

The background is a dark, atmospheric illustration. It features a building with a glowing window on the left side. A figure is visible inside the window, and another figure is shown in the foreground, holding a glowing, multi-colored object. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, purples, and greens, with a warm glow from the window and the held object.

AIK ISKANDARYAN

WILLIAM CALHOUN
AND
THE BLACK
FEATHER

book I

Aik Iskandaryan

**William Calhoun and the
Black Feather. Book I**

«Издательские решения»

Iskandaryan A.

William Calhoun and the Black Feather. Book I / A. Iskandaryan —
«Издательские решения»,

ISBN 978-5-44-934108-2

William returns to the world of wizards and finds out that an ancient and mysterious place called the «Magic Feather Graveyard» has chosen him as its new Keeper and now he is connected to it by an unbreakable Magic Contract. He also reconsiders the mysterious legacy from his unknown ancestor — the Magic Feather. And soon it turns out that together with William, a powerful killer of wizards has returned to the Wizard Community and William is his #1 target.

ISBN 978-5-44-934108-2

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William Calhoun and the Black Feather Book I

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ISBN 978-5-4493-4108-2 (т. 1)

ISBN 978-5-4493-4109-9

Created with Ridero smart publishing system

William Calhoun and the Black Feather

Chapter one

William named after two Williams

Number 7 in the Green Wiz Street belonged to an old woman, Mrs. Oliver, who was much over seventy. With each day, moving around was becoming more difficult for her, not mentioning walking near the house. She lived together with a boy called William Calhoun. Exactly seven years ago, as she was strolling around her house in the evening, about to head home to get ready for bed, Mrs. Oliver noticed a small bundle in the middle of the road opposite her house. The bundle looked like a piece of crumpled fabric thrown out of the passing car. However, since cars on the roads around here were rare, this find was quite a surprise. It was very quiet. Thinking that one of the locals must have thrown out some old clothes, Mrs. Oliver turned around and started walking towards her house. But she stopped when someone started crying. It was a baby cry, no doubts. She looked around and saw no one, but in a few seconds, she realized where the crying was coming from. Her walk somewhat unsure, she headed to the road and, as she came closer, took a good look at the bundle. It turned out to be a baby, wrapped in rags.

Mrs. Oliver picked the baby up. Sensing her care, he fell quiet. His big blue eyes stared at Mrs. Oliver and then the baby's tiny mouth opened in a smile.

«Stop it,» Mrs. Oliver grumbled. «I'm not that old for you, young man, to make fun of my looks!»

No more doubts left, she took the baby home and brought him up as her own.

A teacher of literature in the past, Mrs. Oliver had retired long ago and now lived alone. Her husband passed away a year ago and they didn't have children of their own. After that, the lonely widow lived waiting for the hour she would follow her husband. But she was destined to keep living for seven more years, which she had fully devoted to young William.

She came up with the name for the boy right away. She called the baby boy after two worthiest people, in her opinion, – William Shakespeare and William Blake. Besides that, there was a small white feather sticking out of the rags the boy was wrapped in. Pale yellow word was visible on the feather «Calhoun'. So Mrs. Oliver didn't think on the last name much either.

«Some are born to sweet delight, some are born to endless night...» she quoted as she took the dirty rags off the boy. «What are you born to, mister?!»

From the very first day, she grew quite fond of the boy.

«You are likely destined to a very rare fate and a long life if you've ALREADY survived,» she told him each time.

It was probably a teacher habit to call her students «mister' and «miss' or, perhaps, she really thought the child to be special, but she always addressed the boy politely «mister Calhoun'!

Seven years have passed since that memorable event. Mrs. Oliver decided that the day the baby came into her life will be the boy's birthday. So it was William's birthday today. Mrs. Oliver had spent the whole day in the kitchen and made William's favourite strawberry cake. As a gift, the boy got a set of warm clothes from her – a sweater, thick woollen socks and two shirts.

«You'll need that for your trip when mister Hoggart comes, my dear,» Mrs. Oliver said.

Mrs. Oliver realized that she wasn't getting any younger and it was time to find a family where the boy wouldn't be a stranger. And it was time to send William to school as well. So, a month ago she sent a letter to distant relatives of her late husband where she asked to take William in, explaining that she didn't have much time left and she didn't want the boy to go to the orphanage.

The Hoggarts visited them once when Mr. Oliver was still alive. Mrs. Oliver understood back then that these relatives were very decent and intelligent people. They lived in London and were quite wealthy, so there were no doubts that William wouldn't be a burden for them.

Two days ago, a letter came from London saying that the Hoggarts would be happy to have young William staying with them for as long as he wanted, and that this Sunday evening Edward Hoggart, the head of the family, would come for the boy.

William himself wasn't taking the idea of moving away well. He had no desire to part with Mrs. Oliver, to change something in his life. And, as he often admitted to himself, it was pretty scary to just go and live in a family of people he didn't know. Nobody was going to become his friend, because he didn't know how to be friends with anyone. He happened to have no friends. There were very few people living in the Blackchester County, not mentioning the Green Wiz Street, with its five or six families. Mostly retired people. Until the very last moment, William was trying to convince Mrs. Oliver not to send him off to the Hoggarts.

«But grandma!» William had treated Mrs. Oliver as his grandmother all these years, though he knew the truth about his appearance in her house. «I like living with you! Why should I live with other people if I have you?!»

«Alas, my dear, you will have to go. I'm old and there's little I can do. Life isn't something eternal! There comes a time when we all go where we came from – to the other world! But you... your life is about to change. And you should greet those changes with a smile, not with an old woman who's already standing with one foot in the other world.»

«Then I want to stand with one foot in the other world, too!» William didn't want to give up.

«Don't be silly, young man!» Mrs. Oliver said in her strict teacher-like voice. «How pitiful your life would be if it continued to consist only of an old woman and her house!» Then she added in a softer tone: «You'll find friends, perhaps, even admirers...»

William listened to her silently.

«But, most importantly, a normal family!»

«But I don't know anyone there...» he objected gloomily.

«Then use a chance to know those who aren't your grandma! Besides, your parents, no matter who they are, should be proud of you, young man. Do your best! The Hoggarts will find a good school for you and if you study well, you'll get admitted into a prestigious university!»

William gave it a thought, then said:

«But I know nothing about my parents, grandma. How do I know if they are proud of me or not?»

«That's easy! Make the whole world proud of you! Then your parents will be among others as well!» said Mrs. Oliver passionately, she never stopped believing in what she was saying.

«Alright, whatever you say, grandma! I mean, I'll try... They will be proud...» William said unsurely and added in a sad tone: «Even if they had left me.»

«Go and check your suitcase, young man,» said Mrs. Oliver as she tried to avoid this difficult topic. «Mister Hoggart will be here any minute.»

The boy went to his room obediently to check if he had packed everything for the road, while Mrs. Oliver kept standing there for another minute. And if William had been there with her, he wouldn't have missed the tear that was running down the wrinkled cheek of the old lady.

Chapter two

«Well-Fed Wizard»

Seven years passed since the day Mr. Hoggart took the boy. William was going home at his customary slow pace. He grew up, and his golden hair had become even brighter than in his childhood. Unnatural dark blue of his eyes and smooth features gave him the air of mystery. On 1 July, he turned fourteen and he was going to finish school in a couple of years. Mr. and Mrs. Hoggart were rather kind to him from the first day he had started living with them. They gave him their last name, and over time, William almost completely got used to being a Hoggart. He seemed to have even forgotten that somebody had addressed him as «Mister Calhoun». All in all, William was rather satisfied with his life, but to his mind, it was rather boring. He had some friends but for some reason he wasn't very close with any of them. William liked being alone, he liked pondering on different things.

So. On that September day, he was going back home from school and, as he was passing a café, he suddenly realized that he had never been in a place like that. First of all, he didn't really have anyone to go there with, and, secondly, Mrs. Hoggart always remembered to put lunch into his school bag. But now he wanted to go in and see what was inside. Inside he saw people sitting at the tables and, when he spotted a barman, he walked up to him and was about to order a bottle of water when the other man spoke first.

«Bathroom's to the right!» he snapped and started wiping a glass vigorously.

«What makes you think that I want to go there?» William said, surprised. «I simply want to drink some water.»

«Listen, lad!» boomed the irritated barman. «Either you'll go to that bathroom and sit on the toilet, where you belong, or you'll get the hell out of here and I continue serving demits without you bothering me!»

Surprised with his words, William thought that it was probably the rules: before sitting at the table, you need to wash your hands. He wanted to proceed to the room by following the directions on the wall, but the annoying barman intervened again.

«Is it your first time here or something?!» he bellowed. «To the right and straight on!»

In his heart, William was grateful to the patrons for talking so loudly that nobody heard this awful person yelling at him. He obediently walked in the direction the barman pointed him at, just to stop seeing his annoying face. As he walked, he couldn't help wondering why he hadn't simply turned around and left after this horrible treatment? But William's train of thought was interrupted when he saw a strange picture on the bathroom door – a funny fat man sitting at a table in a night gown and a pointy hat.

For a while, William wondered what this meant, but couldn't think of anything. He shrugged and walked right in. Upon entering, he started towards the sink to wash his hands, but then the door to one of the cubicles opened noisily.

A man in a porter uniform and with a strained smile on his face stared blankly and pompously invited William:

«This way, young sir! Have you got a reservation?»

The front of the man's uniform had a large emblem depicting the same fat man in a nightgown and a strange hat. On that emblem, the man was sitting at the table and stroking his belly in a satisfied way.

William looked around to make sure that this weird man in pompous clothes was addressing him. But there was nobody else in the room. The porter was looming over the toilet as if he was standing by the entrance to a five-star hotel. He was wearing white gloves.

«Are you talking to me?» William asked as he collected himself.

The obligatory smile was gone from the porter's face in an instant and his eyes that were staring blankly shifted over to William.

«Young sir! There's nobody here besides us. I believe you have come to our establishment in order to quench your hunger and thirst. My duty is to see you to your table where you will wait for your order like all the rest!» The voice of this weird man was growing impatient. «And now would you kindly allow me to escort you?»

«Er... Well, let's go!» William said, having decided that since he had never been in such establishments before he wasn't aware of something. The second man today was looking at him like at an alien! No way! He had no desire to continue being a laughing matter! And William headed to the exit.

«This way, young sir!» the strange man said behind him.

William turned around and to his horror he saw that the porter's finger was pointing directly at the toilet seat.

«No way! That's it!» he thought. How had he even ended in a place like this!

William really wanted to leave this utterly weird establishment where everyone, at least to his mind, was treating him like an idiot. But something inexplicable didn't allow him to do it. And, with a mental shrug, William decided that from now on he wasn't going to be surprised with anything, no matter what happened. Even if he would be served his meal right here. He approached the strange man and he gestured at the toilet seat.

«Please, young sir!»

After a moment's deliberation, William sat down and gave the porter a quizzical look. But the strange man just slammed the door shut and flushed the water.

William didn't even have time to be surprised again when everything started spinning before his eyes, but in a moment everything was back to normal again. However, his stomach seemed to be still spinning and that unpleasant sensation made William throw up. The toilet came in quite handy in this situation. When William came round, he was going to apologize to the mysterious «porter», but the man was already offering him a white handkerchief, as if he had foreseen that something like that would happen to the boy. William thanked the porter and took the handkerchief.

The strange man opened the cubicle door before him and pointed towards the exit. William left the cubicle and as he turned around, he saw a really odd picture: the porter was calmly sitting on the toilet, buried in a fresh newspaper. Sensing William's glance, he gave the boy a quizzical look and nodded towards the exit again.

«Enjoy your meal, young sir!» he said almost politely and continued reading.

William went to the sink, washed his face and left this really weird bathroom. Imagine his surprise when instead of the familiar corridor, he saw a completely different place. Now he was surrounded by a narrow pathway illuminated by candles, with voices coming from a distance. They were singing loudly. William made a few unsure steps along the pathway, without any idea where he was. Then he saw a door labelled «Common Hall». As he opened it, William made a few more steps and froze on the spot.

The boy saw a large hall illuminated by numerous candles in ornate holders, on the walls and hanging from the ceiling. Several semi-circle sofas by the table occupied one part of the room. The other part consisted of small compartment-like rooms, inside which William could make out smaller tables and people sitting around them. Nearly all of them were wearing robes, and he thought that there was some kind of a dress-up party in here. Some of the patrons were wearing cloaks and feathered hats. And the girls had feathers attached to their hair. Feathers! They were everywhere! And at the same time, all feathers were different: big, fluffy, of various colours and length.

William was looking at all that as he stood rooted to the spot. He felt completely out of place. And no wonder: he was wearing threadbare jeans, old shoes, and a sweater with a white collar sticking

from underneath. William thought that he and his clothes really stood out from this background. Feeling at loss, he made a step back and at the same time someone he couldn't see bumped into him, nearly knocking him off his feet. The clash ended with the sound of broken dishes.

«Hey, pal!» a female voice said. «Are you going to stand here all day?»

Barely managing to stay on his feet, William turned around and saw a young woman standing before him. Her clothes bore the same symbol like that on the porter's.

Judging by her clothes, she was a waitress here.

«I'm sorry, ma'am!» William apologized and bent down to collect broken pieces from the floor. «How clumsy of me. I'll clean it up at once!»

For a few moments, the waitress watched him with interest, then she asked:

«What are you doing?»

Her look told William that he was doing something improper.

«It's my fault,» he said. «And I want to help you, ma'am!»

«Ma'am?» the waitress asked with a smile. «Where are you from, buddy?»

«I live here, in London,» William got up.

«And have you ever been in taverns before?»

«Er...» he blushed. «No... it's my first time here.»

The waitress curiously watched him for another moment, then said:

«Alright, alright! I'll clean it myself!»

Then she took a green feather out of her hair, waved it and said:

«*Returno!*»

His eyes wide, William watched the plate pieces soar up into the air from the floor and glue back together. Moreover, the spilled soup splashed into the plate and settled in there smoothly. And then a couple of spoons and a jug flew up, made a circle and settled on the tray in her hand.

After performing all that, the girl turned to him:

«Still here? Better sit over there,» she pointed at a table by the wall. «It's vacant. Somebody will tend to you soon.»

After a bit, William came round, looked here and there and slowly walked to the table she pointed at. He was seriously considering the fact that it was just a dream. Then somebody all but slammed a thick book on the table in front of him.

