never before had Christian ever taken pleasure in someone else’s misfortune, but this time he couldn’t help it. That look meant he had another chance ... and he knew the answer.

After a few seconds, Mr. Berebly said, “Good, we need your answer now.”

“Professor Imperius Tutelafeld,” she answered, and then hesitated.

After a second’s pause and with a look of exasperation, she concluded, “Pumpkin juice.”

“Incorrect,” responded Mr. Berebly. “Anyone else?”

As Christian lifted his hand to touch the sphere, he glanced over at the Eastey member. From the look on his face, Christian knew he had no idea and didn’t even plan an attempt to answer. Christian touched the sphere with confidence. Unfortunately, nothing happened to the sphere.

“No other attempts?” asked Mr. Berebly.

Christian repeatedly placed his hand on and off of the sphere, yet nothing happened.

“Last chance,” stated Mr. Berebly.

Christian immediately raised his hand and yelled, “Sir, I do.”

“You must touch the sphere, young man,” instructed Mr. Berebly.

“It doesn’t seem to be working, sir,” Christian replied.

Mr. Berebly thought for a moment. Then, he said aloud, “Very well. Bishop your answer.”

“Professor Imperius Tutelafeld and coriander beer.”

Mr. Berebly looked down at the paper he held. After several moments, most likely done for affect, Mr. Berebly looked up and said loudly, "The Bishop School of Witchcraft is the winner of the Trivia competition."

The hall erupted into applause, the loudest coming from the other members of the Bishop team, who rushed forward toward Christian. They shook his hand, patted him on the back, and Dee literally lifted Christian off of the ground as she hugged him.

After she put him back on the floor, Dee looked at Christian with a combination of amazement and confusion.

"Everyone knows that Professor Tutelafield was known for constantly carrying a mug around with him everywhere he went, but how'd you know what the drink was?" she asked.

Christian actually didn't know everyone knew anything about Professor Tutelafield and his mug, but he explained how he knew.

"I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Lucern this year during one of the monthly OWL visits. I told him of my interest in learning about the history of the school and our magical society and, on a whim, he gave me a book to read."

"What book?"

"The Memoirs of Professor Tutelafield."

"That's an amazing coincidence and a blessing for us. Excellent job today Christian!"

She embraced him once again, but with less enthusiasm this time.

"Thanks," he replied.

After several more congratulations all around the team, everyone began to exit the hall. Christian hurried outside and over to the Quodpot bleachers.

With the sudden death match and all of the congratulations, by the time he reached the seating level of the bleachers, Christian had completely missed the first Taggleduel match. It hadn't taken the full hour allotted, but at least he hadn't missed any of Penny's match.

Eastey had modified their bleachers for these matches. Instead of stadium style seating, they provided standing room only on three levels, which enabled everyone to overlook the field.

Christian actually found an opening he could squeeze into on the first level. Just as he settled into his spot, he heard an announcement, although he couldn't see from where it came.

"Our next match will be between the Bishop School of Witchcraft and the Good School of Witchcraft. Will the teams please take their positions on the field?"

The two teams came walking out of the bleacher tunnel to a roar of applause. While Christian watched the teams take their starting places at the opposite ends of the field, he heard two people nearby talking.

"With the results of the dueling competitions this morning and Eastey winning the first Taggleduel match, Good has no chance to win the competition. However, Bishop can tie for first by winning both of its two matches."

"Yes, I know. Since these Taggleduel matches are worth five points, Eastey is leading with thirteen points now, followed by Good with seven, and Bishop in last with three

points. If Good wins this match, they will finish with twelve points and make Eastey the automatic winner. If Bishop wins, they can tie Eastey by beating us in the last match.”

“That may be true, but our team is quite good, so I doubt if Bishop will beat them in that match.”

“I have to agree.”

Another announcement interrupted Christian’s eavesdropping.

“Let the competition begin!”

A flare shot out of the stands from somewhere above Christian and exploded in mid-air over the field.

Both teams immediately made advancing movements.

Penny and Chic dashed forward toward the log. Chic fell to the ground behind the log, while Penny hurdled the log and broke into a full out run toward the bush, some twenty yards in front of the log. The other two members of the Bishop’s team, Naomi and P.J. Morgan, jumped behind the boulder and provided cover fire for Penny. As soon as Chic hit the ground, he too provided cover fire for Penny.

The Good team had all taken firing positions, two behind the boulder and two behind the log. Penny and Chic had discussed some strategy, based on what they had seen during the Good versus Eastey match. Whether to carry it out or not, Penny would decide. The exceptionally accurate cover fire that her three teammates provided, keeping the opposing players at bay, allowed Penny to implement the strategy.

Although she could easily take a strong defensive position behind the bush on her side of the field, Penny made a quick veering movement and dashed diagonally across the field toward the opposing team’s bush. However, it sat an additional twenty yards away across unobstructed field.

During the run to her own bush, Penny only had to dodge the opposing teams magic. Now, she had to continue dodging them and ensure she didn’t accidentally run into her own team’s cover fire. As she ran, she also shot at the opposing team, to increase the amount of cover fire, but they still cast several spells at her. Many flew well off of the mark, because of the haste in which the opponents made them. Yet, a few came close enough to make Penny either duck or momentarily pause to let it pass her.

One shot almost hit Penny. It actually would have missed her body but hit her cape, which trailed a few feet behind. Seeing this, she evaded the spell by pirouetting like a ballerina to bring the cape close to her body. The spell missed and she continued her sprint.

When Penny reached halfway to the opposing team’s bush, one of the Good players jumped up from behind the log, leapt over it, and raced towards his side’s bush. A question arose now in everyone’s mind ... “Who would get there first?”

At this point, Penny had a shorter distance to it than the boy, but she still had to dodge spells coming from both sides. The boy had another advantage though ... only Penny and Chic had clear shots at him. So, Penny concentrated her spells at him. However, because she had to concentrate on dodging spells, she didn’t hit him and the boy reached the bush first.

Just a second later, though, Penny finally reached the bush as well. Now, none of the opposing players could see her. However, the boy on the other side of the bush crept his way around to the edge, so that he could have a pointblank shot at Penny.

Expecting this move, Penny smoothly performed the dive, roll, and pop-up on one knee maneuver she had done during the Halloween demonstration, landing on the far side of the bush. During her roll, the boy's spell flew within inches over her head. And, when Penny popped up on her knee, the boy stood less than two feet in front of her.

Although Christian cheered Penny on enthusiastically, he actually grimaced at what happened. When Penny let loose with her spell, the close proximity caused the boy to fly three feet up into the air, land in the bush, and fall to the ground with a very loud thud.

As the referee announced the player out of the match, one of the men near Christian said, "I think that's pretty obvious."

The boy slowly got up and staggered off of the field. Penny apologized to the boy. Then, she quickly set back to the match.

From this angle, Penny easily kept the girl behind the log from popping up and either of the other two players behind the boulder from shooting out the side facing her. With this setup, Penny signaled for P.J. to join her and P.J. came straight up the field from their boulder. While she did this, Naomi kept a continuous barrage of fire aimed at the opposing team's boulder on the side away from Penny.

P.J. reached the bush, having to avoid only one spell from the opposing team. Once P.J. reached Penny, she took up a position on the other side of the bush to maintain a constant rate of cover fire on the boulder. This allowed Chic to move forward to the bush on Bishop's side without incident. Once in position, he took up firing at the left-hand side of the opposing team's boulder. They now had all of the Good's team members pinned down and unable to take accurate shots. Finally, Naomi joined Penny and P.J. behind the opposing teams bush.

Naomi took the responsibility of firing spells at the log from Penny, as Penny now ran and dove toward the opposing team's log. As she dove, a girl from behind the boulder took a shot, barely missing her. But, in the process of taking the shot at Penny, P.J. hit the girl on the arm.

As the referee signaled the Good player out of the game, Penny laid flat on the ground as close to the log as possible. The girl behind the log, periodically stuck her wand quickly over the log and, blindly, shot at the ground on the other side. She came close to hitting Penny twice, but couldn't reach far enough over the log without getting hit. Penny crawled, or more scooted, toward the end of the log that pointed away from the field. Once in position, she slowly raised her arm about six inches off of the ground and, without looking, reached around the end of the log and shot a spell down its length.

She couldn't see what happened, but heard a loud "Ooof." A moment later Penny heard an announcement, "Espinoza of Good, you're out of the match."

Naomi quickly joined Penny behind the log. Christian could see them signaling to each other. Then, at the same time, they both popped up and fired behind the boulder. Soon after this maneuver came another announcement.

“Rogers of Good, you’re out of the match.”

The four Bishop players, jumped up cheering. And, after a few seconds of adulation, the four of them led by Chic walked to the opposing team’s end of the field.

Christian hadn’t noticed it before, but flags had replaced the jack-o-lanterns used during the Halloween demonstration. Chic walked over to the pedestal and took the gold colored flag with a large B from the holder on the pedestal and waved it in the air. Immediately came a final announcement.

“The Bishop School of Witchcraft is the winner of the match!”

Applause erupted throughout the stadium.

As Christian joined in, he once again heard the two men talking.

“I know this is a new event to the Competition, but I’ve seen several scrimmage matches. And, I don’t think I’ve ever seen a match where all of the players from the winning team remained at the end of it.”

“It’s quite possible that they could be an equal to or possibly better than our Easteey team.”

“If that holds true, we could end up with a tie between Easteey and Bishop at the end of today’s competition.”

“And that would mean a sudden death match tomorrow morning.”

Christian had completely forgotten about the chance of a tie and sudden death match. He really wanted Penny along with him and Gwen during tomorrow’s adventure.

Throughout the next match, Christian found himself torn between rooting for Bishop or Easteey to win. And, by the end of the first minute of the third match, it looked like Christian’s subconscious wish may come true, since the Bishop team only had two players to the opponent’s three.

Within the first few seconds of the match, each team had lost a player on a simultaneous hit between the two opponents. Then, in an attempt to feign movement, to allow Penny to make a move, Chic got hit. It now left Penny and Sven Johnson both behind their team’s boulder. Easteey had a player behind their bush, stump, and log. The player behind the log lay at the end, a position that gave him a clear view of both sides of the Bishop boulder.

Penny kept a close watch on the three opponents’ actions, as much as she could, and especially the signals that they used between each other. She seemed pretty confident she knew their next move, so Penny said something to Sven.

A few moments later, the boy behind the Easteey bush dashed toward the Bishop bush while the boy behind the log jumped up and ran toward his own bush. Penny watched for a few seconds and then yelled, “Now.”

She ran out from the right side of the boulder and Sven from the left. It looked as if Penny planned to move up to the stump and Sven move up to their bush. About five feet in front of the boulder they switched directions and crossed each other’s path. This maneuver momentarily confused their opponents.

The timing of their crossing, as Penny had planned, coincided with the moment that the boy running for the Bishop bush blocked the girl behind their stump from having a clear shot. As Penny ran toward her bush, the two running boys shot spells at her, both

of them just missing her. Penny, on the other hand, shot a spell at the boy coming forward from the log and hit him. Sven, just before he dove behind the stump, fired at the boy running toward the Bishop bush and connected, just on the heel of his shoe. Unfortunately, Sven didn't get down fast enough, and the girl behind the stump caught him in his left arm.

Only Penny and an Eastey girl remained. Penny knelt behind her bush and the girl lay behind Eastey's stump. Every time Penny tried to move out from behind the bush, she had to duck back just avoiding a spell.

She looked through the bush and saw that the girl lay in the same situation as Naomi during the Halloween demonstration, secured in a fully defensive posture able to see every movement from behind the bush. Penny remembered her maneuver from Halloween night. And to her good fortune, a large branch already lay on the ground where it had fallen during the day's matches.

She thought that the maneuver would probably work again. And, if it did and she won the match, she would tie up the competition and give Bishop the chance to win. Then, she remembered that they would hold the sudden death match tomorrow and it would keep her from helping Christian and Gwen in the search of Mr. Davis' office.

All of this ran through her mind as she picked up the broken branch. Then, she cast a quick spell at the girl, who did just like Naomi and ducked behind the stump. Penny tossed the branch out into the air and dashed around to the other side of the bush, ran forward, dove into a tuck-and-roll, and popped up onto one knee.

Penny never really knew for sure what happened next. Did the match end the way it did because of her weariness from the day's events and anxiety, from a loss of concentration due to all of the things on her mind, or from a subconscious desire for it to happen. Regardless, Penny's spell hit the stump, not her opponent. The branch had confused the girl as planned, but she had recovered just in time to see Penny's spell hit the stump. She quickly cast her own spell at Penny, who remained in her half-kneeling position. The girl caught Penny solidly in the chest.

Penny didn't hear the announcement that called her out of the match. Emotionally stunned, she just sat there and watched as the girl walked down to the Bishop end of the field and lifted the Eastey banner into the air.

"The Eastey School of Witchcraft is the winner of the Taggleduel match and the overall dueling competition!"

As the stadium erupted into a deafening applause, Penny remained sitting on the ground. Her teammates came over to console her, saying things like 'it could happen to anyone' and 'no one's perfect.' She continued to look stunned even when Chic said, "This is a team effort, so don't blame yourself for the loss."

It took Chic's final comment to break her out of her depression.

"At least you lasted longer than a minute into the match."

Everyone laughed and the team strolled toward the bleacher tunnel.

Christian didn't see Penny until dinner an hour later. That's also when they both saw Gwen again, the first time since the morning commencement of the Mag Ag competition.

All of the competitors and Bishop supporters had taken seats around the dining tables in the tent. Penny opted to sit next to Christian rather than her teammates after having spent the last hour peppering each other up after their loss.

The Mag Ag competitors, after a daylong match, joined the rest of the diners last. They looked thoroughly drained of energy, both physically and magically, after the long competition. They said nothing, just entered the tent and sat down.

Mr. Brown stood up and addressed the competitors.

“You should all be very proud of yourselves and your performances, no matter what the outcomes of your competitions today. I know I am.

“After today’s events, we are currently tied for the lead with Eastey. We won the Trivia Competition, with the help of Christian’s knowledge of our school’s first Headmaster’s taste for coriander beer.”

