

# James Potter AND THE CRIMSON THREAD

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LOVINGLY  
BASED ON THE  
WORLDS & CHARAC-  
TERS OF J. K. ROWLING

## **James Potter and the Crimson Thread**

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For “Tabitha Corsica”.  
You know who you are.

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## PROLOGUE *FOUR YEARS EARLIER*

Keynes could sense her coming.

The lights had blinked out while he was on the stairs, causing him to stumble and eliciting a chorus of startled exclamations from his entourage. A second later, when the lights flickered back on, he was alone.

He glanced around quickly, turning on the spot, taking in the painted brick walls and the concrete steps. Gone were the guards that had accompanied him, as well as the official court Obliviator. Keynes barely noticed. What mattered most was the little girl, Isabella Morganstern.

He'd been gripping her by the wrist, squeezing with the full force of his fist, as tight and merciless as a cuff. He knew that he was hurting her, and not just because of her incessant screams. His anger made him vengeful. The thought that he might be bruising the girl's wrist made him squeeze even harder, viciously grinding the fine bones of her forearm. He'd been furious with her for running away from him, but even more, for embarrassing him. This squalling, unmagicked, precocious, British dimwit had dared to defy Albert Keynes, General

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Arbiter for the Wizarding Court of the United States. She'd actually had the audacity to make him chase her.

Fortunately, even though the rest of his entourage had somehow vanished, the girl was still there, dragging behind his fist, her eyes wide as the lights flickered back on. Her hair swung in sweaty blonde curls around her face as she looked up and down the stairwell, searching. For a moment, Keynes thought she was looking for the missing guards, but then he understood otherwise. She was looking for her sister. Petra Morganstern, the young woman whose name the little brat had been shrieking only seconds earlier, the young woman whom they had just left, sleeping the cursed sleep of guilt, lying on a bare bed in a guarded basement cell.

“Don’t be foolish,” he said, mocking the little girl’s hopeful expression. His words were lost, however, obliterated in a sudden gust of cold wind. It flapped the brim of Keynes’ black hat, threatening to whip it from his bald head like a teasing ghost. The whickering air was so cold that he fancied he could feel flecks of ice in it, stinging his cheeks and eyes.

The blonde girl turned to look at him for the first time since being recaptured. Her mouth was still pressed into a worried frown, but her eyes glittered like emeralds, suddenly expectant, even eager.

He shook his head at her, not quite daring to speak again, and wagged an admonishing finger at her with his free hand. He tugged her forward again so that she stumbled up the steps, dragged by his white-knuckled fist. He didn’t know what was going on, but unexpected magic was no surprise in his line of work.

The stairs stopped at the next landing, leading to a single door, thrown open so wide that its handle had cracked the brick hallway wall beyond. Keynes stopped, momentarily confused. They’d been climbing from the basement. There were at least nine more flights of stairs to the top of the building. How could they have reached the top already?

The air was still icy with cold. His breath puffed before his face, chugging with just the faintest tremor of a shiver.

And of course he understood how he’d gotten to where he was after all. His entourage hadn’t been vanished away. *He* had. He’d been magically transported up nine flights of stairs in the blink of an eye,

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during the flash and flicker of the lights. The only reason the girl had come with him was that he'd been holding onto her so tightly.

The girl hadn't performed the magic. But the glimmer in her eyes told him she knew who had.

"You'd better let me go," she said with quiet emphasis.

Keynes tried to imagine fear and petulance in her plea, but he knew there was none. Instead, she almost seemed to be taking reluctant pity on him. As if she was giving him one last chance to avoid something awful.

"You're a little fool," he growled at her, hissing forcefully through his teeth so that spittle flew. His breath puffed pale clouds into the air. "Your sister is guilty. You have no legal magical guardian. The court has spoken, and I intend to carry out its orders. You will be officially obliterated. You're only making matters worse for--"

Another burst of wind, even harder and colder than before, bowled over him, ripping his hat from his head and flapping his robes like a flag. He clutched at the doorframe with his free hand but the wind forced him through, slamming the stairwell door behind him so violently that its tiny window shattered, spraying the hallway floor with crumbles of glass. Keynes scrambled around, grabbed at the door handle and shook it, tugged it so hard that it rattled in its socket. The door was jammed shut, as immovable as stone.

And still his hand remained viced onto the girl's wrist, dragging her with him.

*She* was coming. The girl's sister. It was impossible, but she had awoken from her cursed sleep. She had been summoned by the blonde brat's incessant screams. That was why the girl had stopped calling for her. That was why she was no longer afraid.

Her fear had transferred itself onto Keynes. Amazingly, this fact infuriated as much as disconcerted him. He was accustomed to being the one instilling the fear. Of course, the fright *he* inspired was righteous and true, the fright all wrongdoers feel when finally confronted with the cold hand of justice. Perhaps he did secretly relish being that cold hand. Perhaps wielding the scales of power and vengeance *did* award him an unforgiving thrill. But was that such a bad thing? He took pride in his work, that was all. There was no evil in it. At least, nothing that

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deserved the terror he now felt creeping over him, prickling his skin, swallowing him whole like a snake slowly digesting its prey.

“You stay away from me,” he commanded into the seemingly empty hallway, producing his wand from his robes. To his own ears, his voice sounded small, trembling. The wand in his outstretched hand shook. “You stay away from me! I’m carrying out my duties! In the name of the wizarding court of the United States of--”

“Let her go,” a woman’s voice said. It was low and bloodless, vibrating from the walls all around. Like the blonde girl’s before it, the voice seemed to be offering a reluctant warning. It sounded like a voice that wanted to be disobeyed.

“You stay back!” Keynes cried out, extending his wand full length ahead of him, gripping it fiercely. He waved it back and forth as he edged along the hall, dragging Isabella with him.

The hallway was long and drab, lined with bricks enameled a pale, industrial green. The bare concrete floor radiated cold. Black doors lined both walls, all closed, marching away for what seemed like miles. But that was an illusion, of course. Keynes knew there were stairwells at both ends of the building. If he could make it to the other end, he could take the girl back down. Her sister could not stop him. She was guilty. She was chaos.

Keynes firmed his jaw and straightened his back. He was justice. He was order.

The lights flickered again and buzzed. The bulbs overhead were old, clear glass glowing with bright Goblinwire filaments. They required no Muggle electricity to burn, and yet, one by one, they began to extinguish. Each one popped like a miniature bomb, spraying glass and cold sparks. Darkness marched down the hall toward Keynes, but he forced himself to walk into it, increasing speed and raising his chin to face it.

“Chaos cannot defeat me!” he cried out, calling into the approaching dark. “I am order! Order trumps chaos!” He marched faster, his fist still cinched onto Isabella’s hand, squeezing her wrist hard enough to bruise the very bones, dragging her forcibly along with him.

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The bulb directly over Keynes clouded suddenly with frost. Its light dulled, went cold, then flashed brilliantly, exploding. Glass and sparks rained down on him, peppering his bare head.

Petra Morganstern's voice came from directly ahead of him. "I'm not chaos," it said, and suddenly she was standing before Keynes, her silhouette slight, but rushing with cold wind, somehow towering. She was like a woman-shaped black hole, full of compressed gravity and seamless dark. "And *you're* not order. I just want my sister back."

Keynes halted clumsily and even stumbled back a step, his eyes bulging wide at the shape before him. "Oh, no you don't!" he said stridently, shrilly. "You think you can simply defy me?!" He shook his head furiously, his rage somehow equaling his terror. "You're a condemned criminal! You have no legal rights! You... you...!"

Petra's arm stretched out toward Keynes. He couldn't tell if she was reaching for the girl in his grip or for his own neck. The blackness of her silhouette seemed to pull him in. He resisted, pressing his lips into an enraged line. Violently, he jerked Isabella forward in front of him, using her like a human shield. He hooked his left elbow under her chin, forcing her head back against his chest, and raised his right fist, brandishing his wand. In a second, it was jabbed against the blonde girl's temple.

"*I'll do it myself!*" he shrieked in a fevered rush, his eyes widening with zeal. "I'm not as good as the official court Obliviator, but I know the spell! She may never be capable of forming another memory again. But I can do it! I *will* do it! You'll force me to it! *The court has spoken!*" He screamed the last sentence, hoarsely enunciating each word as if it was a talisman.

"Put down the wand..." Petra said, her voice dropping to an icy monotone. Her form seemed to elongate, to grow in size, looming against the dimness of the walls. The walls themselves bulged away from her. Cracks raced along the bricks, spurting broken mortar like fireworks. Distantly, windows shattered and walls groaned. "*Let. Her. GO!*"

Keynes sucked in a sudden breath, filling his chest and preparing to shout. "OBLIVIA--"

Along the length of the hall, every door blew open like an explosion, erupting with clouds of icy steam. Petra's arm lanced forward

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like a snake, clamping onto Keynes' throat and propelling him backwards, straight out of his shoes. His hands scrabbled helplessly, first releasing Isabella and his wand, and then groping uselessly at the icy fist wrapped around his throat, locked beneath the shelf of his chin. And still Petra's form drove him backwards along the hall, faster and faster, floating in pursuit, flying, her hair streaming around her like the snakes of a medusa. Her shape was a black nightmare of shadow except for her eyes, which blazed like starlight through sapphires. Keynes' heels stuttered wildly backwards along the hall, scattering broken lightbulb glass.

*"I've killed once before!"* Petra's voice boomed. The sound was like cracking glaciers, echoing, ringing along the bulging walls like a gong. *"Horror that she was, the woman I killed was still the better of a deluded insect like YOU!"*

"Petra!" a small, unexpected voice interrupted. It was a girl's voice, familiar enough not to shatter Petra's rage, but to surprise and pause it, at least for a second. Pent lightning crackled along the hall from Petra's eyes and free hand, longing to be unleashed, and yet, reluctantly, she halted. Keynes was still thrust forward in her extended fist, his own hands clamped around hers, uselessly struggling, his mouth frozen in a silent, choked gasp, his eyes bulging up at her face.

"Izzy?" Petra said without turning, blinking the cold blue glow from her eyes.

"No," the voice said meekly. "It's me. Lucy."

Petra finally looked back over her shoulder. Her hair hung around her face like black ribbons, revealing only one eye. She blinked again, ignoring the struggling Keynes.

Lucy was standing next to Izzy. As Petra watched, the girls drew a step closer together. Without looking, Lucy reached for Izzy's hand, and Izzy gave it to her, lacing their fingers together. And with that gesture, Petra understood something. While she had been asleep, under the influence of Mother Newt's poison apple, something had happened between Lucy and Izzy that had bonded them. They were friends now. Other than Petra, Izzy had never before had a true friend. Despite everything, the sight of the girls' clasped hands both broke and gladdened Petra's heart.

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"Don't kill him, Petra," Lucy said. Her dark eyes were calm, neither begging nor demanding. "Not because he deserves to live. I don't know. He does seem like a pretty awful man. He may deserve to die. But you don't deserve to kill."

Petra glanced from Lucy's dark eyes to Izzy's green ones. The blonde girl was nodding slowly. "It's not like with my mother," she said in a low voice. "She was so miserable and ugly inside that she almost wanted to be killed. She nearly begged for it. But this... it's different."

Petra's grip slowly tightened on Keynes' neck, creaking the joints of his vertebra. His jaw dropped as his mouth gaped like a beached fish. His thin chest hitched silently. Petra ignored him, still staring back over her shoulder at the two girls, at their laced hands.

"But... he almost ruined you, Iz..." she said. There was something like a plea in her voice. "He's a human wreck. He deserves nothing but to be ended."

Izzy nodded. Lucy frowned worriedly. "He probably does," she admitted reasonably. "But you don't deserve the stain that ending him would leave on you. On your soul."

Petra heard the words, and knew in her deepest heart, the eye of her rage's storm, that they were good. Lucy was right. And yet...

And yet another voice spoke up inside her thoughts. A voice that she, Petra, had not heard in almost a year.

*KILLING IS NOT A STAIN*, the voice exclaimed, screaming the words in the centre of Petra's mind, drowning out every other thought like an impatient observer that can no longer remain silent. *KILLING IS THE POWER OF IMMORTALITY! KILLING IS BEING AS A GOD!*

"Yes," Petra said to herself, her expression going calm again as she turned back to Keynes. She desperately wanted to agree with the Voice of the Bloodline in her mind. It felt so good to go along. "And he does deserve it..."