This made William jump up. He looked at the book, which resembled a volume on the world history. He could make out green letters on the cover that read «Menu».

«Good day, young sir!» somebody said.

William looked up and saw a tall thin blond man with large hands. One of his hands was tapping the table next to the menu. William thought that if the owner of this hand wished so, he could easily cover the menu with his palm.

«Look,» William finally broke the silence. «Where am I?»

«You are at the «Well-Fed Wiz...» the waiter's voice broke off as if his mouth suddenly became dry.

He wasn't even looking at the visitor, but he suddenly froze, then slowly turned his gaze on William sitting at the table.

«Sir,» the boy asked. «Are you alright?»

«I cannot believe my letters...» the waiter whispered slowly, his eyes round with surprise.

Even though the waiter said this phrase almost under his breath, William managed to hear it. Hear it, but not understand it.

«Sorry, what?»

But the waiter didn't seem to be even listening.

«Yes! That voice... I cannot be mistaken...» he continued muttering, giving William an even more intent look.

«What are you talking about?» William said, confused.

«What is your name?» the waiter disregarded William's words again.

«William! What does it have to do...»

«And your full name?» he interrupted.

«Hoggart! William Hoggart. Listen, what does my name have to do with it? Can you explain to me where I...»

«A liiiiie!» the waiter suddenly yelled, slamming his other hand into the table.

William jumped up in fear again.

«Green Monogram! This cannot be!» the waiter continued yelling desperately. «No, I simply refuse to believe it, sir!» His eyes bore into William, as if trying to find something in him.

«What can't be?!» William asked angrily.

«But... your last name...» the waiter's voice dropped to a whisper. «It is different!»

«Different?» William repeated.

He felt as if he was going to go mad if nobody explained to him what was happening. And WHAT WAS THIS PLACE he was at?!

«Is the name Calhoun familiar to you?» the waiter was persistent. «Calhoun? Perhaps you have heard the name Calhoun before?»

«Look, sir! Stop acting so odd! I don't know the name Cal...» Now it was William's turn to trail off.

The waiter leaned towards him so close that the boy felt the man's uneven breath on his face.

«Why did you fall silent?! You have heard this name before, have you not?» he asked, peering into one William's eye, then another one.

«Did you say – Calhoun?»

«Yes. That is what I said. Calhoun,» said the crazy waiter, patiently, but barely holding himself, as he kept peering into William's eyes.

«I don't know anyone with this name, sir...»

«Green Monogram!» the waiter shrieked as he straightened up. «Mailmages are never wrong! They... they simply cannot be!»

«Mail... who? Listen, sir, you didn't even give me a chance to finish!» continued William, not restraining himself any longer. «I wanted to say that I don't know anyone with the name Calhoun, but it seems familiar.»

In an instant, the waiter was in a dangerous proximity to his nose again. William even had to throw his head back a bit.

«Where?! Where have you heard it?» the waiter continued.

«Well... you may not believe me, but I have a feather with an inscription «Calhoun'...»

«A feather!» the waiter cried out madly. «By the Burnt Envelopes! I knew it! I just knew!»

William was staring at the waiter with deep concern, the same way as people look at a sick person.

«Are you sure you're alright, sir?»

«Oh, I am more than alright!» the waiter said with satisfaction. But his smile was gone in an instant.

«Where do you live?»

«Why do you need to know where I live?» William decided that he wasn't going to take part in that stupid act any longer. Enough, it was time to go home!

He got up and wanted to head to the exit, but the waiter said seriously:

«Knowing where you live is the most important thing I must know in my life, Master Calhoun! Please, answer me. I am begging you! On my knees!» Like promised, he fell to his knees with a thud and folded his large hands as if he was going to say a prayer.

«Blackfriars Lane» William took pity on this mad man.

«And House? Which House?!» the waiter asked in a trembling voice.

«Number 13.»

Upon hearing this, the waiter jumped up, tore the apron off him, threw it on the floor and stumped on the emblem embroidered on it. «Since this moment on I am not working in the «Well-Fed Wizard' any longer!»

Giving William a loving look, he grabbed his shoulder with his large palm and said loudly:

«Number 13, Blackfriars Lane!»

William felt as if he was thrown into a kaleidoscope. Everything started spinning before his eyes, like vegetables in a blender in the kitchen of the kind Mrs. Hoggart. He felt a tight grip on his shoulder, but after a few moments, he was relieved to feel that the grip was lessening. The whirlwind was getting slower and after a moment, it stopped altogether.

He felt as if he was smashed into the floor, so sudden was his arrival. But to his surprise, he didn't feel any pain. As he looked around, he noticed familiar items, furniture, bookshelves... It was hard to believe that it was really happening, but William was standing in the middle of his room, back in the Blackfriars Lane. And the crazy waiter was looming over him.

Chapter three

From Kin to Kin, Kin for the Good of Kin!

When William was able to speak again, he asked in a slightly trembling voice:

«But how did we get here? And who... who are you?»

«We will have time to speak about it, Master Calhoun! And now, please, show me the feather.»

William felt that his patience was running out. The waiter noticed that and hurried to add:

«It is the last thing I am asking you! After that, Master Calhoun will get answers to all his questions, I promise!»

William thought that if he hadn't yet gone mad after all that had happened to him today, then a few more seconds wouldn't change much.

«Well, alright!» he agreed and headed to the wardrobe where he kept his old things in a tattered suitcase.

He took a wooden box from the bottom of the suitcase.

«Is it in there?» the waiter asked impatiently, eagerly following William's every move.

«Yes, I've always kept it in here. I used to take it out and stare at it for hours, then stopped. A useless thing!»

With that, he opened the box. To his amazement, the tiny feather that used to fit the box without any problems, was now large and fluffy, bent in half. It was really fluffy!

«But,» William could barely believe what he'd just witnessed. «It was smaller...»

The waiter stood silently, looking at the feather as if enchanted. William decided to take the feather out of the box, but the moment he touched it, the feather started moving as if it was alive. Taken by surprise, he threw the box up into the air, but at that moment, the waiter's wide nimble hands caught it without letting it fall. Holding his breath, he returned the box to William. The feather was still moving and slowly, lazily, stretching out its hairs, just like a person who wakes up in the morning full of energy, yawning and stretching before getting up.

«No, I'm definitely dreaming!» William had no more doubts. «Such things can't be happening in real life.»

The waiter came closer, bent over the feather and read the name inscribed on it very quietly:

«Calhoun...» Then he added in a normal voice: «There could have been no mistake, I knew it from the moment I heard your voice...»

He made a few steps back and said, giving William a serious look:

«Young William should not be surprised with such things. It is quite...»

«What?!» Everything that had been building up in William over the day suddenly burst out. «A rude person tells me to go to the bathroom where he says I belong; in the bathroom I meet a strange man in a uniform who sits me down on the toilet and flushes me; then I find myself in a very strange place with oddly dressed people; then a waitress nearly knocks me off my feet, and she can collect soup from the floor and glue broken dishes back with the wave of an ordinary feather; and in the end I meet you, and in a few seconds you move me to my own room, where I take out the feather and it is bigger than it was seven years ago and, what's more, it moves! And you say that I shouldn't be surprised?!»

Despite William's heated speech, the waiter remained calm.

«My name is Nymus,» he said. «I am the mailmage of the Calhouns! YOUR mailmage, Master Clahoun!»

«My who?!» William asked.

«Mailmage! Each wizard kin must have one,» and after a pause, he added: «As far as I can see, Master Calhoun still does not know that he is a wizard?»

William needed half a minute for the question to sink in. As he took a grip on himself and ran today's events in his head again, he asked:

«So, I'm not mad and all that happened to the waitress and the tray was for real?»

«Yes. I saw that, Master Calhoun. I admit, I even laughed at your clumsiness. How stupid of me! Laugh at my own master!»

«I'm not your master, what are you talking about? And why do you keep calling me Calhoun?»

«Young William has so much to learn! You should better sit down.»

After giving it a bit of thought, William realized that the mailmage was right. He sat down and then Nymus continued:

«What do you know about your family?»

This question made William shiver, as if someone had just thrown a shovel of snow right into his face. Suddenly, he looked at the mailmage as if this Nymus was the most important person in his life.

«You know about my REAL family?»

«I do! Tell me, how long have you been living here, young William?»

«Since I was seven. Before that, I lived with my grandma. She found me in the street when I was a baby.»

«And how old are you now?» asked Nymus in the same busy-like voice.

«Not long ago I turned fourteen. On July 1.»

«Green Monogram! Then it is really you. I understood that as soon as I heard your voice! Listen, Master Calhoun,» Nymus's voice became even more serious and busy-like, «All your family and relatives tragically died fourteen years ago. It happened a day after you were born.»

William was speechless. For a while, he couldn't say a word, no matter how hard he tried. Then he took a grip on himself and asked:

«How did it happen?»

«Nobody knows!» Nymus replied. «The only known thing is that seventeen wizards died over one night. All of them Calhouns. After that night, the Calhoun kin perished. And I...» he trailed off holding back his tears, «was left without work.»

William thought that the last words were too selfish. They were talking about a completely different thing. And he snapped:

«How is your work connected with my family?»

«It is connected by ancient, really ancient magic, Master Calhoun! Each wizard kin has their own mailmage kin that serves them faithfully. *From kin to kin, kin for the good of kin...* Our kin was always proud of their masters. Because the Calhouns is a rather famous kin among wizards.»

«And I...» William found it hard to process all the information Nymus was giving him. «So, I'm a Calhoun, too?»

«The last,» the mailmage corrected him, «the last Calhoun. Until today you were also considered dead, young William.»

There was a brief silence, after which William said:

«You're saying that I'm a wizard! I'm sorry to disappoint you, but... I can't do things like you do or like that waitress in the tavern.»

«It is easy to refute!»

William gave him a puzzled look and the waiter – the mailmage now – continued serenely:

«Take the magic feather.»

William took the box obediently. As he opened it again, he didn't even have time to touch the feather. It shot out of the box on its own and, pausing in the air for a moment, started drawing eights at high speed.

«Do not be alarmed, Master Calhoun,» Nymus calmed him down, «The feather is not going to hurt you. You just need to call it! It will not lie in your hand otherwise.»

And indeed, William's attempt to grab the feather, then another one and another, ended with the feather slipping away from him the moment he was going to grab it. The feather seemed to be teasing him, hanging right before his nose after each unsuccessful attempt.

«You need to say «*Obnoxus*,» Nymus advised, «and it will lie in your hand.»

William gave him a look full of disbelief, but decided to make one last attempt:

«*Ob... Obnoxus!*» he repeated after Nymus.

The moment William said the word, the feather swayed from side to side and lay onto his hand. The next moment, bright blue light escaped from the tip of the feather, frightening William. The pale yellow inscription «Calhoun' on the feather shone bright and became golden.

This lasted for a few seconds, after which the glow died. The inscription became pale yellow again and the feather in his hand was moving its hairs lazily and calmly, like a cat moving its tail when scratched behind the ears.

«The feather has found its master,» Nymus smiled and advised: «Always keep it close, Master Calhoun Without the feathers wizards become vulnerable.»

«So it's true?» William asked, still staring at the feather. «I'm a wizard?»

«Yes, Master Calhoun. And you are no worse than other wizards. Like I said, you have all the rights to live and study among people like yourself.»

«But,» William looked up at Nymus, «I already live with the Hoggarts and go to school.»

«It can be easily fixed. Now tell me, do they treat you well?»

«Yes!» William said truthfully. «They are wonderful people.»

«That is good!» Nymus said approvingly. «Master Calhoun, you will need to change school. Now you are going to study together with other wizards.»

«Does this mean that there are special places where magic is taught?»

«You think wizards are illiterate? Or that they do not have their own world? Only magic is not taught, young wizards are taught to control it by developing their skills.»

«Tell me, in that place...» William began, as he suddenly remembered, «where we met... were there also...»

«There were only wizards there,» Nymus finished for him. «But I cannot understand how you managed to get there if you did not know about it.»

«By accident. Well, it was my first time at a café,» William admitted. «And when I entered, the barman directed me to the bathroom. You know the rest.»

«Oh, the fate favours us, young William! We have reunited – a wizard and his mailmage!»

«Are you... are you going to live with me now?» William asked awkwardly.

«Live?!» Nymus laughed. «No, young William! Mailmages are not supposed to live with their masters! They live at the Magic Post Office! I used to live there as well until I was fired after losing my masters.»

«But it wasn't your fault that they died, Nymus. Why did they fire you?»

«A mailmage without his wizard is no mailmage at all. He becomes useless and is banished. I was forced to go looking for work and became a waiter at the „Well-Fed Wizard“, that is how the tavern is called,» Nymus explained seeing William's reaction to the name. «I have worked there for fourteen years, but now it is in the past! I shall return to the Post Office tomorrow and tell them that I have found my master, then they will take me back!»

«Well, I'm happy for you, Nymus!» William said sincerely. «You said you used to serve my family... My parents... what were their names?»

«They were Patrick and Sally Calhoun,» Nymus replied. «But like I said before, nothing is known about their deaths. Their bodies were found far from their home.»

William repeated the names of his parents in his head and, for a while, he sat silently. Then he turned to the mailmage again:

«Did you know them well?»

«The mailmage position of the Calhoun family had just been transferred to me at that time. I took it from my father Lester after he had retired. I had just finished the Post Office Academy and started working there. And soon...» Nymus stumbled, «I lost everything.»

He was looking at William as if he could hardly believe that they had met. After a few moments, Nymus continued in a more cheerful voice:

«A for your studies... Like I have already told you, you will have to change school. You are fourteen, and this is the age when wizards are enrolled in the Preparatory Course to one of the MUnis.»

«MUnis?» William repeated.

«Magic University! After graduation, each wizard can choose a profession. You cannot do without higher education, Master Calhoun! There were many powerful wizards in your kin and they all did great at Templedoor and beyond it as well...»

Nymus's voice dropped to a whisper. But after a pause he continued cheerfully:

«First thing in the morning, we are going to the Magic Post Office, I shall get the mailmage license back, and from there we shall go register your magic feather so that you could enrol in the Preparatory Course!»

«It's all great, but what am I going to tell Hoggarts when they get a letter from school about me missing classes?»

«Letters are my job, Master Calhoun,» Nymus smiled. «Hoggarts will not get any letters about your absence from the demit school.»

«Who are demits?» William asked. «I've heard this word from the barman, but didn't pay too much attention to it back then.»

«That is how we call non-wizard folk,» Nymus explained.