Everyone laughed.

“And it’s a pleasure to announce that we won the Mag Ag competition as well. Since this was an arduous and grueling event, I believe our team members deserve a round of applause.”

The group applauded for almost a minute, until Mr. Brown raised his arms to quiet everyone.

“I also have the pleasure of announcing that one of our members will receive an outstanding performance award at tomorrow’s ceremony. This honor goes to Penny for her outstanding dueling performance. Well done Penny.”

The group applauded once more, but for a shorter duration.

“Congratulations to those of you who have completed your competitions for the weekend. Tomorrow’s competitions look very tough indeed, so good luck to tomorrow’s competitors. To you all, I toast.”

He raised a mug to everyone, took a drink, and then sat down. As he sat, the tables filled with food and they all began to eat, relax, and prepare for the ordeals of the next day.

The Headmaster's Office

Christian had a poor night's sleep due to the anxiety from the next day's planned activities. His biggest concern came from the prospect that they would, for some reason, not make it back to Eastey in time tomorrow.

If Christian and Gwen didn't show up at the closing ceremonies to receive their awards for winning their competitions, their absence wouldn't stand out that noticeably amongst the other members of their teams. This would, however, still garner detention for them ... or possibly worse.

Penny's absence, on the other hand, would definitely stand out. When she didn't show to receive her individual award, this would surely result in a punishment far worse than detention. Add the fact that they'd have missed these ceremonies for the purpose of traveling back to school and breaking into the Headmaster's office, an action that could earn expulsion by itself, Christian feared for their scholastic fates.

Christian had finally started to feel like he really belonged in this new magical world and, now, he planned to jeopardize it.

All of these thoughts weighed heavily on his mind. But, the thought of what would happen to his two friends in the long-term really caused him the most concern. His tiredness and concern kicked his imagination into full throttle.

Gwen could return to a school in the non-magical world to complete her education and, possibly, work with her dad. She could even continue using her already developed Mag Ag skills and establish a side business in the magical world, just to keep in touch with it. However, this wasn't what she had planned, nor would it allow her to fulfill her potential as a witch. If she could continue her magical education, Christian believed Gwen could go on to become one of the greatest Mag Ag specialists ever; maybe, a professor or head of the WCA's Department of Mag Ag. With the contacts she could make through her Mag Ag links, she could even someday become the President.

The thought that he may jeopardize Gwen's future caused his stomach to do flip-flops. But, the impact these events could have on Penny REALLY bothered him.

Penny knew no other life other than a magical one. She could, possibly, live out her life assisting her father with his sporadic work. Perhaps she could assist her mother as well. Her parents could even continue to home school Penny, teaching her many of the things she would have learned at school. However, Christian assumed that the WCA would most likely frown upon this activity, so she couldn't publicly practice anything her parents taught her. This might force Penny to practice magic secretly. Then, as she got older, especially once she no longer had her parents to guide her, Penny might turn against the WCA for what it had done to her father. Her love for her father and hatred for the WCA could force her into becoming a wielder of negative witchcraft. And, she could possibly grow to become a powerful source of it and a powerful source of ... evil.

Christian rolled over, trying to control the churning in his stomach.

The thought of Penny, the most kind and good person he had ever known, turning into a powerful evil witch existed purely in his vivid imagination. However, with circumstances aligned a certain way, anything could happen. Christian thought that

tomorrow's events, and possibly getting his two friends expelled, could create the catalyst for those circumstances.

Christian considered leaving before anyone got up and returning to Bishop on his own, thus alleviating the burden and trouble he might inflict upon his friends. But, this would only result in them never speaking to him ever again. The possibility of losing their friendship left the bitterest taste of all. Besides, he doubted very much whether he could pull off the events on his own anyway.

However, Christian did get up before anyone else, but only to get ready. Groomed and dressed, he sat on his bed running through the day's planned activities and trying not to think of the dreadful consequences that may result.

Soon Mr. Brown came upstairs to wake everyone.

"Ah, Christian. I see that you were too excited about today's events to sleep. I'd have thought you'd have been like this yesterday, though, since you had your competition then. Nevertheless, today looks like an exciting day of events, too."

Christian had to agree. Today's events would definitely be exciting.

He sat there for a few minutes more. Then, he finally went downstairs.

When the two girls joined him, he could see a significant difference between them. Gwen looked much more refreshed than she had at dinner the previous night. Penny, on the other hand, looked as if she had slept about as well as Christian did.

Once everyone took their seats, Mr. Brown stood up to address the group.

"Those of you who aren't participating in today's events, please attend them to cheer on your teammates. Today's events include Alchemy, Creature Handling, and Divination in the morning. The Quodpot matches will begin after lunch. Again, for those of you who aren't competing today, split up and support your teammates during the morning competitions. I will see everyone in Bishop's section of the bleachers for the Quodpot matches. Good luck and take us home victorious!"

With his last statement, all of the tables broke into cheers and whistles. After several seconds, the cheering subsided and breakfast appeared on the tables.

Christian didn't eat much, except for a few pieces of toast, mainly to settle his stomach. Penny did the same. Gwen, on the other hand, ate ravenously. Exhausted from the Mag Ag competition, she hadn't eaten much supper the night before.

As people finished eating, they began to leave the tent. The teams participating in the morning's events exited first. Gradually, everyone had gone except Christian, Penny, and Gwen.

Gwen continued to snatch pieces of bacon and mini-muffins from the table until the last few people had departed. But, once the three of them got up from the table, the food disappeared altogether.

Christian, Penny, and Gwen stepped out of the tent and looked around for Mr. Brown. Once the coast looked clear, they hurried toward the main gate and into town. They hurried not because they would be breaking any rules by going into town, but they didn't want to meet up with anyone. If Mr. Brown saw them, he might ask them why they didn't plan to attend this morning's events. So, with the amount of rule breaking that they had planned for the day, they didn't want to have to lie to him on top of it all.

Once outside the gate, they arrived at the entrance to Eastey Town. The post office sat closest to the school's gate, just like in Bishop Town. The Peak Inn lay across the street from the post office, as Christian had seen Friday evening. So, they hurried to the inn.

Many differences existed compared to the Ghostly Inn. Most notably, live people ran it. The three friends located the fireplace, built into the right-hand wall of the lobby, and rushed over to it.

A man, dressed like a cross between a blacksmith and a welder, knelt in front of the fireplace. He wore a heat resistant mask, a fireproof apron, and thick gloves. An ash can and a rectangular, metal box sat next to him. The box opened on top via a hinge and had a bolted latch to lock it. From inside the box there seemed to emanate a hissing sound and sparks would periodically shoot out of a small air vent in the top.

Penny walked up to the man.

"Excuse me sir, but would it be okay for us to use the chimney?"

"Sorry miss. We found an ashwinder nest in it this morning. So, I'm afraid it may be a few hours before I get it entirely cleaned out and ready for use again."

"Is there another fireplace in the inn that we could use?"

"Sorry again miss, but this is our only one. We've been sending our patrons down to the Valley View to use their fireplace. It's just down the street and turn right at the corner, you can't miss it."

"Thank you very much."

When Penny returned to her friends, Christian quickly asked, "What did he say?"

"We can't use this one, but we can use the one in the other inn."

"All right, then. Let's get going."

Gwen, Penny, and Christian casually walked back out into the street. Once outside, they ran down to the corner.

As he ran, Christian noticed that the town had the same kind of stores as Bishop Town, although they had different names and designs. The town had a wand store, a sporting goods store and a separate music store, a computer supply store, another branch of the Bullion's Exchange, a magical supplies store, and even a Moo-line Rouge.

The corner to which they had run had a four-way intersection. Straight ahead led out of town. Left looked like it went into the residential part of town. Finally, to the right, the street dead-ended after about sixty feet at the entrance of the Valley View Inn.

They hurried to the entrance. Then, in a leisurely manner, they walked in.

They didn't have to look for the fireplace, because a short line of people already waited to use it. So, the three of them joined the end of the line.

In somewhat of a panic, Christian asked, "Did anyone remember to bring the ash?"

"I have it," replied Gwen, holding her hand out at Christian as if to say, "Calm down."

She took her purse off of her back, sifted around in it for a few moments, and then pulled out a jar of make-up.

Christian looked at her as if to say, "What is that?"

With an exasperated look, Gwen opened the jar and showed him that she had filled it with ash.

"Good. Now, how does this work?"

Penny and Gwen had totally forgotten that Christian had never traveled by fireplace. So, Penny explained.

"First, you toss the ash into the fireplace. The ash will turn the fire into a greenish blue flame and, most likely, a much larger flame."

"What if there's no fire?" Christian questioned, in a slightly panicky voice.

"The ash will cause the greenish blue flame to erupt in the fireplace. So, once the flame is the greenish blue color, you step into it.

Christian gave Penny a concerned look. So, she added, "Don't worry. As long as the flame is still greenish blue, you're safe to step into it."

Christian didn't look completely reassured, but Penny decided to continue anyway.

"Once you're in the flame, in a loud clear voice you say the name of the place you wish to go; like, Ghostly Inn, Bishop Town. The next thing you know, you're standing in the fireplace of the Ghostly Inn.

"There are two things you need to understand, though, about traveling this way. First, right after you say your destination, it will feel sort of funny. I'm not sure how to describe it."

"Like being sucked up a drain," added Gwen.

"I guess that's a way of describing it. Once you've traveled this way, you get used to the feeling. The second thing, and important to remember, is to step out of the fireplace as soon as you land. Even if you're a little disoriented, it's better to stumble out rather than to stand there getting your wits about you."

"Why's that?" asked Christian.

"Because there could be a real fire going. Once the magic of the traveling process is complete, the fireplace will return to working normally. So, unless you know that there'll be no fire in the receiving fireplace, you want to get out as quickly as possible before you get burned.

"Most of the time you would travel individually. Many fireplaces are only large enough for one person, so you can only leave individually. Plus, you may not know what the size of the receiving one is either. Better to be safe than sorry, is what my dad always said. However, since we know that the fireplace in the Ghostly Inn is large enough, the three of us can travel together. That's why Gwen only brought a small jar of the ash."

"Looks like we didn't need it though," Gwen said, pointing at the pail of ash hanging next to the fireplace.

Just as the girls finished explaining all of this, they reached the head of the line to use the fireplace. The flash of green-blue flame from the previous traveler had just dissipated.

"Are you ready?" asked Penny.

"Ready or not, we need to go," replied Christian, screwing up his courage.

Penny grabbed one of Christian's hands and Gwen the other. Christian assumed this, once again, resulted from the "sharing" of him between the two of them. But, he would understand differently in a moment.

Penny tossed the ash into the fireplace and a green-blue flame erupted inside.

"Hold onto your butts," Gwen said.

Then, the three of them stepped into the fireplace and Gwen said, "Ghostly Inn, Bishop Town."

As Gwen did this, Penny leaned over to Christian.

"I almost forgot. Make sure you keep hold of our hands. We wouldn't want to looooooose yooooooooou."

These last two words sounded like they came through a long tube. It also felt like their arms stretched a mile long, but Christian maintained a strong hold on both their hands.

A moment later, his knees slightly buckled as they landed back on solid ground. Since Christian looked noticeably disoriented upon landing, the two girls helped him out of the fireplace as they stepped out themselves.

"Are you okay?" asked Gwen in a bit of a laugh.

She laughed at the greenish color that remained in Christian's face.

"I ... think ... so. I ... just need to ... get my ... fireplace travel ... ling legs."

"You'll be all right in a few seconds," said Penny.

Moments later, Christian finally recognized the lobby of the Ghostly Inn and the employees floating around taking care of the business.

Once Christian had regained his wits, they calmly walked toward the front door. Once outside, they broke into a full run and didn't stop until they reached the school's main entrance. There, they paused for a few seconds to catch their breath and then stepped inside nonchalantly.

Once inside, they walked at a quick pace toward their dormitory, opened the portal, and went in.

"I need to grab my notes on what Mr. Davis said and did back in February. I'll only be a few seconds," Christian explained.

"I think I'm going to grab a few things too," Gwen added.

"Don't take too long Gwen, I want us to have as much time as possible."

Gwen gave Christian a thumbs-up signal as she raced up the stairs two steps at a time. Christian ran into his room, while Penny stayed out at the foot of the stairs, watching to see if anyone came toward the portal opening.

A few seconds later, Christian returned.

"Anyone come to the portal?" he asked.

Penny shook her head.

They both looked up the stairs, but no sign of Gwen.

Christian waited until a minute had passed since he had exited his room. Then, as he turned to ask Penny to go up and bring Gwen down, she came hurrying down to them.

"Sorry, but I wanted to grab a few things that I thought might come in handy," she explained, as she pointed at the purse on her back.

Christian looked and, although her purse seemed full earlier when she retrieved the jar of ash, it now seemed ready to burst through the zipper. Christian could only imagine the various hairbrushes, perfume bottles, lipsticks, and makeup cases jammed into her purse. Things he just knew would 'come in handy.'

"Let's go!" Christian said with a tone of exasperation.

After closing the portal, they hurried down the spiral stairs to the passageways below. Then, they walked at a normal pace, just like any other students walking along the passageway. Christian thought that all of the faculty and staff had gone to the Competition, but they could hear activity coming from Professor Turnell's office. Christian guessed that he must have volunteered to stay behind in case of an emergency or something.

They had just traversed the passageway to Professor Turnell's office, when they heard someone coming toward them from the direction of the gold tower. Penny had started to look panicked when Christian told her to remain calm. Gwen on the other hand broke into a discussion with Christian, as if in the middle of one with him.

"Yes, I think the final will cover that as well. Although, I think the question might be slanted to ask the negative rather than the positive angle of it."

Just then a boy came into clear view from the light he walked under. Christian recognized him as a senior Longhorn.

Gwen said 'Hi' to the boy, acting as if she had broken from the conversation to acknowledge him.

The boy returned the 'Hi' to Gwen. Then, Christian noticed the look that the boy got on his face. He recognized it as the look with which he had become so familiar over this past year. The look signified that the boy recognized them as freshman, thus giving him the opportunity to ask one of them a question from the school handbook.

