

Chapter 2 — Bus Troubles

The 23rd of August, the school bus came to the Whitewater home to pick up Fern, the new first year student, for her orientation week. Both Tom and Sandy, the Yellow Hall Floor Monitors, also had to return to school with her, since part of their duties was to help the new students get their supplies and learn their way around Bradbury's.

Because of the threat of Dominus Malefic and his band, the remainder of the students were told to be ready to return on the 29th, two days early, and to expect long delays while each student was examined to make sure he or she was not one of the Death Stalkers masquerading as a student. Lindsey heard this delay had happened last year, but now she got to experience it herself. At nine in the morning, she stood on her new porch, five duffle bags of possessions ready to go. She had said goodbye to her mom and stepfather already, though both were watching from the front window. "She looks so grown up, Lloyd," Lena commented, as the two looked at the teenager.

Pop! The Bradbury school bus suddenly appeared. Across the front banner scrolled "To Bradbury's School of Magic." The school logo was also plastered across both sides of the yellow school bus as well as above the rear emergency door. Yet this was not your ordinary school bus, rather it looked more like a double decker Greyhound bus, a mixture of a London two-decker and a Greyhound coach. A large cargo bay below held the students' gear. Two stories of seats meant that this bus could carry at least a hundred passengers. Jimmy, a young man in his twenties stepped off to greet her. A solemn faced second man also got off, his badge indicated that he was from the Department of Defense.

Jimmy had long blonde hair, tied back in a pony tail, and blue eyes with a small blonde moustache. As he smiled, Lindsey saw that he was still missing his two front teeth. "Bradbury School of Magic. I's a pleasure seeing you again, Lindsey Barron. 'om, here, will check you ou' 'o make sure you is you and no one's hiding in your bags. Then, I'll pu' your bags below, ma'am." He still had immense trouble with his t's.

Tom came forward and waved his wand over Lindsey. A bit annoyed, Lindsey replied, "Honestly, how is that going to detect if I am not who I am? When Dominus was being me, that spell wouldn't have detected him as me." Tom ignored her and waved her onto the bus, while he began inspecting each bag and her staff. He shot her a long glance over his shoulder, though she did not see him doing so, as she climbed on the bus. She would be the first student to have her own Staff of Power!

Lindsey moved quickly to the rear of the bus, where Jim and Amanda were sitting in their favorite spot, the very last seat. "Hi, sure is kind of dumb of them," Lindsey remarked.

“We know,” her two friends chorused. “Took him five minutes to check us out. This will be a long morning until the bus gets loaded up.”

“Well, soon we ought to pick up Kathy and Emilio,” Amanda offered a more hopeful note. Indeed, it took all morning long before they had finally picked up all of the students, close to a hundred were jammed into the bus, when it finally began the lengthier portion of their journey, across southern Colorado to somewhere near Telluride.

Kathy, Emilio, Lindsey, and Amanda chatted together, while Jim move up front a ways to talk to some of his older friends. “I always like this part of our trip, we get so see the mountains and forests,” Amanda commented as the bus flew along US 160 through the San Juan Mountains and Forest. Zipping through the streets of Durango at a hundred miles an hour, the bus traveled in twisted space. Still, it was creepy as they apparently “moved” through other cars and trucks as if they were not really there. Not long after that, the bus turned north on State 145 and entered the long, picturesque drive up to near Telluride.

This area was quite remote, only three tiny towns lined this magnificent road which traversed the valley to the east of the towering range of mountains. Last year, they had studied astronomy in their science class, and the four now knew that Mount Wilson Observatory lay just north and west of them. While they were chatting about this, suddenly the bus made a loud bang. It lurched violently and suddenly stopped, heaving students forward in their seats. Thankfully, everyone had obeyed Jimmy and had their seat belts fastened.

“What happened?” Lindsey asked over the terrified shrieks coming from some Red Hall girls up front.

“Dunno, we must have broken down,” Emilio suggested.

“I didn’t think these buses could break down,” Amanda replied. “I thought that they were magically enchanted and all that.”

“Quiet!” the loud voice of Tom, greatly amplified by a spell, thundered throughout the bus. Instantly, silence came. “That’s better. We are having some kind of problem with the bus. I would like everyone to slowly and safely exit the bus in an orderly manner. Stay close together over there on the hillside by those trees, while Jimmy and I see if we can figure this out. Do not go straying around! Thank you.”