Keynes saw the resolve forming in Petra's eyes and tried to shake his head. His eyes bulged from their sockets, even as his face drained of all color, turned as pale as wax.

*He deserves to die...* The Voice agreed, now dropping to a greedy whisper. *They ALL deserve to die!!*

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“We all deserve to die,” Lucy agreed from behind Petra, almost as if she could also hear the vicious Voice in Petra’s mind. Her words were like a lilt of sanity in the frozen air, unavoidable and persistent. “We all deserve to die, Petra, the moment someone with power decides they have the right to kill.”

Petra blinked again.

She paused.

Lucy was right. Of course she was. Petra wanted desperately to refuse it. The Voice that haunted her thoughts railed against it, cursed against it, would have turned and killed Lucy herself just to silence her if it could. But the Voice didn’t control Petra anymore. Despite its strength, and despite the occasional dark persuasion of its logic, the Voice of the Bloodline was no longer a curse. It was just a part of her, and she was a part of it.

Grudgingly, hating herself for doing it, she let go of Keynes.

He dropped to the floor and crumpled like a doll made of loose sticks.

Petra stared down at him, unmoving and unmoved. She yearned to kill him still. Her fingertips arced and crackled with icy power at the thought. But somehow she resisted.

Warmth approached her from behind. The two girls took Petra’s hands, one each, warming them and stifling the killing power that wanted to lance out, that yearned for expression.

*You can hold it in for a time,* the Voice seethed petulantly, diminishing once again into the background noise of Petra’s mind. *But you can’t control it forever. And when you finally unleash it, it won’t care who is standing in your way...*

“Is he still alive?” Lucy asked, looking down with morbid fascination at the crumpled form of the Arbiter.

“He’s alive,” Petra admitted reluctantly.

Lucy nodded. “I’m glad, Petra,” she said, and then glanced up at her, her dark eyes somber and sincere. “I’m glad you didn’t kill him. Because some things can’t be undone. Some lost things can’t be unlost. No matter how much you might want them to be.”

Later, barely an hour from that moment in the hallway with the three girls standing hand-in-hand, Petra would remember Lucy’s words.

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They would come to her in a flash of light and a moment's horror-- a moment that would turn into an endless ringing note, growing louder rather than softer with every passing day and month and year. Petra would know all too painfully well how much one might wish for a lost thing to become unlost.

But were Lucy's words true? Were lost things ever *really* lost forever?

Petra had been teased with such bargains before, but they were always false bargain, empty hopes, mere capricious tricks intended to manipulate.

But what if she, Petra, could conjure the answer herself? What if, purely by the strength of her own immense power and prosaic intelligence, she could write her *own* bargain?

Was there any price worth paying, no matter how high, to find out?

She wondered. Over the course of the following years, Petra wondered that more and more.



## **1. THE INTERVIEW**

"Looks just like the first time we rode it," Ralph commented jovially, making his way along the corridor of the Hogwarts Express to the raucous noise of boarding students and the nearby hiss and chuff of the crimson engine. Rafters of steam, brilliant white in the morning sun, drifted past the windows. "It's easy to forget the whole world's about to drop straight off a cliff, isn't it?"

Rose hefted her bag past a gaggle of nervous-looking first years. "I really wish you'd stop saying that. You're just repeating what your father says."

"Well," James bobbed his head, "Denniston Dolohov *is* chief Muggle advisor to the Minister of Magic. It's his job to know all the ways the magical world is breaking out into the Muggle, and the other way around. He'd know better than anyone. Here."

He pointed toward an empty compartment near the end of the corridor. Noisily, they shunted open the door and filed in, unloading their knapsacks and duffles and hoisting them up onto the luggage racks.

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James leaned to peer out the window before sitting down. The usual crowd milled on the platform-- knots of families saying goodbye, students hurrying with carts of trunks, tall porters in red coats directing people and tweeting their whistles-- but the collection of wizarding news people were still evident in the foreground, holding court near the engine. The *Daily Prophet* photographer's flash poofed over the crowd as he snapped more pictures. Next to him was Myron Madrigal from wizarding wireless news, who appeared to be conversing with Cameron Creevey, broadcasting live with his wand held between them. James grimaced, knowing that the boy's infectious enthusiasm would probably fill ten breathless minutes of air-time, whether Madrigal wished it or not, and nine of those minutes would probably be about James Sirius Potter.

"She doesn't seem to be down there anymore," Rose commented, cramming in next to James and blocking his view with her bushy reddish hair.

"Probably already on board," Albus suggested, joining them in the compartment and tugging the door shut with a bang. "Getting all set up for her big interview, I imagine. Your public awaits, James."

"Just shut it, will you?" James shook his head in embarrassed annoyance. "She'll probably be interviewing loads of us, not just me. Besides, it sure wasn't my idea."

Rose sniffed. "But you didn't say no, did you?" Suddenly she raised a hand and waved energetically. "Bye mum! Dad! Love you! See you at Christmas!"

The train shunted and clattered as it began to roll forward. The chuff of the engine rose both in pitch and rhythm, becoming a steady, noisy beat in the air. The faces on the platform began to drift sideways, receding away. James shouldered his cousin aside as much as possible and spied his own parents watching, smiling in the sunlight. His mum saw him and waved. He waved back tentatively, nervously, thinking of the upcoming interview.

"She's changed, I expect," his dad had said the day before, when the official request had come by owl from the offices of the *Daily Prophet*. "I don't think there's anything to worry about, James. The world has bigger cauldrons to boil these days. What possible harm could she do anymore?"

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Aunt Hermione had been far less magnanimous when she'd heard about it only moments before, on Platform Nine and Three Quarters. "You just remind her whose nephew you are," she'd whispered into his ear, unsmiling. "I doubt she's forgotten me, or a certain glass jar."

A sharp rap came from the window of the compartment door. James glanced back to see a man on the other side, peering through with a cane raised in his fist, prepared to knock again. He was a small man with large hands, clean-shaven beneath a bland bowler hat, wearing tiny wire-framed spectacles and a tweed vest. His eyes flicked over the occupants of the compartment and landed on James.

"James Potter?" he called through the glass.

James nodded, and the tension in his chest cinched a few notches tighter.

"I'm Mr. Bullova from the *Daily Prophet*," he said, still raising his voice to speak through the glass window. "We spoke yesterday via floo? We're ready for you if you are." He stepped back, not waiting for an answer.

James heaved a sigh and moved reluctantly to the door. "That sure was fast."

"Don't forget us little people when you're all famous," Albus clapped him on the shoulder as he went.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Potter," Bullova shook his hand briefly but vigorously as James joined him in the corridor. "We're just a few carriages up. If you'll follow me." He gestured and led the way, moving with a sort of mousy economy, not looking back.

James felt terribly self-conscious following the man through the carriages, knowing that he was being seen by loads of his friends and schoolmates, who by now had some idea of what was going on. Despite what he'd said to Albus, he suspected that none of *them* were being interviewed for the *Daily Prophet* about 'the changing magical world and its impact on the younger generation' (as Mr. Bullova had blithely put it in his invitation). But then again, as Uncle Ron had commented on the platform, none of them were the firstborn son of Harry Potter.

They passed through three connectors, finally entering a much more sumptuous carriage near the front of the train. Red carpets and

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brass fixtures adorned the corridor and the smell of pipe tobacco seemed to have worked its way into the very grain of the polished wood paneling. Here, teachers rather than students occupied the compartments. As James passed by, he recognized Kendrick Debellows, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, his crew-cut head nodding in conversation with Potions Mistress Lucia Heretofore. Across from them was a surprisingly young man with black hair and sharp features. The man glanced up as James passed the compartment, his expression merely idly curious. James had never seen him before and wondered fleetingly if he was some new teacher's assistant. He was clearly too young to be a professor.

"And here we are," Bullova announced crisply, stopping at the last compartment and shutting open the door. "Just have a seat, if you would."

Bullova stepped aside and gestured with the cane in his large left fist, ushering James inside. As James entered, Bullova shunted the door closed from the outside. James turned to look back through the compartment window, but the small man was already retreating down the corridor, a gold pocket watch open in his free hand.

James turned back to the compartment, which was much different than any of the others he had ridden in. It was larger, with four red upholstered chairs instead of benches. Between them was a small but heavy table, polished to a mirror-like shine. A small notebook, bound in buff leather, sat on the table. Atop this lay a vividly green quill. James recognized the instrument from his father's descriptions. It was a Quick-Quotes Quill, charmed to record whatever it heard, albeit with questionable embellishments.

James decided to sit while he waited. He chose the chair nearest the outside window and plopped into it, thankful for the moment of quiet, but restless to get the interview over with.

The outskirts of London streamed past the window, resplendent in the morning sun. James watched the city blur along for a moment, and then turned his attention back to the Quill.

Experimentally, he cleared his throat.

The Quick-Quotes Quill jumped to attention, flicking into the air as the notebook snapped open, riffling to a blank page. With a tiny

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pecking sound, the Quill tapped down onto the page and vibrated bolt upright, as if waiting.

Fascinated but a little leary, James leaned closer to the table. “My name,” he said slowly, experimentally, “is James Sirius Potter.”

The Quill began to scratch busily across the page, stopping after only a few seconds.

James leaned closer still, craning his head to read the upside-down writing.

*The young Potter introduces himself with a degree of palpable pride, clearly content with the pedigree of his famed lineage.*

“The pedigree of his...” James read, furrowing his brow. “I didn’t...! What do you mean ‘palpable pride’?”

The Quill began to scribble again. James made to grab for it, but the Quill leapt and feinted easily around his reaching hand, pecking back to the notebook without the slightest pause and continuing mid-sentence.

James jumped to his feet, meaning to grab the notebook away from the Quill, but a sudden buzzing noise startled him. Something small flitted around his head, and then droned toward the window, where it landed with a faint bump on the windowsill. James saw that it was a beetle. He almost dismissed it and resumed his mission to tear away the offending notebook page (upon which the Quill was still writing furiously) when a sudden suspicion—nearly a certainty—fell over him like a leaden wave. He looked closer at the beetle, which seemed to be regarding him from its perch on the sill. Its antenna waved faintly.

James’ shoulders slumped. With a sigh, he sat back down in the chair. Before him, the Quill finally finished its paragraph and jerked upright again, waiting.

The beetle unfurled its delicate wings, buzzed them, and lofted from the windowsill, casting its tiny shadow onto the table, where it landed near the notebook and Quill. It trundled toward the edge nearest James, glinting iridescent green in the flickering sunbeams, and

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then stopped, seeming to eye him again with its tiny, unblinking orbs. After only a moment, the beetle burst into a greenish rainbow of dense, swirling smoke, which condensed into the unmistakable shape of a woman. She was seated coquettishly on the edge of the table in a natty green jacket and skirt, peering at James through tortoiseshell spectacles, her red lips formed into a sardonic little smile.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Mr. Potter," she offered, dropping her eyes slightly. "Old habits die hard. But I do find that what a subject does in the thoughtful moments before an interview can be highly illuminating. I'm Rita Skeeter."

She extended her hand, which was very thin and pale, palm down. Almost reflexively, James shook it, but briefly. Her fingers were cool but strong, despite the looseness of her grip. James guessed that she was in her late fifties, but had clearly invested much effort and money to appear much younger. Her probably falsely blonde hair was done in flouncy waves that framed her narrow, immaculate face.

She brightened and turned toward the notebook. "I also apologize for this..." Without reading it, she tore the topmost page out and balled it in her hands, throwing James a conspiratorial little wink. "The Quill is still set to Tabloid mode. Embarrassing, but a necessary evil when one also freelances for publications like *Witch Weekly* and the *Crafty Conjurer*. Just one moment..."

She withdrew a sleek wand from her sleeve and daintily tapped the Quill, which lofted briefly into the air, pirouetted, and then tapped back down onto a new blank page in the notebook, apparently reset to a less sensational recording mode, although James knew he couldn't be sure.