But, suddenly, the look changed as he recognized Christian and Penny, and he quickened his pace away from them. Apparently, Christian's reputation for knowing the handbook and Penny's reputation for wand work on irritating seniors had spread.

They reached the end of the passageway without any other encounters. Christian led the two girls over to the stairs leading up to Mr. Brown's office and explained where the stairs led. Then, Christian walked over and stepped inside the passage behind the wall.

Penny and Gwen watched as Christian disappeared, almost as if he stepped right through the wall. Even though he had explained this to them, they still found it a remarkable sight. The two girls then followed him into the passage.

Once the girls joined him inside, Christian let Penny take the lead. As she did, Penny pulled out her wand and said, "Lumos." The tip of her wand didn't glow as brightly as Ms. D'Amor's had on the way back from the OWL, but it glowed brightly enough to see their way down the stairs.

They soon reached the bottom of the stairs, where Christian peeked around the corner and down the hallway to the elevator. To his pleasure, the coast was clear. To his even greater pleasure, no wall of fire blocked their way either.

They slowly crept down the hallway waiting for some sort of protective spell or school administration member to capture them, but nothing happened. When they reached the end, Penny put her wand away and Christian pulled out a piece of paper.

Reading his notes, Christian raised his right hand toward the door and said, "Letium y excidium."

Nothing happened.

He reread his notes and tried it again, but nothing happened.

Christian stared at the door for a moment. Then, he realized the problem.

Exasperated, he handed his notes to Penny. And, in a very disappointed voice, he said, "Here, you try it."

Penny raised her right hand toward the door and said, "Letium y excidium."

The door began to rise with the rock-on-rock scraping noise. They stood anxiously by the elevator entrance waiting to see if anyone came down on the platform. Their faces showed relief, when they saw the empty platform sitting on the other side of the door.

Christian stepped onto the elevator platform and signaled for the girls to join him. They waited for a few moments and the platform began to rise as the rock-on-rock scraping noise began, signaling that the door had started to close.

Their stomachs tightened as the elevator approached the top of the shaft. Light emanated from above, indicating that the doorway at the top of the shaft stood open to whatever or whoever may await them there. Regardless, they would have no place to hide.

Would they find a guard waiting? Would they encounter some sort of magical trap or barrier to keep them from progressing? Or, could Mr. Davis have somehow teleported back into his office in-between competitions?

The elevator stopped. They had reached the top.

Christian, Penny, and Gwen didn't move, but stood looking out of the elevator into what looked like a short hallway. The hallway appeared slightly wider and more than twice as high as the one below. In-between the electrical wall sconces, hung eight four-foot high portraits. Each wall only had four portraits on it, even though they could easily handle three times as many, due to their height.

Christian could see the plaque on the bottom of the closest portrait, which read, "Professor Imperius Tutelafield, Headmaster, 1711-1768."

"These must be the portraits of the school's headmasters," stated Christian.

The chance to see the previous headmasters drew Christian out of the elevator. Penny and Gwen soon followed. However, as soon as they stepped off of the elevator, a voice rang out, which startled the three of them.

"What are you students doing up here at the Headmaster's office?"

From another voice came, "This could be cause for expulsion, if you do not have business with the Headmaster. At least it would have been back in my day!"

To that last statement, a full discussion broke out about whether visiting the Headmaster's office would cause automatic expulsion or whether the decision needed to include the particular situation.

Once this discussion broke out, Christian realized who had spoken. The voices came from the people in the portraits. They all began speaking at once, gesturing along with their comments, in a full-scale debate.

While the debate raged on, Christian guided the two girls toward a very short set of stairs at the end of the hallway. The stairs led up to a door, on which hung an ornately designed version of the school shield with 'Headmaster' emblazoned on it. They had just started to climb the stairs when a familiar voice rang out.

"Christian. Penny. Gwen. How are you doing? What brings you here?"

Simultaneously, the three students turned toward the last portrait, which, of course, belonged to Mr. Lucern.

Although it seemed silly to do so, Christian replied to the portrait.

"Fine sir. We're here to address a serious school issue with Mr. Davis."

"Did you know that Mr. Davis isn't in right now?"

"Yes sir, but we wanted to be here waiting when he returns."

"Well, it is unorthodox to allow students to wait in the Headmaster's office unescorted, but I know how trustworthy you are. Plus, if it IS as serious as you say, I want to make sure Davis takes action on it as soon as possible. So, don't worry, I'll clear you with these people and halt their discussions about expulsion," said Mr. Lucern's portrait.

"Thank you, sir," Christian replied, just as Mr. Lucern turned to try to break up the debate among the other portraits.

So, Christian, Penny, and Gwen continued up the stairs to Mr. Davis' office. Upon opening the office door, the various contrasts that existed within engulfed them.

The round office had two stories. The lower level's design could have come right out of any old castle or monastery. Most of the walls on this level consisted of old, wooden bookshelves rising from the floor up the wall's entire twelve-foot height.

The lighting, though, contrasted with this design. Electrical sconces, which automatically came on when anyone entered the room, hung on the walls illuminating some of the darkened areas. A large, electric chandelier, currently off, dangled over the middle of the room and must provide more light in the room at night than the sun provided during the day.

The second level, barely anything more than a walkway around the office's circumference overlooking the first floor, created another contrast with the lower level design. The walls up there consisted almost entirely of metallic framed windows, providing the headmaster with a nearly 360-degree view outside. An additional contrast came from the abundance of sunlight this provided to the upper level, and to some parts of the floor below.

More pictures of scenery, buildings, and people, of which Christian didn't recognize, hung the height of the wall between the bookshelves. The people and animals within these portraits moved periodically within their picture frames. Some even moved between paintings. Even in pictures of scenery, trees blew in the wind and lights within houses would go on and off or move from room to room, while smoke rose from the chimneys. This movement and activity contrasted sharply with the unmoving, cold, glass windows of the second level.

The furnishings offered the last contrast. First, Mr. Davis kept the room sparsely furnished when compared to the size of the office. Second, the style of the pieces didn't blend well. The only table, a large, wooden one that could easily date back over three hundred years, sat to the left nearer to the door than to the desk. The desk, also large and wooden, loomed directly in front of the door some forty to fifty feet away. It too looked very old. A wardrobe with a full-length mirror, sitting off to the right side of the door, looked like it came from the early nineteen hundreds. Lastly, the chairs in front of the desk, the desk chair, and the computer monitor on top of the desk were very new.

After everyone had taken in enough of the spectacle, Christian began to map out the plan of attack.

“What we need is hard evidence to tie Mr. Davis to some activity or event that could harm the school, Mr. Brown, or both.

“Gwen, you look through the papers on the table, but be sure to put everything back the way it currently is. Penny, you look on and through his desk and, again, make sure everything’s back in its place when you’re done. I’ll check out the upstairs and see if there’s anything up there.”

The two girls adjourned to their respective areas of the first floor, while Christian climbed the built-in ladder to the second floor.

After about fifteen minutes, Christian leaned over the railing of the second floor and said, “Nothing up here. What about you guys?”

“I’ve looked through the stuff on top of his desk and nothing. I’ll look through the drawers now,” replied Penny.

“Nothing over here either,” answered Gwen.

“I’m going to come down and look through the bookshelves.”

“Didn’t you say you heard him gathering papers just before they disappeared? I’ll bet he took all the incriminating stuff with him,” suggested Gwen.

“You may be right, but let’s check EVERYTHING in here before we give up,” Christian replied as he climbed down the ladder.

Gwen walked over to the wardrobe. She looked inside and found three well-pressed traveling cloaks, but nothing else. She then knocked around the inside of the wardrobe to see if she might hear a hollow sound, signifying a hidden compartment. The wardrobe sounded solid.

“You know, the way things are going, it looks like we’ll be able to make it back to Eastey in plenty of time,” Penny said, lifting her head momentarily from inspecting the desk’s top drawer.

Christian shrugged and gave Penny a disappointed look.

“What else did you hear that night?” asked Gwen as she stared into the wardrobe’s mirror imitating Mr. Davis’ haughtiness.

“Let me check my notes,” Christian replied as he walked over to one of the wall sconces, pulled out a piece of paper, and began to read it.

“First they talked about ‘The Site’ and the operations there. Then, one of them, I’m guessing it was Mr. Davis, walked over to probably the table and I heard papers shuffling. Next, one of them moved again, which I assumed was Mr. Davis returning to where Mr. Alexander stood. Mr. Davis then said, ‘I think I have everything. Shall we?’ So, you’re probably right in that he may have grabbed all the incriminating stuff before they left. Lastly, Mr. Davis said, ‘Scopo Transeo.’ And, immediately after that I heard a sucking noise and a sharp ‘crack.’”

Christian heard Gwen mutter something, as he continued looking at his notes, to which he commented, “What did you say?”

In response to his question came a vacuum-like sound, followed by a sharp ‘crack.’

“That was the noise!” Christian exclaimed.

He turned to find the source of it.

“Penny, where’s Gwen?”

Penny, digging through the bottom drawers of the desk, looked up over the top of it.

“I don’t know. The last I saw, she was looking in that wardrobe.”

The two of them walked over to the wardrobe, looked inside and all around it, knocking on all four sides, while calling Gwen’s name. They found no sign of her.

Penny and Christian stood in front of the wardrobe staring at the mirror.

“Hmm, let’s try something,” Christian said.

He pulled his notes out of his pocket again.

“Read this,” he instructed, pointing at something in the notes.

“Scopo Transeo,” she said.

Immediately, with a vacuum sound, the mirror began to suck them inside. They tried to fight the fierce force, but to no avail. They both disappeared into the mirror with a sharp ‘crack.’

The Gauntlet

Christian and Penny tumbled onto a hard, stone surface.

"So nice you could join me," Gwen said as she stepped out of the shadows.

"You know, I was concerned about how long it would take you to find me; if ever. I thought I might have to continue on by myself," Gwen commented as she helped her two stunned friends up off of the ground.

"Continue on? Where are we?" asked Christian, still trying to shake off the ringing in his head from the trip through the mirror and adjusting his glasses from the impact of the landing.

"I'm not sure, but the only way out is through there," she replied, pointing toward an opening in the rock wall ... a doorway leading somewhere.

Christian suddenly realized that they stood in some sort of cave. He almost said so aloud, but decided not to state the obvious. But, no sooner had he decided against saying so when Penny exclaimed, "We're in some sort of cave!"

Christian walked over to the mirror from which they had just exited and examined its solidness. He thought that maybe they could just walk back through it.

"Yeah, it's solid again. No way to get back," said Gwen as she watched Christian.

"Wait," he said.

Getting down on his hands and knees, he began looking around the floor for something. He found it difficult to see the floor clearly, since the cave's only light came from one flaming torch hanging on the wall next to the open doorway. After a brief search, Christian got back up holding his notes.

"Okay. Both of you grab hold of one of my arms," he instructed.

Christian handed his notes to Penny and maneuvered everyone so that they all stood in front of the mirror. Then, he grabbed the forearms of the two girls to strengthen the hold each of the girls had on his arm. Once he had a tight grip, he nodded to Penny.

They prepared themselves, as Penny said aloud, "Scopo Transeo."

Nothing happened.

They released each other and, resignedly, began to walk toward the doorway.

They traversed a short tunnel, about six feet long, and crowded around the other end before exiting into the unknown and, as they found, unseen. They could only assume that it opened into a vast cavern, because the tunnel exited into something almost entirely void of light. But, every little sound echoed thunderously.

They could, however, see one source of light a distance away. And to their pleasure, the light illuminated another doorway. However, they couldn't tell the size of this exit or the exact distance to the light. Additionally, and of more importance, they couldn't tell the size of the cavern they had to cross or the perils it held for them.

"How are we supposed to get over there do you think?" asked Gwen.

Penny pulled out her wand and said, "Lumos."

The tip of her wand glowed brightly enough to show that the tunnel exited onto a very small, rock platform, which led to a narrow stone path leading in the direction of the distant doorway.

"It looks like a bridge. We'd better go single file, since it isn't very wide," said Christian.

Gwen and Christian both pulled out their wands.

"Lumos," said Gwen, and the tip of her wand illuminated.

Christian tried it, but the tip didn't illuminate. He tried a second time, but to no avail.

"I guess I'll just walk between the two of you," he said with a tone easily revealing his disappointment.

They began to follow the stone bridge slowly, with Penny in the lead and Gwen bringing up the rear.

They had barely walked ten feet onto the bridge, when something flew over their heads. They all fell to the ground, because of the breeze they felt as it passed. Had they been of adult height, the thing would have surely knocked them off of the bridge.

The three children lay flat against the stone, craning their necks ever so slightly to see what flew over them. As they did, the thing glided over them from the opposite direction, this time less than two feet over their heads in their current prone positions.

Penny thought she saw the thing's outline, but couldn't tell for sure. So, she rolled onto her back, holding her wand at her side.

"What're you doing?" asked Christian.

"Trying to get a better look at whatever it is," explained Penny.

Moments later, as Penny expected, the thing returned soaring just a few feet over them again. However, as it began to fly over, Penny quickly lifted her wand and the light from the tip of her wand outlined the creature's full shape, to include its ten-foot long wingspan.

"That's what I thought!" exclaimed Penny.

"What?" asked Gwen.

"It's an olitiau," Penny replied.

"What's an olitiau?" asked Christian.

Penny then went into one of her long-winded, non-stop explanations.

"It's a giant bat with a wingspan around ten to fifteen feet. It's not from our country, but comes from Africa; so, someone brought this one here. My dad had an encounter with one once. Someone had brought one into the country, although it's illegal, expecting to use it for delivering larger mail packages, just like we do with regular bats. They soon found out they had made a mistake, because these creatures are very different from normal bats and don't take to associating with or assisting human beings. In fact, we're just a food source to them.

"One thing, though, is that they don't like eating any fresh meat and they especially like things that have had all of the blood drained from them. So, they'll do anything to cause us to die, particularly something that will cause us to bleed to death. That's why it's trying to knock us off of the bridge, so that we'll fall to our bloody deaths. And then, it can eat us."

"That's disgusting!" Christian exclaimed.

"And scary," Gwen added.

"Is there anything we can do to chase it away?" asked Christian with a noticeable tone of concern.