One by one, the students climbed off, talking hastily, voices full of concern. The four joined Jim and his older friend. Jim was saying, “This should not be happening. These are magically enchanted buses.”

“You’re right about that, Jim,” Francesco, Emilio’s older brother and fifth year Brown Hall student, replied.

“Maybe it’s sabotage!” Henry Freeze, the Black Hall fifth year student ominously suggested.

Deiter Cross, the Black Hall boy who had teased Lindsey relentlessly all last year, spoke up, “Well then, we had all better look out, it’s probably Dominus coming for Lindsey again. Lindsey, here comes Dominus.” Several other Black Hall students snickered at his jest.

Lindsey realized that here was a big difference between her dad and herself. She now knew that her father would have, non-verbally and without a wand, cast some spells onto Deiter in retaliation. Lindsey wouldn’t do such a thing.

“Just ignore the creeps,” Jim came to her defense. They watched as Jimmy and Tom crawled underneath the bus.

“his is no’ supposed ‘o happen!” Jimmy called out. “Wha’ do we do now?”

Tom slide out from under the front of the bus, even from this distance, Lindsey saw that his face had gone white. He brushed off his suit and came over to the milling students, standing at the side of the road. Behind them, the mountain slopes rose, but on the western side the slopes rose to jagged mountain sides.

“Sabotage, students. Someone had used a remote controlled bomb to blow up the bottom of our engine. Sixth, fifth years, I want you to form up a perimeter around the younger students. Expect more trouble. Miss Barron, I suggest that you summon your staff. This is not a drill, students. Be alert for trouble, while we try to summon some aid,” Tom explained. Several Red Hall girls shrieked in alarm, but before they could begin to complain, he added, “Don’t panic. Fear is our worst enemy. Focus, wizards and witches. This is not a time to be out of control of your senses.” His serious mein only added to the overall fear and tensions.

“Margarete: Come,” Lindsey commanded. Many watched in surprise as her Staff of Power came flying from the cargo hold to her hand. This gave many something else to discuss, as the older students began to organize the younger ones.

“Circle, form into a circle,” Jim ordered. Francisco and Henry Freeze began stationing the older students around the clump of younger ones. Lindsey and her staff stood close to Amanda, Emilio and Kathy. “Please, keep talking to a minimum. Each of you is to stand guard over the area you are facing. Like the ancient TV westerns, you know, a circle of covered wagons fighting off we Indians.” A lot of chuckles momentarily lightened the chilling mood, he was an Apache after all. Amanda and Lindsey faced eastward, looking up the beautiful, but relatively steep meadow that climbed up from the valley floor and road.

Reduced to whispering, words flew fast and furious. “Do you see anything?” “No, how about you?” “This isn’t supposed to happen.” “Are we under attack?” “It must be Dominus.” “I

don't see anything yet." "What are we supposed to see?" "Will we be all right?" "I think we ought to have had more protection." For several minutes, whispered comments flew in all directions.

Something began moving around in Lindsey's skirt pocket. She reached down to feel it. "Oh, it's the lucky foot," she whispered to Amanda, who glanced down at her pocket too. "Golly, it's getting a bit frantic, Amanda."

"Dad said it warned of danger," Amanda recalled her father's words. "Look out, but from where? I don't see anything yet!"

Lindsey looked all over the flowered meadows and the ever climbing hillside, but saw nothing, yet her lucky rabbits foot only jumped around more wildly within her pocket, rather annoying her. "I only see a chipmunk with a stick in its mouth," she said grimly to her friend.

Amanda looked at the small rodent too, but then her smile changed to fear. "It's displaying magical energy traces, Lindsey! It might not be a chipmunk!"

While they stared at the small furry creature, it suddenly began growing, morphing into a tall, bearded man wearing black robes! The transformation took less than a second. Jim, Francisco, and Henry now saw the man, as well as many others who were looking in that direction. The stick in its mouth became a wizard's staff in his hand, his magical spell command words could be heard by all who were facing his direction. "Ball of Fire!"