«I see!»

William found it hard to believe that all of this was happening to him for real. His life was changing rapidly. And each moment spent with Nymus changed his destiny even more. After a bit of thinking, he spoke up again:

«So, Hoggarts will know nothing about the school... And where am I going to study? Where's this school?»

«The classes take place in London,» Nymus replied.

«In London?» William repeated, unbelieving.

«Yes, in London! Looks like I need to tell Master Calhoun even more about wizards and the wizarding world.»

«Yes, please, if you don't mind!» William replied gratefully.

Nymus placed one hand over the other, as if he was going to start a very long story:

«Well, you will learn most of it in the classes on wizard history, but I will tell you the main things!»

«Take a seat, Nymus,» William pointed at the bed beside himself.

«Take a seat?!» Nymus repeated indignantly.

«Well, yes. Is something wrong with that?»

«Master Calhoun, no decent mailmage will allow himself to sit when his master is present, under no circumstances. It is not according to the mailtiquette!»

«Stop calling me master!» William said angrily. «I've never been a master to anyone. I've never even had a dog. Besides,» he added in a less angry tone, «I'm your wizard and I allow you to sit in my presence.»

«No, Master Clahoun, I am a decent mailmage and I am very happy to find my wizard again! But even under these happy circumstances, I shall not break the Post Office Code! Allow me to keep standing before you and do not offer me to take a seat again.»

«Well, as you wish,» William gave up. «So, what about wizards?»

«Yes, right! The world we live in, Master Calhoun, equally belongs both to demits and to wizards.»

«But Nymus,» William interrupted him, «during the fourteen years of my life, I've never met any wizards. Other people I know also believe that all the talks about wizards are nothing more than fairy-tales.»

«Long time ago, fairy-tales were written by wizards themselves, as they described their own adventures or the lives of their friends. Then demits started writing fairy-tales. As for the fact you have never met wizards until today... that is how it is supposed to be! Demits should not be aware of the true state of things. But you are a wizard, Master Calhoun, and it is wrong that you find this out only at the age of fourteen. It is completely wrong, Green Monogram!» the mailmage couldn't help swearing again.

«Nymus, Nymus...» William hurried to cool the mailmage's emotions. «I've found it out thanks to you, please, calm down.»

«I apologize, Master Calhoun,» Nymus hurried to say and continued. «So, where was I...»

«Talking about wizards and ordinary people,» William reminded him.

«They are called demits.»

«Fine! Wizards and demits. Continue!»

«Right, demits! Most of them believe that everything they have achieved is due only to their own efforts!»

«Isn't it?»

«Of course, not, I swear to Post Office! There is the IFW – International Federation of Wizards, which acts in all countries of the world. Its current president is Quincy von Bulberg. Though, to my mind, Fafner would have filled the role of the international leader of wizards so much better. But who am I, a mere mailmage, to judge these thing. I am just a midget! A Letter Worm! A wide-foot frog!» Nymus suddenly started to humiliate himself.

«Nymus! Stop insulting yourself!» William said strictly. «We've already agreed that you are my Mailmage!»

«Yes, Master Calhoun, that is true!» Nymus brightened up. «I serve the proud Calhoun kin, the last representative of this noble kin!»

«Er... thanks, but you'd better continue your story about wizards,» William interrupted him softly.

«Whatever you say, Master Calhoun! Your word is the Envelope Seal for me!» and Nymus bowed elegantly.

«Oh, come on, stop apologizing, bowing, calling me master, and being so overly polite! Since today we're friends, remember this. And friends don't bow to each other!»

These words made Nymus's face practically glow.

«Oh, my noble Master Calhoun! It's clear that there's noble blood in you, the noblest of them all! And I am very proud that I am...»

«Tell me, Nymus,» William interrupted him calmly, «can a master fire his mailmage?»

«Yes, if desired! Then representatives of several vacant kins will be sent over for a new mailmage to be selected. But this happens only if a mailmage dishonours the kin of his wizard or angers the wizard for some reason...»

Then he added in alarm:

«And why is Master Calhoun asking about it?»

«Because Master Calhoun will fire you if you bow to him again or will continue praising him every other sentence!»

«Oh Master Calhoun!»

Nymus fell to his knees and started wailing and pleading not to be fired:

«Fourteen years living in disgrace for staying without masters, for dishonouring my noble kin... Oh, I am a worthless mailmage, Green Monogram! Worthless! Worthless!»

«Now, now...» William tried to calm him down, «I'm not going to fire you, just stop acting like this and embarrassing me!»

These words made Nymus smile. He jumped up and turned to William.

«As you say, Master Calhoun! Like I said, your word is the Envelope Seal for me!»

«Alright, then!» said William. «Now, please, continue telling me about the federation of wizards and its connection with pe... with demits.»

«Yes! So, demits do not even suspect that there is at least one wizard among the leaders of their countries, who makes sure the situation stays under control. Because if wizards stop helping demits, the balance will shift and then...»

«Then what?»

«It will be chaos!» Nymus said. «The peace between wizards and demits will be gone!»

«Has it happened before?»

«Thank Celestine, no! But things worse than that happened!»

«What can be worse than what you've just described, Nymus?»

«Once,» Nymus's voice dropped to a whisper, «there were dark times for wizards. Wizards were on the verge of extinction! But it is best to avoid mentioning this! As we, mailmagings, like to say: «Do not disturb the Post Office archive!»

William gave it a bit of thought, then said:

«Well, if it's best to avoid it, then we will! Tell me, where do wizards live? Not here, in London?»

«Not only in London! Wizards live everywhere. In all corners of the world.»

«And they live in houses, like demits?»

«Of course, they do!» Nymus said indignantly. «Their houses are situated quite close to demit ones. But they are either hidden from prying eyes or they can be seen, but nobody will pay any attention to them.»

«Why is that?»

«Because a Repulsion spell is placed on wizard houses, which allows them to avoid any attention from demits. They do not need it.»

«And schools for wizards, are they hidden from demit eyes as well?»

«Master Calhoun, wizards do not study until they are fourteen. And they do not go to schools.»

«How? What do they do all this time?» William was surprised.

«They learn to control their abilities from the age of seven, when they get their Magic Feather, and they spend seven years after that on becoming close to it. It is one thing to receive a feather – you need to get along with it. And it requires a lot of time and a lot of knowledge, which they get from the books and from their parents. When the time comes and wizards turn fourteen, they are enrolled in the Preparatory Course, after which they can be admitted to a MUni. MUni is...»

«Yes, yes, I already know! You said it yourself – Magic University!»

«Envelope Seal! That is right! Master Calhoun learns fast!» Nymus noted happily.

«I'm trying!» William said sarcastically. «Continue.»

«There are four MUnis: Templedoor...»

«And there's place for all students in them?» William asked with a shade of distrust.

«Of course! Those are not like demit schools, small, uncomfortable, where it is hard even to study, not mentioning living!»

«Do wizards live in MUnis?»

«It is an obligatory part of education! Otherwise, they will stop perceiving MUni as their home, which will later weaken their connection with teachers and influence their studies. Not mentioning the time they would spend on getting to classes.»

«Are MUnis that far?»

«Nobody knows. Even we, mailmages, have never known the exact location of any MUni, young William! And we are supposed to know all the addresses to get all letters to addressees.»

«Oh! Then each wizard is sent letters through you, mailmages? Is that right?»

«That is right! Cannot do without us, mailmages!» Nymus replied, proud of his profession. «We deliver not only letters, but also parcels, gifts, and everything that can be sent.»

«How do you deliver mail to students without knowing MUni addresses?»

«Oh, that is easy! We simply put the name of the MUni as our destination and get there in a few minutes! But I have to say...» at this point Nymus raised his chin and added another portion of pride to his voice, «not all mailmages are so slow! Peregrining takes some mailmages only a few seconds...»

«Mailmages like you, for example?» William could barely keep himself from smiling.

«Master Calhoun is so kind... and right, as always!»

«Alright, alright, I understand that I'm very lucky to have you as a mailmage!» said William solemnly. «What is peregrining?» he asked after a bit of thinking.

«Peregrining is a process of movement, transporting letters or wizards across space.»

«Well, looks like I've already been through it and let me tell you: peregrining is a rather peculiar way of earning a headache! And what is Templedoor?»

«The first peregrining is always accompanied by discomfort, Master Calhoun! But do not worry. You will get used to it! As for Templedoor, it is one of four MUnis and, according to the popular opinion, it is the most elite institution to teach magical arts. There are also Wingville, Findsor, and Garville. These are four acknowledged MUnis.»

William got up and started pacing the room, trying to remember each word.

«Are there not acknowledged ones?» he asked.

«There are. But few wizards take them into account! And few enter them.»

William stopped for a moment and looked at Nymus.

«Do they give bad education?»

«It is not bad or good, Master Calhoun, it is WHAT they teach that matters. And they teach dark evil things, Green Monogram! They even say that no mailmage dares to go there. Unless his master sends him over there with an errand! But wizards usually try to avoid giving such errands. They understand that things may not go well for their mailmage.»

«Oh! What can they do to him in there?»

«Torment! Torture! Pry important information about the Post Office and even kill! Green Monogram! To do this to us, mailmages!»

«Calm down, Nymus! I won't send you there, don't worry. Have there been such cases?»

«Oh, of course there have, young William, there have!»

William started pacing the room again.

«Why is it impossible to enter a MUni right away? Why is it necessary to study for a year before that?»

«Because it is the preparatory course of magic that reveals the abilities of a wizard! Unable wizards or those who do not want to study will never get invitations from MUnis! But I am quite sure that in a year I will deliver a letter from a MUni to Master Calhoun! And, Post Office save me, let that letter be from Templedoor!»

«So what's so special about it that makes it better than others?»

«Well, the first and the main reason is that it is headed by Fafner himself!»

«Who is he?»

«Unsent Letters! Not knowing Ferzibald Fafner is like knowing nothing about wizards!»

«Well, Nymus, you can excuse me. Don't forget, I've known about wizards for less than an hour.»

«Wind Take My Letters!» Nymus slapped his forehead with his large hand. «That is right! Ferzibald Fafner is one of the greatest wizards of all times! He founded the Wizard Association and he is the chairman of the Wizard Education Department. He is also one of the founders of the «Carefree Wizard' Fund that helps wizards from all around the world with problems connected with housing, health, and family. The Fund has helped many those suffering from the incurable Bellini's Disease to cope with the illness and ease their suffering.»

«But if this Fafner is so powerful, why is Quentin von Bulberg the president of the International Federation of Wizards, not him?»

«Quincy!» Nymus corrected him. «Well, Quincy von Bulberg inherited the position from the previous president – Oliver Burke. Burke fiercely hated Fafner for being so loved and respected by everyone, while he, Burke, the president of the International Federation of Wizards, was not taken seriously by anyone. At one time, Burke even wanted to dismiss him from the position of the rector of Templedoor, but as soon as the Wizard Association and the rest of the Wizard Community learned about his intention, the main office of the International Federation of Wizards immediately received several hundred million of letters with threats. The letters said that if Fafner was to be dismissed, all the parents would take the students back home. And the teachers, in their turn, called the Council of Professors where they collected the votes of all colleagues and they threatened to leave their positions if the MUni would be headed by someone other than Fafner.»

«Wow!» William said emotionally.

«Yes... I remember that the Magic Post Office played a great part in it... I can still clearly remember my grandfather telling how crazy it was in the building of the Magic Post Office because of such amount of letters!»

«So this happened in your grandfather's times?»

«Yes. About three hundred years ago! Not a line more, not a line less!»

«Oh! So how old is Fafner?»

«Well, nobody knows Fafner's exact age! As far as I know he is about six hundred years with an envelope!»

«Six hundred years!» William found it incredible that someone could live this long. «And how old are you, Nymus?»

«Oh, I am quite young, Master Calhoun, I am just a century with an envelope!»

«Over a hundred years!» he cried out. «Amazing...»

«So, Fafner,» Nymus continued, «at the time, he was going to run for the president of the International Federation of Wizards, but Oliver Burke used his right to appoint his successor personally, and, of course, Fafner was the last wizard to become his successor. But this only led to increased hate towards Burke and Fafner's popularity.»

«So, this Federation governs all wizards?»

«That is right! The next level of authority after the International Federation of Wizards is taken by the Wizard Association, headed by Fafner.»

«And besides him being the rector of Templedoor, is Templedoor better than the other three MUnis in some way?»

«Of course! Under Fafner, students started studying deeper and more efficiently than it had been before him. He dismissed all teachers that had worked at Templedoor before and brought his students and comrades to fill their places, and they turned out to be better teachers than their predecessors. And education at Templedoor entered a new level of quality.»

«Awesome!» William said with deep admiration towards Fafner. «So are we going to enroll me in the Preparatory Course tomorrow?»

«Master Calhoun cannot wait to start studying!» Nymus noted with obvious satisfaction.

«Are you kidding? I couldn't even dream about this! Studying among wizards!»

«Do not diminish yourself, Master Calhoun! The Calhoun kin is known for producing real stars of the wizarding world every few generations, and they live in glory and respect for the rest of the days!»

«Wow!» William managed.

«Yes, Master Calhoun has all the rights to be proud of his kin,» Nymus added, «rights like no other wizard! No wonder the Calhoun kin is often called the Proud Kin!»

«What did we do?» William asked stupidly.

«I have already told Master Calhoun that once, dark times came to the wizarding world! Further existence of wizards was threatened and many of them laid their feathers in the battle against the evil that started dwelling in the Community!»

«What kind of evil?»

«Oooh,» Nymus said passionately. «The Dweller of the Dark came from the gloomy swamps to overthrow the rulers...» Nymus dropped down to whisper again. «But May I Never See Letters Again, he failed to do it thanks to your famous ancestor – Deverell Calhoun! My great-grandfather Bommel from the Nymus kin served him faithfully at that time! And now I serve you, Master Calhoun, and my kin, as I've said before, is very proud of their wizards! *From Kin to Kin, Kin for the Good of Kin!*» quoted Nymus, holding his chin high.

William was so shocked by everything Nymus had told him that he went deep into his thoughts for a while, running each word Nymus had said about his ancestor Deverell Calhoun over in his head.

Meanwhile, the door to the house opened noisily and a voice drifted up:

«William! Are you already home, dear?»