“Oh. Um, my dad said that the creature’s eyes are sensitive to bright lights. He said that he cast a large ball of light, which stunned the creature long enough for him to cast a binding spell on it.”

“Can either of you cast a light bright enough to stun this creature long enough for us to make it across the bridge?” asked Christian.

“I’ve never tried that kind of a spell before and don’t know the actual spell either,” replied Gwen.

“I can try,” Penny responded.

Just as she said this, the creature flew over them once again.

Penny popped up into her one-knee position and shouted, “Globus lucerna.”

A sphere of light, about the size of a golf ball, shot from the end of her wand. It flew through the air right behind the creature and stopped in midair, about fifty feet above and away from the bridge.

Using this ball of light, they could see the creature. When it completed its turn, it saw the light and, after a moment of surprise, just flew around it.

Penny quickly fell prone to the bridge once again, just in time to avoid the creature’s dive at her.

“I just don’t have enough magical power in me to create a large enough sphere of light,” Penny said apologetically.

“You may not ...” began Gwen “... but, maybe WE do.”

“What do you mean?” Penny asked.

“If we all join hands, the total magic within the three of us might do the trick.”

“Will that work?” asked Christian.

“It’s worth a try,” replied Gwen.

Christian grabbed Penny and Gwen’s hand. He had some concern about being the link between the two of them, because his lack of magic might somehow diminish their combined magic rather than add to it.

Penny started to get up on one knee and shoot toward the dark side of the bridge, when Christian pulled her back down.

“Let’s wait until it returns to the other side of the bridge, so that you can use the other ball of light to see where it is.”

No sooner had he said this than the creature soared over them once again.

Penny popped up on her knee and aimed toward the floating ball of light. Then, she shouted, once again, “Globus lucerna.”

This time a sphere of light the size of a basketball shot out into the air and floated next to the smaller one.

As soon as the creature turned, it let out a screech and began flapping violently. It did this hovering there and trying to shake off the sudden, blinding brightness.

Christian immediately let go of the girls’ hands and shouted, “Go, go, go.”

The three of them took off at full sprint across the bridge, now well illuminated by the new sphere of light. Christian could also see the walls of the cavern and the sheer drop from the bridge. So, he focused on reaching the other side.

Penny reached the safety of the doorway first and stopped, gasping for air.

Christian, right on her heels, arrived a split second later and also tried to catch his breath.

Gwen had slipped getting up initially, but had made it within twenty feet of the doorway. Then, Christian saw the creature lunging out of the air toward her. Without hesitating, he ran out onto the bridge and grabbed Gwen's arms, just as the creature seized hold of her backpack purse.

Christian and Gwen's combined weight momentarily hindered the olitiau from lifting them both off of the ground, because the sudden increase of a second person caught the creature off guard. This gave Penny time enough to point her wand at the creature and, for a third time, shout, "Globus lucerna."

A ball of light, the size of a tennis ball, shot from her wand and hit the creature in the head. The sudden shock from the light and the impact of the spell caused the creature to lose its grip on Gwen.

Gwen and Christian fell a few feet to the ground. But, they both immediately jumped up and ran to the safety of the doorway.

"Thanks, both of you. I thought for sure I was destined to be that things next meal."

They all chuckled, but Christian could see Gwen shaking ... and not from laughter. He walked over and put his arm around her.

"I think we need a short rest before we continue on," he said.

So, they sat down in this new tunnel, while Christian continued to hold Gwen.

Penny sat across from them and decided to just accept the situation.

They rested for several minutes, until Gwen stopped shaking. Then, they continued on to the end of this new short tunnel and did not stop at the exit. Instead, they stepped right on out and into a second cavern, but one noticeably different from the other.

This one appeared smaller, although they never really saw the full size of the first cavern. Also, the tunnel opened onto the ground level of this one. And lastly, a bunch of oil burning, wall sconces and tall, freestanding oil lamps lit this cavern, which allowed them to see everything.

Unfortunately, they could only see a high, shrub wall that spanned the width of the cavern. And, the wall had only one opening, which lay directly in front of them.

"I guess we go in," said Christian with a tone of acceptance.

He led the girls into the shrub and, after a very short trek, the path split left and right.

"It's a maze," he noted aloud, showing surprise and concern in his voice.

"I don't suppose either of you has a can of spray paint on you?" he added.

"What's 'spray paint'?" asked Penny.

"Fresh out," replied Gwen.

Then, she added, "What's the spray paint for?"

"To mark the path we follow. That way we can tell if we end up backtracking across the path we've already taken. And, it'll give us the correct path to follow if we need to make a quick retreat to the safety of the tunnel."

With that thought, Christian looked down both directions of the path. He wondered what may lie waiting for them inside the maze and almost expected something to come running at them right now.

"I don't have any spray paint, although I'm not quite sure what that is. But, would this do?" Penny suggested.

She stepped over to the bush directly across from the entrance path. Then, pointing her wand at the bush, said, "Pigmentum ruber."

The bush turned red.

"Cool!" exclaimed Christian.

"I used to change the color of my kneazle when I was bored," Penny said with a smile. Then, she added, "It only lasts for about ten hours, but I sure hope we're out of here by then."

They followed the path right and around a turn, until they came to another intersection, where they could go straight or turn left. Penny turned the bush at the intersection red and they followed the path straight.

They went straight ahead for over ten yards, where it made a quick left and right and then continued straight again. It ended into a grass-covered garden, unkempt though, as the grass had grown at least six inches tall. Christian saw on the other side of the garden that the path appeared to continue.

He started to step into the garden when Gwen yanked him backwards.

"What was that for?" Christian complained.

"Because that's serpent grass in there," Gwen said.

"You mean there might be snakes hiding in the grass?" Christian asked.

"No, I mean the grass is the snakes."

Gwen picked up a stick from the ground and tossed it into garden. Snakeheads popped out of the ends of the grass strands. They hissed and snapped at the stick, showing the small fangs within their open mouths. The response from the few near where the stick landed caused the whole garden to erupt into a hissing pit of snake-headed grass. It turned the garden into a sight that sent shivers up Christian's spine.

"Thanks," Christian said with a shiver.

"One or two of them can't do too much harm to you. But, as many of them as there are in there, they'd easily and quickly take you out," Gwen explained.

"So, how do you think we can get over to the other path?" Christian asked.

"I don't think we want to," Penny commented.

Christian and Gwen looked at her.

"You see those cobwebs on the edges of the path opening," Penny said, pointing across the garden.

Christian and Gwen nodded.

"From the thickness and design, they're the beginning of an actual spider web. Specifically, it's the web of a Brazilian acromantilla. They're more aggressive than the African ones, like Ms. Mander has and, of course, are illegal in the U.S."

"Sounds like maybe we should head bac,." Christian said.

"Probably a good idea," Gwen replied.

They would have chuckled at the obviousness of the idea, but they all had concerns about what else to expect inside this maze.

They returned to the split, where Penny had marked the second bush, and followed the other path. After about five feet, it turned right and paralleled the first path for about ten yards, where it dead-ended.

The three children turned to go back when a bush grew up immediately in front of them. They hadn't noticed that the bushes along here had small thorns on them, so it would be pretty much impossible to just crawl through them without ripping themselves to shreds.

Penny pulled out her wand and, pointing it at the bush that had just popped up, said, "Incindo Grande."

A flame shot out of her wand, burning the bush.

In response, the thorns of the bushes that encircled them started to grow.

"Penny stop!" shouted Gwen.

When she did, the thorns stopped growing, but they had already grown to six inches long. The children now found themselves inside of a deadly cage.

"Wait a second," Gwen said, looking more closely at the bushes that surrounded them. She stood there for several seconds. Then, she stepped toward the recently grown bush.

Christian at first couldn't see what she did. But, when he did, he couldn't believe it. She had started to tickle the bush.

In response, the bushes that surrounded them all started to shake. Then, the thorns began to shrink. Lastly, the new bush went back into the ground.

Without hesitation, the three children dashed away, back to the split.

"How did you know that tickling the bush would work?" Christian asked, breathing heavily.

"Well, once I recognized that they were gorse bushes, I knew that magic spells wouldn't work against them. Then, I remembered that they are very emotional and will react violently if treated poorly. And, they'll react just as strongly to any other types of treatment. So, I figured, let's make it feel good and see what happens," Gwen explained.

"Nice!" Christian commented.

So, they backtracked to where they first entered the maze and continued on past it. After following the path through a few more turns, they came to a four-way junction.

"Now which way do we go?" asked Christian.

He actually said this more as a disheartened statement rather than a question.

Oddly, though, Gwen answered him.

"That way," she replied confidently, pointing to the right path.

"How do you know?" asked Christian looking perplexed.

"Easy. You see those bushes on both sides of the path down there?" she explained pointing down the left path.

Without really waiting for a response, she added, "Those are wild blackberry bushes. You know how in the non-magical world all plants are alive and how in the magical world, they are ALIVE."

Christian nodded.

“Well, you don’t want to get caught in between two wild blackberry bushes in the magical world. They will grab you with their thorny vines and cut you up pretty bad. Worse case, if they bind you to where you can’t get away, you’ll end up bleeding to death. There’s nothing better than a dead corpse for fertilizer.

“As for these other two paths, it’s a tossup. However, look at this bush here,” Gwen said pointing to the bush on the corner of the right path.

“This limb’s bent and this one’s broken, as if someone frequently turns this corner and bumps into them. So, I would guess that this is the path that Mr. Davis takes,” she concluded.

“Way to go, Gwen!” Christian exclaimed in astonishment.

Then, with a quick look down the right path, he added, “Let’s go.”

Penny turned the bent bush red and followed her friends down the path.

They soon came to another intersection. They could either continue straight, which appeared to either turn or dead end some thirty feet ahead, or they could take a left path, which turned to the right after only a few feet.

They decided to try the left path, thinking that their current one would end. Once Penny marked the bush across from it, they entered the left path.

Almost immediately, it turned right and a short distance later turned left. This path finally looked promising. However, after following this one through a few more turns, they ended up back at the four-way junction. The path with the red bush now sat to their left and the path with the blackberry bushes went to the right.

So, they followed the red bush path once more. A few seconds later, Penny turned the bush across from the left path back to its normal color, so that they knew which way they went. Then, they continued on and found that this path didn’t end, as they thought, but turned left.

However, no sooner had they turned, when they saw a large, cat-like creature around a hundred feet or so directly ahead of them. And, unfortunately, it saw them too.

As they stood staring at the creature, which stared back, Christian whispered, “What is it?”

“It’s a cath sith,” Penny whispered back.

“Is it dangerous?”

“Yes. And ...”

“Lemme guess, illegal,” Christian whispered, although not laughing at the humor.

“I think we should ...” Gwen started.

“Run!” Christian finished for her.

The moment they moved, the cath sith started toward them.

“Duck in here, I have a plan,” Christian said, pointing the two girls toward the path that they had taken earlier that circled back.

As the two girls did so, Christian continued running down the main path.

Soon the creature had turned the corner and spotted Christian. It immediately chased after him, as Christian had hoped. He knew that the three of them would never reach the tunnel to the previous cave before the cath sith caught them. Besides, if they made it to the tunnel, it could follow them into it.

Christian ran down the path, with the creature closing the gap. He soon came to the four-way junction and, without hesitation, continued straight across. When he reached within ten feet of the end of the path, he dove into the air landing near and rolling into the bush wall at the end of the path.

He quickly got up and tried to reattach his glasses, which just barely hung on to one ear. The moment he touched them, they fell and, after fumbling them a bit in the air, he caught them and put them back on. Then, he quickly put his back against the bush, as he now looked directly at the cath sith that had followed him down this path.

Christian glanced to his left and right and found that both directions dead-ended after about five feet. He had no escape. He only hoped that his plan would work.

The cath sith had slowed, approaching Christian at a cautious pace as predators do when they have their prey trapped. It slowly crept closer and closer. The beast stopped about ten feet from Christian and prepared to pounce. At that moment, a dozen thorny vines whipped out from both sides of the path and grabbed the cath sith. It writhed and bit at the vines, but the vines continued to ensnare the beast, digging their thorns deep into the creature's flesh.

After a few minutes, the cath sith stopped moving. As a result, the vines from one side of the path released it, while the vines from the other side pulled the creature into the bush. Once the blackberry bush had pulled most of the cath sith into it, Christian dashed past them.

When he reached the left turn intersection, Christian finally stopped and signaled for the girls to rejoin him.

"What happened?" asked Penny.

"Let's just say, I have a whole new respect for blackberries," he replied.

They all chuckled, more from the tension than from humor. Then, they continued on the main path.

After they had passed the spot where the cath sith had originally stood, the path turned left and almost immediately they came to yet another intersection. This time the options included continuing straight or turning left. Both paths seemed to go for about fifty feet and either dead-ended or turned another direction.

"Any suggestions?" asked Christian.

Both Penny and Gwen looked around for signs of frequented travel or oddities. After a few moments, they both shrugged.

"I guess we'll go straight, since that worked for us at the last junction."

So, they continued forward.

They had reached three-fourths of the way down the path when Gwen shouted, "Stop!"

"What is it?" Christian and Penny both asked, almost simultaneously.

"You see down there at the end of the path, how that one plant protrudes out from the shrub line? That's a Jidra."

"A Jidra?" asked Christian.

"Yeah. It's part plant and part animal. More importantly, it's omnivorous and if we get too close to it, it will grab and devour us."

“Well, I hope the other path is the right one. I don’t think I want to be devoured by a plant ... animal ... whatever it is.” responded Christian.

They all agreed and turned back to take the other path.

After Penny turned the bush across from it red, they followed the left path for several yards, until it turned right. Then, a short distance later, it turned left and ended at another tunnel entrance.

“Well, that was fun. We’ve had a giant bat, deadly grass and bushes, and carnivorous cats and plants. I’m glad you two know your plants and animals,” Christian quipped.

Then, with a sigh, he added, “I guess we should see what’s waiting for us next.”

They trudged into the tunnel and, after a short distance came to the exit. This time, they stood at the exit and looked into the next room.