Two seconds from being a chipmunk, a giant ball of flames began forming just beyond the edge of the circle of nearly a hundred students! "Suck It!" Lindsey screamed, forgetting that they were supposed to be silent. Just as the leading edge of the flames reached Jim, the entire spell evaporated, its magical energies arced into Lindsey's staff. Three seconds after the transformation of the rodent, wild screams of terror and panic erupted from the center of the circle of students, the younger ones panicked! At that same instant, three magical missiles from Jim hit the attacking wizard, but had no effect. Amanda saw some kind of energy shield surrounding the man nullify her brother's missiles.

One second later, Henry's lightning bolt arced across the hundred feet and struck their ambusher in his chest. Again, Amanda watched that same shield absorb that one as well. A peal of thunder drowned out the screams of the younger students, who were helpless against such an opponent.

One second after that, Francesco's spell activated, Lindsey heard his command words, "Dispel his magic!" Amanda saw the energy shield surrounding his body disappear!

"Poison Cloud: Kill!" their attacker screamed. Everyone saw a sickly, yellow cloud of vapors appear just before the tightly packed group of children.

“Suck It!” screamed Lindsey, once more. Again, just as the cloud reached Jim, who began to cough, the spell disintegrated, its energy arced into her staff.

Amanda screamed louder over Lindsey, “His magical shield is gone! Attack him!” She waved her wand and a magical missile flew where her fingers pointed, striking their attacker.

Now, many wands began waving and making a downward movement. The second year students’ most powerful spell in a situation like with was to fire a single Magical Missile. While one alone would not do much harm, close to one hundred would be fatal, even to the strongest of opponents. Just as the first of the missiles struck the man, he commanded his staff, “Teleport: . . .” As usual, the words of his destination were not heard. Instantly he was gone, and piles of magical missiles struck the ground where he had been standing.

Covered in dirt and oil, Tom, wand at the ready, came rushing up to the group, but their attacker was gone. The entire group was deadly silent, all wands were poised for another spell, all eyes looked at the spot in the sloping meadow where the man had been. “Well done, students! Well done indeed!” Tom spoke encouragingly to the group. “He’ll think twice before attacking you again, I’m sure.” Tom tried to convince the students that the worst was over, though Lindsey detected a faint trace of uncertainty in his voice.

Everyone watched for a minute or so, only the winds blowing through the tops of the more distant white pines could be heard. “Okay, I think he is gone. Continue your vigilance, while I see if I can repair our bus,” Tom ordered and ran back to the bus.

“Good moves, Lindsey,” Jim said. “Saved our butts twice, mine in particular.” He smiled at her, Lindsey stared at the ground momentarily. Of course, now everyone began whispering about how Lindsey’s staff had absorbed both destructive spells.

“But you were the one who spotted him first,” Lindsey whispered to Amanda. “You deserve big credit too.”

“I’d rather not be in the lime light. I can’t handle it as well as you can, Lindsey,” her dear friend whispered. “Will he be back?”

“I’d expect so, after all, he has not hurt any of us yet. That must be his purpose, I think,” Lindsey whispered back. The two scanned the meadow and hillside over and over, looking for more signs, but saw none as yet.

“Sh! Stay alert, everyone!” Henry called out. “This isn’t over yet!” The noise subsided a little.

Everyone heard a rumbling noise, coming from far up the valley slopes to the east.

“What’s that?” many voices asked nearly simultaneously. Shortly, everyone knew. A giant boulder came smashing through the trees, bouncing over several boulders as if it was a huge rubber ball! “I got it,” called out Francesco. “Disintegrate: Rock!” he commanded, making a circling motion with his wand. The boulder shattered into ten pieces.

While much of the huge boulder was gone, ten smaller pieces clattered on down toward the tightly bunched students. “Push!” yelled Jim. The older students followed his order. With a sideways motion of their wand, a dozen voices called out, “Push Rock.” Lindsey watched amazed as the smaller fragments went flying off in many other directions, eventually landing in the road around the bus, but hitting nothing.

“That was a close one!” Jim exclaimed. “Stay alert, everyone!”

