

## Chapter One – James

October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020, 11:53 a.m.

Professor Featherstone asks the class a question, but I'm not really paying attention.

*I bet if I really concentrate, I can teleport out of history class and into PE. Ms. Baines is a much better teacher than Professor Featherstone. I mean who wants to be called 'professor' at a high school? It makes him sound old!*

"James?" Professor Featherstone asks, yanking me out of my thoughts.

"Huh?"

Everyone turns to look at me.

"Eyes forward, please."

A few girls giggle to my right and I sigh forcefully. I hate Featherstone so much.

Professor Featherstone adjusts the collar of his sea-blue trench coat. I don't know how he's able to walk in that thing. It practically touches the floor!

"Anyway," he continues. "Like I was saying, Aphrodite was born from seafoam."

I roll my eyes. *Mythology is so boring. It's all make-believe. He's literally teaching us fairy tales. C'mon, teach us something real!*

"The magic of the..." He drones on and on about the Greek gods and I tune out again. *How does this prepare us for life? How is this 'magical' information useful?*

"Why do we need to learn this?" I complain aloud.

"It's extremely valuable to know—"

"How so?" I ask.

He slams his hand down on his desk, earning gasps from everyone. I wince.

"You know what? Mr. Baxter, I'm beyond tired of this. You have been talking to me like this since the day I met you, and—"

“What about the way you’ve been talking to me?” I ask. He forms a fist with his hand at his side, his posture rigid and his other hand turning white against the desk, exhaling through clenched teeth.

I glance up at the digital clock above the classroom door. It reads 11:59 am.

*Almost lunch.*

The professor stands up straighter and keeps his eyes narrowed on me. “Mr. Baxter, go to the princ—” The lunch bell cuts him off and the room is instantly filled with controlled chaos as everyone starts getting up to go. I stand up quickly, grab my history binder, and hurriedly weave my way through the five rows of cluttered desks and people, toward the front of the classroom. When I get to Professor Featherstone’s dark wooden desk, I pause to smile mockingly at him.

“Saved by the bell!” I say cheerfully. I spin on my heels and proceed toward the exit.

“Mr. Baxter!” he calls after me angrily, but I continue walking. “Go to the p—” But I’m already out the door and turning right down the hallway.

“Hey!” someone shouts behind me. Thinking they’re talking to someone else, I keep walking, heading toward the cafeteria. “Hey, James!” the person shouts again. I stop and turn to see Logan, my best friend, barreling toward me, his hands balled up in the sleeves of his grey sweater.

“Hey,” I greet him when he finally catches up.

“That was pretty intense back there!” he exclaims, brushing his black hair out of his face. I laugh, stopping next to the senior class painting projects pinned to the wall.

“I totally won that argument. He had nothing! I mean, if detention is all you can come up with, then you shouldn’t be arguing with a teenager.”

“Oh yeah!” he says, slapping me on the back. “It’s extremely valuable to know,” Logan says, imitating Professor Featherstone.

“Mr. Baxter, I am beyond tired of this,” I say, making my voice deeper. We both bust out laughing, earning amused looks from other students.

“You going to Alma’s Cafe again?” Logan asks as our laughter dissipates into grins.

“Yeah, of course! Why would I want to eat that gross cafeteria food?” I ask, cringing at the thought of the ‘food’. Logan chuckles. “Wanna come?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nah, I like that gross cafeteria food.”

I laugh, walking around him. “Whatever you say!”

“Uh, James?” Logan’s smile fades.

“Yeah?”

“We’ve got incoming,” he points behind me and I turn to see Professor Featherstone storming toward us, fists clenched.

“Mr. Baxter!” He locks eyes with me Logan’s smile returns as he turns me toward the exit.

“Go, go, go!” he says.

I smile and take off down the hall.

“Bye!” Logan shouts.

“Bye!” I shout back, looking behind me to see Logan hurry out of Featherstone’s way, then I dash around the corner, my stomach rumbling loudly. I run in the direction of the cafeteria, but instead of turning right, I go left, jog down the empty hallway, and drop my binder off at my locker before continuing on toward the office, where I sign my name on the sign out sheet in less than a second, barely noticing Ms. Beck, the secretary, and dash out. It’s not until I finally reach the entrance, or rather the exit, that I suddenly feel lonely. I wish Logan was coming with me.

I grab the door handle and lean into it, opening the heavy monstrosity wide enough for me to fit, then squeeze through the gap. The door slams shut and I jog down the concrete steps, taking two at a time, salt crunching under my shoes. Snow blankets the front lawn.