Returning her wand to her sleeve, Skeeter turned back to James, relaxed comfortably on her perch on the desk, and narrowed her eyes at him. For what felt like half a minute she merely studied him, her gaze ticking slightly over his face, as if reading his mind, or at least giving a very practiced suggestion of it. James blinked at her, and then around the room, growing exquisitely uncomfortable in the stuffy quiet. He could see the door over the woman's left shoulder and heartily wished he was already on the other side of it.

"You'll have heard about me," she finally stated, her voice quietly musing. "From your family." She nodded, as if resigned and slightly

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penitent. “I understand, of course. But I want you to know that I am not the journalist I was then. I’m not the Rita Skeeter your Aunt and uncle and father met those many years ago, James. May I call you James?”

James gave a small shrug and nodded.

“I was young then, James,” she went on with a wistful sigh. “Young, and eager, and perhaps a *bit* too ambitious. But I’m different now. I need you to know that before we start. You can *trust* me.” She leaned even closer, waiting for him to make eye contact with her. Her gaze was huge and somber behind her stylish glasses. “*I’m on your side, James.*”

Slightly nonplussed, James shrugged and bobbed his head again, not knowing if he actually believed her. The intensity of her stare was like being probed with purple-eye-shadowed spotlights.

But then Skeeter relaxed again. She blew out a sigh and nodded to herself. “That’s a relief, James. Because for the sake of my readers, I need to know the real you. The *unguarded* you. Shall we begin?”

James merely nodded a third time. He pushed himself back into the upholstery of the chair, trying to extract himself from Skeeter’s perfumed aura.

“This is your seventh year at Hogwarts, then, yes?” She asked lightly. “And despite the turmoil elsewhere in the world, your last two years have been remarkably uneventful. Something that was never true for your famous father.” She smiled at him observantly, looking for a response. James couldn’t tell if there was congratulation or reproach in her gaze. When he offered no comment she went on briskly. “So, are you looking forward to graduation?”

James drew a deep breath, relieved to finally confront a question he could answer. “I guess I am. I haven’t really decided what I’m going to do with myself afterward. I was thinking of becoming an Auror. Like my dad. But my grades are...” He shrugged and bobbed his head noncommittally.

Behind Skeeter, the Quill commenced writing again, scratching busily over the notebook. It was minutely distracting.

“Ah, yes. Harry Potter, the Auror,” Skeeter nodded lightly, and then turned serious. “But these are difficult times in which to be an

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Auror, are they not? Three years since the Night of the Unveiling. The Vow of Secrecy erodes more every day. It must be extremely frustrating, even hopeless work, trying to patch together the wall that divides the magical world from its Muggle counterpart, while still chasing down the occasional flying carpet smuggler and dabbler in dark magic. Wouldn't you agree?"

James did agree, having heard his father say virtually the exact same thing over the past few years, but he felt uncomfortable saying so. He merely shrugged.

Beneath the steady shimmy and clatter of the train, the Quill scritched and capered.

"You were there on the night that it happened, weren't you?" Skeeter asked quietly, cocking her head. "The Night of the Unveiling? You were right there in the middle of it all, isn't that correct, James? What do you remember of it?"

James pressed his lips together, thinking furiously. What could he say? There was no way to answer the question easily, or even safely. The Lady of the Lake, the mastermind behind the whole nefarious affair, was virtually unknown, considered a myth by most of the people who had heard of her, and this despite her potentially disastrous appearance at the so-called Hogwarts "Quidditch Summit" two years earlier. Petra had battled and ultimately defeated her there, with some unlikely help from an Alma Aleron student named Nastasia Hendricks. And yet it was Petra who had borne the blame for the plot of the Morrigan Web, adding to the guilt already heaped upon her for the Night of the Unveiling, when she had indeed deliberately fractured the veil of secrecy between the Muggle and magical worlds.

"I was there," James foundered uneasily, "It was all kind of a blur. I don't remember a lot."

"But you remember your friend, Petra Morganstern?" Skeeter probed, raising her eyebrows. "She *was* your friend, yes?"

James nodded faintly, thinking back to that night. He could still see Petra in his memory, walking down the centre of the broad New York avenue, hand in hand with her young sister Izzy, lofting parade floats into the air with the sheer power of her mind. He could still hear the toll of her voice as she called out to the Statue, the guardian of the

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magical city of New Amsterdam, caster of the greatest secrecy spell ever conjured, asking her to lower her torch, to break the spell.

James nodded soberly. "Yes, Petra is my friend."

"You speak in the present tense, James," Skeeter clarified, as if she thought she might have misheard him. "Surely you don't mean to suggest that you are still friends with Ms. Morganstern. She is, after all, the most notorious witch in our lifetimes, perhaps in all lifetimes. The only female Undesirable Number One in history. The mastermind behind at least two murderous and chaotic plots to undermine the very foundation of our world. Of course, at the time, she had been living under the protection of your family, isn't that right? And she had spent the previous summer in the Potter household, after the mysterious tragedy of her grandparents' farm, where both of them ended up dead." She paused, allowing her words to sink in, studying James' face. "What do you say to the people who claim that this represents a serious lapse in judgment for a head Auror? Who claim that he should not only be dismissed from the position, but brought before the Wizengamot for negligence and conspiracy?"

Skeeter was clearly trying to provoke James, and had been since the interview began. It was beginning to work. James glared at her, calm but heating with anger. "I'd say none of them were there when Petra showed up and told her story."

"Perhaps you can tell it to us yourself," Skeeter suggested.

James had grown both bolder and slightly more jaded over the past two years. He did not rise to her bait. "No one would believe it," he sighed, glancing at the door behind Skeeter. "And it's not my story to tell."

"*Are* you still friends with her, James? Are you in contact with Petra Morganstern?"

James was not surprised by the question. He'd even prepared himself for its eventuality. He shook his head. "No. How could I be? She's been in hiding for years now. She may not even be alive anymore, for all we know."

Without thinking about it, he closed his right hand into a loose fist, enclosing the thread of coldness he sometimes still felt there.

The Quill scribbled on, capturing his words.

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“Now James,” Skeeter chided mildly. “You know as well as I that Ms. Morganstern is still alive. Reports of her sightings, along with her Muggle sister Isabella, show up regularly in the press. Surely your father, and therefore you, hear about even more sightings than the rest of us. And yet she somehow continues to elude capture. Just last month, in fact, there were reports that she had appeared in the International Armory of Forbidden Books and Artifacts. What do you believe she was looking for?

James didn’t have to lie this time. He shook his head. “I don’t have any idea. I wish I knew.”

“Many believe she is up to something far worse than the Morrigan Web. You and your family hosted her and considered her a friend. Do you have any insight into what her plan might be?”

James sighed deeply. He wanted to say that Petra wasn’t the real enemy, that it was all a diversion created by a terrible watery demoness, an agent of chaos summoned by a broken magical bargain. He wanted to say that Petra had cracked the Vow of Secrecy in order to save his father and prevent further bloodshed. More than anything, he wanted to say that Petra was beautiful and innocent and the very reason that the Morrigan Web had been defeated. But the last few years had shown him that it would do no good. There was an inertia to these things. The world had decided that Petra was the focus of all villainy—the “*She-Voldemort*”, as some had begun to call her—and James now knew that there was no way to reverse such a tide without getting buried and drowned beneath it.

And after all, in a sense, public opinion was correct about Petra, albeit in a way that very few could guess: she *did* carry the last shred of Voldemort inside her. She was the Bloodline, cursed to bear the last flicker of the villain’s soul inside her own, even if she *had* tamed it and forced it into submission, as she claimed, and James fervently believed.

“I thought this interview was going to be about how young people like me were adjusting to some new perilous world?” He asked, looking up into Skeeter’s eyes where she still sat on the edge of the desk.

He expected her to be perturbed but she gave no sign to that effect. Her smile, in fact, perked a little wider. Behind her, the Quill scratched and wrote.

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“Tell our readers about Headmaster Merlinus Ambrosius,” Skeeter said smoothly. “There is great curiosity about him. A figure of lore and legend, he is. Would you say that he lives up to the mythology?”

James nodded, feeling that he was on slightly firmer ground discussing the headmaster, who was more than capable of handling himself, regardless of what the press said about him. “He does. He can be a bit scary sometimes, but never in a bad way. He always comes down on the right side, and he knows how to keep order, that’s for sure. And he does it without just piling on reams of rules.”

“You Potters never did much care for rules,” Skeeter smiled. “Isn’t that right, James?”

James shrugged, feeling slightly bold. “Like the rules about registering as an *Animagus*?”

Skeeter’s smile snapped shut like a jewelry box. She glared at him, her green eyes nearly sparkling. Of course, she *was* registered nowadays. But if it hadn’t been for James’ Aunt Hermione, Skeeter would likely still be secretly using her abilities to illicitly eavesdrop and report on delicate conversations. She glanced back at her Quill and notebook, then briskly produced her wand and tapped the Quill. It stopped, backed up, and scribbled out a long line. Then, with a practiced force of will, she turned back and smoothed her features. She seemed content to change the subject.

“As we said earlier, James, we live in a world where the Vow of Secrecy crumbles more every day. You were there two years ago when Hogwarts hosted its first Muggle exchange students, the very spearhead of the Ministry’s plan to soften the blow to Muggle society, should the veil between our worlds finally fall. While that program was not considered a smashing success, more such programs are attempted elsewhere each day. Do you and your friends support such measures?”

James began to grasp Skeeter’s real reason for the interview. She had an agenda in mind, as she always did, and she meant to either pressure him into agreeing with it, or outing himself as its small-minded detractor.

“You said it yourself,” he said, glancing at the window to hide the mixture of unease and growing anger on his face. “The Hogwarts

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Muggle exchange wasn't tried again after the whole disaster in the Great Hall when everyone, students and world leaders alike, were almost killed by the Morrigan Web. That doesn't give me a load of faith in any other programs like it. But if you want to know what my 'friends' think, there are loads of them right here on the train. Feel free to ask."

"I may do that," Skeeter replied smoothly. "But even without deliberate programs to manage the revelation, many wizarding spaces are less secure than ever, despite the Ministry's efforts to shore them up. Muggles stumble into formerly unplottable and hidden wizarding spaces with increasing frequency, requiring the response of ever-more-harried squads of Obliviators. Elsewhere, there is serious concern that the confines around sanctuaries for magical beasts have weakened and frayed. There is legitimate fear that someday the residents of London may awaken to an Acromantula terrorizing their streets or a sea serpent prowling the Thames. The Centaurs, it is rumoured, have sensed the degenerating boundaries of their forests and plan a deliberate incursion into the Muggle world, whether to serve as ambassadors or claim dominion no one knows for sure. And yet, many young witches or wizards like yourself consider all of this a good thing, a sign of progress. Where others see a loss of political power and potential chaos, *they* see open doors for cultural exchange, careers, and commerce in a newly integrated world. Do you agree with them, James?"

James drew a sharp breath to respond, not sure exactly what he was about to say except that it would be terse and angry and probably exactly the sort of emotional outburst Skeeter was hoping for, when a shape arose beyond the window of the door behind the blonde woman, momentarily distracting him. James recognized the small figure as it ascended slowly into view, hand-made and ridiculous by design, its cloth head flopping like a doll's and its stubby arms waving clumsily in the shifting sunlight.

It was a hand puppet. The Hufflepuffs had been making them ever since James' first year, putting on silly shows with them, sometimes in the great hall at official functions, more often spontaneously from behind tables in the library or the backs of sofas in common study areas. The Hufflepuppet Pals, as they called their little troupe, had developed quite a popular following, even among some of the staff and teachers.

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The puppet beyond the glass of the door was the Voldemort figure, with stitched orange and red eyes, a rather pointed, bald head, and a small, ridiculous smile. It flopped back and forth as if it was dancing to its own secret song, a stick of a wand glued to one limp hand.

“James?” Skeeter prompted quizzically. She read the direction of his gaze, and then glanced back over her shoulder.

The Voldemort puppet (commonly known as Voldy to the other Hufflepuppet Pals) dipped quickly from view before Skeeter could see it. She frowned at the empty glass, and then turned back to James.

“I, uh...” James stammered slightly, trying to recollect his thoughts. “I don’t expect the threats are quite as bad as the newspapers make them out to be. We’re a long way off from seeing any dragons breaking free into the Muggle world. Although I suppose it would make a pretty good news story, wouldn’t it?”