Henry, now coming to grips with their opponent’s strategy, ordered, “Gang, let’s put up a series of Force Walls between us and the hillside there, just in case he pushes more down upon us. I’ll put up the first one and the rest of you, anchor yours to mine. Form a barrier between us and fan it out to protect the bus as well. That’s still our ride to school!” Lindsey, Amanda, Kathy, and Emilio watched, fascinated to see this new spell in operation. A shimmering wall appeared between the eastern edge of the group, fanning out at a forty-five degree angles to either side of them. Now a boulder would be deflected harmlessly around the bus and the students.

Nervously, the group waited. Tom cursed and said “Clean!” about ten times. He had slid out from under the bus, entirely covered in transmission fluid. “What a damn mess! I can’t fix it,” he said to Jimmy, who stood there wringing his hands.

The lucky rabbit’s foot in her pocket began vibrating once more. “He’s trying something else,” Lindsey called out. All eyes scanned the slopes and meadows to the east. A dark grey wall of fog began slowly creeping down the slopes towards them, growing larger with each passing second.

“He’s trying to obscure us so he can do something bad to us,” Jim called out. At once, several older students cast, “Dispel Magical Fog.” Several of the attempts failed to dispel the fog which now reached their force wall, which momentarily held it at bay, though it slowly began rising up the sides of the wall. Just as the creepy fog reached the top of the wall, Francesco’s dispel activated, the fog vanished, only to reveal another one was coming their way!

Hastily, the ten older students cast their dispel spells. At last that one too vanished. Suddenly, the earth began shaking under their feet. Many called out “Earthquake?” Yet this did not really seem quite like an earthquake. A few seconds later, everyone saw a huge landslide coming down at them, splintering the pines in its path as if they were but match sticks!

“More force walls!” screamed Henry in a panic. At that exact instant, four people dressed in their robes appeared beside the bus. Governor Alister waved his wand and commanded,

“Freeze!” Instantly, the landslide halted in its path, as if frozen in time. “Get the children into the bus, Cho Lin, I will hold the landslide a while.”

Everyone turned around and saw an angry looking Governor Alister, his arms outstretched as if holding back the landslide. Professors Cho Lin, Huan Su, and Delius Dogs moved toward the frightened students.

Delius spoke, “Kids, onto the bus immediately!” Hastily, the hundred students rushed towards the bus, Jimmy stood by the door, looking like a ghost, motioning them inside.

As Amanda and Lindsey walked past Cho Lin, their Yellow Hall Counselor, both grinned at their professor, who had given them both special lessons last year. Cho Lin returned their smiles and gave them a wink. Lindsey and Amanda totally relaxed, they knew that they were now completely safe.

In just a couple of minutes, all were aboard. Jimmy took the driver’s seat. Sitting in their usual spot at the very rear, her group watched as the three professors stood behind the bus and simultaneously cast the same spell, “Push.” Slowly the bus moved forward, while Jimmy steered it onto the roadway. Several times the professors had to cast their spell, stopping only when the bus was safely beyond the landslide. Only then did the small group see a door appear beside Governor Alister. They watched as he stepped through the door and appeared behind the bus at Cho Lin’s side. The landslide now continued its thunderous roll, stopping at the roadway, though blocking the entire road with debris.

Quickly, the four cast other spells, and Lindsey and her friends watched numerous magical shovels quickly un-burying the roadway. Finally, the three professors climbed onto the bus. Governor Alister was the last to board. “Now then, is everyone safe and unharmed by this little adventure?”

Satisfied that no one was injured, he waved his wand once more, “I hope that you find the remainder of the trip most interesting. I thought it would be nice to ride into Bradbury’s being pulled by a team of twenty white horses. What do you all think?”

Indeed, a team of horses appeared in front of the bus, which began rolling on down the road. Spontaneously, clapping and cheering broke out among the students. Cho Lin walked to the back of the bus, and the small group made room for her to sit with them. “Welcome back, Lindsey, Amanda, Kathy, Emilio, Jim. I see you had some practical spell use today,” she said calmly, though Lindsey detected a faint trace of concern in her voice, as if she were trying to make light of just how serious this accident had been.

Jim began to outline what had happened to the bus. When he got to the attack portion, Lindsey interrupted him, “It was Amanda who first spotted the magical enchantment on the chipmunk and we watched him morph into his real form. If Amanda had not spotted that when

she did, I would not have had time to activate my staff, the ball of fire would have hit us all.”