Reaching the bottom, I look back at the school’s towering brick walls and sparkling windows that are cloudy with frost. Seeing no sign of Professor Featherstone, I step onto the sidewalk and heave a heavy sigh, fogging up the air. I turn left, passing several parked cars. As I approach a bright red hatchback with long black eyelashes mounted on the headlights, a strong gust of wind blows past me, making me stumble. “Whoa!” The wind

stops abruptly, and I stare in the direction from which the wind came. “Hello?” Of course, there’s no reply. I put my hands in front of me in an ‘I-don’t-want-any-trouble’ kind of way, turning to walk backward a few steps, searching for whoever had passed me to make that gust push me. “Who did that?” Again, no reply. I turn around and run as fast as I can all the way to Alma’s Cafe without slowing down. I grab the cold door handle and pull it open, my heart racing, my throat burning from the cold air, and rush inside and straight to a small booth in the corner. As I sit down, I feel a touch dumb for the whole reaction.

*Did I imagine the wind?* I wonder, breathing heavily.

“Would you like anything to drink?” I look up to see a cheerful waitress tapping a pencil on a notepad.

“Oh, uh, yeah, water would be nice,” I reply. She writes something down on her notepad and I have to wonder if she’s really taking notes for water.

“Anything else?” she asks. “Anything to eat?”

“I’ll have a cream cheese bagel.”

“Is that all?” She writes something else down on her pad.

“Yep.” I reply, still breathing hard.

“And do you want your bagel heated?”

“No thanks.”

“O-kay! I’ll be right back with your bagel and water.” She seems awfully cheerful. Maybe it’s a professional calling to always be so happy—I mean, a bagel with cream cheese and water isn’t exactly going to earn her a big tip. I nod and she slides her notepad and pencil in her apron pocket, smiles, and walks away.

A yawn escapes me, and I finally feel like my heart is beating at a steady rate, but man, I am tired! I cross my arms on the table, rest my chin on my hands, and sigh.

Less than three minutes pass before the lady is back. She has a chilled, water-filled glass clinking with ice in one hand and a plate with the bagel balanced on her forearm. I sit up.

*You could carry the plate in the other hand you know.* I’m pretty sure she’s just showing off.

She grabs the plate off her right arm. “Here’s your bagel,” she says, setting the plate down. “And here’s your water.”

“Thank you,” I reply politely.

“No problem. Enjoy!” she says, walking away. I eagerly devour the bagel, not even taking the time to savor it, then pick up the glass and bring it to my lips, but before I can take a sip, something catches my attention outside.

Walking by the large window in the front of the cafe is Professor Featherstone. He’s pacing back and forth, a map in his left hand. It’s strangely coloured—a pale orange with dark-orange lines. Normally I’d just look the other way and continue doing what I’m doing, but there’s something about the way he’s acting that makes me curious. I drink a gulp of water as I scootch my chair back and slowly stand up, not taking my eyes off him, inching baby steps to the side of my table. Featherstone starts to walk away, and I take that as my cue to pick up the pace. Dropping money on the table, I take a big swallow from my glass, then walk quickly toward the exit and open the door roughly, not wanting to lose him.

Professor Featherstone keeps walking, unaware of my presence. I creep along the front of the café, avoiding the noisy salt and snow on the cracked sidewalk. When we’ve moved past the café, he stops suddenly and I frantically look for a hiding spot. Thankfully, there’s an alley off to the left. I scurry into it and sink down to the pavement on the far side of a dumpster, peeking my head out from behind my hiding spot. Professor Featherstone looks behind him, not moving for a couple of minutes.

*Come on, move!* As if he heard my thoughts, he turns around, facing back the way we came. The expression on his face tells me he’s debating something... but what?

He glances in my direction, and I gasp, plastering myself against the side of the dumpster. *Did he see me? Did he see me?* I hear a crinkle of paper.

“Hmmm...” Professor Featherstone mutters. “This kind of looks like the alley on the map.”

*What is he talking about?*

“I wish those animals could just pick a place and have that be the entry point, instead of moving it every week.”

*Who are 'those animals'? And what does he mean by 'entry point'?* This guy is weird, always has been, but whatever he's talking about only confuses me more and has me thinking the lunch hour would have been better spent eating a second bagel rather than rubbing up against what smells like dead vermin and moldy coffee. I hear footsteps walking toward me and sink into the shadows further, holding my breath.