Three colored sphinxes, over a story high, dominated the room. Christian cautiously stepped out of the tunnel first. As soon as he did, the three sphinxes rose up on their back haunches, scratched toward the three children, and let out an ear-piercing screech.

The three children ran back into the tunnel, until the sphinxes settled back to their resting positions. As soon as they did, while the children approached the exit again, the sphinxes began to speak in unison. More specifically, they began to rhyme.

*Enter the circle
If ye be brave.
Be ye a knight
Or be ye a knave.
The brave of heart
Will quickly find,
We are not evil
And may even be kind.
Approach us direct
And you will see
How quickly you die
Torn apart by three.*

After saying this, the sphinxes closed their eyes and became motionless.

“I think that’s pretty clear. Why don’t you two wait here?”

Christian started to step out of the tunnel, when he stopped and added, “Now they’ve got me talking in rhyme, too.”

After a nervous chuckle together, Christian proceeded slowly and directly toward a circle on the floor, some thirty feet in front of the tunnel exit. Also on the floor, red, blue, and gold colored paths led from the circle to the corresponding colored sphinx. The circle sat only ten feet from the sphinxes and Christian knew that if they attacked him, he wouldn’t have time enough to retreat to the safety of the tunnel.

As soon as Christian stepped into the circle, the sphinxes came to life again and began to speak in chorus.

*The path you have taken
Has brought you here,
Surviving dangers
And conquering fear.*

*The knowledge you have used
Has battled you this far,
But the knowledge unused
Will win you the war.
Select the colored path
Which represents the school.
Choose correctly and
The sphinxes you will rule.*

Christian stood in the circle thinking about what the sphinxes had just said.

Gwen, thinking the riddle had confused Christian, tried to help.

“Christian, choose the gold path. That represents Bishop and, since Mr. Davis is Bishop’s Headmaster, he’d make it that one.”

Christian thought about that for a moment.

Then he said, “But that’s too easy and it doesn’t go along with everything else they said. They referred to the path we’ve taken and the knowledge we’ve used to come this far. The ‘path’ means the gauntlet we’ve followed since coming through the mirror.”

“I get it. We used my knowledge of animals to make it past the olitiau and the animals in the maze,” exclaimed Penny.

“I see. And we used my knowledge of Mag Ag to guide us through the maze,” added Gwen.

“Right. Magical creatures are the specialty of Eastey, or the red school, and Mag Ag of course is a specialty of Bishop, or the gold school. So, the remaining school whose knowledge we haven’t used is Good or the blue school,” concluded Christian.

He took a deep breath. Then, he took a step onto the blue path.

At first, Christian stumbled backwards startled, because all three sphinxes moved. But, rather than attacking, all three of the sphinxes bowed toward him. Then, the blue sphinx stepped off of its pedestal and sat at the side awaiting its opportunity to take its position once again.

The pedestal, the bottom step of a short set of stairs, led up to another tunnel, which the sphinx’s body had concealed.

“Let’s go!” directed Christian.

The two girls slowly moved toward the new tunnel, while Christian stood between the sphinx and them. As soon as the girls had entered the tunnel, Christian quickly joined them.

Once they had all stepped inside the tunnel, the sphinx took its position on the pedestal again and blocked the doorway.

“Well, there’s definitely no going back from here,” concluded Christian.

As they proceeded to the end of this short tunnel, they exited into a small cave with just one object in it ... a mirror. It looked exactly like the one from which they exited after being sucked out of Mr. Davis’ office. So much so that Christian thought, at first, that they had somehow returned to the cave in which they started.

He walked over to the mirror and expected to feel the same hard surface he felt in Mr. Davis’ office and in the first cave, but his hand passed through the surface.

Gwen and Penny saw this, so they came over to the mirror and stood next to Christian.

“Does anyone want to rest or should we just press forward?” he asked.

“Let’s get it over with,” came Gwen’s response.

“Yeah. Let’s go,” added Penny.

The three of them stepped forward, hesitated for a moment, and then stepped into the viscous mirror and disappeared.

The Secret Revealed

This trip through the mirror went much smoother than their first one.

They stepped out of the mirror as if stepping through a doorway and quickly realized that the mirror exited into some sort of office. However, it was not a magical office.

This room had no talking or moving pictures hung on the walls and no bookcases, filled with magic or witchcraft related information, lined the walls either. In fact, they saw nothing magical in the office, except the mirror from which they just emerged.

Christian walked over to the mirror and touched it. It had turned solid.

The girls watched him and, after he touched the mirror, the three looked at each other as if to say, "Here we go again."

Christian noticed two words inscribed above the mirror: *Scopo Transeo*.

"Well, at least we won't have to remember the words to activate the mirror," he said.

Christian looked around and, as it appeared from first sight, saw nothing special about the office. Everything seemed pretty ordinary and, pretty much all of it, made of metal.

A metal desk sat to the right of the mirror with a metal cabinet on the other side of it against the wall. Three metal filing cabinets lined the left side of the room with two metal windows on the other side of them, which looked out the metal wall. Next to the cabinet by the desk, and covering most of the right side wall, hung a ten-foot long pushpin bulletin board, of course, edged in metal. Lastly, a metal door, currently closed, exited the office at the end of the bulletin board.

In the center of the room, a long, narrow, rectangular table took up most of the office space. Although he couldn't tell for sure, because papers covered the whole top of the table, the metal legs of the table hinted at its composition.

They each took a part of the room to examine. Penny took the desk, Gwen stepped over to the file cabinets, and Christian moved quietly toward the door.

He looked out of the door's window and saw no one. He would have done the same with the other windows, but the glaze and caked dust on them only allowed the sunlight to faintly shine in. However, through the door's window, he saw that the exit faced some woods that sat on the other side of a chain-link, barbed-wire fence.

Christian thought, "This doesn't look very friendly."

He stepped away from the door and began to peruse the bulletin board. Tables and graphs on production, daily output, and various business terms covered most of its surface. But, none of it meant much to Christian though.

However, a drawing or map of the United States caught his eye. On the map, someone had drawn depictions of the three schools at their respective geographic locations. And, they had attached it to the board by five stickpins, one in each corner and one in the middle. Christian removed the pins, folded the map up, and put it in his back pocket.

"Did you find something?" Gwen asked, hearing Christian folding the paper.

"Not really. You?"

"No. Just receipts, inventories, and stuff like that."

“Penny, have you found anything?” Christian asked.

“The desk was practically empty and all that’s in this cabinet is a spare suit and cloak,” Penny replied.

Christian began to search through the papers on the table. Penny joined him, while Gwen continued to look through the file cabinets.

Almost every paper they looked at on the table contained the logo of the Howard Corporation. Most looked like generic memoranda or letters sent to all of the offices of the company.

Then, Christian found a letter addressed directly to Mr. Davis from Mr. Howard himself. It explained what Mr. Howard expected from Mr. Davis and his production complex. And, it stated how the success of the whole corporation depended upon the facility’s crystals and silica production. It concluded that Mr. Davis must take every step necessary to keep the operations and shipping schedules on track.

“Check this out,” Christian said, as he handed the letter to Penny.

Gwen looked over Penny’s shoulder as the two of them read the letter together.

“This is one big piece of evidence that we need to take with us,” Christian said, as he took the letter, folded it up, and put it in his other back pocket.

While putting the letter in his pocket, he glanced down at the table and, under the letter he had just picked up, he found what looked like another map or drawing. He brushed away the rest of the papers covering the map and stood looking at it for a few moments.

Then, he looked up and said, “I think I’ve found what we’ve been looking for.”

The two girls joined him in examining the map on the table. It detailed the complex, including the trailer office, in which they stood, located in the northeast corner.

Near and west of the trailer, according to the map, sat a Sasqi pen, dwarf pen, elf pen, and mermaid pool.

The three of them looked up from the map at each other, mouths hanging open in surprise. Then, they looked back at the map.

It displayed a mine entrance, Firehouse, and manufacturing facility, which all sat in the upper portion of the complex with the office and pens. And, from the way it looked on the map, a fence with a large gate separated the upper and lower halves. However, both sat within an overall perimeter fence that had a main entrance at the southern end of the complex.

A storage facility with a loading dock sat partially in both the upper and lower halves of the complex with access to the loading dock from the lower portion. The rest of the lower portion of the complex consisted of a parking area, security building, and an office building.

“We are definitely taking this with us. I think Mr. Brown will understand what this is all about, but I just wish we could get more evidence,” remarked Christian.

“Would pictures help?” asked Gwen.

“Yeah, but why do you ask?”

Gwen took her, now torn, backpack purse off of her back and dumped its contents onto the table.

“These are the things I thought we might need.”

Her purse had contained a bottle of healing ointment, bandages, two plastic squirt bottles of green liquid (one dark and one light), another plastic container with something solid in it, a cell phone, a digital camera, and three chocolate Dragon Bars.

Dragon Bars provided a boost of energy, either magical, chemical, or both, which students frequently consumed while studying for exams. The wrapper's advertisement proclaimed, 'If you're draggin' then eat a Dragon!'

"Dragon Bars! Thanks, Gwen! I'm starved!" exclaimed Christian.

"Smart thinking," added Penny.

Each one grabbed a bar and, practically, inhaled it.

"I have to apologize Gwen ..." Christian started, but paused to chew for a few seconds.

Then he added, "I had no idea you had this stuff in there. I just thought ..."

Christian hesitated again. But, before he could finish, Gwen did it for him.

"I know, you thought I had makeup or hair gel and stuff in here, right? I can't blame you. That might have been true for the Gwen of a year ago, heck, even six months ago. But, having had you two as friends, I think I've changed."

"I've noticed it too," added Penny.

"Really?" asked Gwen.

"Yeah. You get to know a roommate pretty well. And you get to know your best friend even better."

Gwen smiled and then said, "Thanks!"

"We'd better get back to the situation at hand," Christian stated as he looked back down at the map.

"Gwen, you man the camera and Penny the wand, and I'll try to stay out of both of your ways. We need to get some pictures that'll give everyone the undeniable truth about what's going on here.

"First, let's go by these pens and take some pictures. Next, we'll go by the mine and see if there's anything worth shooting there. Then, we'll make our way to the Firehouse to see what it is. And, if at all possible, go on to the manufacturing facility and check it out. Finally, return back here.

"If anything happens to any one of us, the other two need to come back here and see if they can use that mirror to get out of here. If the mirror just takes you back to the tunnels, you can come back through and use the cell phone. It may not work in here, so go to wherever you can get a signal and call for help. You'll have to try and find out where we're at too, so that you can tell whomever you call where to come. Gwen, can you show Penny how to use the phone?"

Christian stood by while Gwen showed Penny the basics of using the phone. Then, she showed her how to use the stored numbers.

After a few minutes of letting Penny handle the phone, Christian asked, "Penny, you okay with using that?"

"I think so," she responded.

"She can use the stored numbers to call my dad and tell him who she is and that I'm in trouble. He knows that Penny's my roommate, so he'll believe her. Although, he'll be furious to know where we are ... wherever that may be."

“Gwen, do you have room in your backpack for this map?” Christian asked.

She picked her purse up off of the table and turned it around. Aside from the main compartment, which she had restocked with everything but the camera, cell phone, and chocolate bars, it contained a separate compartment in the back designed to fit a thin note pad. She folded the map, placed it inside the compartment, and put the purse on her back.

“Ok. Let’s go,” Christian said.

They moved toward the door.

Christian gave a quick glance outside and saw no one, so he slowly opened the door. He stepped out onto the metal platform outside of the door and quietly stepped down the stairs. At the bottom, he stopped and signaled for the girls to join him.

While they did, Christian peeked around the corner of the office trailer. He didn’t see anyone standing or walking about. But, for the first time, he could see some of the complex depicted on the map.

The pens sat a short distance away, just west of where he stood. However, open ground lay between the corner of the office trailer and the pens. So, instead of going straight across the open ground, they hurried straight northeast toward the perimeter fence. Once there, while maintaining a watchful eye for anyone coming down any of the paths between the buildings, they slunk along the fence toward the pens.

The first enclosure held a pool of clear water, about twenty feet deep. At the bottom of the pool they could see a metal door, closed at the moment, which led to somewhere south in the complex. At that moment, a girl popped up at the edge of the pool right in front of them. She had a pretty face, although she had green hair and skin and big blue eyes.

“Hello,” whispered Christian.

The girl didn’t respond, but just blinked.

“Can you understand me?”

The girl nodded.

“Can you speak?”

The girl shook her head and then closed her eyes.

When she did, Christian heard a voice. However, it didn’t come from the girl, but from inside his head.

“My name is Morgen. I am a Nixi. They have taken my comb, which keeps me to do their bidding. Can you help me to get my comb and to return home?”

Christian turned to Gwen and Penny.

“We heard it too,” Gwen replied to Christian’s unasked question.

“What is it that they have you doing for them?” Christian asked, turning back to the Nixi.

“They have me control the quality and flow of the water into the structure,” Morgen replied, nodding toward the large building nearby.

“We will try to help you. We will need to get others to help us. With this device, we will be able to get the help we need,” Christian said to Morgen, as he pointed at the camera that Gwen held in her hand.

Christian heard in his head, “Shiny object.”

“Yes. The shiny object will flash a light at you, which will let us get help for you,” Explained Christian.

Morgen looked over at Gwen, who took her picture. Gwen checked the quality of it and gave Christian the thumbs-up signal.

“Thank you. We will get help as soon as we can,” Christian told Morgen.

“I understand. Thank you,” came her mental reply.

Then, with a splash of her tail, she returned to the bottom of the pool.

Christian gave a quick look around and signaled the girls to follow him.

They hurried around the Nixi pool, now walking in open ground, and came to an actual enclosure. According to the sign on the fence, they had come to the Elf pen. Inside of it stood an aboveground, manmade, cave-like dwelling. They found no sign of anything or anyone inside the enclosure, so Gwen took a picture of the sign with the dwelling in the background.

Quickly, they proceeded on to the Dwarf pen. It resembled the Elf pen and appeared unoccupied as well. Gwen prepared to take the same type of picture, when a little person strode out of the dwelling and dumped a bucket of water onto the ground.

“Excuse me sir,” Christian beckoned toward the person.