“That’s true, professor,” Jim concurred. “Our counter spells, came a few seconds after Lindsey removed the immediate threat.

“Professor Cho Lin, how soon will we learn how to dispel magic?” asked Lindsey. “That spell saved the day several times. I don’t know how many times that Jim, Francesco, and Henry cast that one, but it was a lot to help us out.”

“Dear, I will speak to Alister about it, but I would think that he may have that one be the very first one taught to you second year students. However, Lindsey, your staff ought to be able to cast that one for you. Please bring your staff and visit me as soon as you get settled in at school. We need to see just what all it can do for you and see that you know how to activate them.” Lindsey grinned, this was incredibly perfect for her.

By the time they had finished outlining all that had happened, the horse drawn bus arrived at the parking lot of Bradbury’s School of Magic. Alister rose and spoke, “Today, students you have learned a valuable lesson. If you all stick together and work together, you are stronger than these Death Stalkers. Alone, you would have been killed, but working together, you defeated him. Well done, all of you and a particularly well done to you older students. I thank you. Now, let’s get inside, I’m sure that you want to get unpacked and get something to eat. I for one would like a cup of tea. Professors, will you join me for tea in my office, once you see the students safely inside?”

Sandy and Tom were waiting their Yellow Hall classmates as they disembarked. Indeed the Floor Monitors for the other four halls were also present, rounding up the students on their lists as well. Sandy said, “Okay, Lindsey, Amanda, Kathy, you are in room six this year. Pam is already here waiting you.” Hastily, she told the others which room was theirs.

“Is it true, your bus was sabotaged and you were attacked?” Sandy asked. “We’ve heard all sorts of wild rumors. Professor Cho Lin was interrupted right in the middle of her orientation meeting with the first years and dashed off like there was no tomorrow!” Seeing the girls with their many duffle bags standing beside her, she added, “Oops, sorry, I forgot.” She waved her wand and commanded, “Move: room six.” Lindsey’s many bags disappeared from the parking lot, appearing beside her bed in her new room, startling Pam, who now knew that her friends had finally arrived. She ran down to greet them as they walked up to the pentagram dorm building.

One by one, Sandy moved each girls possessions up to her room. As a group, they began the walk through the main gates, passed the Admin Hall, heading to the dorms, located in the center of the pentagram shaped campus. “Yes, a bomb of some kind blew out our bus engine or something like that, it just stopped dead along side of the road,” Lindsey began. By the time they reached the dorms, Pam was there anxiously awaiting her friends.

“You are all right? Oh that is good news. We heard awful rumors,” Pam said as she hugged each of her roommates in turn. A few minutes later, inside their new dorm room, the three once more explained what had happened to Pam. She listened eagerly but asked way too many questions that the three could not answer. Who was the Death Stalker? Did they recognize him? What got blown up?

“Yes, my staff actually worked and sucked up two nasty spells,” Lindsey finally had a question she could answer.

“You should have seen it! A ball of fire was just about to fry Jim, the older boys, and the rest of us. They were in the process of trying to cast a dispel spell, when it was sucked straight into Lindsey’s staff. Impressive,” Amanda vouched, while Kathy nodded enthusiastically.

An hour passed rapidly, as the three girls filled Pam up on the details. At last, the foursome headed down to the Bookstore to get all their needed books and supplies for this year. The store was crowded with nearly five hundred other students all scrambling to get their supplies. As they stood in the different long lines, the only consistent topic of conversation among all the students was the sabotage of the bus and the attack on the students by a Death Stalker. Occasionally, Lindsey, Kathy, or Amanda were interrupted from their tasks by others asking them about the frightful event.

Supper arrived just as the quartet finally made their last purchases. After dumping the piles of books and supplies in their room, they raced down to the dining room, where the first years had already begun gathering for the formal dinner. They joined Emilio, Jim, and Fern, who were already there. “Glad you three are here, now you can answer everyone’s pleas for details of our attack,” Jim teased them. “Besieged, that’s what it’s been like.”

Tom and Sandy arrived, out of breath. They had been run ragged today, not only with their duties to all of the first year students during orientation week, but also with the early arrival of everyone else. “Thank goodness no other buses were attacked,” Tom said as they sat down near Fern.