Skeeter tried to hide her disappointment. “No one wants chaos and mayhem just for the sake of ‘a good news story’, James,” she clucked her tongue. “But even if the threats of incursions by magical beasts or centaurs are overblown, what do you think of the prospect of mingling the magical and Muggle worlds once and for all? Do you agree that it would be a good thing?”

James let out a breath, his anger diminishing to a sort of bland impatience. “It wouldn’t be the first time our worlds had been mixed, would it? And if I know my history, there was a good reason why we decided to split them up.”

Behind her spectacles, Skeeter’s eyes brightened. “Is that so, James? What have you been taught about that, then?”

“I’ve been taught the same as everyone else,” James bristled. “A thousand years ago, the good witches and wizards realized that it was almost impossible to keep the bad witches and wizards from trying to take over the Muggle world by force. The temptation was just too great for the magical people who wanted nothing more than power. And even a lot of Muggle kings and emperors and villains were willing to hire magical mercenaries to bully their enemies, to make their armies invincible, to curse anyone who opposed them. The balance between the magical and Muggle worlds was too skewed to maintain. So we went into hiding, used our powers to live in secret among the Muggles,

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unseen by them. The laws of secrecy protected the Muggles from the worst of us, and from the worst of themselves, the ones who would throw the door open for power at any cost.”

“You’ve learned all of this from Headmaster Merlin, I assume?” Skeeter asked, cocking her head slightly.

“I learned it from my history books,” James said, raising his eyebrows challengingly. “From Professor Binns’ classes, ever since my first year. We all take those lessons. I assume you did, too, at some point.”

Skeeter laughed lightly. “It’s been a long time since my schooling, I’m afraid,” she waved a hand dismissively. “And yet I do remember enough to know that Headmaster Merlin features prominently in many of those ancient stories you reference. A thousand years ago, he himself was the sort of mercenary wizard who hired himself out to Muggle kings, willing to curse whomever they wished, willing to feed their sometimes fanatical desire for power, no matter how it might poison their societies.”

“Yeah,” James admitted, unfazed. He had had the exact same discussion with Rose on a few occasions. “But he’s different now. Everyone can see that. Otherwise he’d never have been given the job of headmaster of Hogwarts. He’s changed since the person he was back then.”

Skeeter was nodding even as James finished his response. “So you believe that Merlinus Ambrosius can change over a span of a thousand years,” she suggested, bowing her head to look at him over her spectacles. “But humanity and wizardkind cannot?”

James sat up in his seat, exasperated, opening his mouth to say that it was one thing for a single person to change and quite another for the entirety of human nature, when the Voldy puppet arose slowly into view again just past Skeeter’s shoulder, again knocking all the words right out of James’ head.

The Voldy puppet wasn’t alone this time. Next to it appeared the old headmaster puppet, Dumbledore, complete with tiny spectacles, a snowy white beard and pointed purple hat. On Voldy’s other side, another puppet leapt into view, this one with lank black hair and bored hand-drawn eyes: the Severus Snape figure (inexplicably known to the others as “Snape-a-doodle”). Both the Dumbledore and Snape figures

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clutched blunt miniature clubs between their stubby arms. They began to pummel the Voldy figure with classic *Punch and Judy* vigour.

James tried desperately not to smile, which of course only made the inexplicable puppet antics immeasurably funnier. A laugh boiled up in his chest, even as he struggled to hold it in, compressing his lips into a grim, trembling line.

Skeeter glared at James, her curiosity turning to suspicion, and then whirled around again.

The Hufflepuppet Pals dropped instantly from view.

“Something interesting in the corridor, James?” Skeeter asked, still looking back over her shoulder.

“No, ma’am,” James answered perhaps a bit too quickly, unable to completely hide the laughter in his voice.

She slid an eye slowly back at him, her head still turned toward the door. Impatient now, she slipped off her perch and stalked to the compartment door, shuttling it noisily open. She glanced along the corridor in one direction, and then the other. James watched, waiting for her to capture whoever it was that was putting on the private performance. Instead, she merely glanced back at him from the doorway, her eyes narrowed, as if she expected him of goading her somehow. Clearly, whoever James’ secret entertainers were, they were no longer present in the carriage. Again, Skeeter composed her features, closed the door much more gently than she’d opened it, and returned to the table, now merely leaning on it.

“A lot of wizarding families,” she said, ignoring the interruption, “struggle with accepting the idea that their children might choose to pursue vocations in the Muggle world. One doesn’t need to be of strictly pureblood heritage to see that many would view this as a step down, a denial of one’s magical traditions. Do you agree with those of your generation who believe that such attitudes are outdated and prejudiced? An outmoded view based on obsolete stereotypes?”

“Look, if you just want me to repeat a bunch of handbill slogans and Progressive Element posters, I can find one and just read it to you,” James said, his annoyance finally overriding his sense of propriety. “There are usually three or four of them on the notice boards, next to

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the Wanted Witch posters for Petra Morganstern. You don't need to talk to me to find the stuff you want to hear."

Skeeter's expression of smug victory was just barely hidden beneath a mask of wounded shock. "Why James, I've no idea what you are getting at. I'm merely asking you to respond to the concerns of the day, the concerns that you and your classmates are most affected by--"

"The concerns you most want to pump up to make people as angry and afraid as possible," James interrupted, rolling his eyes. "Sure. Fine. So maybe a bunch of centaurs and giants and beasts will break out of their weakened boundaries and run through the Muggle streets. Maybe the old wizarding families are chock full of stuffy, backwards elitists who think the Muggles are all lower class rabble unworthy of their marvelous magical kids. And maybe none of it matters because Undesirable Number One, Petra Morganstern, will soon wipe us all out with some all new... doomsday... thingie..." He threw his hands up, growing flustered, but not losing his head of steam. "What are *you* doing about any of it? Getting people all in a lather? Selling fear and worry and suspicion like candy? Even if all that stuff is true, all you're doing is making it worse. People like my dad and Merlin and Denniston Dolohov are working to make it better. But you're just adding to the problems. You're piling rubbish on the people trying to make a difference. And you," he shook his head, suddenly realizing that he'd said far more than intended, not quite wishing he hadn't, but knowing he probably soon would. He drew a deep breath and blew it out, deflating slightly. "You have the gall to stand there and look all superior about it."

Behind Skeeter, the Snape, Dumbledore, and Voldy Hufflepuppets applauded, flailing their limp hands wildly but silently, seeming to leap up and down behind the glass window. James saw them and felt his cheeks redden in mingled anger and embarrassment. He'd had an audience for his final outburst. This reminded him, of course, that soon enough that audience would encompass most of the magical world.

"Thank you, James," Skeeter smiled indulgently at him as the Quick-Quotes Quill finally finished recording his diatribe on the notebook behind her. "I think we're done here. Good day."

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When James exited the compartment feeling prickly and disgruntled and yet somehow perversely satisfied, leaving Skeeter to pack up her Quill and notebook, he was bemused to see no sign of the Hufflepuppet Pals or their puppeteers. There was, however, a folded note lying on the floor of the corridor, flashing in the flickering sunbeams as the train passed through dense forest. His name was printed on the front in small, flowing script. He stooped to grab it, thankful that Skeeter hadn't decided to accompany him back to his compartment, although even he knew how unlikely that was.

As he walked, nearly fleeing the staff carriage en route to his own, he unfolded the parchment and read the short note.

*Good on you, James! You put that obnoxious twit  
in her place. Thank us later for the well-timed distractions.*

*Your friend,  
Millie and the HufflePuppet Pals*

James frowned at the note, blinking. He knew who Millie was. Millicent Vandergiff was a Hufflepuff seventh-year with whom he'd had a few passing interactions over the last few years. Blonde and willowy with a surprisingly silly, quick wit, she had dated Graham Warton briefly late last term, breaking up with him after only a few weeks and leaving him in a morosely dejected mood for days. James knew almost nothing more about her.

Shrugging, curious about Millie but dreading the article that would likely appear in the next few days in the *Daily Prophet*, James refolded the note and stuffed it into his robe pocket.

Considering how everything could have gone if puppet Voldy and Dumbledore and Snape-a-doodle hadn't shown up when they did, he decided that he did probably owe Millie and her friends his thanks the next time he saw them.



When James returned to his compartment, Albus and Ralph were tensely focused over Ralph's traveling chess set, upon which Albus' few remaining red pieces were dejectedly mounting a hopeless but stubborn defense against Ralph's ivory army. Lily had left to find her friends elsewhere on the train, and Rose was buried in a thick new book. James plopped onto his seat, thankful that no one was immediately asking about his interview with Rita Skeeter. For a minute, he watched the trees and fields sweep past outside the train.

It occurred to him that he would never again ride the Hogwarts Express as a student, and a momentary malaise descended over him. He thought back to his first, nervous ride to Hogwarts, filled with nearly crippling anxiety about living up to his father's legendary reputation. A wan smile came over his face as he recalled his first meeting with Zane, the unexpected American with his precocious wit and roguish irreverence, and Ralph, the apparent Muggle-born, filled with apprehension, equipped with the ridiculously oversized, green-tipped wand.

He replayed his other most memorable moments on the train: his and Albus' first confrontation with Scorpius Malfoy, back when Scorpius had still been full of vim and vigour about becoming a Slytherin, before any of them knew that it was Albus who would go to the green and silver whilst Scorpius, amazingly, ended up a Gryffindor; the chasing of the strange shadow creature, the Borley, and the subsequent encounter with the swarm of Dementors around the crimson engine. The meeting with the otherworldly entity known as the

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Gatekeeper and the nearly disastrous train ride after, when Headmaster Merlin had miraculously saved the train from barreling to its doom in Sparrowhawk gorge.

He mused on the many games of Winkles and Augers he had played with his friends as they travelled back to school, each year more confident, excited, and eager to face whatever awaited them.

He remembered the giddy anticipation of new school subjects and experiences, of connecting with old friends and rivalries, of seeing teachers both beloved and abhorred.

This, he thought again, cautiously probing the concept, was the last time any of those things would ever happen. James could scarcely appreciate each passing moment for the sense of sudden melancholy that it evoked in him. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had transformed from a frighteningly mysterious challenge during his first year to a deeply familiar old friend as he began his seventh. It had never been quite real to him that those days would one day end. Now he knew: there would be only one last train ride, eventually one final night slept in his bed in Gryffindor tower, one last meal in the Great Hall with his friends and all the teachers lining the head table on the dais, one last ceremonial school event in the form of his own graduation.

And then after that, the real world awaited. Much larger and more exciting and infinitely more challenging than Hogwarts had ever been.

It was a giddy, troubling realization, underlined by the steady rumble-clack of the train, carrying James inexorably forward into his future, whether he was ready for it or not.

He turned to Rose and asked what she was reading, not so much because he was interested, but just to break the tension of his thoughts.

“The second of those Cormelian Blitz detective stories,” Rose answered eagerly, not taking her eyes from the open pages. “You know, the female giantess who solves mysteries in old timey Diagon Alley. Written by professor Revalvier, although under a different name. Much different from her other stories, I have to say. A little on the violent side. Mum’s hair would probably stand straight up if she knew I was reading it.” She licked a finger and turned a page, flicking her gaze over it.

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James nodded, already bored with the topic. He let Rose fall back into her book and decided to get up and wander the train again, ostensibly in search of the cart lady, but hoping more for distraction than a licorice wand or a packet of Cockroach Clusters.



## **2. WINDS OF CHANGE**

“First years!” Hagrid boomed, raising his lantern as always, and summoning the newest students to himself. James spied the half-giant easily over the heads of the disembarking students as they milled on the Hogsmeade platform, and the sight gladdened him. “First years, this way to th’ boats! Step lively now. Yer trunks will be taken direc’ly. Follow me an’ watch yer step.”

“I wish I could ride the boats again,” Lily commented wistfully from next to James. “So much better than the carriages, don’t you think?” The ever-present entourage of her friends cooed and agreed all around. James stepped away, not wishing to be seen in their company. He was a seventh-year after all, and was expected to be above hanging out with a gaggle of middle-year girls. Beneath this, however (although he would never admit it aloud), he half-resented the easy popularity that his sister had cultivated over the past few years. She and her friends burbled on, barely noticing his departure.