*Uh-oh! Uh-oh! Uh-oh!!* I start to panic. *This was a bad idea.*

Somehow, he walks right past without noticing me. I continue to hold my breath, and he continues right on down the alley. I wait for his footsteps to get a little quieter before I get up and follow him, hugging the right wall and crouching low to the ground.

He turns left, so I scurry across the alley to get behind him. This routine continues for another left, a right, another right, a left, and then I lose track of the many more turns after that. The whole time, Featherstone barely glances up from his map, mumbling random things like, "I hope my plan works" and "I wonder if it'll be Mac or someone else..." He finally stops in a dark square, four cars wide. The brick buildings surrounding us are unusually tall for the small town of Hankala.

Did we walk all the way to the city? I stand up straight and turn in a circle, taking in the snowless concrete square. Crumpled pieces of paper, plastic bags, and cigars litter the ground. In front of Professor Featherstone, a large green dumpster sits as if it hasn't been moved for years, with garbage bags piled high, spilling over its edge.

Suddenly remembering that I'm here in secret, I dart behind a pile of smelly garbage bags against the left wall just before the square, and without thinking rest my free hand on one as I crouch down. A sticky liquid pours out of a small hole and runs down the back of my hand and I scrunch my face in disgust. I yank my hand away, watching in horror as the liquid drips from my hand, a hint of panic creeping in.

*Oh my gosh! Ew! Ew! EW! Gross!* I press my hand to the grey brick walls and run it up and down it, trying to get the stuff off me. Most of it comes off on the wall, gravity slowly pulling it from there to the ground, and I desperately and quietly run my hand down the cleaner parts of the wall next to me.

A crinkling of paper draws my attention away from the goo on my hand, and I sink down a little farther, slowly poking my head out from my hiding spot. Professor Featherstone is facing away from me, holding an ancient-looking hardcover book in his left hand. He flips open the football-sized book and starts flicking through the pages.

Wow. That trench coat must have some deep pockets.

“No,” he mutters. “No, no, no...” dismissing whatever he’s reading as he continues turning the pages.

*What is he looking for?*

“No, no, ah-hah!” he exclaims and taps a page. “Here it is—the summoning spell.”

*The summoning spell?*

He pulls out a transparent green gemstone the size of his palm and lifts it high into the air, his palm facing the sky.

“Vocatio. I am here to summon a creature, a creature of greatness, a creature of battle, a creature of the sky. I seek this creature for great reason, for an important mission. One that will save the O Arbor Vitae. Bring me what I seek!”

Silence follows this bizarre plea.

*Who’s he talking to? And what’s the O Arbor Vitae? Is that, like, in another language or something?* A loud creaking of metal yanks me out of my thoughts, and I look past the professor and feel my eyes go wide. In fact, I start to question my sanity. Am I really seeing this?

The once rectangular dumpster is now folding itself into a skateboard ramp, the bottom half stretching itself into a dark green runway going underneath Featherstone’s feet. He’s not fazed at all. It finally stops a few feet behind him, worryingly close to my hiding spot.

The next thing I know, the garbage around the square zips to the edge of the dumpster runway and forms a straight line on both sides, evenly spaced from each other. I hear a popping sound come from the right of the ramp and turn my head to look. I didn’t think it was possible, but my eyes go even wider. A piece of garbage has now turned into a gumdrop-shaped light.

*Pop! Pop! Pop!*

More and more pieces of garbage do the same thing, and I squeeze my eyes shut and pinch my right arm, testing to see if this is actually just a crazy dream.

I hold my breath, chanting intensely, *please be a dream, please be a dream, please be a dream*. I slowly open my eyes, hoping to be lying in my bed, safe and sound, but I'm not.

*This is actually happening.*

As I exhale, I shiver, not because I'm cold, but because I'm terrified. The lights have now started blinking on and off like at an airport runway. Through all this, Professor Featherstone hasn't moved an inch, he just stands there calmly, like he's waiting for something, something greater than a dumpster runway and garbage that turns into gumdrop lights. Everything around us starts to shake. The walls move like waves and the ground rumbles as if something large is stampeding across it.

Featherstone yawns and returns the emerald to his pocket.

*I hope those walls don't collapse.*

To add to the chaos, a bright beam of light shoots down from the sky. I squint as it hits the ground and briefly envelops the concrete floor in a transparent, shimmering, gold blanket. A blast of warm air washes over me as the wave of light fades a few feet behind me. Then the shaking stops abruptly.

"Aha, it is you, Mac!" my teacher exclaims triumphantly.

I gasp.

Right where the beam of light hit the ground stands a griffin.