«Mrs. Hoggart!» While Nymus was telling him about wizards, William seemed to have moved into a different world! It seemed to him that there was no other world but the world of wizards. There was only the world with Ferzibald Fafner, the International Federation of Wizards, their presidents, and MUnis headed by Templedoor! He learned all that just then, from Nymus, but he knew he didn't want to go to any other of the three MUnis. He could hardly wait for the day when he would study magic under Fafner the Great himself and his teachers! But then, he suddenly remembered that he was still in the Blackfriars Lane, in his room. And his only connection to the magic world and wizards was Nymus!

«You need to leave,» William said. «It's Mrs. Hoggart and she can enter any minute!»

«Alright,» Nymus said. «But if Master Calhoun wishes, I can return to him any moment! It is my duty! To summon me, Master Calhoun needs to write my name on a piece of paper and to burn this paper.»

«What an odd method!» William noted, but then he saw that the mailmage's face was turning sad and added: «Alright, Nymus! I'll remember that! When should I expect you tomorrow?»

«If Master Calhoun does not need me today, I shall come tomorrow with the first letters of the Post Office – at 06:17!»

«Great! This is the time Hoggarts leave for work!»

Nymus was already going to peregrine, when he suddenly asked an unusual question:

«And where do Hoggarts work?» the mailmage's right eyebrow shot up.

«Er... I think in the sphere of public relations!»

«Curious...» Nymus said, rubbing his beard, «very curious...»

«No, they aren't mailmages!» William assured him with a smile.

But Nymus seemed to be thinking about something completely different. William noticed it and ushered him:

«Nymus! You need to go! See you tomorrow!»

«Green Monogram!» Nymus snapped out of his reverie. «That is right, I need to go! I do not want Master Calhoun to have problems because of me! Good Mail, Master Calhoun!» With that, he disappeared with a sound as if somebody crumpled some thick paper noisily.

There were steps and soon a knock on the door. Then the door opened a bit, revealing Mrs. Hoggart's head to William.

«Hello, Mrs. Hoggart!» William tried to sound natural. «You're early today!»

«Hello, dear!» Mrs. Hoggart entered the room and gave William a kiss on the forehead. «Yes, the day turned out surprisingly easy and I came home earlier! What was this noise in here? I thought the bed collapsed! Are you alright?»

«Yes, I'm great!» William was searching for an explanation for Nymus's noisy peregrining and finally found one. «I wanted to move the nightstand a bit, I always stumble on it when I enter the room.»

«Strange! It seems to be standing on the same spot...» Mrs. Hoggart walked to the nightstand and started thinking hard on where to move it so that it wouldn't get in William's way, but he hurried to interrupt her:

«That's because I've changed my mind and moved it back! No matter what, it's the best place for it!» he said and hurried to change the subject. «And when is Mr. Hoggart coming home?»

«Alright!» Mrs. Hoggart continued her line of thought. «Let it stay here for now, but I'll tell Edward over the weekend to do something about it. He'll be home any minute! He called from work and said that he would finish earlier today as well. So, I've decided to make an excellent chicken pie, so start on your homework to be done by the time dinner is ready!»

«Great!» William nodded. «Then I'll start on it right away!»

«Yes, yes. I'm going! I won't bother you, dear!» – Mrs. Hoggart was going to leave when she suddenly turned and asked: «Is everything alright at school?»

«Yes... yes...» William muttered, «it's great!»

«Wonderful!» she kissed him again and left the room.

William spent some more time thinking about today's events. After talking to Mrs. Hoggart it seemed that this whole story with the mailmage and wizards was nothing more than a dream. And now he was awake and his life became like it used to be. William liked his life. Firstly, he was lucky to have such parents, even if they were foster ones. And secondly... Secondly, he was already saying a mental good-bye to his old school. He took his textbooks out of his backpack and hid them deep in the wardrobe. Tomorrow, he was going with Nymus to register his magic feather, after which he hoped to be enrolled in the Preparatory Course for a MUni.

The feather! William had just remembered about it. He took the box from under the bed, which he had placed there when Mrs. Hoggart was heading to his room.

As he opened the lid, he was happy to see that it was still on its place – though, at first it grudgingly pushed at William's fingers with its hairs when he tried to take it, but after him whispering «*Obnoxus*», the feather became friendlier.

«I wonder what you can do?» William was thinking aloud as he stared at his feather, white with black dots. He pointed the Feather at the bed and ordered: «Bed! Unmake yourself, I want to sleep!»

Nothing happened. Then, slightly disappointed, William put the feather back into the box and then into his backpack, not to forget it in the morning.

«Fine, I'll need to learn how to control you!»

He unmade the bed in a traditional way, climbed under the blanket and immediately fell asleep, completely forgetting about dinner.

Chapter four

Magic Post Office

Early in the morning, William was still in bed, fast asleep. The first rays of sun still hadn't shown, when there was a loud sound of «crumpled paper». William jumped up, but calmed down right away after hearing a familiar voice.

«Master Calhoun, Good Sunrise!»

«Nymus!» William rubbed his eyes. «Listen, could you appear without so much noise next time? Hi!»

«The mailmage from the Nymus kin did not want to scare his Wizard!» Nymus sounded hurt.

«Alright, alright! No offence! What time is it?»

«Exactly 06:17! Mailmages are never late!» Nymus's cheerful voice wasn't very loud, but somehow it filled the whole room.

«Do mailmages sleep at all?» William asked.

«Mailmages?! Sleep?! Never!»

«Really?»

«I am telling you the truth! It is one of the most truthful truths that can ever exist in the sphere of truths, Master Calhoun! Besides, we cannot be late for the Magic Post Office! They are open for public until nine a.m. Then the Post Office Meeting begins! We need to hurry!»

«Fine! Give me two minutes!»

William jumped out of the bed, washed his face quickly, pulled on his jeans and a clean shirt, and took his backpack.

«I'm ready! Shall we go?» William said, then he realized that he had no idea how they were going to get to the Magic Post Office. «And how are we getting there?»

«We are peregrining! Take my hand!»

Squeezing his backpack tight with one hand, William grabbed Nymus with the other. He felt familiar dizziness, but not as bad as the first time. Besides, Nymus's hand gave him the feeling of protection. Everything was over in a few moments.

They were standing in the middle of a large hall covered with piles of letters! William couldn't even make out what the floor was made of and what colour it was. Letters hid almost everything in here. They were everywhere! The floor, the windows, the walls – everything was covered with letters! Besides, the letters were alive! They were either flying from one end of the hall to the other or they moved at a very high pace back and forth.

William saw an endless number of mailmages rushing in all directions, as they were trying to find and to pick up the letter they needed. They used their large hands to sort piles of letters on the floor, on the tables, and on the windows of the giant hall.

«We are in the Correspondence Hall!» Nymus explained, sensing William's confusion. «Several million letters arrive here every day, waiting to be sent!»

«Nymus, wouldn't it be more convenient to store all the letters in a special place so that it is easy to find the required one?»

«A special place?» Nymus repeated. «The building of the Magic Post Office is that special place – it was created for that!»

«Do only London wizards send so many letters?»

«The Magic Post Office, Master Calhoun, is the only one in the world. And it is located in London. Letters come here from everywhere. We are the heart of the world correspondence. That is why serving at the Magic Post Office is such a great honour for any mailmage.»

William looked at all that crazy fuss. He was surprised with the passion and diligence the mailmages fussed around with, from door to door, carrying the correspondence, sorting it, giving over to each other, and putting it down.

«Tell me, Nymus, can anyone become a mailmage?»

«Green Monogram, of course not! Mailmages are a special species born for one reason – to achieve the honour of serving the Post Office one day. We have our own schools and training. You, wizards, are taught magical arts, we are taught to know each corner of the world and to be able to get there at any cost. It is one of the many reasons why wizards cannot do without us. We honour our traditions and pass them from generation to generation. Our motto is: „From Kin to Kin, Kin for the good of Kin!“.»

«I understand,» said William, «that I don't understand any of that!»

William noticed that mailmages were different from each other in appearance. Their only similarity, apart from the blue mailmage uniform, were giant hands. The young man looked at Nymus. He was practically glowing with happiness and his expressions made it clear that this was his home. Fourteen years spent away from the Magic Post Office were gone and he was happy to be at home again.

Suddenly William saw that a mailmage, having found the letter he needed, placed it right inside his palm. Then another and another.

«That's why you have such big hands! You put letters in there!» William said.

«Yes!» Nymus nodded. «Our hands are our everything! Without them we would not have been who we are! They are a defining feature of any Mailmage. We use our hands to store and transport correspondence to the addressees!» He stretched out his hand and showed William a compartment on his palm for storing letters.

William had seen something similar on kangaroos at the zoo. He didn't pay attention to this during their first meeting with Nymus and he was quite impressed now.

«And why can't you use ordinary bags for delivering post, Nymus?»

«Ordinary bags? Demits use those, not mailmages. Being a mailmage is a very dangerous job, Master Calhoun. Bags are a very unsafe place for keeping letters.»

«Why is it dangerous?»

«Over several dozen mailmages go missing from the Magic Post Office in a year, because they are hunted down by enemy intelligence.»

«Wizards have an intelligence service, too?»

«Of course! Like everywhere else.»

«Why do they want to steal other wizards' letters?»

«To read them! Wizarding world is just like the demit one in this, Master Calhoun! Each wizard kin has mailmages. The higher is the status of a wizard in the community, the more dangerous it is for his mailmage to move around. There will always be those who will want to know more about his master's business and plans. Especially if he has enemies. That is why many high-ranking wizards unregister their mailmages to keep their correspondence safe and mailmages work undercover.»

«Does Fafner have a mailmage?» William asked suddenly.

«Of course he does! But everyone has been trying to find out who he is for centuries. Only Fafner and the Postmaster know that!»

«You haven't told me why you keep letters in your palms. Is it safer?»

«That is right! When someone or something puts the life of a mailmage in danger, the inner pocket on the palm instinctively shuts tight and then not even the most ancient and powerful magic can help the evildoer get the letter. It is very old mailmagic! Even though we are not a warlike people, no wizard can make us open the correspondence we are delivering with their magic!»

«So mailmages aren't wizards?»

«Wizards?! We are a separate species that has existed for as long as wizards and demits themselves! We do not submit to the general laws, but the Post Office Code. Beyond the Magic Post Office, we obey nobody but our masters. We are created to help the wizard kin which we give the oath to serve loyally with each new generation.»

«I'm sorry if I've hurt your feelings, Nymus. I had no idea!»

«Master Calhoun should not apologize to his mailmage! We have the only type of magic – mailmagic. It serves the only goal – to deliver letters to their addressees. We have no need in other abilities. Mailmages have existed since the appearance of writing. Back then, if you believe Mailmage History, messages were passed orally and mailmages wrote letters themselves, leaving them on the walls of addresses.»

«Do mailmages have their own history?»

«But of course! Mailmages have all kinds of their own things – Post Office hospitals, Post Office rights, a special pass to all corners of the world. We even have a special article in the Wizard Constitution, which says that any wizard, except for his Master, who dares to threaten personal immunity of a mailmage will be stripped of the feather from two to five years. Depending on which mailmage rights violation the wizards commits. You see, mailmages are a kind of ambassadors. Not only from one country to another, but also from one wizard to another. And all ambassadors, as it is well known, have personal immunity.»

«Can mailmages themselves betray their wizards?»

«They can. But it is a severe violation of the Post Office Code, as well as the Celestine Oath, which we give during the Mailmage Initiation Ceremony. If a mailmage breaks the oath, he will be separated from the Central Magic Post Office once and till the last line! After which he will be stripped of his right to take part in exchanging any kind of correspondence in any way and his further Mail Activity will be persecuted and punished by Law.»

«Why is it so important to have a mailmage? Can't we just use mobile phones or the internet? There are so many ways of exchanging information instantly and, more importantly, safely.»

«Master Calhoun has yet so much to learn about the wizarding word. He still does not know that wizards and other representatives of the International Federation of Wizards do not use digital and electronic devices.»

«What? Why not?!»

«Magic Feathers have ancient magic in them that has bad influence on digital and electronic devices when it is near them, they stop working because of the interferences the feather causes.»

«No way! Here's one advantage demits have compared to wizards,» William noted. «Wizards can use the latest digital achievements.»

«On the contrary!» Nymus objected. «Wizards do have similar achievements! Only in more convenient ways. But Master Calhoun will have time to learn about all that.»

The amount of new information made William fall silent for a while, then he looked around and asked:

«Why are we standing, not moving ahead?»

«Because we havenot been summoned yet and we are waiting for a messenger from the Postmaster to see us there.»

The moment Nymus finished his sentence, someone very heavy nearly knocked William off his feet.

The boy looked down and saw a grey-haired old man, short and with a crooked nose.

«Young Wizard, could you move away for a bit and allow me to keep searching for letters?» the old man said grumpily.

«I'm sorry, sir! I haven't noti...»

«Vulpik!» Nymus cried out. «I can't believe my letters!» He knelt down and hugged the grey-haired old man he'd just called Vulpik. «Why you, Tattered Parcel, still growling at everyone in the morning, as I can see!»

«Nymus!» the old man with the crooked nose recognized him. «Celestine's Monogram! May I Lose My Letters! Which winds have brought your envelopes here? Are you with us again?»

«Yes! With a wizard again!» Nymus told him.

Then the eyes of mailmage Vulpik stared at William's shoes meaningfully and then slowly went up until they reached his face.

«A Calhoun?» he said with distrust, turning back to Nymus.

«Yes!» Nymus nodded with a satisfied smile. «To be exact, the last of the Calhouns.»

Vulpik got up suddenly, almost pressing himself to William, and started examining him. He seemed to have forgotten all about the letters he'd been looking for.

After giving William an intent look from head to toe, he said slowly:

«So here you are...»

«This'll be enough! Go back to your letters, you Tattered Parcel!» Nymus shooed him off. «I'll pay you a visit after lunch if I'm free. So get ready, set a table. Let's Seal some Envelopes!»

«I'm so glad to see you again, Nymus! Celestine's Monogram! Years away haven't changed you a bit!»

And Vulpik disappeared as suddenly as he had appeared.

«Nymus,» William dared to break the silence, «who's Celestine?»

«Marcus Celestine is the founder of the Magic Post Office and the whole system of mailmages that has been working all over the world for many centuries. When we take the oath to our master, we do it by placing our hand on the Post Office Code signed by Marcus Celestine.»

«Wow...» William drawled, «you have your own world in here, as I can see!»

In a few minutes, a young black-haired curly mailmage in glasses approached them and addressed Nymus:

«Nymus House Representative?»