Becky Salinos, their sixth year captain of Yellow Hall’s track and soccer team, dropped by to ask, “Lindsey, do you really have a Staff of Power? I mean, it’s all over the school — that you used it to save the whole bus load.”

“Yes, my dad left it to me. Tom, the Department of Defense man, told me to have it at the ready when we got off the broken down bus. I’m glad he did, or we might not be here now,” Lindsey replied.

“Super cool! Can I see it after supper? I’ve never see a real one, you know, up close and all that. Can anyone but you touch it? I mean without getting cursed or something?” Becky added, “That’s if it is cool with you, if I do so, I mean.”

Lindsey grinned, the whole school now knew that she had a Staff of Power, while not even all of the professors had one. She knew that many of her friends really wanted to see one close up. “Sure, after supper, Becky.”

“Attention please,” Governor Alister signaled the assemblage of students to their first formal dinner as a group. At once, a hush fell over the large room. All of the professors sat along their long table perpendicular to the many rows of student tables. Lindsey noticed that, unlike last year, many of the teachers had very grim faces.

“Welcome back, one and all. I am most happy to see you again. Before we begin tonight’s feast, I would like to express my sincere thanks to all of those on the bus that was attacked today. Yes, to quell rampant rumors, for the first time in recent history, one of our school buses bringing students here from the central high plains was attacked. An explosive device was placed beneath the engine and triggered while en route here. Once the students were evacuated, a Death Stalker appeared and attacked some hundred of you students. All halls were represented, he was not singling out any particular hall as some might suggest.”

“Yes, Miss Lindsey Barron does have a Staff of Power, I helped her attune it to her a few months ago. Between the brave efforts of the fifth and sixth year students and Miss Barron, a total disaster was averted in a timely manner. She used her staff to absorb two of his spells which would have very likely killed most all of the students, while the older students fended off many other spells, including a landslide and a falling boulder headed into their midst. In fact, once the older students had removed the Death Stalker’s magical protective spells, as I understand it, everyone of the nearly one hundred students let lose a volley of magical missiles, forcing the Death Stalker to make a hasty exit.”

“Students, there is a very valuable lesson to be learned from this harrowing experience. By acting together, by working together, you found yourselves more powerful than a single, highly skilled Death Stalker. Yes, we indulge in Hall rivalry and competitions, but in the end, we are all students of magic. In trying times such as these, by working together, respecting your fellow students, we can triumph over evil men. Respect the positive aspects of those in other Halls, though their beliefs might not be yours.”

“Okay, I’ve lectured quite enough for one day, let the feast begin.” He waved his hands and the tables filled with piles of steaming, hot food, six different courses from which to choose. For a time, everyone forgot the excitement of the day, diving into the delicious meal. Emilio sampled from all six main courses, naturally.

Around six that evening, nearly all of the Yellow Hall students gathered in their large commons to watch the giant TV screen and the MagNews, which all expected would discuss the attack on the school bus. Hugo, his broad smile and whiter than normal teeth, appeared precisely on time. His report, however, was not quite what many had expected.

“The top story today is the unprovoked attack by Death Stalkers upon an Arthur Bradbury’s School of Magic bus, which was bringing a hundred of our children back to school. Yes, nothing is safe any longer, not even our children’s school bus. A remote controlled explosive device was detonated, forcing the bus to stop at a precise location where a Death Stalker lay in waiting. Sources close to the near tragedy reported that a Ball of Fire was cast, but just as it began to burst upon the helpless children, the spell was absorbed into a Staff of Power. Who do you suppose held that staff? Why, none other than Miss Lindsey Barron herself!”

“This whole sordid affair raises many questions that KMAG wants answered. Has Governor Alister Broadwell been taking the safety of our children for granted? Why would Governor Broadwell put a Staff of Power into the hands of a second year witch, entrusting her with such power? Would not it have been far better to put it into the hands of the Department of Defense guard, who would know how to use such? Why had not Governor Broadwell foreseen such an attempt and taken stronger preventative measures? Why did he leave the students to fend for themselves, their very lives at stake, for so long a time before intervening on their behalf? Is he getting too old for the job? Many have been asking that question.”