In a flash, the little person streaked over to the fence. With hands on hips, the little person replied, “No SIR!”

Christian thought about the response for a moment and then replied, “Madame?” She nodded.

It was easy to understand Christian’s confusion, as the person had a full beard.

“Are you a dwarf?” Christian asked.

No sooner had he said it than he realized how silly it sounded.

“Dwarf in general, Karzelek specific,” she replied.

“Why are you here?”

“Find good veins, help in mine, protect all in mines.”

“Why are you helping them in the mines?”

“They took our treasure. We need our treasure. Our treasure is our life.”

Christian looked over at the girls and the three of them shared a look of disgust at the situation.

“We will try to help you get your treasure back and to escape here. It will take some time. To help us, we would like to use this device. It will briefly flash a light at you.” Christian explained, as he again pointed to the camera.

“No flash light,” the Karzelek replied.

Then, she streaked back into the dwelling.

Christian looked at the two girls, they shrugged, and Gwen took the picture of the sign and dwelling.

The sign of the last pen read “Saski pen.” Another cave-like dwelling stood inside of it and tucked into a grove of trees, which continued beyond the pen. This one also appeared unoccupied, so Gwen took another picture of the sign and the dwelling.

As she did so, Christian had a thought.

“You don’t suppose that ‘Saski’ could be short for ‘Sasquatch’ do you?” he asked aloud.

“Possibly. They’re very strong and very docile,” responded Penny.

No sooner had Gwen taken the picture than they heard men talking. The three children scrambled up into the trees outside of the Saski pen and watched.

Two men in uniform came around the corner from the path between the office trailer and the Firehouse. The two men talked as they turned the corner to walk between the Firehouse and the pens. Once they had navigated the turn, they stopped talking and one of them started to whistle as they walked along the pens.

The Karzelek came zipping out of her dwelling and yelled, “No whistle!”

Then, she picked up something lying on the ground and threw it at the whistling man.

“Hey!” shouted the man.

He reached to pull his gun out of his holster. But, before he could even reach his holster, the Karzelek had zipped back into her dwelling.

“Pesky little creature,” the man complained loudly, hoping the Karzelek would hear him.

However, she didn’t return.

The two security guards continued walking toward the Saski pen, as Christian, Penny, and Gwen ducked down lower behind the trees. As the men approached the near corner of the Firehouse, one of them turned and faced the Saski pen and the grove of trees in which the children hid.

Christian tensed up, thinking the man had seen or heard them in the trees. But, instead the guard leaned his back against the Firehouse, took off his shoe, emptied a few small rocks out, and put the shoe back on. Then, the two guards turned the corner and continued down the path away from the children.

Christian relaxed again. He sat down on the ground, with his elbows resting in his knees. He looked over at the pens, then toward the path the guards had just followed, finally he turned toward the girls.

“I think we need to wait in these woods until the sun is lower in the sky. Although doing so is going to make us miss the final ceremony at the competition and get us into trouble, I think we need to do it for our safety and to ensure we get the evidence we need.”

The girls agreed.

As they sat there waiting, Christian noticed that fog hung in the air outside of the fence. Then, he looked up and noticed that fog hovered over the complex as well. However, no fog existed anywhere within the complex that he could see.

“Hey, did you guys notice the fog.”

Gwen shrugged, but Penny responded.

“This is one way to magically conceal a location from being seen or found. Along with the fog cover, there’s usually another spell that in some way keeps anyone from entering the complex area too.”

“That explains the lack of perimeter cameras, I guess,” commented Christian.

They sat in the protection of the trees for several hours, until the shadows within the complex became more prevalent. Once they felt it safe, they decided to make their way over to the mine.

Christian took the lead as they headed due west, along the northern perimeter fence. As they followed this along for several feet, they stayed in the trees to remain concealed. Then, they came to the western perimeter fence and followed it south.

The safety of the trees continued within this section of the complex, but abruptly ended at a rocky hillside after a short distance. To maintain some seclusion from any wandering guards, they decided to climb over boulders as they continued south even though they found it rough going.

Christian, still in the lead, crested a larger boulder and found himself at the edge of a cliff. Although not a high cliff, he would definitely die if he fell. That thought ran through his mind, but quickly disappeared when he saw the spectacle below him. He quickly fell on his stomach to stay out of sight. The two girls saw him and did the same, crawling forward for a better look.

The mining entrance sat below them, as depicted on the map. What the map didn't show made the three of them gasp.

A Sasquatch came walking out of the mine entrance, pushing a mining car filled with gravel and rocks and a second one followed close behind. They pushed the cars along a track into a tunnel, which led toward either the Firehouse or the manufacturing facility. A third Sasquatch came out of the mine carrying two large boulders, one under each arm. He, or she, took the boulders over to a pit, tossed them in, and returned to the mine.

During all of this, several Karzeleks plodded back and forth between the mine and the tunnel. And, just as the second of the two cart-pushing Sasquatch disappeared into the tunnel, a file of three humanoid beings came walking out.

Christian first noticed the shackles they wore around their ankles, which emitted a red glow. But, in spite of the bindings, he found the rest of their appearance remarkable. These beings had dark skin, as black as a starless night, and pointed ears that reminded Christian of Ms. Callidus.

"Are those elves?" he whispered.

"I think they're Svartalfar, or Dark Elves. They live underground, which is probably why they're using them in the mines. They're also excellent smiths, which could be another reason for using them here. My dad met one once while he was working with the Witches Council. He said the conversation they had was fascinating, which he told me and my mom all about."

Penny thought to continue, but decided against it due to the seriousness of the situation below.

Armed guards followed the file of Dark Elves, as well as strategically positioned around the whole mining area. Christian knew they would never make it into the mine with all of these guards, so they would have to settle for pictures from their current vantage point.

"Gwen, take a picture of the elves, before they enter the mine," Christian instructed.

Gwen quickly raised the camera and took the picture. She even had time to take a second one.

Christian looked at her puzzlingly.

"I wanted to take a close-up, too," she responded to his look.

He nodded to show his approval.

“Take a few more of the area, including some with the Sasquatch and the Karzeleks in them. Then, we’ll make our way over to the Firehouse,” he told Gwen.

She agreed.

A few minutes later, the two Sasquatch came out of the tunnel pushing their empty cars and returned to the mine. After Gwen took a few pictures of them, she put the camera away since she had taken pictures of the Karzeleks earlier. Then, Christian led them back down the rocky terrain and backtracked to the safety of the trees in the northwest corner of the complex near the Saski pen.

Once safely in the trees, they sat and rested. More precisely, they sat and contemplated what they had just seen. They did this for several minutes with none of them making a sound. Then, Christian jumped up and broke the silence.

“This is unthinkable! How could they do this? Using slave labor in general is horrendous. But it makes it somehow worse that they’re using MAGICAL slave labor just to profit a non-magical corporation!”

The anger brewed within Christian from the thought. But, when he saw Penny crying and Gwen fighting back the tears too, he became furious.

Just as his anger peaked, something happened that brought them all back to the reality of their situation. A couple of squirrels jumped down from a nearby tree and scurried toward the Saski pen. A rabbit, hiding behind one of the trees, darted off toward the rocky hillside. And a couple of field mice dashed off toward the back of the Firehouse.

Something must have scared or startled the animals.

So, the three children ducked behind some trees and waited to see what had caused the flight. They crouched there looking around and waiting, but no one or thing showed. However, to be on the safe side, they decided to wait until dark before they tried to get inside the Firehouse.

While they waited up in the hillside in the safety of the trees, Christian scanned the building. Then, he realized that the Firehouse had no side door or windows on the west side or back of the building.

“Gwen, may I see the map of the complex again?” he requested.

Gwen removed her backpack and the map from within.

“Penny, could you provide a little bit of light?” he asked.

Penny complied.

“Just as I thought. The drawings of the buildings show all of the doors and windows. And, the firehouse has two windows and one door all in the front of the building. Well, I guess we’ll have to skip this building,” he concluded.

“Maybe not,” Gwen retorted.

She reached into her purse and pulled out the container that held the solid thing in it.

“This should help,” she said.

“What is it?” he asked.

“It’s a charm made from mixing the heart, skin, forehead, and nails of an aardvark, wrapped in the skin of an aardvark. If you wear it against your chest, it’ll let you walk

through walls. That is, of course, as long as the walls aren't magically charmed to resist it."

"Sounds pretty cool. Okay, I'll try it."

"Wait!" protested Penny.

Christian stopped just as he started to put the charm over his head.

"Why shouldn't I be the one to go inside? I have the most wand experience out of the three of us and whoever goes in may have to use magic to get out."

"Well, I think we want to avoid using magic blatantly, if possible, so that we don't let anyone know that we're magical. Plus, Penny, you ..." Christian hesitated, hoping not to hurt Penny's feelings with what he planned to say.

Then, he finished his comment. "... you don't know a lot about the non-magical world and most of what's going on in there will most likely be non-magical. So, I don't think it's the best choice to have you go in."

"But what about me?" Gwen said with authority.

"I know more about industry than you do. I understand what's going on with regard to both magical and non-magical things. And, I can wield a wand as a last resort. I'm the logical one to go in;" she stated definitively.

"You may be right, but I feel I should be the one to go," Christian demanded.

"Why?" Gwen snapped.

"Because ... I don't want anything to happen to you two." Christian blurted.

Although embarrassed, he continued to tell them how he felt.

"I'm the one that got you two into this situation. And, having talked you two into doing something that will inevitably get you in trouble is bad enough. But, if anything were to happen to either of you, I wouldn't be able to live with myself."

"This may be a little odd coming from me, but don't you think that's a little self-centered?" Gwen said more as a statement than a question.

"What do you mean?" Christian responded.

He understood the comment, but her reference confused him.

"She means that you didn't 'talk us into' anything. We decided to be a part of this by our own choice. We understand what's at stake and we want to do something to help. We're here of our own choice, not yours!" Penny added, somewhat angry with Christian.

Christian recognized the anger in her voice and tried to explain.

"I didn't mean to sound self-centered, although I didn't do a very good job. I just don't want anything to happen to either of you. You're my friends and the first ones I've ever really had."

"We understand Christian. You just need to recognize that, as friends, we couldn't let you do all of this on your own because we don't want anything to happen to you either. We're here to make sure nothing DOES happen to you and to do what we can to help uncover this secret operation."

It then became clear to Christian that, although all three of them wanted to help the school and Mr. Brown, their primary objective is to protect his or her other two friends. Plus, their strength came from working together ... and from their friendship.

So, he reconsidered and gave his opinion from this new perspective.

"I understand now. I'm sorry for the way I was thinking. We'll deal with everything together. But I still think that I should go in. If anything goes wrong inside, Gwen you need to be out here to help the two of you to get back, in case the mirror doesn't work. I don't think your father would be too interested in helping Penny and me, if you aren't with us."

After several seconds to consider it, Gwen nodded in agreement.

So, Christian took off his shirt to make sure that the rope tied around the charm reached the right length to stay against his chest. When he removed his shirt, Penny noticed the medal that he already wore around his neck. Then, she noticed the dark red mark, in the shape of the medal, on his chest.

"Christian, what's that?" she asked, pointing at the medal.

"Wow, I forgot I had that on. I just got so used to wearing it around my neck. It's a medal that my father wore as a symbol of his love for my mother."

"Well, you're having some sort of allergic reaction to it," Gwen added.

Christian looked down and saw the red mark. When he touched the mark. It felt tender and sore. He sat there thinking and recalling events from the past year. Then, it hit him.

"You know throughout the year, I'd periodically get a pain in my chest in this spot. I'd brush it off as anxiety or indigestion. Then, today I had a searing pain in my chest just as we entered the cavern with the giant bat. But, once we entered the cavern I blocked it out, as we were busy trying to stay alive. The same thing happened twice in the maze, once when we approached the serpent grass and again when that cat creature was chasing me. And, as it got closer, the pain increased. Yet, again, I was a little too busy to think about the pain. And, it happened one last time, just before we entered the chamber with the sphinxes. However, once the sphinxes read the first riddle, the pain stopped."

"It sounds like your father's medal is some sort of danger warning charm," concluded Penny.

"You know what else it means, Christian?" quizzed Gwen.

Christian looked at her and shrugged.

"It means that your father was either magical or knew about magic," she said.

"Your right! This proves that my father was magical and it's from him that I get my magical abilities."

"But why would the Chair of Truth select you as a Fireball, if your father's your magical source?" asked Penny.

"It's possible that your father received his abilities from his mother, who may have been a very powerful witch. So, the chair picked up on her, rather than your father. It's happened before," Gwen explained.

"Yeah, but for a girl, not a boy," Christian replied.

"Plus, Mr. Brown told me that the chair may just have made a mistake," added Christian.

"When the school year's over, you should ask your mother more about your father and maybe find out about your grandmother too," proposed Gwen.

"Yeah, but first we have to get finished here," Christian said.

He put the aardvark charm around his neck and put his medal in his front pants pocket. Then, he put his shirt back on and ensured the charm still rested against his chest.

“Ok, let me have the camera,” he said.

“Hold on a second,” Gwen responded.

She pressed a couple of buttons on the back, waited a few moments, then opened a compartment on the side and removed something. Then, she handed the camera to Christian.

He looked perplexed.

“I removed the added memory from the camera. You can use the basic memory to take some pictures inside. If ... something should happen to you, we have the pictures we’ve already taken on this memory chip.”

“Good thinking,” Christian noted.

Then, after a moment of contemplation, he added, “In fact, if I don’t return within thirty minutes, take the memory and go. You can use a laptop to show the pictures to Mr. Brown.”

He stood up and prepared himself.

“I think you two might be better off hiding behind the trailer, rather than over here. If anything goes wrong, I’d expect security will be very active and abundant, and you won’t want to go running across open ground with security around.

“If everything goes well, I’ll meet you behind the trailer and we’ll make our way down the eastern perimeter fence to the manufacturing facility. I’ll see you both over by the trailer.”

“Good luck,” said Penny, with worry in her voice.

“Wait!” exclaimed Gwen.

She again took the backpack off and took something out.

“Take this too.”

She handed him the squirt bottle with the light green liquid in it.

“What’s in here?”