«Yes! I came to get my Mailmage license back!»

«The Postmaster is absent today. His deputy is ready to see you! Follow me!»

And the young secretary headed towards one of the numerous doors. It led to a narrow corridor with a marble floor. The corridor was rather dark and gloomy and was a great contrast to the bright hall they'd just left. There were numerous offices along the corridor, on both sides. Each door had a sign shaped like an upturned open envelope with the name of the department on it and the second sign sticking out, shaped like a piece of paper. That one stated issues and tasks each Magic Post Office Department handled. William noticed that one of the envelope signs on the door said «Magic Post Office Archive', and the piece of paper added «Authorized personnel only'.

Finally, the young secretary stopped by the door, the envelope sign on which said: «Postmaster Deputy, Thomas Hill'. The bottom part of the sign, instead of the customary piece of paper, was decorated with a large Post Office emblem – a yellow envelope with a green MPO monogram and a white magic feather inside, which symbolized how inseparable the kinds of wizards and mailmages were. Below there was the motto of the Magic Post Office, already familiar to William from Nymus, in large red letters: «From Kin to Kin, Kin for the good of Kin'.

The curly mailmage told them to wait and entered the room, then came out a minute later to say:

«The Postmaster Deputy is expecting you!»

With that, he disappeared in the dark corridor.

Nymus entered the door, William following him closely. The office of the deputy of the Magic Post Office Master turned out to be surprisingly bright and spacious. William looked around. The first thing that he noticed was a statue, the height of a fourteen-year-old boy, depicting a big-handed figure in a uniform, running somewhere. On the inside of his palm there was an envelope corner.

Behind this figure, there was a second one – in robes, with a long feather in his hand. There was a sign in golden letters on the bottom part of this statue: «Kin for Kin, from Kin to Kin!»

«Please, sit down,» said an old mailmage wearing red robes. His face was adorned with a long beard. «I am Thomas Hill, deputy to the Magic Post Office Master.»

The massive table before the Postmaster deputy had a few dozen papers, with the same number of red feathers over them writing something fast and without a break. These feathers were different from William's. They were smaller and, as William guessed, used only for writing. There were two massive armchairs with soft seats next to this massive table.

That was where Nymus and he sat down. The low armchair made it hard for William to make out the face of Thomas Hill. Besides, the fluttering of feathers over the table made it even more difficult. But William made an attempt to focus his eyes on Mr. Hill's face.

The deputy of the Magic Post Office Master addressed Nymus:

«Your letter says that you desire to get reinstated as a mailmage.»

«Yes, that is correct!» Nymus replied with a slight tremble in his voice.

«Your letter also says that you have somehow managed to find an offspring of the kin your kin has served loyally for many centuries,» Thomas Hill continued.

«Yes, that is true!» Nymus's voice sounded more confident with every question.

«Your letter also mentions that fourteen years ago the abovementioned wizard kin YOUR kin used to serve was killed in a mass murder and that since then the Calhouns were considered a dead kin.»

«Yes, that is correct!»

«And you state that this young man,» he pointed at William, «you have arrived with is that representative of the Calhoun kin?»

Nymus glanced at William and replied:

«Yes, Your Mailness!»

William could barely keep himself from laughing when Nymus address the Postmaster's deputy this way.

«Please, young man,» he turned to William, «allow me to look at your magic feather.»

William looked over at Nymus and he gave him a nod. William took the box with the magic feather from his backpack. This puzzled Thomas Hills.

«May I ask you,» he addressed William, «what are you doing?»

«Er... I'm taking my magic feather out, sir,» he replied politely.

«From a box in your backpack?»

«Yes,» William said unsurely and looked over at Nymus again.

«You see, Your Mailness, Master Calhoun grew up without knowing that he...»

«What?» Thomas Hill asked dryly.

«That he is a wizard.»

«By the Post Office, how is that possible?» Thomas Hill look surprised.

«You see...» Nymus started.

«I was brought up by demits, and I've been living with them all this time,» William came to help.

«A Calhoun among demits?» the Postmaster deputy exclaimed. «We are really witnessing a historical moment, gentlemen,» he said with sarcasm that remained unclear to William. Then, seeing that William was still holding the box, added with a smile: «Don't be shy, young man, take your feather out!»

William set the box down on the table and opened it. The magic feather sensed freedom again and stretched out its hairs, then slowly moved them from side to side.

Thomas Hills didn't look so smug anymore. The next moment his smile was gone completely. He was looking at the magic feather and its size, which was large even by magic feather standards, with great attention and with a bit of distrust. Then he told William:

«Try picking it up, young man...» he said in such a tone that suggested that until now he was quite sure that he was being tricked with this newly-found offspring of the Calhoun kin.

William took his magic feather without any problems and gave Thomas Hill a questioning look. Seeing the feather in William's hand made him speechless. The pause was so long that William couldn't help glancing at Nymus again. But the mailmage didn't need to intervene this time. The deputy of the Magic Post Office Master came back to his senses and started talking again:

«May I take a look at the name on the magic feather?»

William held the feather out for him, but the Postmaster deputy waved his enormous hands:

«No, no, please! Just hold your feather closer to me, it'll be enough!»

Even though this request seemed strange to William, he wasn't surprised much with anything now. Holding his magic feather with both hands, he brought it closer to Thomas Hill's face. He slightly leaned forward, then leaned back in his large armchair.

«Mister Calhoun,» he addressed William much more politely than a minute ago, «have you used it a lot all these years?»

«No, not once,» William confessed.

«That's why the feather is without a handle...» he bent over the feather again and examined it quickly, «I advise you to get a handle for the magic feather, Mister Calhoun. If you are going to study magic arts, you will definitely need a handle!»

«Yes, sir, I will!»

«Could you...» he gestured for William to put the feather away, «say the *Probatos* spell to make sure all the formalities are followed, Mister Calhoun?»

It was time to give Nymus a questioning look again. He hurried to assist:

«It's easy, Master Calhoun!» he explained. «Take your magic feather and say loud and clear «*Pobatio*!»

«*Probatio*!» William said and the spacious office of the Postmaster deputy Thomas Hill was lit with a bright green beam coming from the magic feather.

This lasted for about twenty seconds and everyone was silent. When the beam had disappeared, Thomas Hill stood up, walked around his table and headed to one of the cabinets his office was full of. Nymus and William watched him with no idea what was going on. Hill returned to his table with a piece of paper in his hand. He sat back into his armchair, took a feather from the table drawer and directed it at the paper, releasing the feather after a bit of thinking. For a few seconds, the feather hovered over the paper, then started writing something energetically.

Thomas Hill opened his eyes.

«This is, of course, none of my business, Mister Calhoun, but...» he hesitated before asking the question: «tell me, what are your plans for the future?»

William thought that this was a rather odd question, considering the reason they came here for, but it was asked and he had to answer it.

«Well, I'm going to study at the Preparatory Course to enter Temp...» he broke off, «one of the MUnis.»

«Already aiming at Templedoor!» Thomas Hill smiled and continued without paying attention to William's embarrassment: «Yes, it's the right place for you, Mister Calhoun. Besides, you won't be the first Calhoun in there!» Suddenly he leaned back in his armchair and connected the tips of his fingers right beneath his nose. «I wonder if Fafner already knows about you...»

«No, sir,» William replied, «why would he?»

«Quite a number of reasons, Mister Calhoun! Believe me! Well, this isn't my business!»

With that, he leaned forward and took the filled up piece of paper the feather had just stopped writing on and handed it to Nymus. The paper turned out to be a signed document reinstating Nymus as the mailmage of the Calhoun kin. Besides that, the document was a license that gave him the right to receive and transfer correspondence.

Nymus scanned the document and glowed with happiness.

«Right! Time to part, gentlemen! Don't forget to get your uniform, Nymus.»

«Yes, Your Mailness!»

«Good bye!» William said as he headed to the door. He wanted to put his magic feather back into the box, when there was a voice from behind.

«Oh, don't you even think of keeping your magic feather in the box again, Mister Calhoun, it's disrespectful towards the creature! It is alive, you know!» his tone wasn't strict, but quite insistent.

«Alright, sir,» with that William put his feather into the pocket of his jeans.

Nymus and he left the office of the Postmaster deputy Thomas Hill.

«See, I told you it would be okay!» William said when they were walking along the corridor. «I'm so happy for you!»

«Yes, I should not have worried, Master Calhoun! I need to visit the Equipment Department now. Wait here for me, I shall be right back.»

«Sure, Nymus, go on!»

And William sat on a bench to wait for Nymus. He came out five minutes later wearing a new outfit. He had the pale blue uniform of mailmages, not unlike the one postal workers wore. Nymus's shoulders were adorned with red feathers, almost like epaulettes, carrying words «Calhoun' embroidered in gold.

«Would you look at my mailmage!» William made a show of dusting off his feathered shoulders. «You look great, Nymus!»

«Thank you, Master Calhoun!» Nymus's face glowed with happiness.

«Where to now?» William asked him.

«To register your magic feather!»

He took William's hand and said the next destination clearly:

«Feather Nest!»

Chapter five

Feather Nest

After visiting the enormous hall of the Magic Post Office, completely covered with letters, William couldn't even imagine that he would face something similar. But he was wrong. The hall he and Nymus arrived at was just as huge. And the floor was also covered, but not with letters. William took a closer look. There were countless feathers all around, of different colours and sizes.

Nymus said by his side:

«Here we are!»

«Where are we, Nymus?» William asked.

«We are at the Feather Nest! This is where wizards get their magic feathers! And if there is a place that has the biggest number of all kinds of birds, then this is it!» he pointed at the feathers under their feet.

«And why is there nobody in here?»

«This is the flight room, Master Calhoun! By the end of the day, when the Feather Nest closes down, birds are allowed in here to fly. I shall stay here to wait for you while you are inside,» he pointed at an unremarkable door on the far wall of the hall.

No wonder William hadn't noticed it at first.

«But why should I go there alone?» William asked. He didn't want to part with Nymus. He was used to the mailmage always being by his side, to them doing everything and going everywhere together.

«Those are the rules, Master Calhoun,» Nymus replied. «No wizard may enter the Feather Nest accompanied by another person. This excludes mistakes in the choice the birds make.»

«What choice? What are you talking about?»

«You see, Master Calhoun, when a wizard enters the Feather Nest for the first time, one of the birds flies over and grants him a feather. Before coming here, wizards can only guess which bird will choose them.»

«What happens next?» William asked, thinking that this procedure reminded him of a child's game more and more.

«After one of the birds comes down from its perch and grants its feather to a wizard, Mister Wellington takes the feather, examines it and explains how to treat that exact feather and which personality that feather has. Then he registers the feather in the Feather Tome and gives it to its new owner.»

«Nymus, what am I supposed to do? No bird has granted me this feather. I've had it since my birth. Won't I have any problems because of that?»

«I think there should not be any problems!» Nymus replied. «The feather can obey only one wizard. If it obeys you, then it does not have any other owners beside you. Just tell Mister Wellington that you have come to register a magic feather and it is all in the envelope.»

«Alright, Nymus! Then I'm off!» William breathed out and headed towards the door on the far wall of the hall.

As he approached the door, he heard some sounds coming from inside. William opened the door and all but drowned in the cacophony of birds crying, whistling, warbling, singing, cawing, and chirping. He suddenly remembered the time he'd been to a zoo with Mrs. Hoggart and was deafened by the noise coming from the bird cage. But compared to this racket, that noise was silence. William sighed, driving the memories off, made a step, and the door closed behind his back all by itself.

William made another step and looked around. This huge room seemed to be full of birds, from top to bottom. William had never seen so many birds in one place. Just then he made out a counter through this live wall of wings and feathers, which stood deeper into the room and resembled a giant nest. There was also another thing. Despite the floor being made of stone, there were full-scale trees, bushes, and flowers growing right through it, with a small swamp in one of the corners. William had no doubts it was real: there was a rotten smell coming from the small swamp, as well as frogs croaking. The birds were still flying chaotically around the room and those that stopped flying landed on almost any object in here: walls, the ceiling, windows, tree branches, and other places.

Somehow making his way to the «nest», William was surprised to find it empty. He decided that there was nobody in here apart from the birds and turned around to leave. But then a huge hawk appeared from nowhere and dashed right at him. William closed his eyes, but the hawk flew over his head with a cry and disappeared.

When William opened his eyes, he was surprised to find a grey-haired old man behind the counter, with a sharp face and an eagle-like nose. His grey hair fell to his shoulders and his yellow eyes with black pupils, just like that of the eagle, stared right at William.

«Welcome to the Feather Nest, young wizard!» he said in a shrill voice and then, suddenly irritated with the noise around there, made a deafening cry, much like an eagle. The noise instantly died out.

The old man gave William an expectant look.

«Good day, sir...» he greeted the man, looking into the face of this strange master of magic feathers with a bit of fear.

«...Wellington. I'm at your service, young wizard! You have probably come here for a magic feather?»

Wellington walked around the counter, came up to William and, taking his hand, started examining it, not unlike a tailor who examines a client's figure.

«Sir, Mister Wellington,» William hurried to move his hand away, «I've already got a magic feather.»

Mister Wellington returned behind the counter at once.

«Then why have you come here, young man?» he asked, puzzled.

«I'd like to register my magic feather,» William replied.

«To register?» Wellington stared at William's face. «I can't seem to remember you... When have you been here before?»

«Never. I've never been here. And I've never been granted the feather.»

«Oh?» Mister Wellington's face looked even more puzzled. «Then, may I ask you how you have received it?»

«I've had it since my childhood. For a long time, I had no idea what it was for. But then they told me, and I want to study at the Preparatory Course. And, as I understand, I need to register the feather to do that.»

Mister Wellington was listening to him, as they say, with his mouth open, but he quickly overcame his shock and asked:

«May I take a look at the feather?»

William took the feather out of his pocket and placed it on Mister Wellington's hand. Strangely enough, the feather didn't mind. Mister Wellington gave it a long and thorough examination, turning it over in his hands, and then he stated:

«White Raven!» He gave the feather another look. «A contourless atypical flyfeather. Quite unusual for a magic feather!»

«Why is that?» William asked, genuinely interested.

«Well, first of all, magic feathers usually appear in the steering part of the bird, that is, in the tail. And this feather...» at this point Mister Wellington gave the feather another intent look as if checking himself, «it is, no doubt, from the bird's wing!»

«Is it of any significance?» William asked.