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Rose was waiting in line for black carriages and the ride up to the castle. James joined her, waving to Ralph further down the line where he waited with some of his Slytherin mates. Ralph waved back sheepishly. He'd been acting a little strangely ever since they'd met on platform nine and three quarters.

"If I didn't know any better," James commented idly. "I'd say Ralph was up to something."

"Our Ralph?" Rose clarified, frowning and glancing aside. "Ralph Deedle? He's about as cunning as a mint humbug. I wouldn't count on it."

The carriage trip up to the castle was a familiar and splendid ride, with the sun just dipping behind the mountains and painting the clouds with watercolor pinks, purples and oranges. Against this panorama, Hogwarts castle loomed, seeming to lean back on its rocky perch, comfortable and welcoming. Its myriad windows glinted like golden coins flashing in the bottom of a pool. James found himself crammed into the carriage with Rose, Morgan Patonia, Ashley Doone, Graham Warton, and Joseph Torrance.

"Good summer, everybody?" Graham asked blandly, seeming merely to pass the time. James didn't answer. On his other side, Joseph Torrance brightened. "Went to the Hocus Brothers Circus when it came to Chudley. The levitating acrobats and juggling elephants are great, but Montague the performing dragon is best of all."

"What's he do?" Rose asked from the front seat. Before her, as always, James could just make out the skeletal shape of the thestral in its harness, trotting into the shadow of the castle.

"Oh, amazing things," Joseph enthused. "Aerial stunts through flying rings, breathing fire to light torches held in bears' mouths, balancing a whole team of dancers on its tail. It barely ate any of the people in the audience, and only stomped one or two of the concession stands. But even that was just for show, I'm pretty sure."

"It's a dangerous thing, dragging dragons around the country these days," Morgan sniffed. "I hear the Ministry is cracking down on those sorts of events, what with all the weakened borders around magical places."

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“I hope not!” Ashley Doone piped up next to Morgan. “I want to see that show when it comes to Diagon Alley this winter! No way that’s not secure enough to host a magical circus.”

James sighed to himself, impatient with the topic of magical security after his interview with Rita Skeeter. Deep down, he didn’t believe things were as bad as the newspapers and tabloids made them out to be, although he had an inkling that this might be false hope. His dad didn’t talk of it much, not because there wasn’t anything to say, James suspected, but because he didn’t want to worry his family. This was rather worrying in itself, of course, but it was a bland worry, without specifics, and easier to forget.

“Did you hear about Damian Damascus and Sabrina Hildegard?” Rose suddenly asked, turning on her seat to look at James and Graham. “They dated all summer and just announced their engagement to be married. Can you believe it? *Married!*”

“You’re joking,” Graham accused flatly.

Rose shook her head. “Not a bit. Saw the invitation myself. Came by post just a few days ago. It’s horklump and hemlock themed.”

Graham rolled his eyes grudgingly. “Well, that’s definitely Damien and Sabrina.”

“Not really all that surprising when you think about it,” Morgan sighed. “I mean sure, Sabrina’s got a few points on him in the beauty department, but they were like mortar and pestle all through school. I’m surprised it never occurred to them before that they were meant to be.”

“But,” James finally spoke up, “they’re not old enough to be married! I mean, are they?”

Ashley shrugged. “They’re adults, now, at least technically. Damien’s started himself a nice little alchemical practice in Puddlemere, and Sabrina’s studying for her curse-breaker certification. Plenty of people get married young. It’s romantic, I think.”

James’ mind reeled at the idea. To him, Damien and Sabrina were still fellow mates and Gremlins, albeit graduated now. It didn’t seem possible that they were already so far along in their grown-up lives that they were making lifelong commitments and career choices.

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Shortly, the conversation drifted on to other topics, including James' interview with Rita Skeeter. He told them briefly about it, assuring them that it was no big deal, and would probably barely warrant a few inches on the back page of *the Daily Prophet*, which he sincerely hoped, but didn't quite believe.

Soon enough the carriage squeaked to a halt in the main courtyard below the open front doors. James clambered out, along with the rest of the older students along the line of black carriages, and followed Graham and Ashley up the steps. Professor McGonagall stood watching next to the open doors, her face as imperious and grim as always, a parchment unrolled in her right hand. She peered at it critically, glancing up over her spectacles as the students passed, one by one.

"Mr. Potter," she said briskly, flicking her gaze at him, then those with him. "Misses Patonia and Doone. And you, too, Mr. Warton. Please make your way to the antechamber behind the Great Hall, and be quick about it."

"What," Graham hesitated. "Are we in trouble already?"

"Not if you do as I say," the professor answered curtly. "And you as well, Mr. Deedle." She nodded to Ralph as he clumped up the steps to join them. "And no stopping at your tables along the way. I don't want to see any biscuit crumbs on the floor of the antechamber when I arrive." She eyed Ralph pointedly. "Now hurry on, and take any other seventh-years with you, should you see any." With that she dismissed them, returning her attention to the parchment in her hand.

Rose looked mildly affronted. "Well then," she huffed lightly. "Seventh-years only, it seems. See you later then, I guess."

"I wonder what this is all about?" James muttered as they stepped into the shadow of the main entrance, heading toward the glow of the Great Hall and the clatter of gathering students.

"No idea," Ralph shrugged. "Do you think she'd know if I ate a biscuit on the way, like? I'm dead starved."

"I wouldn't risk it if it was me and my house on the line," Graham proclaimed, clapping Ralph on the shoulder. "But it isn't, so I say go for it, Mr. Slytherin."

Ralph didn't, but as he passed the tables laden with freshly baked snacks and waiting plates and silverware, it seemed to be a very close

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thing. Overhead, as always, the hundreds of floating candles made a constellation of tiny flames, bright against the darkening sky that appeared magically imprinted on the rafters and vaulted ceilings. The massive and ornate rose window at the head of the hall glowed with sunset hues, spreading its diffuse light over the gathering, chattering, laughing students.

As James threaded through them, making his way along the Gryffindor table toward the front of the hall, it occurred to him that perhaps he'd been looking at his return to school from the wrong perspective entirely. This wasn't merely the last chapter of his Hogwarts career, after all. It was the beginning of one final hurrah, a year filled with whole weeks and months and seasons of new adventures and challenges, untold new experiences, familiar faces and lifetime memories just waiting to be made. It didn't make the melancholy doldrums that he'd felt on the train go away, but it did balance them against the heady anticipation of the year yet to come. The current of time would carry him forward into his future whether he wished it or not. He might as well embrace the journey and enjoy the ride.

James, Ralph and the rest of the seventh-years climbed the steps to the dais in a scattered line, skirted the head table where a few teachers were just beginning to gather and take their seats, and passed through the heavy wooden door on the right side. James had been in the antechamber only a few times before, but remembered it well. During his first year, it had been the sight of Merlin's interview with Ralph's father, wherein their true magical heritage as Dolohovs had come to light. The room looked exactly the same now as it had then: a collection of chairs and sofas scattered somewhat haphazardly around a large hearth, currently unlit and gray with cold ash. Paintings of various pastoral scenes and miscellaneous portraits surrounded the walls, packed between the pillars that supported the arcade ceiling. James recognized one of the paintings from the sketches in Ralph's antique potions book: a crowded scene representing the coronation of the first wizarding king, Kreagle. In the far corner of the scene, a dark-robed figure leaned against a wall, smoking a long pipe and ignoring the festivities. The figure looked at James as he passed, its eyes distant but watchful. It was

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Severus Snape, of course, in one of his many disguised portrait forms, keeping an eye on the myriad corners and recesses of the school.

"Anyone know what this is all about?" Trenton Bloch asked, throwing himself into a high-backed chair and kicking one knee up over the upholstered arm.

"S'tradition, isn't it?" replied Julian Jackson, the captain of the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, seating herself on an ottoman before the cold hearth and smoothing her skirt primly. "Every year, McGonagall gathers the seventh-years for a little secret pep talk or something, although they're forbidden to speak of it afterward."

"I never noticed that before," Ralph commented, frowning.

"Face it, Ralph," Deirdre Finnegan offered lightly, "What you don't notice could fill the great hall from floor to ceiling."

Behind her, Kevin Murdock snorted a laugh.

Ralph's frown turned offended as he glared at Deirdre, but James smiled and nudged him with an elbow.

Millicent Vandergriff stood near Julian Jackson, leaning lightly against the arm of a sofa. She met James' eyes and gave a secretive little smile and wink. James nodded back at her, still smiling. She had changed her hair over the summer. Her long, straight locks had been trimmed to a shoulder-length blonde bob that swung lightly whenever she turned her head. James was less surprised that she had made the change than that he had actually noticed it. Millie Vandergriff had always been merely a background face in his world: funny, a little crude, and boisterously loud from her space at the Hufflepuff table, but generally forgettable. The new haircut changed her somehow, at least in his mind. For the first time, she struck him not just as a rather shrill laugh ringing in the halls or a whispering component of some inexplicable female cabal outside the door of the girls' bathroom. Now, suddenly, she was a fairly fetching and curious girl who had, for whatever reason, taken some nominal interest in him.

As James watched, she sat down next to Julian and engaged the other girl in some animated but low-key conversation.

After a few minutes, Professor McGonagall entered, bringing with her an air of hectic gravity. The room quieted immediately and most of the students drifted into seats or clustered in knots against the outer pillars. The former headmistress circumvented the room until she

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stood with her back to the dark hearth, her eyes ticking over each face in a quick inventory.

“A few brief words as you enter your final year, students,” she said with no preamble, pitching her voice low, by her standards. “As you may imagine, there are certain responsibilities that go with attaining your seventh year. For better or for worse, you are now the standard bearers for everything that this school represents. Your younger classmates will look up to you as examples and role models. Some of you will rise to this responsibility, and indeed have done so already throughout your terms. Others,” she paused briefly and flicked her gaze over several faces, peering at them over her spectacles, “will struggle even to represent your own best interests, much less those of your fellows. To those who fall into the latter category, allow me to be perfectly clear: we expect better from you. *The school* expects better from you. And you should expect better of yourselves. You will soon embark on a new journey outside of these familiar walls, and there you will not find merely docked house points for flouting rules. Heed me, for this may be the last time anyone offers you this warning.” She paused meaningfully, letting the weight of her iron gaze settle over the room like a cold blanket. Then, she softened slightly, raising her chin and drawing a breath.

“There are, however, certain privileges that accompany these responsibilities,” she said, almost with a note of reluctance. “I’ll thank you, as you may guess, not to flaunt these to your younger classmates. Let them discover them as you are about to now.” She produced a small scroll and unrolled it in her thin hands, beginning to read: “As per tradition and administrative decree, seventh-years shall not require special permission to access the restricted section of the library.”

James blinked and glanced around the room, curious to see if anyone else found this a particularly exciting privilege. Rose would be thrilled with it, he knew, but no one else in attendance showed as much as a raised eyebrow.

“Further,” McGonagall went on, still reading from the scroll, “Certain classes may be exchanged for an equal length of work in the career field of your choosing, by arrangement with the headmaster

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and/or related professor, not to exceed more than ninety minutes per week."

This did inspire a response from the gathered students, who glanced around at each other and stirred in their seats, clearly excited at the prospect of trading class time for some hands-on experience, perhaps even outside the school. James glanced aside at Ralph. They had both toyed somewhat idly with the idea of going into Auror training, more for lack of any other ideas than a particular passion for the career. Did this mean they could actually trade class-time for trips to the Ministry of Magic with James' dad? Could they actually accompany him and his partner, Titus Hardcastle, on the occasional raid or investigation? It seemed almost too tantalizing to consider, and yet perhaps it was actually possible.

"The Forbidden Forest is still forbidden," McGonagall soldiered on, quelling the sudden hiss of whispers that had erupted around the room. "However, with the permission of the headmaster, myself, or Professor Hagrid, you may conduct your own expeditions into the Forest for any of a list of prescribed purposes, including but not limited to: the gathering of potion ingredients, observation of certain magical creatures, herbological gardening and cultivation, and limited recreational activities.