“It’s diluted grylio venom. Never mind what a grylio is.”

Christian almost snickered that Gwen knew he would have asked that question.

“The venom, at full strength, will cause instant death, if it should get into someone’s mouth, eyes, or nose. But diluted, it will temporarily incapacitate. If you use it, just make sure it doesn’t splash back on you or else it’ll do the same to you,” Gwen explained.

“Man, you really did come prepared. Were you ever a boy scout?” he said with a laugh.

“No, just things I picked up over the years,” she replied.

They shared one final laugh together.

Christian crept over to the back of the Firehouse. He snuck over to the building’s edge nearest the trailer, peeked around the corner, and signaled for the girls to come ahead.

The girls ran to the trailers edge and watched as Christian walked toward the center of the Firehouse's back wall. Then, he took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and walked forward.

Christian expected to feel the pain of his nose hitting the wall. But, when he opened his eyes a few steps later, he found himself standing inside of the building. And, after a brief moment of disorientation, he realized he stood under a walkway that went around the whole interior of the building. This walkway allowed anyone on it to look down onto the ground floor. Luckily, since the only light within the building came from the ceiling over two stories up, the shadows had concealed his arrival.

He heard some people walking around above him, but he couldn't see them. Periodically, though, he saw an armed guard or a worker in a hardhat or white lab coat walking along the walkway down at the other end of the building.

From his current vantage point, Christian could only see part of the walkway and nothing on the ground floor, because large crates blocked most of his view. To make his way around the building, he would try to stay in the shadows against the wall as much as possible. However, crates also sat along the wall periodically too and would force him to carefully navigate around them without being seen.

For a moment, Christian considered using the charm around his neck to walk through the crates, but he didn't want to chance trying to walk through one and getting stuck inside. So, Christian made his way around to the side of the building, where he had fewer crates around which to navigate. But, he still had to take care to remain in the shadows as much as possible, because in this part of the building more people could see him.

As he moved along, he noticed that all activity by and attention of the people on the walkway focused on a large single-story, cement block room in the center of the ground floor. Based upon how these people would stop and look down at the room, Christian assumed that it either didn't have a ceiling or they could see something sticking out of it. He wanted to make his way around to the front, if possible, to see if it had a door or window he could use to look inside of it. Unfortunately, a large crate blocked his path along the wall to reach that vantage point.

He sat for a few moments and watched the movements of the people both on the walkway and on the ground floor.

Those on the walkway, aside from the security guards, mainly just looked down at the cement block room and not really doing any work; therefore, not routine in their actions. However, one man on the walkway, wearing a white lab coat sat on a high chair monitoring a panel of buttons and switches and typing on a computer. Once in a while, he would look down at the room, but concentrated on his computer most of the time.

The security guards kept a constant pace around the walkway. Christian counted two of them, completing a circuit every ten minutes. This meant that every five minutes one of them would pass the exact same point on the walkway.

The people on the ground floor focused their attention on the front of the block room, so they would, most likely, not notice any movement in the shadows. So, Christian planned to time his movement around the crate, and along the wall, with the movement of the guards and the periodic looks by the computer operator.

Christian had decided when to move and had just begun to do so, when he heard voices coming from directly above him. He stopped immediately and quietly moved back into the shadows, listening to the people.

“Isn’t it cool!”

“Yeah! I never would have thought they even existed, if I hadn’t started working here.”

“I hear that the fire from them is so intense and pure, it minimizes impurities in the melting process and in the crystal growth in general. It also allows the process to proceed faster, cutting the time to grow a crystal in half.”

“Yeah, and using the other creatures, and their magical abilities, the whole process of making wafers and chips is one-third the time it takes everyone else in the world.”

“Plus, because of their purity, the chips have more capability than any others in the world.”

“That’s why we’re making the big bucks.”

“You said it. Although, I’m sure the corporation’s making money hand over fist and it’d be nice if they shared a little more with us peons.”

“Here, here. Uh oh, we’d better get back to work.”

Christian heard the footsteps of the two men as they hurried away from him along the walkway. He saw them leave through the door at the other end of the building on the walkway level.

Christian waited a moment, listening for any other voices from above. And, once he thought it clear, he timed his move and slithered around the crate.

From his new vantage point, he could see most of the activities going on at the other end of the building. This level lay even with the tunnel that they had seen earlier, where the various species of beings would walk into from the mine entrance. Inside the building sat the mine cars that the Sasquatch had pushed inside, still filled with various materials. Most of these cars held what looked like some sort of rock, while a few others had metallic chunks of ore.

The Dark Elves offloaded ore and rock into large crucibles that hung suspended from a crane attached to the ceiling. They filled them meticulously and, once finished, they would push the large crucible onto a platform. Then, once the elves had placed the freshly filled crucible onto the platform, it would rotate, switching the newly filled crucible with one that came from somewhere out of Christian’s view.

The one out of view came from its concealment visibly hot inside, with heat and a red glow emitting from within. Then, a crane would lift the heated crucible to the other side of the building, once again out of Christian’s view. While this all took place, the elves returned to loading another crucible.

As the elves walked away, something emitted an intense wave of heat and bright light from the block building. Christian had to see what had caused this. But, before he did, Christian decided to take a few pictures of the elves working.

He really wanted a picture of the activity inside of the block room. But, to get one, Christian would once again have to time this move well. For some reason, he believed the elves would sense his presence if he came too close to them. He waited until they

had positioned another crucible and returned to load another. Then, he moved forward.

Christian quickly, as close to the wall as he could without slipping through it, slid along down to where he sat even with the opening of the block room. He could now see a flame shooting out from the room at the most recently positioned crucible, turning the crucible red hot and melting the rock and ore inside of it. He moved a few feet more and gasped with astonishment.

The room held an, apparently, fully grown dragon. He could only see the beast's head and part of its neck. They kept the dragon's head and neck immobilized with two large metal "collars" secured to the floor, which forced the dragon to keep its head in one position, facing forward. The flame that heated the crucibles came from the dragon.

Christian reeled in shock and nearly fell through the wall. For one thing, he had never seen a dragon before. But, he almost cried to see it mistreated in such a manner. Christian steadied his resolve and didn't cry.

Seeing this dragon, a fantastic creature in so many aspects, treated in such a manner, Christian wanted to lash out at everyone here. If he could wield magic to any degree and knew a good offensive spell, he probably would have done just that. But instead, he remained hidden in the shadows, fighting the wave of emotions surging within him.

While Christian dealt with this awful feeling, he lost track of time. The elves had returned with another crucible and he didn't have time to sneak toward the back of the building. So, he just froze in the spot.

The elves walked down to the rotating platform, just twenty feet away from Christian. But, they merely went about their task and returned to load another crucible, without giving Christian even a glance. He sat there a bit confused and disappointed, because he thought for sure they would sense his presence. So, he concluded that either their natural abilities didn't work properly due to their tired state, they purposely chose not to draw attention to him, or his lack of magic caused them to not sense him.

Christian quickly took several pictures of the dragon. Then, looking around the rest of the building, he saw that the crucibles the crane took away went over to a room on the other side of the building. The room appeared to have some sort of a force field around it, because he could see it shimmer as the crucible pass through it.

More elves worked in this room doing something with the molten liquid, although Christian couldn't see what exactly they did. He didn't concern himself with the task of these elves, especially since he couldn't make it over to the location undetected. But, from a distance, he did take a picture of the crucible breaking through the barrier and the elves working within.

He thought the pictures he now had could thoroughly tell the story of what takes place in this building and decided he shouldn't push his luck. So, Christian started to move toward the back of the building. But, still in shock from seeing the mistreatment of all of these magical beings and creatures, he forgot to time his movements with the cycle of the security guards. This mistake became immediately apparent as he stepped around the crate and heard someone yell, "You! Stop where you are!"

Christian at first thought about running out of the side wall, but didn't know who or what might await him out there. Instead, he decided to leave through the back wall. However, this hesitation allowed someone on the ground floor to close on him.

Christian raced toward the back of the building, as he heard footsteps closing behind him. He quickly squeezed off a stream of the light green liquid over his shoulder and the footsteps stopped. He didn't stop to look back, but continued running until he passed through the wall and had emerged outside running toward the pens. He skidded to a stop, changed directions, and bolted toward the trailer.

The girls saw him running toward them and quickly stood up from their hiding positions.

"Inside, quick! We're getting out of here!" Christian urged in a whispered yell, as he removed the charm from around his neck.

They all hurried up the stairs and into the trailer. The two girls rushed back to the mirror, while Christian stopped at the table.

"Penny, I need some light," he requested anxiously.

Penny hurried over with the tip of her wand illuminated.

He scanned the table very quickly and scanned it a second time, as if looking for something specific. Gwen started to ask what he was looking for, when he lifted some papers and grabbed a booklet.

"Let's go!" he cried.

The three of them stood in front of the mirror together with their clasped hands.

"Cross your fingers," Christian said.

Then, he nodded to Gwen, who nodded back in acknowledgement and a second later said, "Scopo Transeo."

With the sound of a vacuum, the mirror sucked them in with a sharp 'crack.'

The Telltale Beginning

The three of them tumbled to the floor.

They expected to feel the hard rock floor of the cave from which they came into the trailer, but instead a much softer wooden floor broke their fall.

After overcoming their disorientation, the children realized that two people stood watching them. Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor stared down at the three of them with their mouths open in a frozen look of surprise.

The children had landed right in the middle of Mr. Brown's living room, falling out of the out-of-place mirror next to the fireplace.

Mr. Brown stammered, "How did you ... where were you ... what's going on here?"

Mr. Brown gestured for the three students to take a seat on one of the sofas, while he and Ms. D'Amor sat down in the chairs.

With the adults staring at him and waiting impatiently, Christian wondered where to begin. He glanced at his two friends on each side of him on the couch. Then, he decided to start from the beginning and let whatever punishments they might receive come as they may.

Christian started with the second night at school, when he saw Mr. Davis with Mr. Howard. The description of his encounter that night surprised Mr. Brown. However, when Christian described the meeting he overheard on Halloween, especially how Mr. Davis had arranged the operations at the manufacturing location to trace back to Mr. Brown, Mr. Brown hardly showed any emotion to Mr. Davis doing something like that. Mr. Brown did, however, blush when Christian explained that this statement by Mr. Davis concerned him and the girls enough to where they decided to take action.

Christian explained how using the information from Penny's dad, Mr. Lucern, and the bits and pieces of information overheard from discussions Mr. Davis had with his visitors, the three of them had pieced together a basic understanding of the whole situation. Then, he described how they developed the plan to eavesdrop on Mr. Davis, so that they could get into his office to discover the details. And, how infiltrating Mr. Davis' office didn't provide any help, but led them into the cave of challenges and ultimately to the manufacturing compound.

Gwen passed her camera to Mr. Brown, after loading the storage card back into it. Christian also handed the memo and the "Production Output" booklet he had grabbed off of the office table to Ms. D'Amor. While Christian described what they did and found at the compound, Mr. Brown and Ms. D'Amor looked at the pictures. Ms. D'Amor periodically let out a gasp at what she saw.

Before he knew it, Christian had given them the whole story. Afterward, he sat back, having finally unburdened the heavy weight of the situation. The elation lasted only momentarily, as he remembered that he and his two friends had some severe punishments coming their way.

Ms. D'Amor stood up and faced the fireplace. Although she tried to hide it, Christian could see her crying. The pictures truly disturbed her, which in turn upset Mr. Brown.

Mr. Brown sat with his head down. Christian thought he had continued to stare at the pictures in the camera, but then realized he was staring at the floor and not at the camera.

After a few moments, Mr. Brown raised his head. His face showed how shaken he was from everything.

Christian wanted to speak, but decided against it.

Mr. Brown finally looked at the three children.

“Do you three realize how upset and disappointed I was, we all were, when you didn’t attend the closing ceremonies? Then, how concerned we all became when you didn’t board the bus for the return trip?” he said in a low and serious tone.

“Did we win?” asked Penny.

“No ... but that’s not the point!” chastised Mr. Brown audibly upset.

Mr. Brown took a deep breath and continued in a low, calmer tone.

“I appreciate the chance the three of you took on my and the school’s behalf, but you should not have done this. You should have come to me with the information you overheard from Mr. Davis in the first place.”

“But sir, would you have believed us?” interjected Christian.

“I honestly don’t know, but you should have left the investigation and actions to the adults. You could have been hurt or killed, especially in that cave and at the compound.”

Mr. Brown sat up in his chair, as if letting everyone know that he now spoke as the school’s Assistant Headmaster.

“The three of you have broken more rules than I can count on both hands. I will have to take this information to the disciplinary board and let them decide what should be done. Ms. D’Amor will escort you three back to school.”

Ms. D’Amor wiped her eyes with her back still to the children. Then, she turned around to face the group.

“Please follow me,” she said.

The broom trip to school didn’t hold the same excitement as the one on Thanksgiving. In fact, all four of them displayed somber attitudes during the trip. The somberness continued as Ms. D’Amor escorted the three students to their dormitory and watched as Christian went into his bedroom and the two girls up the stairs.

Christian thought about food, since they had missed supper. But, he really didn’t feel much like eating with the forthcoming punishments so fresh in his mind. So, he dressed for bed and crawled into it.

He laid in bed for hours, thinking about what might happen to him and his two friends. If the day’s events and the burden of the impending punishments hadn’t completely exhausted him, Christian wouldn’t have fallen asleep at all.

Christian fought hard to maintain his level of concentration the last week of school, an important point for finals week. The same went for both Penny and Gwen.

The first three days of the week consisted solely of classroom reviews of what they had learned throughout the year. And, although Christian frequently thought about what would happen to him and the girls, he would force himself to pay attention again.

However, at times he had an underlying feeling that studying for the exams may be fruitless, since they would probably get expelled soon anyway. But, the three friends swore that they would apply themselves to the exams. This way, they could prove to themselves, and others, that they really did deserve to stay in school.

Every night they met with Christian leading most of the study sessions. Gwen of course would take over to lead the Mag Ag study sessions and Penny led the Magical Creatures ones. So, by Thursday, exam day, they were ready.