«No, no. But it's a curious fact. So curious that I can't personally remember a similar case,» Mister Wellington said. «Secondly, the fan part of the feather is quite fluffy, which means two things. First: this feather hasn't been used for a long time or it's very new. And second: the bird that used to carry it lived on the swamps. Black spots on the fan part of the feather are a proof to that. They appear on birds that often dive into the water for food. But here comes the mystery,» at this point Mister Wellington's voice dropped to a whisper: «White Ravens *never* dive for food. They steal it from smaller birds or eat carrion, like all ravens.»

«So, you're saying that this isn't a White Raven feather?»

«I'm saying that this is a rather dangerous feather, young man!» Mister Wellington said. «Think well before using it. Reckless use of this magic feather and at this young age may lead to serious trouble.»

«Thank you, I'll keep that in mind,» William replied politely. «So, may I register it?»

Instead of answering, Mister Wellington opened a large book that lay on the counter beside him. He brought the feather close to his eyes to see the name written on it and froze. Then he said very quietly:

«Calhoun...» Mister Wellington's eyes went slowly up to look at William, then, just as slowly, dropped back to the inscription.

«What's surprised you so much?» William asked.

But Mister Wellington, still silent, bent over the open book and started looking through it quickly.

The book itself deserved a special mention. Its feathered black cover seemed to be alive, and distant bird cries that were coming from its pages terrified William. Soon, Mister Wellington found the page he needed and pressed the tip of the feather to it. At the same moment, the book slammed shut on its own accord. Mister Wellington barely had time to lift the feather from the page in one quick movement. Then he looked up at William and said strictly:

«Your feather, young wizard! Under no circumstances it can be registered in this book!»

«But...» William had no idea what was going on. «Why?»

«The registration record with the information about your feather...»

«What's wrong with it?»

«...has been in the Feather Tome for a long time, which automatically excludes its second registration!»

«Whose name is it registered under?»

Mister Wellington opened the Feather Tome again on the required page, scanned the entries and found the one he needed.

«The name of the owner disappeared from the pages of the Feather Tome long time ago!» he said strictly.

«What does this mean?» William started to feel really worried.

«That he is long dead!»

At that, William felt completely lost, not knowing what to do now. Meanwhile, Mister Wellington continued:

«Names disappear from the pages of the Feather Tome only in this case!»

«You mean,» William asked once more, «I can't register *this* feather again?»

«A magic feather cannot be registered twice, as it cannot serve two owners even if it has been inherited. Thus, allowing you to use it will violate article 64 of the Wizard Constitution stating that

illegal use of magic feathers by anyone is persecuted and severely punished by wizzards. But...» Mister Wellington suddenly fell silent.

«But what, sir?» William had already said a mental goodbye to studying at the Preparatory Course and to everything that came after it.

«...considering the fact that you are using it and that it's been with you for a long time, besides, it recognizes you as its owner, and if we consider the fact that magic feathers don't serve strangers... and are free to choose a wizard for themselves...»

«Then what?» This long listing of all the facts and rules William didn't understand made the waiting completely unbearable for him.

«Then there's no law violation in this!» Mister Wellington finished his thought.

William felt the lump in his throat starting to melt and his hands stop sweating.

«So I may use it because it is already in the Feather Tome?»

«That's right, young Calhoun!»

«In that case, thank you,» William said sincerely and turned to leave, but at that moment, the old man called out:

«Mister Calhoun!»

«Yes?» William turned around.

«Always keep the feather close to you and give it to no one! Your feather is able of committing any kinds of heroic acts, but at the same time it is capable of truly horrible things.»

William was overwhelmed with happiness. First of all, he'd registered his magic feather. Secondly, he was up for the unknown study at the Preparatory Course of magic. Perhaps, that was why he didn't pay due attention to the last words of Mister Wellington and just replied politely:

«I'll remember, sir! Good day!» and walked towards the door.

At the same moment, a shrill eagle cry pierced the room. He turned around in fright and saw that the nest-shaped counter was empty again and the birds that had been sitting quietly on their places were flying around chaotically, filling the room with the noise.

William hurried to leave the room and shut the door behind himself with relief as he headed to Nymus.

«Master Calhoun!» he called out happily. «I hope everything is fine?»

William nodded and Nymus and he left the Feather Nest and started walking along the street filled with wizards and other creatures, unfamiliar to William.

«Where are we, Nymus?» he asked, looking around this strange street.

«Feather Street!» Nymus replied. «Mostly, visiting wizards live here.»

As they were passing one of the numerous shop windows, William read the name «Fancy Wizard'. There were several dozen dummies with robes of different designs, lengths and colours.

«Did it go well?» Nymus asked again.

«Yes! Partially!»

And William told him about his odd misadventures in detail. Nymus listened quietly, but in the end, he said:

«Do not worry! At least, now you are the owner of a *registered* feather, which means we can send a letter to the Wizard Education Department and apply for the Preparatory Course! I shall handle it. Master Calhoun has nothing more to worry about.»

«I'm so grateful to you for everything you're doing for me, Nymus!»

«Serving Master Calhoun is my duty!» he responded.

«Where to now?» William asked briskly.

«I shall peregrine Master Calhoun to the Blackfriars Lane, then I shall return to the Magic Post Office and start on the letter to the Department. The answer should come by the evening.»

With that, he took Williams' hand and they peregrined.

Chapter six

The Six O-Clocker

Several hours had passed before Nymus appeared again. William busied himself with cleaning his room. As he was tidying up and dusting, he kept thinking about Mr. Wellington's words and about that other Calhoun who used to wield this feather. Perhaps, that very night, when all Calhouns were killed, someone managed to place their magic feather beside him, right before their death. Because it was clear that the feather could have belonged only to one of his ancestors. But Mr. Wellington made it clear that feathers didn't serve strangers. Whom did he mean by strangers? It must have been another wizard kin! But, according to Wellington again, feathers couldn't be inherited! Why did he have this feather? And why did it obey him?

Then he remembered the morning at the Magic Post Office and Vulpik's reaction to his surname. Vulpik's reaction wasn't much different from Wellington's reaction at the Feather Nest. What could all that possibly mean? William had been pondering about those questions for a long time, but he failed to find an answer. Finally, he dropped this useless activity.

Not long before evening, Nymus came, as promised.

«Good Mail, Master Calhoun!» he raised his hat in a customary movement.

«Nymus!» William was particularly glad to see his mailmage. Because he was supposed to deliver him a letter from the Department with the results of his request about studying at the Preparatory Course. «Have you got any news?»

«Yes, Master Calhoun! I do not come empty-handed!» At this held out his large right palm. And that one clearly had something inside.

William realized that now the expression «not empty-handed» had acquired quite literal meaning for him. «Who knows,» he thought, «perhaps it was made up by mailmages!»

«Do you have a letter from the Department?» he pointed at Nymus's swollen palm.

«I do! That letter exactly!» Nymus pulled out a blue envelope from his palm pocket and handed it to his master.

William took out the letter and read it aloud:

«Dear Mr. Calhoun!

The Wizard Education Department is happy to inform you that you have been officially granted the status of the Preparatory Course enrolee. You are to complete a year of studies of the special Enrolee Program, within which you are to study such subjects as Featherology, Wizard History Refutation, and Magiflorology. After the year of studying at the Preparatory Course, you will receive grades awarded for each of the abovementioned subjects according to the Fifteen-grade system, which will allow you to enter a MUni according to the total grades you will receive during the Preparatory Course! Please, note that each of the three subjects will be taught for two months. By the end of March next year, you will get a letter with your grades, where you will also find a referral to a relevant MUni.

Best regards,

Daphne Wootton (vice head of the training department)

Enrolee Training Department»

To William Calhoun

13, Blackfriars Lane,

London, England.

William finished the letter and gave the mailmage a happy look.

«I've been admitted, Nymus!» he exclaimed. «Admitted to the Preparatory Course!»

«Master Calhoun has chosen to read the letter aloud, so I am already aware of that! Please, accept my congratulations, Master Calhoun! But this is not the only news I have brought!»

He held out his other hand and pulled out another envelope, purple this time.

«Whom is the second letter from?» William asked, puzzled, as he took the envelope from Nymus.

«From the Department as well! It is supposed to come together with the letter about the admittance to the Preparatory Course!»

William opened the second letter and also read it aloud:

«Dear Mr. Calhoun!

The Wizard Education Department is eager to inform you that this Saturday the Annual Enrolee Ball is going to take place, which all enrolees of the Preparatory Course are to attend. Attendance is mandatory. In case you turn the invitation down, your further studies at the Preparatory Course will be annulled and the refusal to take part in the Annual Enrolee Ball will be viewed as disrespectful to the Ball regulations and its organisers. We would also like to inform you that because of the anniversary of the Annual Enrolee Ball, it is going to take place in Germany, at the residence of the president of the International Federation of Wizards, Quincy von Bulberg. To reach this destination, you will need to come to the Cabstation before 5:30 p.m. this Friday, where you are going to take the Six O'Clocker together with other participants of the Ball to travel to the castle. During the ball, all enrolees will receive feathermaps with addresses of the teachers where regular classes of the Preparatory Course will take place.

Please, find your invitation ticket enclosed to this letter. You will need to have it with you as a pass to the Annual Enrolee Ball.

Best regards,

Charlotte Walsh (Enrolee Correspondence Department)

Wizard Education Department»

To William Calhoun

13, Blackfriars Lane,

London, England.

«This cannot be!» William said after he had finished reading the letter. He took the golden invitation ticket out of the envelope and read:

William Calhoun

Participant of the Annual Enrolee Ball

At first, William was thrilled. And no wonder: he was accepted as a full member of the wizard community, invited not just anywhere, but to the castle of the president of the International Federation of Wizards, where wizards come to from all over the world. But in a moment, his delight was quickly replaced by disappointment.

«I'm afraid this isn't going to work, Nymus!» he said gloomily.

The mailmage didn't have time to say anything as William continued:

«What am I going to tell Hoggarts?» he pointed at the letter from the Department. «That I'm going to go to Germany to take part in the wizard ball?»

«Master Calhoun is free to act as he wishes!» Nymus said with respect. «If he wishes so, he will go to another place where he will not have to ask for a permission to move around.»

«But where will I go? Where will I live, how will I pay for my needs?»

«Do not worry. I can sign Mister Calhoun for a membership at the Carefree Wizard Fund, where he will be given accommodation, food, clothes, and other necessary things.»

«No, this won't do!» William refused. «I love Hoggarts and I can't just leave them like that. They are my family. Not by blood, but still. And they have been taking care of me for so many years and consider me their son. No! I'd better tell Mrs. Hoggart that I'll spend the weekend at Bobby Atkinson's place. She knows him, we go to school together, I mean we did, she won't mind.»

«Well, Master Calhoun knows better!» Nymus agreed reluctantly and added: «It is Thursday already, tomorrow at half past five we need to be at the Cabstation.»

«By the way! What is this Cabstation?»

«Cabstation is the oldest station of London. It is famous for its legendary Six O’Clocker, which is surrounded by so many myths and mysteries it is even hard to imagine! Well, I am not going to spoil the impression with my stories! You will get the chance to see everything with you own eyes tomorrow!»

«Oh, I’m looking forward to it, Nymus! It’s decided, then! When should I expect you tomorrow?»

«Ten minutes before half past five Nymus will be here! Be ready by that time, Master Calhoun.»

«Alright! And now you need to go, Nymus. Hoggarts will come soon! See you tomorrow!»

«Good Mail, Master Calhoun!» Nymus raised his mailmage hat and disappeared with the already familiar sound.

It was bright already. And it was raining, quite usual for this time of the year, raindrops beating against the window of the room William was sleeping in. With his nose pressed to his pillow, he was still watching his last dream, when something barely noticeable and soft tickled his nose. For another half a minute William was resisting it, as he kept sleeping, but the insistent irritator covered his face completely. William sneezed loudly and tore his head from the pillow. As he opened one eye, he tried to see who had disturbed his sleep, but the only thing he saw were white hairs that had obscured the world. He pulled out the magic feather that had halfway come out from under the pillow. Lately he placed it there before sleep. Holding the feather tight in his hand, William sat up.

«Listen, buddy,» he addressed the feather strictly. «Let’s agree on one thing: if you want to continue being friends with me, you’ll never wake me up without a reason again. Like it or not, but I’m the boss around here! Otherwise, next time you’re going to sleep under the bed!»

As a reply, the feather seemed to have drooped in his hand, then William said to it, softer this time:

«No offence, alright? Just try not to wake me up in such an unpleasant way. And I was kidding about the bed...»

This made the feather straighten up again, but, probably to show obedience, it moved its hairs a little bit.

«Wonderful!» William said in a satisfied voice and jumped off his bed.

Since the day William stopped going to school, he couldn’t find what to do with his time when he stayed home alone. Before, he devoted all of the time to homework and now, when he stayed at home alone, he just paced his room, waiting for Nymus. This time he wasn’t just waiting for news from him, but Nymus himself. In a few hours, he was going to go to Germany, and since morning, he had an unbearable desire to speed up time to make the time of the trip closer. It wasn’t difficult to convince Mrs. Hoggart to let him spend the weekend at Bobby Atkinson’s place. William stayed with him for a day or two before. Hoggarts trusted William completely and he had never let them down before. So this time it went alright as well. William said that he would go straight to Bobby’s after school, so he said his goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Hoggart and wished them goodnight, then returned to his room and fell asleep soon.

Since morning, William was getting ready for his trip to Germany, pleasantly excited. Though, frankly speaking, the preparation consisted of him patiently lying on his bed, trying to imagine what was waiting for him out there, among other wizards, at the castle of Quincy von Bulberg, and what would the ball be like.

He glanced at his watch – they showed quarter past five. «Nymus should come soon!» he said to himself and started pacing the room again. He checked once again if his magic feather was with

him, but it was, so he put it back into his pocket. Then he walked to the window, following some kind of instinct, to see if there was anyone by the door, but then he remembered that Nymus wasn't in the habit of entering the house through the door. Hoggarts weren't back yet. They were usually back home not earlier than six, but who knew what their schedule was today. «I wish Nymus would come!» he thought, glancing at the watch.

Nymus came very soon.

«Good Mail, Master Calhoun!»

«Nymus! Finally! I've started to worry! I've been just lying on my bed all day, having nothing to do, waiting for you to come!»

«You should have written to me! I would have come right away!» the mailmage replied.