“In our latest KMAG survey, eighty percent have grave doubts about the job that Governor Broadwell is doing. Some are going so far as to call for his replacement. KMAG tried to interview Governor Broadwell to put these questions to him, but he refused to be interviewed. Of course, this only adds to people’s ever growing suspicions! After all, it was his failure to protect the Rod of the Apocalypse this spring which led to the total destruction of that ancient relic.”

Infuriated, Pam yelled out, “What did you do, Hugo, interview five worried parents and get four to say they were worried? Eighty percent, bah. You are missing the whole point!” She turned to her friends and added, “I’ve had enough of his drivel, I’m going for a walk.” Pam was quite angry, and her four friends left with her.

Walking northward, Pam continued, “You should have seen just how fast Professor Cho Lin reacted and responded! Five seconds and she was on her way. Honestly, they acted as fast as humanly possible.”

“I know, Pam,” Emilio soothed her. “They were there in the nick of time. What’s with Hugo and KMAG anyway? What’s the point of riding Governor Broadwell like that?”

Since the school term had not yet started, no one had any homework to do. The group found many others also out for a walk as well. Shortly, two Red Hall girls came up to Lindsey. Peggy West, a second year student like themselves, had been on the bus with them earlier today. Her friend, Monique Blackburn, a fourth year student and fellow computer whiz, was with her. Lindsey noticed that their cherry red lips seemed even redder than normal, but perhaps it was merely her not having seen them for several months.

“Lindsey, can I have a word with you?” Peggy asked, timidly.

“Sure, we are just calming Pam down. Hugo’s newscast was rather awful,” Lindsey replied.

“I, I want to thank you for saving my life today. If it hadn’t been for you, I’d have been burned to death. I owe you one. If you ever need anything, let me know and I’ll try to help you.”

“Thanks, but you helped too, casting your Magical Missile helped drive him off of us,” Lindsey added, hoping to allow Peggy to gain some self-respect.

“Yes, and since Peggy is my friend,” Monique broke in, winking at Pam, “you can count on me too. You need something, let us know. You’ve got friends in Red Hall. Besides, Pam would shoot me, if I allowed any harm to come to you,” she teased her friend Pam, who blushed. Monique had taken Pam to the formal end of term ball last year. “One just has to protect the ones that you love, at least that is how we all feel in Red Hall. I mean, I’ve no love at all for Deiter Cross and his sidekicks, so I won’t feel any obligation to help those boys. We in Red Hall will do anything for those we love, that’s what’s important to us, you know. You need some help, Lindsey, you say the word, Red Hall will be there to help you.”

“Thanks, both of you. I will, but I think that we are really safe while we are here at school. After all, the attack came out there on the road, not here on campus,” Lindsey replied. What a difference a year made, she thought. At the start of last year, she was looked upon as a helpless cripple, a special needs student, probably just a figurehead.

Just then, a group of Black Hall students passed them, going the opposite direction. Henry Freeze, a fifth year student, called out, “Hey Lindsey. Thanks for your help today. Impressive. You should think of joining Black Hall. We can use more important people in our hall.”

Deiter Cross, who had been relentless in his teasing and taunting of her all last year, said antagonistically, “Yeh, thanks Lindsey, though with that staff of yours, I don’t know why you didn’t do more to save us.”

His always angry sidekick, Loyd Armstrong, added, “Yeh, thanks Lindsey. It’s all Alister’s fault, you know. He ought to have protected us better. One lousy Department of Defense man, ha! I told my father about that and he is going to raise hell with the Board of Governors about Alister.”

Lindsey nodded to the passing boys. Once they were out of earshot, Pam observed, “Well, that’s a change, Lindsey. At least they are thanking you for what you did. That’s a step in the right direction. Maybe everyone is realizing the wisdom in what Governor Alister said at dinner.”

“I don’t think so,” Monique responded, “Black Hall always acknowledges someone who has demonstrated superior fighting skills, such as you did today, Lindsey. You just got their attention today, that’s all. Take it from me, I’ve been around here longer than you have. By Monday when classes start, they will have forgotten all about it. But we won’t!” She gave Lindsey a warm hug and the two went their way.