"Additionally," the professor said, lowering her scroll. "As many of you may be aware, this castle is endowed with many secret passageways, hidden chambers, and unmarked amenities. Some of these you will surely have discovered either by illicit exploration or by word of mouth from less scrupulous former graduates. What you may have heretofore utilized secretly and in part, you are now granted full and sanctioned access to. Tomorrow evening at ten o'clock sharp, after your classmates are confined to their common rooms and dormitories, Mr. Filch will take you on a tour of these amenities. You are neither to map these places, record any passwords, nor share in any way their locations, purposes, or benefits with any other students."

Here she met James and Ralph's eyes, pointedly. "Is that perfectly clear?"

James nodded, as did the rest of the gathered students. Even as he did, however, he wondered if this was a promise he could truly keep.

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He imagined how Rose would respond if she knew that they had kept such tantalizing secrets from her. She would probably die of outrage.

"I certainly hope you *can* abide by these rules," McGonagall said, the doubt in her voice deliberately evident. "Because your freedom to use such amenities is dependent entirely on your ability to keep them secret. Please do not test me on this."

"Finally," she went on, now heaving a deep sigh and removing her spectacles, allowing them to dangle on a fine chain around her neck. "I have a pronouncement that will likely shock none of you, although as with everything else said here, I would like very much for you to keep this a secret until I make my official statement."

She looked over the crowd of seventh-years again, this time with as close to a softened expression as ever came over the professor's stern face. "I have served both you and this school for many more years than I ever thought possible. I have been honored to oversee not only your growth and education, but many of your parents', and even grandparents'. But now, as mixed a blessing as it will surely be, I find that I am ready to call an end to my long tenure. This shall be my last year as a member of Hogwarts' staff. My cottage and my gardens await, as do my pipe and what remains of my family. My one and only request of you, students..." Here she shook her head and, amazingly, the ghost of a wry smile curled her lips, "is that you make my final term as blissfully *uneventful* as possible."

This was met with a ripple of laughter, but as James glanced around the room he saw many faces showing what he felt: surprise and uncomfortable dismay. Professor McGonagall was currently the oldest and most prominent member of the Hogwarts staff. It was difficult even to imagine a Hogwarts without her presiding over it. Merlin may be the current headmaster, and he may occupy that post for many decades to come, but somehow he was merely the brain of the school. Professor Minerva McGonagall was its heart and soul, despite her eternally stern and stoic demeanor.

James' earlier melancholy momentarily blotted his world again, covering it like a storm cloud obscuring the summer sun. Not just because he couldn't imagine Hogwarts without Professor McGonagall, but because, after his interview with Rita Skeeter and her reminder of all

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the ways that the magical world seemed to be disintegrating, he had a deep fear that the professor's request for an uneventful final term was doomed even before the year had begun.

Ashley Doone raised her hand peremptorily. "What will you do, Professor?" she asked in a small voice.

McGonagall slowly shook her head, still smiling faintly. "I haven't the slightest idea, Miss Doone," she answered. "And that, my dear young friends... is the most marvelously freeing feeling in the world."

Sensing an end to the gathering, the students began to stir and murmur. McGonagall raised her voice once more. "A last order of business before you go to your house tables," she said quickly. "Most of you will likely have learned on the train who your Head Girl and Boy shall be this year..."

"I only know that it isn't me," James muttered, smiling aside at Ralph. "And hooray for that, despite what my Mum may have wanted."

"Erm," Ralph said, looking suddenly uncomfortable.

"This year's Head Girl," McGonagall called as the students stood and drifted restlessly toward the door. "Is Miss Fiona Fourcompass of Ravenclaw House. And Head Boy shall be Mr. Ralph Deedle, of Slytherin. I trust that you both have already spoken to this year's new prefects on the train, explaining their duties and the parts you shall play in them."

Ralph nodded solemnly at the professor as James boggled at him, dumbfounded. "Did it first thing, Ma'am," he reported. "Just like the letter said."

"Why didn't you tell me?" James rasped as the gathering finally broke up and bottlenecked at the door. "It was one thing for you to get prefect back in our fifth year-- I swear it's taken me this long just to get used to *that!* But Head Boy!?"

"*That's* why I didn't tell you," Ralph rolled his eyes. "I knew you'd make a big hairy thing out of it."

"It *is* a big hairy thing!" James spluttered. "Since when are you even angling for that kind of responsibility?"

"What do you mean?" Ralph looked slightly wounded. "I've always been the responsible one. All those times you and Zane and Rose

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were heading off on half-witted adventures, who was the one hanging back and being all careful?"

"You weren't being 'careful,'" James rolled his eyes. "You were being scared out of your wits. *Not* the same thing."

"Look," Ralph said, stopping next to the door and turning to look at James. "You were all worried that when I got prefect all of a sudden I'd be throwing a damper on your fun. Did that happen?"

"It totally did!" James whispered harshly. "You made us get back on time every Hogsmeade weekend. You made sure we couldn't nip off with the rest of the Gremlins when they had their secret caravan holiday. You reported to my mum that I'd broken my glasses *and* nagged me ever since to wear them in class, just because she asked you to! You even told Zane to stop popping up at all hours whenever he and the experimental magical communications crew have a new technique to test out!"

"He woke me up at two in the morning floating over my bed," Ralph bristled. "I mean, fun's fun, but he nearly made me wet myself, I swear."

"Promise me this won't all go to your head, Ralph," James insisted, glaring up at the bigger boy.

"It won't and it hasn't," Ralph proclaimed, firming his jaw and pushing up to his full, prodigious height. A moment later, he slumped back to his normal posture. "Besides, at least I kept us out of any death-defying predicaments and earth-shattering plots for two whole years. And you haven't even thanked me for that."

James blew out a breath and relaxed. "I'm not sure how much credit you can take for that, exactly," he shook his head.

As they finally pushed their way back into the noise of the Great Hall and found their seats, James was interested to see the ghost of Cedric Diggory floating near the head of the Hufflepuff table, regaling the younger students with some apparently enthralling story. Probably he was entertaining them with tales of his experiences during the legendary Tri-wizard Tournament, which was a favorite topic ever since he had become the official Hufflepuff House Ghost.

"Sometimes I miss the Fat Friar," Graham commented, grabbing a handful of rolls from a nearby platter. "Ever since he retired, The Hufflepuffs have been lording it over us with their dashing new ghost."

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Scorpius shook his head in Cedric's direction and sneered. "He certainly is rather windy for a 'Spectre of Silence'."

Rose clucked her tongue primly. "Jealousy is such an ugly emotion. I think it's wonderful that Cedric has finally found some new friends and a purpose." She glanced back at him over her shoulder, and then deflated slightly as she turned back. "Even if it does only remind us that Gryffindor doesn't currently have any house ghost at all."

"How's that work, anyway," Cameron Creevey asked from further down the table. "I mean, it's tradition for every house to have one, right? Slytherin has the Bloody Baron. Ravenclaw has the Grey Lady—"

"It isn't like we can just order a new ghost from a mail order catalog," Graham complained. "But still. It's a real disappointment, coming into our last year with no Gryffindor Ghost, even if old Nearly Headless Nick was a bit of a nutter sometimes."

"Speaking of last years," Rose perked up, lowering her voice conspiratorially and leaning eagerly toward James. "What about your big meeting with McGonagall? What sort of secrets did she let you in on? You can tell me!"

James shook his head firmly. "We're all sworn to secrecy. Seriously. I'm forbidden from telling you a thing."

"Come on," Rose weeded, and then narrowed her eyes slyly. "I probably already know about it all. I just want to see how much they've finally let you in on."

"You'll have to wait until your seventh year," James replied, raising his chin in what he hoped was a superior and lofty manner.

Rose rolled her eyes and drew her breath to retort, but at that moment Professor McGonagall called attention to the annual Sorting ceremony. James turned his attention to the head table, thankful for the distraction.

Holding the Sorting hat in her hand over a single wooden stool, Professor McGonagall called the newest students one by one to the dais. As they came, each more tentative and nervous-looking than the one before, the professor lowered the Hat onto their heads and, after either a few moments or as much as a minute, the Hat would proclaim their new house in its high, reedy voice. In turn, the houses applauded their newest members and welcomed them to their tables.

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As James watched, he could scarcely believe how young the first years looked. He was on the other end of that spectrum now—to their eyes, he was surely the impossibly older and worldly-wise seventh-year. He remembered being in their shoes, thinking how much taller and more grown-up the seventh-years looked. If only he'd known then what he knew now: that seventh-years weren't really any more confident or aloof than first years. They'd just had several more years practice at *pretending* to be.

Again, James remembered Professor McGonagall's proclamation in the antechamber. This, incredibly, was her last Sorting ceremony. Who would take over for her next year? Merlin, perhaps? Or one of the other longer-term teachers, like Professor Flitwick or even Neville Longbottom? As hard as he tried, he simply could not imagine anyone else holding the Hat by its tip, reading off the names in that clipped, stern voice.

And then another rather dismaying thought occurred to James: the Sorting Hat had not sung a song before its duties this year.

It was tradition that the Hat would regale the waiting students with some possibly amusing, possibly profound lyric that it had concocted between its annual duties. And yet during James' first year it had not provided its customary tune. Nor, it seemed, did it plan to this year. Of course, as James had thought once before, after so many centuries of service, one could forgive the Hat for taking the occasional year off. But it struck him as especially troubling that, for whatever reason, his first and last years would be marked with no such musical diversion.

As the Sorting finally finished and Professor McGonagall took the Hat back with her to the head table, the entire Great Hall gave a round of hearty applause, half in welcome of their new housemates, and half in celebration that the night's official proceedings were nearly over and they could all soon go to their respective common rooms for less formal First Night merriments. The only unfinished detail was the official start-of-term announcement from Headmaster Merlin, which James knew from experience would be brief and very much to the point.

"I hear Ralph was named Head Boy," Rose whispered in James' ear as the applause filled the hall. "Are you jealous?"

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James glanced back at his cousin, certain that she was joking. Her raised eyebrows and knowing half-frown told him that she was not.

"Of course I'm not jealous," James shook his head fervently. "That's stupid. Why would anyone want to be Head Boy?!"

"Nobody becomes Head Boy or Girl because they *want* to be," Rose whispered as the applause died down. "They do it because of the people who want it *for* them, and the expectations that it confirms. People expect Ralph to have ambitions because his dad is a big deal at the Ministry these days. But so is yours, if you hadn't noticed."

The room fell to silence on Rose's last words, preventing any reply from James. All of a sudden, he didn't know what his reply would be anyway. He frowned at Rose, but she merely looked past him, turning her attention to the headmaster as he took the ornate golden podium. Somewhat disgruntled, James turned around to watch as well.

"Greetings, students," the big man proclaimed in his deep, rumbling voice, towering over the podium in his golden dress robes, his beard combed and gleaming with the exotic oil he wore in it for formal occasions. His heavy gaze roamed over the gathered students, marking each face. "And welcome to an all new year of lessons, camaraderie, and sport at Hogwarts school of Witchcraft and Wizardry. For new students, I am Headmaster Merlinus Ambrosius. I will save us all much time and attention by stating, as always: you may look to your older classmates to inform you of how we do things here on a day-to-day basis. That is their duty and honor. Make use of the resources granted you, and if any should refuse you or lead you astray, you shall inform me personally so that I may show them the error of their ways. Our general rules are few but carefully enforced: the Forbidden Forest is forbidden for a reason. If you break this rule, the result will be at the very least instructive, so long as it is not deadly. Curfew is ten of the clock on school nights, eleven-thirty on weekends and holidays. Our dear caretaker Mr. Filch has been authorized to carry out whatever punishments he deems fit for those who ignore this schedule, and you should be under no illusions about the creativity he is wont to employ in carrying out his duties."

As the headmaster spoke, he nodded toward the rear of the room, where Filch stood, as usual, near the main doors, slowly stroking the head of the ancient Kneazle cat curled in his arms. Filch offered a

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confirming nod that was more scowl than smile. James had learned over the past two years that, amazingly, Filch and Merlin were very nearly blood-brothers in their approach to law and order. Merlin kept the old caretaker in check mainly by giving him free rein in the small responsibilities that were granted him.