«I didn't want to waste your time! I've been at the Post Office and I still remember how many letters were there and other stuff! So I've decided to be patient instead and wait for the set hour!»

«Well, there was really a lot to do at the Post Office, what is written stays written!» Nymus sighed. «Has Master Calhoun taken the letter with the invitation to the Ball?»

«Damn!» William swore. «I've completely forgotten about it!»

He took the letter from the Department out of the drawer and pulled the invitation out.

«There, we can go!» he said.

«Then hold on tight to my hand!» he gave William his hand and they peregrined.

The familiar peregrining sensation didn't cause discomfort anymore. Quite the contrary, in that little time that had passed since his first peregrining, he got used to it so much that he couldn't imagine any other way of travelling. When the peregrining was over, he was terrified to find that he was standing two steps away from giant hooves rushing at him. Frightened, he was going to jump away to avoid being trampled, but large nimble hands of the mailmage held him, preventing him from doing it.

«No, no! It is but a statue, Master Calhoun! We are in the Waiting Hall of the Cabstation!»

It took William a few moments to catch his breath. Once he'd managed that, he felt embarrassed for being afraid of the harmless statue. He soothed himself by the fact that normal statues didn't have a habit of scaring people, so he had nothing to be ashamed of.

«Even though they are carrying their carriage at full speed, they never leave their niche,» Nymus pointed at the pedestal below.

«It would have been nice to get a warning BEFORE peregrining!» he was still staring at the unusual sculpture. «What are they made of?»

«Common stone,» the mailmage replied casually.

«Yes, but stone has immobile nature, as far as I know. Or are you going to say otherwise?»

«No, I am not!» Nymus smiled. «Wizards have a way of treating stone, Master Calhoun! They are capable of turning it into anything at all. Long time ago, when demits were still in close contact with wizards, this skill made demits call wizards stonemasons. It is no secret that many sculptures of demits were made by wizards.»

«No secret for whom?» even though William got used to Nymus with his strange stories, but sometimes he had to struggle not to go mad from some of them. «Fine, forget it!»

He looked around. The Waiting Hall of the Cabstation was at least several times larger than those of demits. It looked like a giant building with stone slabs on the floor. Perhaps those slabs or perhaps something else gave this rather spacious hall a subtle resemblance to a medieval dungeon where they tortured people. A huge statue depicting a carriage pulled by three giant white elks, which stood in the middle of the Hall, made the atmosphere even gloomier. Stumping their hooves, yet not moving from their spot, the elks were tirelessly pulling the black carriage. But the walls were the most remarkable feature, they had dual nature and kept changing their appearance all the time. William was enjoying the view of the soft ground on the walls that surrounded the Waiting Hall completely when they started to change their colour to darker ones, right before his eyes, until they had completely

changed into dark-blue waters of the ocean. Moving from one state to another, the walls filled the Waiting Hall with relevant colours, creating semi-darkness at one point, and submerging it into the ocean at another. William found it most remarkable when the shiny white humps of the elks were lit by blue flares of the water reflected from the walls. The elks seemed so life-like and realistic at that point, that if he'd met them at a zoo, he'd have had no doubts they were alive. His mixed feelings, caused by indescribable fear of the first seconds after arriving to the Cabstation, and now the incredible fascination with this building, were soon replaced by open delight. It was the delight that filled him as he looked around, examining large clocks on tall poles. There were so many of them he couldn't have counted them all from the first attempt even if he wanted to.

«The mother of all London stations!» Nymus said. He was pleased to see the delight of his master at seeing the majestic Waiting Hall.

«But who built it all, Nymus?»

«Wizards! They are really good at installing such things in buildings,» he pointed at the changing walls made from living nature elements.

«This is incredible!» William cried out, giving the walls another look. They had just submerged the Waiting Hall into semi-darkness by turning into ground. «And this is merely a Waiting Hall! I can only imagine how more important wizard buildings look like!»

«Much more majestic and impressive!» Nymus assured him.

«And what are those clocks on poles? Their arrows move in the opposite direction.»

«They are supposed to be moving in the opposite direction, Master Calhoun. They do the countdown of all arrivals and departures. This clock,» Nymus pointed at the one nearby, «has arrows moving in different directions! For those waiting for this trip it serves as an indication that the trip was moved to a different time. And this one,» he pointed at the clock next to it, «is ours. It shows that three minutes are left until the arrival of the Six O'Clocker. So we should better find our way to the platform.»

«Where's the platform?»

«Come!» Nymus headed to the window in the far corner that was located right in the wall made of living nature element. William followed him.

There were long benches all around, enrollees sitting there with their parents who had come to see them off to the Ball. Of course, William didn't know any of them. For a moment, he felt really uneasy because he actually didn't know any wizards at all. «But at least he had Nymus!» he kept saying to himself. He'll have time to make friends with wizards. It was too early to fall into despair.

They walked past the endless rows of benches and finally reached the window, with the cashier sitting beyond it and reading a newspaper. William saw the name of the newspaper «Informed Wizard'. Nymus knocked on the window. The same moment the elderly wizard put his newspaper aside and gave the newcomers a questioning look. Nymus bent over William's ear and whispered:

«Your invitation ticket! You need to show it to pass.»

William quickly pulled out the invitation from his pocket and handed it to the elderly wizard in glasses. He took the ticket and touched it with his feather. The invitation vanished from this touch. After this, the elderly wizard said politely:

«Please, step through, Mister Calhoun!»

At this, Nymus took William to the wall, which reflected them now. The water suddenly parted, revealing an oval oak door. They opened the door, stepped through and found themselves on the platform.

«Nymus, so the water wasn't real, just an illusion?» William asked when they were standing on the platform among other wizards waiting for the Six O'Clocker.

«No, why? It is real, like the ground that replaces it regularly. It is a security system – only those that have the ticket may pass. Those who try to reach the platform without the ticket will simply step onto the ocean floor and drown... Excuse me!.. Make way!... Thank you!... Please, sir... What

a lovely child... let us pass,» while explaining all that, Nymus was holding William with one hand and used the other hand to push through the crowd. «If the walls are in their earth shape at that moment, the frauds will bury themselves the moment they make a step.»

«But you've managed to pass somehow,» William noted, «and nothing happened to you.»

«Master Calhoun forgets that I am a mailmage! Mailmages do not need to cheat to get anywhere, because they have a special pass to all places. We can peregrine anywhere we want without breaking the law. However, it is prohibited to take our wizards where they are not supposed to be or they need a pass for. It is a blatant violation of the Post Office Code, and for this violation... Allow me the doubt of whether you have chosen the right place on the platform, Miss... For this violation we will never see letters again!»

After passing through the last row of wizards, they came to the front of the crowd.

«There! Now nothing will get in the way for Master William to enjoy the sight of the arrival of the Six O'Clocker!» he said in a satisfied voice and folded his arms on his chest.

They were standing in a gloomy dense forest. The only source of noise here were the loud voices of wizards, who, judging by the thickening crowd, were still arriving, and it was becoming hard to move. Instead of the rails William had expected to see he only saw a path leading from one part of the forest to another. When he turned around, he didn't see the towering building of the Cabstation behind the crowd. He actually didn't see anything towering there. Only the trees.

«If it has not been for the crowd, Master William would have seen a shabby hut, no longer than ten feet. It's for diversion!» Nymus explained seeing his confusion. «Demits often come here, and the large building of the Cabstation in the middle of the forest would have caused, let us say, some degree of misunderstanding.

«But there's a forest here! Besides, there are no rails. There's actually nothing here except for the forest.»

«Rails?» Nymus looked surprised.

«Of course! We're taking the Six O'Clocker, after all!»

«Master William, the Six O'Clocker is not a train,» the mailmage replied shortly.

«What is it, then?»

«A cab.»

«A cab?»

«Not an ordinary one, of course, but a cab!» Nymus replied in a busy-like tone.

«But is it possible to travel all the way to Germany by cab?! Even though the station is called the Cabstation, I thought it was merely a name, and we're travelling by train.»

«I have already told master Calhoun that wizards do not use any kinds of digital or electronic devices, like demits. Magic Feathers do not allow them to work properly,» the mailmage reminded him.

«Oh, right... now I remember!» William said and they fell silent again. After a while, William asked: «When will I see you again, Nymus?»

«I will meet Master Calhoun here, when the Six O'Clocker brings enrolees back. And if you need me earlier, you know how to call me.»

«Alright, Nymus! I'll let you know!»

Suddenly William felt something starting to vibrate deep down under his feet. The ground started moving – first slightly, then more and more, and then the whole platform was shaking, as if it was an earthquake. Soon the sound of hooves coming from underground turned into real thunder, followed by even heavier shaking of the ground.

«The Six O'Clocker is coming!» Nymus had to all but shout to be heard. «I wish you an unforgettable trip, my Master! Have a good journey!»

«Thank you, Nymus!»

The moment he said that, the thunder of hooves coming from deep under deafened all the other sounds. A part of the path not far from the place he and Nymus were standing, suddenly rose up. Small pieces of soft ground flew into the air and it seemed like someone large was making the way through the thick ground, struggling to get to the surface. And a moment later, the shovel-like powerful horns showed from under the ground and rushed forward, followed by hump-nosed heads, necks and, finally, white bodies of blue-eyed elks, pulling the legendary black carriage!

This process lasted for a while and soon, when the carriage was fully on the surface, it turned out that the Six O’Clocker had the same size as ordinary trains. It consisted of an endless row of connected cabins. Each cabin looked like a miniature cab. William suddenly realized he had no idea which cabin he was supposed to take. He turned to ask Nymus, but the mailmage was gone. There was an old wizard instead, who was holding his granddaughter’s hand.

«I must have missed the sound of him peregrining because of that racket!» William thought. «Well, now I’ll have to think on my own!»

He saw the enrolees taking seats in the cabins quite chaotically and he headed towards the one right opposite to him. But as he approached it, he saw through the round window on the door that all the seats inside were taken. The cabins were for four people each, with seats facing each other. William moved along the «train’ until he found a cabin with only one passenger. William opened the door and asked:

«Excuse me, are other seats taken?»

The passenger just lazily turned his head, gave William a look and said as lazily:

«Nah!» after which he turned to the other window again.

Then William jumped inside the cabin. Once inside, he looked around. The cab inside was rather tall, even an adult could stand here without touching the ceiling. It was rather roomy as well, to stretch out the legs. Round windows on the doors on both sides reminded illuminators in a ship cabin. The cabins had pillows and other necessary things to make the journey comfortable for the passengers. There were black hooded robes on the seats, neatly folded. After glancing at his travelling companion and seeing that he was already wearing the prepared garment, William took the robes and, following the example of his companion, threw them on. There was a letter «E» encircled by a feather embroidered on the chest. Finding his new outfit quite comfortable, he finally sat down, noticing how comfortable the seats were. Now William’s eyes focused on the companion sitting opposite him. It was a rather chubby pink-cheeked boy with tousled hair, about the same age as William. It seemed that the boy wasn’t interested in anything. He was staring at the trees in the forest and seemed to be lost in his thoughts. But William wasn’t too happy at the thought of spending the whole journey in silence. Besides, it felt like the right time to start making friends. So William decided to show initiative and start the conversation.

«A bit gloomy around here, isn’t it?» he said with irony.

The pink-cheeked companion didn’t even move after being talked to. Only after a few seconds, he turned his head lazily and looked at William:

«Only don’t think that if we’ve happened to be in one cabin, we can get to know each other, become friends, and die best friends in the old age!» he grimaced and turned away again.

William was speechless for the moment, taken aback. That was some damn luck! He thought that if somebody wasn’t going to open the door of the cabin and seat with them, the journey would be a complete disappointment! But his thoughts were interrupted by a strong push that threw him back in his seat, followed by the sound of hooves. The Six O’Clocker started to move.

Slow at first, then faster and faster, they were moving forward. William couldn’t see how going faster and faster the blue-eyed elks thrust their hooves deeper into the ground until they started to submerge. Following the example of his unfriendly companion, he was staring out of the round window and he suddenly noticed that with each second the ground outside the window was going higher until it covered it completely. The carriage went underground.

«Oh no!» William thought. «However, I should have guessed that our journey would take place underground. Because if the cab came from underground when it arrived to the station, it means that it should continue its way underground as well!»

It became rather dark in the cabin, making it hard to see anything. Suddenly the light was lit, revealing the round face of his companion, who'd just added the brightness to the oil lamp that had been barely burning. William turned his head, saw a similar lamp to the right of himself and adjusted the flame in it. The next moment, the cabin was brightly lit by two lamps on both sides of the cabin. But William thought that this light made the atmosphere in the cabin even gloomier.

The cab was already underground completely, but William could feel the cabin dashing forward at great speed. At the same time, the Six O'Clocker wasn't moving along the tunnel, it was digging it as it went with the horns of the elks. Fresh ground beating against the windows of the cabin was a witness to that. Frankly speaking, the sight wasn't only rather unpleasant, but also quite scary. «Will they have to move underground all the way?» he thought. The journey by the Six O'Clocker didn't seem such a safe activity anymore. His companion continued staring through the window, which didn't show anything but the dirt, and it seemed that he was deeply indifferent to anything happening outside. William was going to take a nap to make the journey seem less scary and monotonous, when there was a slight difference in his companion's behaviour. His hands, calmly lying on the seat just a moment ago, were suddenly holding on very tight to it. And he started sweating profusely, staring at the round window. But these weren't the only odd things. As William followed his look, he noticed that the dirt on the window started disappearing, making way to water drops. There were more and more of those drops, and it was enough to make William's heart sink. He immediately remembered the walls of the Cabstation Waiting Hall, and he clearly understood what was going to happen next. He was staring at the eerie window in fear, unable to tear his eyes away from it. And then the familiar thumping of hooves coming from up front stopped. The Six O'Clocker had come out of the gloomy dungeon and changed the nature element, now going at an incredible speed along the ghostly ocean bottom to the silent hooves thumping of its elks. Frightened sea creatures scattered away from the horrifying gloomy carriage and its just as gloomy helmsmen. Neither it was calm inside the cabins! Round windows showed wide-open frightened and excited eyes of young passengers watching the mud rise up from the bottom from under the wheels of the mysterious cab. William's heart was all but jumping out of his chest and he turned to his companion to share his impressions from the eerie seascape. But as he looked at him, he was not less horrified to see that the boy had gone red in the face and was struggling for breath, as he attempted to undo the button under his neck.

«Can't... breathe!» he managed with difficulty.