Thursday's exams included only written tests for Alchemy, World History of Magic, Divination, Mag Ag, and Spell Casting. However, the hour-long Magical Creatures exam consisted of half written and half hands-on. The hands-on portion consisted of the students demonstrating the proper handling and feeding of a barometz.

The students had laboratory exams in Alchemy and Mag Ag the first two hours of Friday morning. Then, they had the rest of the day off, while the teachers scored the results from the final exams. This left many of the students too nervous about the exam results to relax.

Although pleased with their exams, Christian, Penny, and Gwen also couldn't relax. But, their uneasiness had nothing to do with test scores. Ms. D'Amor pulled them aside as they departed their Mag Ag laboratory exam and told them that they would meet the disciplinary board at five o'clock that afternoon. So, their nervousness came from knowing that they only had until then before they found out their fates as students.

The rest of Friday morning, up until the lunch period, the students had the opportunity to make their way to the dining hall where they could each cast their secret votes for student president. And, Mr. Brown would announce the results at the end-of-year feast that night.

The scores from the final exams had been posted on the bulletin boards in the entry hallway by four o'clock Friday. Penny and Gwen had both passed all of their exams. Gwen, of course, received the highest grade in Mag Ag and Penny the highest in Magical Creatures. Christian, received the highest scores in the other four classes, ranking second to Penny in Magical Creatures and happy to just pass Mag Ag.

The scores raised their moods slightly. As planned, they had not only proved to themselves how much they had learned and how well they had learned it, but doing so well may also provide proof of their worthiness to remain at Bishop.

Christian, Penny, and Gwen waited in the common room until ten minutes before five o'clock. Then, they began their slow and disheartening walk to the dining hall.

They entered the hall, which had already been set up for the evening's end-of-year feast, and trudged up onto the upper level of the dining hall to the faculty and staff table. Mr. Brown, Ms. D'Amor, Mr. Bangar, and the four SWC members sat behind the table.

Mr. Brown stood and addressed the three defendants.

"Ms. D'Amor, please read the charges against these students."

Ms. D'Amor stood up next to Mr. Brown and read off a list of thirteen offenses. When she had finished, she took her seat again.

"How do you three plead?" Mr. Brown asked from his chair.

"Guilty," they replied in chorus.

Christian began to add a statement, describing how well they had done on their finals. But, Mr. Brown raised his hand to silence him.

“Having pleaded guilty, as the board had assumed, and with the board having taken into account your classroom and out of class behaviors, the disciplinary board has decided the following.”

Mr. Brown hesitated as he examined a piece of paper.

“On the charges against you three for breaking into the Headmaster’s office and venturing outside of school grounds, as a result of your Alice In Wonderland trip through the looking glass, you have been found ‘Not Guilty.’ Based upon the assumption that you did this for what you thought was the benefit of the school and not for malicious purposes.”

Mr. Brown saw the elated looks on the three children’s faces.

“I wouldn’t go celebrating just yet. The three of you HAVE been found ‘Guilty’ of being absent at the Tri-School Competition, which is a school-sponsored event that you were required to attend unless otherwise authorized to be absent. Since you didn’t have that authorization, you three will be doing detention next semester.

“And, Mr. Drewell, you have been found guilty of inciting your fellow students into mischievous activities. For this, you will be doing an additional detention with me next semester.

“I will also be calling you three up in front of the entire school assembly during tonight’s feast to make an example of you to the rest of the students. You’re dismissed and I’ll see you on time at the feast tonight,” Mr. Brown said in a noticeable Assistant Headmaster manner.

The three students, who no longer looked elated, turned and slogged out of the dining hall and back to their dormitory. But, although rather depressed, they still felt relieved that they didn’t get expelled.

“Meet you upstairs in about twenty minutes,” Christian said.

The tone of his voice displayed his depression.

He plodded into his bedroom, as the girls trudged up the stairs.

Christian packed quickly, but not as quickly as he normally would have. He kept visualizing he and his two friends standing in front of the whole school with Mr. Brown chastising them and the other students’ laughter echoing off of the walls and in their ears.

Once he had finished packing, and since he still had over ten minutes before he would meet the girls, Christian decided to take one last look out of his window. While sitting there on his floating rug, he gazed out across the lake and thought how he would miss this view.

With the possibility that the school may find a way for him to live upstairs next year, he wondered if this might be his last time ever to enjoy this spectacular view. And, although he may not get to return to this room next year, he kept reminding himself of the most important point...he WOULD be back next year.

As he looked out of the window this one last time, he saw a bird soaring high above the lake. And, he wondered if his friend, or possibly enemy, the hawk had come to visit. But, regardless of whether it was the hawk or not, it didn’t fly down.

After a few more minutes of enjoying the view, Christian floated back down, rolled up the rug, put it into his duffle, and hiked upstairs to the common room.

The feast rivaled the one they had at the beginning of the school year. All of the students ate ravenously, since most didn't eat much lunch due to the anxiety of waiting for their grades.

After a while, everyone had had his or her fill. But, even though they had finished, no one left. Instead, they sat around the tables chatting excitedly, snitching pieces of food now and then.

Then, a short while later, the faculty and staff members made their way down and mingled amongst the tables and students. Some of the teachers congratulated Christian on his marvelous first year. And, after about thirty minutes of student and adult interaction, Mr. Brown stepped back up onto the upper level, near the edge of the stairs.

"May I have your attention?"

He had to speak a little louder than usual, so that everyone could hear him over the discussions going on throughout the hall.

"It's time to present our annual awards, concluding with the award of the Bishop School of Witchcraft Trophy of Honor.

"First, I'm pleased to announce that Ms. Lucinda Ferris has been re-elected as the student president for next year. Congratulations Lucy!"

He led the school in a round of applause, as Lucy stood and waved.

Next, Mr. Brown proceeded to call up individual students, primarily journeyman level and one apprentice level, who received academic awards as the top student in his or her academic specialty. Once these students had returned to their seats, he addressed the entire student body once more.

"The Witches Scholastic Honor Society identifies those students who showed outstanding character, notable scholarship and leadership abilities, and distinguished themselves in service to the school and our society. The following individuals have achieved this recognition."

Mr. Brown proceeded to read off a list of thirty individuals, who stood up next to the table where they sat. After a short round of applause, Mr. Brown then signaled for the thirty students to take their seats once again.

"We have three more members of this prestigious group that I would like to call out separately and have them come forward," Mr. Brown stated.

Then, he pulled out a piece of paper and, looking down at it as if reading the names, he said, "Penelope Humblot, Gwenevere Torres, and Christian Drewell."

Nervous and surprised, the three friends walked up onto the upper level of the dining hall and stood next to Mr. Brown, facing the student body.

"As well as being selected for the Witches Scholastic Honor Society, these three freshmen will share the honor, which typically goes to just one individual each year, as the recipient of the Bishop School of Witchcraft Outstanding Achievement Award.

"They have demonstrated outstanding leadership, ..." Mr. Brown said as he stepped behind Christian.

“Excellent character, ...” he said stepping behind Gwen.

“And unwavering courage, ...” he said behind Penny.

“All in honor of and dedication to our school,” he concluded stepping out the other side of the three students.

“Well done,” Mr. Brown said to the three children, now standing in front and slightly to the side of them.

Mr. Brown began clapping with the rest of the school quickly joining in. While everyone continued clapping, Mr. Brown stepped more in front of the three children and whispered, “I told you that I would be calling you three up in front of the school assembly as an example to all of the students.”

He gave them a smile and then gestured for the three children to return to their seats. The applause continued the whole time as they did and quickly died down once they had returned.

“Our last award for this year is to announce which dormitory is the winner of the Bishop School of Witchcraft Trophy of Honor. Last year’s winner,... the Vipertooshs.”

The Vipertooth table exploded into applause and cheering, interrupting Mr. Brown.

“Yes, yes. Congratulations to last year’s winner. Unfortunately, the Vipertooshs weren’t in the running this year, primarily due to the efforts of one individual who shall remain nameless,” Mr. Brown said without looking at Derick Foulmoth.

However, a few thrown rolls hit Derick, who quickly got up as if to retaliate. But, he decided to sit back down instead.

“It was however a very close race throughout the year, between our remaining two dormitories. The Longhorns came through with a significant surge of merits over the last few months and would be our winners for the year by a significant margin as a result. However, due to the efforts of three freshmen who helped surge them to victory, I am pleased to announce that the Fireballs are the winner of this year’s Trophy of Honor!”

Immediately, the entire hall exploded into applause and cheers. Most of the excitement resulted from the fact that this signaled the end of the school year. However, the Fireballs applauded their win and their three outstanding freshmen, giving several congratulatory comments and pats on the back to Christian, Gwen, and Penny.

As the cheering and applause continued, Mr. Bangar brought in the house trophy, levitating it as he walked. Once he reached the upper level stairs, he placed it on a table that had suddenly appeared next to Mr. Brown. The letters on the front of the trophy glowed in flaming red and read, “Fireballs.”

Accompanying Mr. Bangar, a red dragon soared across the false sky above, breathing fire into the air as it flew. Then, it flew toward the back wall and disappeared.

As the applause subsided, Mr. Brown made his final remarks.

“Before you all evacuate our lovely dining hall for your final night in the dormitories, I want to leave you all with one reminder. To all of you who hope to return to our wonderful school next year, please remember this ... now that you have begun your magical education, the use of magic outside of our school is forbidden.

“We are proud of all that you have done this year. Please have a safe and enjoyable summer and we look forward to seeing ALL of you back here this fall.”

He emphasized the word 'all' while he looked right at Christian. Christian saw this and smiled so large that Mr. Brown could see it from where he stood.

The students all rushed out of the dining hall and back to their dormitories, eager to get to bed and rise early, so that they wouldn't miss the bus in the morning.

Christian, Penny, and Gwen joined everyone. Their emotions ran the range from concern of the detentions next semester, confusion and pleasure from the events that just took place, and excitement of returning home in the morning. However, they benefited from the emotional exhaustion, which allowed them to fall asleep immediately.

Christian waited at the bottom of the stairs the next morning for Gwen and Penny to come down. Once they did, the three friends lugged their bags down to the front entrance and placed them on the luggage carts sitting there.

In the dining hall, everyone seemed to wolf down his or her food and exit the hall quickly, to get in line for the bus. As Christian, Penny, and Gwen ate their breakfast, Mr. Brown approached their table.

"So, what adventures do you three have planned for the summer?"

"I think I'm just going to relax like any non-magical boy of almost thirteen years old." Christian replied.

"So, a very adventurous summer then, right?" joked Mr. Brown.

Christian laughed.

"How about two young female witches?" Mr. Brown continued.

"Probably vacation down in Mexico, visiting my dad's family," responded Gwen.

"Helping my mom and dad," replied Penny.

"Well, I hope this doesn't put a crimp in your summer plans, but I've selected your group detention for next semester," added Mr. Brown.

The three students looked concerned.

"I'd like you three here a few days early, next semester, to assist with the freshmen orientation weekend. Any comments?" Mr. Brown presented.

"No sir," the three said in unison, visibly showing their relief.

"As for you, Christian, I haven't come up with your individual detention just yet. We'll have to wait until next semester to determine that one."

Christian acknowledged his understanding. Then he asked, "Sir, what will happen with Mr. Davis, the compound, and everything?"

"I don't exactly know. I've already passed the information on to my contacts on the Witches Council. I really don't know what repercussions will result, but I'm sure this will impact the relationship between the two political sides of our society. Especially, since the President, apparently, knew of the compound's existence.

"But I don't want you three to concern yourselves about this over the summer. Promise me that you'll all focus on having as much fun as you have ever had on a summer vacation."

"We promise," they responded in chorus, laughing as they did.

"You three had better get going or you'll have to sit in the baggage lockers during the bus ride."

With a final wave, they hurried out of the dining hall.

The line for the bus stretched into the school grounds, but moved fairly rapidly. Once on the bus, the three friends couldn't find three open seats together. However, Wendy Breze, a Fireball freshman, who had a seat to herself, got up and moved when she saw the three of them looking for a seat. They thanked her and sat down, just dropping their suitcases and bags on the floor in front of them. Then, they kicked back, relaxed, and began to recall the events of their first year.

"We need to promise to keep in touch over the summer," proposed Gwen.

"I agree," added Penny.

"How should we do it?" asked Christian.

"We should send each other letters by raven," replied Gwen.

"That way, it will make it to me no matter where I end up going this summer," she added.

"How do I get a raven to pick up a letter?" he asked.

"Just step outside and hold your letter up. Now that you're a recognized witch, the ravens will watch to assist you. Otherwise, you can wait until one delivers a letter to you and you can then give your letter to it," explained Penny.

"Cool," Christian concluded.

The bus ride for Christian and Gwen ended quickly. Gwen and Penny hugged goodbye. Then, Penny quickly hugged Christian and sat back down, tears welling in her eyes.

"We'll write to you soon," Christian said to Penny.

With a final wave goodbye, Christian and Gwen bumped their way to the front of the bus, dragging Gwen's luggage along, and stepped out of the door.

Leewood stood waiting with the limousine and quickly relieved them of their burdens. Gwen and Christian climbed into the car, as Leewood loaded their bags into the trunk. Soon, they had entered the interstate headed to Christian's house and, soon after that, the two children fell fast asleep.

They awoke when Leewood opened the door.

"We've arrived young sir."

Gwen and Christian both got out and saw Katy waiting at the front door.

While Leewood unloaded Christian's bags and carried them to the front porch, the two children said their goodbyes.

"If you don't want to mess with the ravens, give me a call if you want to talk. Here's my number."

Gwen proceeded to write a phone number on Christian's hand.

"Make sure you write this down somewhere, before you wash your hands."

They both snickered.

Then, Gwen hugged Christian and said, "Thanks for everything this year. Your and Penny's friendships have meant a lot to me."

She gave Christian a peck on the cheek and, waving goodbye, got into the car while Leewood held the door for her.

Christian waved goodbye as the limousine pulled away and had soon driven out of site.

Then, he ran up to the porch and hugged his mother the strongest hug he had ever given her. They walked into the house, carrying Christian's bags inside, talking as they had done for years ... best of friends and anxious to hear about each other's activities.