“To conclude,” the headmaster went on, lowering his chin to peer intently at the gathered throng. “You will have noticed, perhaps, a few changes in our staff during the summer. Our much respected charms teacher, Professor Filius Flitwick, has finally succumbed to the demands of his muse, choosing to spend the remainder of his years in pursuit of his art and the perfect cup of oolong tea. He shall still grace us with his presence on certain special occasions. In the meantime, however, I trust you will offer a sincere greeting to your new charms teacher, Professor Donofrio Odin-Vann, himself a graduate of these esteemed halls, and a valued new member of our teaching staff.”

Tepid, confused applause washed over the room as heads craned to find the new teacher at the staff table. James was fairly shocked to discover that the new charms teacher appeared to be the young man he had glimpsed earlier that day on the train. He stood tentatively from the end of the table, smiling thinly and lifting one hand in an appreciative wave. He wore short-cropped dark hair and a tidy little pointed goatee that, on almost any other man, would have looked malevolently wicked. On him, however, it looked merely forced and contrived, rather like the young professor was trying just a bit too hard to cultivate a dashing image. James liked him, despite his obvious youth and discomfort. Or perhaps even because of it.

“And with that, students,” Merlin proclaimed, raising both of his slab-like hands, “The official portion of the start of term festivities are concluded. You may feel free to finish your meals and repair to your dormitories, where I am quite sure--”

A sudden and wholly unexpected thumping sound echoed through the room, emanating from the tall wooden doors at the rear of the hall. Merlin paused, his brow lowering slightly at the interruption. For a moment, stony silence filled the hall. And then the doors thudded again as someone seemed to knock on them from the outside, the noise

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amplified by the natural acoustics of the Hall. At the sound, the doors eased open, as if pushed tentatively from the outside.

Filch watched brightly, his gaze alert and careful, stepping aside as the doors began to creak open.

Revealed behind them, eyes wide and worried behind a pair of chunky black eyeglasses, was a middle-aged man dressed in a pink polo shirt and blue jeans beneath a light jacket. His right fist was raised in a knocking gesture. Next to him was a portly woman with a mass of voluminous brown hair and a purse slung protectively over one shoulder. Two children stood behind her, a boy and a girl, one each peeking from around her prodigious hips.

"I'm sorry," the man said, his adenoids turning the phrase into a nasally echo around the suddenly silent Hall. "The missus and I... we seem to have gotten just a wee bit lost. We saw the, um, lights of this domicile from below, and the missus, she suggested we pop up and... er... ask directions."

Every eye in the room stared back in complete, astonished silence. Merlin himself seemed, perhaps for the first time since James had ever met him, utterly at a loss for words.

The spectacled man drew a breath and looked around, clearly trying to make sense of the scene before him, and failing miserably.

"Can any of you," he asked querulously, clearing his throat against the echo of his own words, "point us properly in the direction of the Lakes of Killarney? Only, we have reservations for seven o'clock, see, and..." His voice finally trailed away as the strangeness of the sight finally overwhelmed him.

Hanging near the end of the Hufflepuff table, Cedric Diggory's ghost noticed the man's wife staring at him, her eyes so wide that the whites were visible all the way around. Her fingers trembled at the base of her throat. Her lips quivered in a tiny frown of speechless shock.

"Boo?" Cedric said, raising a hand and wagging his fingers at her.

Ponderously, the woman keeled over backwards in a dead, heavy faint.

"It appears, Mr. Caretaker," Merlin finally said in a wholly different voice than before, eyeing Mr. Filch where he still stood next to

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the rear doors. “That we have rather unexpected Muggle guests. Please, let us make sure that they feel perfectly... *at home*.”





### 3. THE MIDNIGHT SUMMIT

There was no official obliviator on staff at Hogwarts, but Merlin was more than equipped for the task, with his otherworldly powers and his weirdly hypnotic staff, its carven runes glowing with faint blue light. Students were hastily dismissed and instructed to proceed directly to their common rooms while the headmaster, with the assistance of Professors McGonagall and, curiously, Trelawney, revived the fainted woman and placed the four confused Muggles into a sort of walking trance. They were still alert enough to look vaguely around at the students and living paintings and moving stairways, but when they spoke, it was in dull, dreamy voices. James, along with a knot of wide-eyed students, watched from the landing beneath the Heracles window as Merlin and the professors led the family back to the open main doors. Beyond them, a small brown car was parked in the darkness of the courtyard, its headlamps still on and its engine puttering dutifully.

“A school, you say,” the Muggle woman said, blinking vapidly up at Merlin.

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“Oh yes,” he replied with a comforting smile. “But don’t you concern yourself with that, my dear lady. Soon you and your delightful family will be en route to your destination. We can show you the way. Quite simple, really. You shall have a wonderful holiday, and you’ll forget you were ever here or met any of us.”

“Who *did* we meet?” the man asked a little blearily, looking aside at his wife with furrowed brow.

“Oh, that nice older fellow at the petrol station,” she said, with just a hint of uncertainty in her voice. “When we stopped for directions. He was so helpful, wasn’t he?”

The man nodded as he stepped out into the dark courtyard, accompanied by Professor Trelawney on one side, Professor McGonagall on the other.

The two children, each no older than ten, followed along, eyes wide, absorbing everything in sight. James knew how Merlin’s forgetting spells worked. By the time the family got back onto the main highway, their memories of Hogwarts would have faded to a breath of a dream, completely ephemeral, unrooted from reality. The children would remember it slightly better, since young memories, James knew, are both more firmly rooted and far more detailed. But no one believed kids when they talked of moving staircases, floating candles, or mysterious castle-schools looming out of the untracked Scottish countryside. For once, James was glad of that otherwise unfortunate truth.

“Go on with you, now,” Filch called up the stairs in a hushed growl. “This don’t concern none of you lot. Do as the headmaster said, and be quick about it.” With that, the caretaker hurried on toward the open doors, a paper map folded under one arm and, strangely, a red plastic travel mug clutched in his right hand. The mug steamed faintly and left the aroma of coffee in the cool air of the entrance hall. Props, James knew, conjured to both help the Muggle family find their way to their destination and confirm the planted memory of a helpful petrol station visit.

“What if more Muggles wander up to the castle?” Cameron Creevey asked breathlessly, still watching from the landing alongside

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James, Rose, and Scorpius. The boy sounded as excited about the prospect as he did worried.

"Merlin will cast a new unplottability charm over the grounds," Rose said impatiently, turning to tramp up the stairs. The rest followed her, sensing that the show, as it were, was mostly over. "The only reason those people got through is that no one knew how weak the old boundary had finally gotten. There's no way to test these things, really."

"Makes me wonder, though," Cameron said, taking the steps two at a time to catch up to Rose and James. "That Muggle reporter you told me about from your first year, James? Martin Prescott? Maybe that's partly how *he* was able to get through to the school. He followed the signal from Deedle's gaming device, but maybe the unplottability spell was weak even then, letting him through?"

James didn't want to think about that particular adventure. Martin J. Prescott was still presenting news stories on Muggle television, still working for a program called *Inside View* which seemed to specialize in celebrity gossip and dubious tales of two-headed bat babies or faces of saints being miraculously burnt onto toast. James didn't want to admit it, but he was quite certain that Prescott had gotten through the school's unplottability by a technological loophole and sheer bloody-mindedness, not any weakening of the school's ancient secrecy spells. No, the weakening was part of the chain-reaction caused when Petra Morganstern, with the help of her sister Izzy, had broken the veil of secrecy in Muggle New York almost three years earlier.

He glanced aside at Rose and saw the same thought on her face. She understood the magic of it all even better than him. The baseline power of all secrecy spells was the fact that Muggles didn't *want* to believe in magic, not deep down. It was too shocking and weird. It upset the comfortable house of cards that their perception of the world was built on. And that, unfortunately, was what Petra had changed. She had thrust a new reality on them, if briefly and in part. And now, bit by bit, the Muggle world was waking up to a new reality. The spells of secrecy were weakening because, for the first time in a thousand years, and perhaps not even by choice, the Muggles were *willing* to believe.

Allowing Cameron's conjecture to hang unanswered in the air, James followed Scorpius and Rose through the portrait hole and into the waiting common room, which, despite the strange events of the evening,

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was as boisterous and cheerful as any other First Night. Unsurprisingly, the bust of Godric Gryffindor bobbed and swooped through the upper recesses of the room like a drunken bumblebee, propelled by the wands of several competing students in a game of Winkles and Augers. Cheers and jeers rang out jovially. Illicit bottles of butter beer and platters of Honeydukes' sweets (compliments of George Weasley, as per recent tradition) decorated every table. The crackle and glow of the fireplace warmed the crowded room as James threaded his way in, breathing a deep sigh of relief. In a constantly changing world, he thought, the Gryffindor common room, at the very least, was always the same.

"See you in an hour?" Rose said quietly, sidling close to James and Scorpius. "Same place as usual?"

James nodded.

Scorpius shrugged noncommittally, reaching for a bottle of butter beer on a tray and drifting toward the gathering of Winkles and Augers players.

It had become rather a ritual on First Night for the past few years, the secret little midnight summit wherein James and a few trusted friends reported and discussed any important clandestine happenings over the summer. None of them referred to it as such, but James had begun to think of it as a pale, yet somehow significant, shadow of the old Order of the Phoenix. He didn't know if he looked forward to the annual meetings, exactly, but this year, unlike the last two, he thought he might finally have something interesting to report.

That would come later, however. For the moment, he threw himself into the happy noise and welcoming familiarity of one of his favorite places.

Next to the fire he spotted his sister Lily with her constant cadre of friends, Chance Jackson, Marcus Cobb, and Shivani Yadev. Shivani's brother Sanjay, who had just been sorted into Gryffindor house thirty minutes before, hovered nearby, glancing around with nervous happiness. Beneath one of the night-dark windows, 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> years Walter Stebbins and Xenia Prince, who had begun dating late last term, sat nearly nose to nose on the sofa, smiling and batting eyes at each other in low conversation, barely noticing the Winkles and Augers match waging furiously over their heads. And seated on either side of one of

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the study tables near the girls' dormitory stairs, Graham Warton and Deirdre Finnegan were heatedly debating a list of names on a parchment between them.

James knew without asking that the list was a potential lineup for this year's Quidditch team. He drew a deep breath, grabbed a butter beer of his own from a nearby table, and decided to join them, knowing what was to come.

"And there he is," Deirdre glanced up pointedly. "First, we've got Muggles in the Great Hall. And now, James Potter's name on a Quidditch roster. Could things get any stranger?"

"What will it be *this* year?" Graham cocked his head as James plopped onto a chair. "Are you expecting to get inducted into the Harriers the night before tryouts? Or do you have a conflicting follow-up interview with Rita Skeeter and maybe the Minister of Magic?"

James rolled his eyes, knowing he had no choice but to endure Deirdre's and Graham's derisive ribbing. "None of that will happen this year. I promise."

"You promised the same thing at this very table last year," Deirdre said, drooping on her chair. "What was it then? Dragon pox?"

"Scrofungulus, if you must know," James sighed. "Caught it on Hagrid's field trip to see the swamp mokes. Couldn't move my neck or swallow anything larger than an Every-Flavour Bean for a week. It was miserable, thank you very much."

"And the year before that?" Graham said, frowning and rubbing his chin in mock consternation. "You actually made it to the tryouts, if I recall, but you...?"

"Crashed your broom into one of the goal rings," Deirdre nodded.

"I'd broken my glasses," James interjected defensively. "I did my best anyway! It's not *my* fault I can't see for distance without them."

Graham sighed and raised his chin to peer across the room. "It's a good thing that we've got that sister of yours as Keeper. It would be terrible bad luck not to have a Potter on the Gryffindor team. Do you suppose *she'll* make tryouts this year, Deirdre?"

"She's never missed one so far," Deirdre answered. "Not that there's any question she'll be on the team again, same as the last few years. She's a natural."

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James waited a beat and then raised his eyebrows patiently. "Are you done giving me a hard time? Because I'm not going to miss tryouts this year. It's my last chance to make the team and I won't miss it for anything."

Deirdre nodded and returned her attention to the hand-written roster. "That's good, because see this empty spot right here?" She tapped the bottom of the parchment. "That's where Geoffrey Rook should be, only he graduated last year, and he was the best seeker in a decade. You up for filling his giant shoes?"