Reacting instantly, William rushed to his side and started slapping his cheeks, trying to bring him back to his senses.

«What's the matter with you?» he asked quickly.

«My...» he pointed at his backpack, «...inhaler...»

Realizing at once what he was supposed to do, William rummaged in the boy's backpack, took out a small breathing device and held it to the boy's mouth. He grabbed it with his lips and started breathing greedily. After a few moments, the boy was already able to hold the inhaler himself. William was looking at him with pity and fear at the same time. Soon his companion started recovering. He put away the inhaler, made a few deep breaths and started talking, finally.

«Tha... Thank you!» he said, his breathing still ragged.

«No problem!» William replied, calming down.

«Wayne Ferguson!» he introduced himself.

«Will Calhoun!» William replied automatically. «Does this often happen to you?»

«Not really. Only where there is little air,» Wayne Ferguson replied, still breathing heavily. «My lungs contract and I don't get enough oxygen.»

«I see. Well, then, keep that thing closer to yourself from now on!» William took his seat again and gave Wayne another worried look: «Feeling better?»

«Yes, thanks! Where are you from?»

«London. And you?»

«Preston! It's in Lancashire. There's definitely much more air out there than here!»

«Yeah, that's true!» William grinned. «I've never discussed the air of Preston being on the ocean floor before! Are you in the Preparatory Course as well?»

«Yes,» Wayne replied, «that's why I'm going to this damn Ball!»

«You don't really like it, do you?»

«Well, the Ball is okay, but the journey...» he nodded at the inhaler on the seat, «is quite uncomfortable.»

«So, you do know how the Ball is organized?»

«Who doesn't,» Wayne snorted, «Everyone knows about it from early childhood. It's a tradition to hold the Ball before the Preparatory Course starts.»

«I'd be happy if you share the information with me! I know nothing about it!»

«No problem. I owe you!» Wayne took a deep breath and started talking. «The ball itself has four stages. The first one is the opening of the Ball! Well, the choir sings its well-wish song, after which we'll be given feathermaps...»

«What are these feathermaps, by the way? The letter from the Department mentioned that they'd be handing them out, but I didn't understand what they were for.»

«Well, feathermaps are the things that will help us to peregrine to classes to the houses of the teachers. They can be located in completely different places and it would be quite difficult to get to them without feathermaps.»

«I see! What happens next?»

«The second stage – when delegations from all four MUnis arrive ceremoniously to the Ball. It's always an incredible sight. They appear and start talking one by one of what awaits their students within their MUnis. This way the enrolees who haven't decided which MUni to enter after the Preparatory Course get a more vivid impression about each of them, which makes their choice easier later. They learn about the history of each MUni, as well as about the teaching method, special subjects and so on. And after that, when professors end their speeches, the third stage comes – dancing. During the dancing part, enrolees get to know each other, find new friends, but mostly they just step on each other's toes!»

«I can imagine that!» William said with irony. «What about the fourth stage?»

«The closing ceremony! After which we get into this death machine again and go back. That's how this ball goes.»

«Awesome! And how do you know so much?»

«My older brother Ralph told me! He took part in the Annual Enrolee Ball twice! First when he was an enrolee like us, and the second time as a graduate curator of enrolees. We'll be assigned one when we get there.»

«You're lucky to have such a brother! Which MUni are you going to enter?»

«Garville, of course! My whole family studied there! I'm the youngest, so it's my turn now!»

«Well, I hope that's where you'll go by the end of this year! I want to go to Templedoor!»

«Well, Templedoor is considered the best MUni by many people, that's why the grades to enter it are higher than for other MUnis. But, personally, I don't think that this makes Garville worse than Templedoor. Each MUni is unique, but Templedoor always takes special talented wizard kids. So, if you can't get there, I recommend going to Garville without any further thinking!»

«Well, if Templedoor doesn't work out, that's what I'll do!»

William looked out of the window. They were still moving along the ocean floor. Trying to keep it out of his mind, he decided to distract himself with Wayne's stories.

«Tell me what is the Six O’Clocker famous for? My mailmage says that there are many legends and that...»

«You’ve got a mailmage?!» Wayne interrupted roughly.

«Well, yes,» William was puzzled by this question. «Why does this surprise you? I thought every wizard had one.»

«Every adult wizard – yes! Mailmages don’t serve children. They serve the head of the family.»

«Oh, I see! Well, I am the head of the family. I mean, the last representative of my kin.»

«I’m sorry, I didn’t know!»

«It’s alright! So what is the Six O’Clocker famous for?»

«Well, like my grandfather told me, and like his great-grandfather told him...» Wayne interrupted the story with another intake through the inhaler, «long time ago, when there were difficult times in the Wizarding Community and many families were forced to leave the country, it was the Six O’Clocker that took them away.»

«Why couldn’t they peregrine? Why use the Six O’Clocker when peregrining takes much less time and energy?»

«At that time peregrining was monitored by the enemies, and quite often, when wizards peregrined, they came not to their destination, but right into the hands of their enemies. Even before that, during battles, the Six O’Clocker delivered provision and backup troops to those who were forced to defend themselves in a castle or a fortress of some sort.»

«How long have the Six O’Clocker existed?» William was surprised by the historic scales the Six O’Clocker routes encompassed.

«Nobody knows. It is considered to have simply existed and that’s it. Even during the times of Goodwin of Essex, the Blue-eyed carried their legendary carriage to the most remote parts of the world, each time with an important mission.»

«And why is it pulled by elks, not horses, like usual?» The thought just came to William’s head.

«Usual where?» Wayne asked with a grin.

«Well,» William drawled, «among demits.»

«That’s right!» Wayne nodded. «Only they use horses because they are unable to tame other faster creatures.»

«Er... aren’t horses faster than elks?» William asked stupidly.

«Don’t make me laugh!» Wayne laughed as if he had just been told a very good anecdote. «Only White Elks are faster than elks. Well, except for all the flying creatures.»

«Are you serious?»

«Of course! It’s a well-known fact that elks can run at the speed of more than two hundred miles per hour. As for white elks, they pull their carriages at the speed of over four hundred miles.»

William was starting to feel irritated when he heard something for the first time, but this «something» was followed by «everyone knows». «Well, I’ll have to get used to it!» he thought to himself and asked:

«Are the Blue-eyed that kind of elks?»

«They are, but they are the only representatives of their kind!» Wayne said busy-like. «The others were driven to death.»

Meanwhile, the Six O’Clocker pushed from the bottom with the hooves of its Blue-eyed and was speedily going up to the shore. After reaching it, it didn’t go out of the water, but drove the horns of the Blue-eyed into the ground and submerged the cabin into the underground semi-darkness, illuminated by two dull lamps, as before.

«There,» Wayne looked out of the round window, «we’ll arrive soon!»

The Six O’Clocker moved underground for a short time, then it rushed to the surface, accompanied by the endless racket of the hooves of the Blue-eyed, until it was on the surface again, following its course, but moving at a slower pace than before. The underground darkness made way

to the twilight of the majestic mountains. When William looked out of the window, he was able to make out only that they were moving on the ground, like a normal carriage was supposed to do. But it was impossible to make out anything else because of the stubborn fog and the mist on the glass.

«Is it far to the castle?» he asked Wayne.

«Almost there!» he replied. «The Six O’Clocker only moves on the ground in two cases: when it takes passengers and when they are to get off.»

He’d just finished talking, when the speed of the mysterious cab started to slow down, then it slowly came to a halt in a mountain area.

William reached out for his things, ready to get off, by Wayne stopped him:

«Wait, not yet! We aren’t supposed to get off until a curator comes to take us to the castle.»

«So we’re up for another journey, this time to the castle?»

Wayne just shrugged to that.

William sat down again, waiting for the curator to show, and soon the cabin door opened suddenly, letting in cool mountain air. He breathed it in deeply and sat with his eyes shut for a while, enjoying the work of his own lungs. Then a head showed up in the open door and an unfamiliar voice started talking, making them both jump.

«Are you going to sit here till morning? Do you want me to continue risking my health and freezing out here?» said a young wizard in purple robes. He had slick hair and an unhappy face. His robes had a red «G» on the front.

William hurried to get out, and Wayne, who had also been sitting with his eyes closed, doubly happy to feel fresh air, followed him at once. When they got out of the cabin, stepping out on the frozen ground, the young wizard headed to a group of enrolees waiting for them nearby. He made a few steps forward, then turned around and addressed the group:

«Alrighty, kids! I’m Morty, a junior curator. Don’t huddle and stand in a line! My task is to take you safely to the castle and stay at your side at all times, to make sure you don’t do anything stupid!» He glanced around the foggy landscape. «It’s easy to get lost here, especially with this visibility, so try to keep up and follow me!» At this, he turned around and headed to the castle.

After the enrolees had covered some distance, there was loud a echo from the thumping of hooves, after which the mountain area was filled with shrill elk cry, which made everyone slow down involuntarily.

«No stopping! Move along!» Morty’s voice said.

And they continued moving at a usual pace. Not far, on both sides, William could see other groups through the fog, which were following their curators to the castle, dressed in black hooded robes. He thought that from the side their silent procession looked more like a secret druid gathering.

They walked in silence. The atmosphere of this foggy area instilled some level of fear and everyone tried to keep close to the person in front not to stray from the path. Getting lost in the fog, in the mountains, seemed a rather gloomy and easily achieved prospect. Finally, they reached stone gates, passed through them, and came to the base of the stairs leading to the castle. Then Morty addressed them again:

«Everyone here? We haven’t lost anyone on the way?»

«All here!» the enrolees replied in a chorus.

«Great! Then follow me and step very carefully! Hold on to the railings in the middle of the stairs!» After saying this, he turned and started ascending the stairs slowly, leading the scared enrolees.

On both sides, the stairs were lit with torches hidden in mouths of stone dragons directed upwards. And their scaly stone wings towered over the stairs themselves, giving them a more frightening look. The patches of thin fog, pierced by the firelight, made it easy to imagine that these dragons were real. After making it up a few round stairs and nearly slipping on one of them, William realized that they were made of stone dragon tails placed close to each other. The long tails were

stretched out to create a step when touching the tail of the opposite dragon. They intertwined in the middle of the stairs with their diamond-shaped tips, forming a kind of railing, which junior curator Morty advised to hold on to.

Finally, leaving endless steps behind, the enrolees reached a wide landing, finding themselves before the entrance to the castle. The doors were open wide, letting the light flow onto the landing. All curators moved forward and stood in groups on both sides of the oak front doors. There was short silence and the enrolees started exchanging looks, whispering quietly to each other. Soon this whisper turned into real hum. Glancing around, William couldn't find Wayne Ferguson, then he decided that he would try to find him later in the castle, when the crowd dispersed.

«Welcome to Alpurg, enrolees!» came a female voice with heavy German accent.

William couldn't make out the face of the one who spoke. The backs of the enrolees standing in front of him made it hard to see. But he managed to. There was a tall noble-looking middle-aged woman, with a high hairstyle and an arrogant expression, standing in the doorway. She was wearing emerald-coloured robes with very narrow sleeves.

«To the residence of Baron Quincy von Bulberg,» she continued, «the president of the International Federation of Wizards! I am Frau Bertha, and while you are at the castle, I will be your senior curator! If you have any questions, you should address them to me! And now come forward and stand along the walls, near the curators.»

Everyone did as told quietly and now the enrolees were standing close to the walls on both sides of the front doors. When no enrolees were left on the upper stairs, Frau Bertha took out her silver magic feather and ordered loudly:

«Avolare!» And a purple light came out of her feather and pierced the neck of one of the stone dragons.

To the utter horror of the enrolees, right before their eyes, the grey stone colour started disappearing gradually, revealing coal-black scaly bodies, before revealing their majestic bodies completely. When the transformation was completely over, dozens of huge wings waved, creating strong wind, and the gloomy abyss, hidden by the dragon stairs until then, was filled with blood-chilling roar. William clearly felt how this roar made the hooves of the Blue-eyed stump again, this time in his stomach. The dragons soared up into the sky and sat on the tall towers of Alpurg, after which they folded their wings and became stone again. Now, where the stairs used to be recently, the frightened enrolees could see dark-blue lifeless abyss, hiding barely visible snow tops of numerous mountains.

The thought that the stone dragons could have come alive and remove their tails back when they were ascending the stairs, made William tremble nervously. Because if that had happened, the enrolees would have inevitably fallen into the abyss, the stairs had been hiding. Now, Morty's words about caution while they were ascending the stairs had a completely different meaning.

«Follow your curators now, everyone!» Frau Bertha said. «They will take you to the Dining Hall!» With that, she turned around and entered the castle.

Chapter seven

Alpurg

After Frau Bertha had disappeared inside the castle, the dazed enrolees couldn't move from the spot for quite a while, shocked by the terrifying dragon stairs. Towering over the mountain area, Alpurg was situated on one of the most unreachable tops. Not unlike prisoners on an island without a boat, the enrolees were standing on the edge of the cliff, unable to tear their eyes away from the dark abyss, with the castle front doors open wide behind them. The fog, thickening over the mountains, submerged the area into darkness. Brightly lit windows of Alpurg were the only source of light.

«Alrighty, the show's over! If you feel faint, dizzy, sick or unwell in any other unacceptable way, let me know! And now into the castle, all of you!» Morty's cheerful voice brought everyone back to their senses.

The next moment, enrolees dashed into the open front doors of the castle, eager to get away from the dangerous abyss. Junior curators were waiting for them in the entrance hall. Not only them. The entrance hall of Alpurg was full of wizards and witches. Some were strolling up and down the stairs, cheerfully talking to each other and paying no attention whatsoever to the enrolees. Others were talking quietly, laughing from time to time. And some were whispering conspiratorially in the corners. After all the enrolees had gathered around their curators, they started instructing them. Morty, who seemed to be the only cheerful adult in the whole castle, took his group to the side and said in a low voice:

«Listen up, kids! While you're here, remember one simple rule: if you don't want to get in trouble or get me in trouble, don't argue with Frau Bertha! So be quiet as a feather, lay lower than the Six O'Clocker when it travels!»

At that moment, a wizard in yellow robes appeared behind Morty and waved at the enrolees in a friendly way. They started waving back, which puzzled Morty. He turned around quickly and jumped with surprise when he saw the newcomer.

«President Albertson! Would you be so kind and not bother me while I'm instructing the enrolees?» he said impatiently. The wizard in yellow robes turned around, clearly offended, and walked away.

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