Pam said, “She’s really a cool person, you know. I like her a whole lot and she likes me, even though I am rather ugly. My dad says that I am now old enough to wear a bit of makeup. Monique says that it might help me look better and she is going to give me some lessons on how to do it later on. You are all welcome to come too, I’m sure she wouldn’t mind sharing her skills with you three.”

“Well, I’m game,” Kathy said. Lindsey and Amanda remained quiet, neither had any real interest in such matters as yet.

Lindsey suddenly remembered that Professor Cho Lin wanted her to drop by after supper. “I nearly forgot! I’m supposed to go see Cho Lin. I’d better rush over there. See you all in a little while.” As she walked rapidly to her professor’s office, she summoned her staff to her.

“Sorry that I’m so late, professor. Honestly, with all the excitement, I forgot.”

Cho Lin smiled, she’d let her long, black hair down and changed into a silk dress for the evening. “Accepted. Honestly, I was also rather busy myself, so the timing is perfect. Thanks for bringing your staff. Governor Alister insists that I help you learn and master all of the powers of your staff.”

“Here, I brought along dad’s list of what Margarete can do, though I don’t know most of the spells yet.” Lindsey handed her the paper her father had left her on her staff’s capabilities.

Cho Lin looked them over for a time. “Ah, yes, a staff tailored to a Dispellor. Your father has had this one specially made for his use.”

“How can you tell?” Lindsey asked, curious about this aspect. That her father had this one made for him seemed important to her. Margarete was even more special to her now.

“For one thing, the spells she innately possesses are very different than normal Staves of Power. Many of these spells you will be learning this year. It can cast a Continuous Light. Normally, we place the light source itself on the top of the staff, rather like a torch. Your simpler Light spell only lasts a few minutes, this one lasts indefinitely. It will cast four Magical Missiles at one time. She will cast a Ball of Fire or a Lightning Bolt, these are your primary attack spells. It will also cast a Paralysis spell and a Levitation spell, plus a Fly spell. However, her true powers lie elsewhere. She can cast Dispel Magic spells and she can provide you with personal protection, it’s called Lesser Invulnerability. That’s what the Death Stalker had on himself today. Most

spells through Grade 4 will have no effect on you while this spell is in effect. That gives a DisPELLer a distinct advantage. It can cast Skin of Stone, which Amanda made good use of during your soccer game with Black Hall last term.”

“Whenever you suspect trouble is coming, have her cast the Invulnerability spell on yourself followed by a Skin of Stone. That way, you cannot easily be harmed either by weapons or lower level spells, giving you a decided advantage. Now the final spell she can cast is the Teleport spell. This one, I strongly advise against using until you have learned to cast that spell yourself. Witches can get into a whole lot of trouble with this one. If you are off in your casting, you may arrive with half of your body buried in the ground or five hundred feet in the air. I once knew a wizard who made a mistake with his Teleport spell. His feet materialized in solid stone beneath his feet. The only way to free him was to amputate his feet and then he spent a month in the hospital re-growing new feet. He was lucky.”

“I promise I won’t touch that spell!” Lindsey replied, horrified at potential consequences of this spell.

“Good girl. Now then, let’s walk over to the Hall of Evocation and practice casting these spells from your staff. She’s absorbed quite a bit of spell energy today. Good practice dictates that she be left half charged so that you have the capability of absorbing a good number of spells.”

On their way, she added, “Oh yes, you can also use her as a staff to bash someone. If you get in a good physical strike, she can cause almost as much harm as a good sword strike. Of course, once we start practicing the spells, we will likely draw a crowd of curious students, who will want to watch us. Will that be okay with you?” Almost as if reading her mind, she added, “I will make sure that you do not embarrass yourself.” Lindsey grinned and nodded.

Sure enough, just after the first Ball of Fire detonated in the outdoor casting area between the tall columns, curious students began congregating, sticking around to watch the demonstration. Among these were her four friends, of course. Even Monique and Peggy showed up to watch the display of spells.

After an hour of practice, Lindsey had everything down pat, excepting for the Teleport spell, which they ignored for the time being. She found using the staff incredibly easy as well as recharging it, when its stored magical energies ran low. By eight o’clock, she and her friends walked back to the dorm. Lindsey felt more confident than she ever had felt before.