James nodded and firmed his chin. "I am. I've been practicing all summer. And I've spent the last two years keeping at the top of my game on the Night Quidditch League."

"Oh, don't remind me!" Graham exclaimed, drawing a hand over his face in annoyance. "You and that gang of midnight hooligans are a total embarrassment to the sport. I hear they let you ride one of those idiotic American scriff things when you play!"

James had forgotten how much Graham hated the marginally secret nighttime Quidditch matches. "It's called a skrim, actually--"

"Not another word!" Graham's eyes blazed. "I swear, I'd report the lot of you if I didn't think most of the teachers already know about it and just pretend not to."

"Longbottom's gone to a few of the matches," Deirdre commented with a shake of her head. "He's the one what grows the herb they all take so as to skip a night's sleep. Somnambulis, it's called."

"Discipline," Graham declared, perking up in his seat and meeting Deirdre's eyes fiercely. "*That's* what's missing from this school these days! Some good old-fashioned discipline! Squash all this Night Quidditch nonsense. Distracts everybody from the real thing, it does."

James shrugged and bobbed his head, knowing it was best just to keep quiet.

Thankfully, at that moment Walter Stebbins and Xenia Prince chose to interrupt the discussion, slipping into two chairs side by side.

"What do you all think of the new Charms teacher?" Xenia asked in a hushed voice, leaning over the table and brushing her short dark hair out of her face.

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"Looks like he's barely older than I am," Graham said, still bristling. "If he's old enough to buy a Firewhiskey at the Triple Sticks I'll eat a bludger."

"He's twenty-five," Deirdre sniffed. "I asked Professor Shert. He graduated the year before we started. That means Ted, Damien, and Sabrina all knew him. At least a little."

"We should ask them about him next time we see them," Graham suggested darkly. "Maybe they've got some dirt on him. Can't hurt to know a few dark secrets about any new teachers if they come in all eager to prove their mettle."

James shrugged. "He seemed decent enough to me. I don't get the idea that he plans to make life hard on anyone. Seemed to me like he's still figuring out how to *look* like a teacher, much less *be* one."

"I'll miss old Professor Flitwick," Xenia said with a sigh, glancing sadly down at the table. "He was my favorite."

Next to her, Walter nodded solemnly. James tried not to roll his eyes. He had a suspicion that Walter would respond the same way if Xenia suggested there were a flock of fuchsia ducks living on the moon.

Slightly less than an hour later, James, Rose, and Scorpius met Ralph and Albus beneath a torch in one of the older sections of the castle. It had been a dour, if confusing walk through the night-time halls. Rose and Scorpius, James now knew, were officially seeing each other again, although, as always, it was a brittle and tempestuous union. At the moment, for reasons James couldn't guess, they were once again not talking to each other, leaving him to walk in chilly silence between them. It was probably for the best, since they were not really supposed to be out of their dormitories this late, although curfews didn't formally begin until the next night.

"We tried to open it," Ralph whispered as James finally, gratefully, joined him and Albus, "But it never works for us."

"It never works for *you*," Albus corrected. "It works for *me* just fine, but it always opens on a room full of chamber pots."

"Step aside," Rose said stiffly. "Your problem is that you don't have enough imagination."

Ralph backed away obediently, giving Rose room to stalk purposely along the corridor before him. She turned after a few paces, retracing her steps.

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“What I need,” she said with careful emphasis, “is a room to meet in secret, where nobody like Filch can get in, where no one can overhear us, including any disguised portraits, and where nothing we say can ever be repeated.”

She turned again, following her steps a second time.

“What I *also* need,” she added, dropping her voice to a seething stage-whisper, “is a boyfriend who doesn’t *trip* over himself every time Fiera Hutchins so much as glances in his direction.”

“And here we go again,” Scorpius drawled wearily. “You can give it a rest any time, you know.”

Ralph looked mildly perplexed. “I don’t think that’s the sort of thing you’re going to find in the Room of Requirement.”

As Rose finished pacing, a door suddenly appeared where only blank stone wall had been a moment before. She glanced challengingly from Ralph to Scorpius, and then turned to the door, pushing it open and breezing inside.

As Scorpius entered, she glanced back with mock disappointment. “I guess Ralph is right after all,” she said archly. “The Room of Requirement can’t provide *everything* I need. Because here *you* are.”

“Honestly, Weasley,” Scorpius said, glancing languidly around the small room, and James could tell by the use of her surname that this wouldn’t end well. “I was merely being friendly to Fiera when I met her in the Great Hall. But if you’re jealous of her, you could always just ask for her help with, say, a little makeup and a new hairstyle.”

Rose’s cheeks went brick red. “A *little* makeup!? She wears enough for the two of us! For the whole school! But if *that’s* what you like... some haughty, made-up, Slytherin drama queen...!”

“I think I liked your angry silence better,” James muttered, unslinging his knapsack onto the small table in the centre of the room. “Why’s it always either cold shoulder or heated words with you two?”

Albus plopped into the chair furthest from the door, beneath the broad silvery frame of a Foe-glass. “Reminds me of why I continue to prefer the life of a free-wheeling bachelor.”

Fuming, the set of her face indicating that she had, for the moment, righteously burned off the excess of her anger, Rose lowered

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herself into the chair next to Albus. "You're a bachelor," she offered, "because no self-respecting girl can bear that you constantly smell like toad putty and swamp boot."

"I have a natural musky scent," Albus shrugged breezily. "Comes from being too busy at the manly arts to worry about primping in a mirror all day."

"It also comes from sleeping in the same clothes for a week straight through the summer," James suggested.

"And from thinking a bath is interchangeable for another splash of dad's aftershave," Lily said, hurrying through the door and dropping onto the chair opposite Rose. "Sorry I'm late everyone. What did I miss?"

"Nothing so far," Ralph sighed, settling into his own chair between Scorpius and Rose. "Except another row between *these* two and some unwelcome insights into Albus' nonexistent love life."

"Look who's talking, Deedle," Albus said, favoring Ralph with a piercing look. "When's the last time *you* had a date?"

"I go on dates," Ralph shrugged. "I just don't spend all the rest of my time gassing on about them."

Lily whispered loudly in Rose's direction: "He's got a thing for his Head Girl, I hear."

"That's more ambition than amour," Scorpius glanced aside at Ralph. "He's become quite the social climber, our Ralph. Finally living up to his House assignment."

"You're all full of Doxie-doo," Ralph shook his head. "You don't know anything about me. I probably shouldn't even be here, now I'm Head Boy. If one of those Snape portraits sees me on the way back to the dungeons..."

"Just tell him you were spying out the rest of these sneaks," a new voice suggested in an unmistakable American accent. "That's the sort of double-dealing duplicity the Snapester likes best. And don't pay any attention to the rest of these malcontents, Ralphinator. I think it's killer you made Head Boy. Way to go!"

James smiled at the rectangular piece of mirror he had removed from his knapsack and propped on the table. In it, a blonde boy's face could be seen, speaking from the depths of what appeared to be a mound of dirty laundry and candy wrappers. The mirror was one of the

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remaining Shards of Merlin's legendary Amsera Certh, now broken up and reduced to its most basic uses. At one time, Merlin had been able to spy on conversations held via the Shard, but since then the sorcerer had deliberately destroyed his own portion (much to his evident disappointment), vowing never again to subvert the Shard for his own espionage.

"Easy for you to say, Zane," James said with a shake of his head. "You don't have to put up with Ralph second-guessing every decision against the Hogwarts Handbook of Student Conduct."

"Hi Zane," Lily piped up, craning on her chair to see the boy in the Mirror. "How's life back at Alma Aleron?"

"Same as always in most ways," Zane bobbed his head. "Complicated and worrying in others. The Time-lock is getting a little wonky as the unplottability spell around the outer wall frays like an old scarf. Little chunks of the school keep breaking through into Muggle basements and attics all around Philadelphia, popping up like bubbles. Professor Jackson says he has a solution in the works, but for now we've had to restrict the Time-lock to the century before the city of Philadelphia was founded, just to be safe."

"Things are getting tetchier around here as well," Ralph said soberly. "We just had a Muggle family join us in the Great Hall, just as Merlin was finishing up his start-of-term speech."

"No!" Zane's eyes widened. "How'd they get in?"

"Just drove their car right up into the courtyard," James said, his shoulders slumping. "They were lost and looking for directions."

Uncharacteristically, Zane looked worried. "I'm sure old Merlin was up to the task of wiping their memories and sending them on their way, right?"

"*And* setting up a refreshed unplottability field around the school," Rose said. "But yes. It's a concern. Things are unraveling in ways no one can really predict. And there doesn't seem to be much anyone can do about it."

"Which brings us to why we're all here," Scorpius said somewhat impatiently, leaning back in his chair and raising his eyebrows. "For whatever it's worth, we're the few who may have some idea of who is really behind all of this. Meaning, of course, Judith, this very secretive

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*Lady of the Lake* person. And Petra Morganstern, our very own Undesirable Number One. Not that we've heard more than a peep from either over the last few years."

"No news for two whole years," Lily blew a breath up into her blonde fringe. "How do we know that Judith, the Lady of the Lake, is even still out there? Maybe she gave up and went back to whatever dimension she came from?"

James shook his head firmly. "Judith's not the type just to give up. The more ground she loses, the harder she fights. But we know she's still out there, working behind the scenes, letting everyone blame Petra for her plans."

"I still don't understand how anyone can blame Petra for what happened with the Morrigan Web," Lily said, her brow darkening. "Loads of us were there when it happened. We saw Judith and her fighting!"

"We did see it," James agreed sourly, "But hardly anyone seems to remember it right. Judith has a sort of slippery quality about her that makes most people forget about her the moment she's out of sight. Even the people that do sort of remember her are afraid to admit it. Don't you see? People *prefer* blaming Petra. She's the villain that they know. It's less complicated, and somehow more comforting that way."

Rose nodded. "That's why the consequences of her plan are still unfolding everywhere around us."

"And how do we know that?" Scorpius asked, cocking his head.

"Because you've got Muggles showing up in the Great Hall," Zane replied from the Shard. "That's evidence that Judith's plan, her version of our destiny, is still in play. Because the Crimson Thread is still stuck in our world, not the one it belongs to. The Thread is like a rock in the gears of our world's destiny. As long as it's here, things will continue to break down more and more over time."

"And the Crimson Thread," Scorpius said, doubt creeping into his voice, "*is* Petra Morganstern, according to you lot."

James sighed. "We've been over this. When Judith brought the other dimension's version of Petra into our world through the Vault of Destinies, then killed her here, that version of Petra—the Morgan version—became a part of our universe. Now, *our* Petra is the new Morgan. The Crimson Thread plucked from the Loom represents *her*.

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She believes that the only way to set things back to rights, to get our own original destiny back, is for her to take Morgan's place in that other dimension, Morgan's version of our world, restoring the balance."

Lily nodded tentatively. "And the fact that the Vow of Secrecy is still coming apart is a sign that she hasn't succeeded in doing that yet."

"Judith doesn't want her to," Ralph said. "Petra's her toe-hold in our world. If Petra replaces the Morgan from that other dimension, not only do the destinies snap back into place, Judith gets sent back to whatever netherworld she came from. She'll do anything to make sure Petra doesn't do that."

Scorpius looked doubtful. "Two years is a long time. How can we be certain that both of them are even still alive?"

"Petra was just in the news a few weeks ago," Albus said, staring reflectively into a dark corner. "She apparently broke into some top secret armory of forbidden artifacts and books, looking for something. One of the guards saw her."

Lily shrugged uncertainly. "He could have been mistaken. Petra's posters are up everywhere. The guard might have just seen some woman in the dark and assumed it was her."

"It was her," Albus replied with unexpected conviction, still staring into the corner. James watched his brother, narrowing his eyes.

"Well then," Scorpius said briskly, sitting up again in his seat. "That does bring us to the point." He glanced around the room, looking from face to face. "Have any of us seen or heard from Petra since last we met? Any word at all?"

Every eye in the room turned silently to James. It was Zane who prompted him from the Shard. "What do you say, James? You're the one with the magic mind-meld to our favorite misunderstood villainess. How sure are you that she's still out there? And that she really is the new Crimson Thread?"

James drew a long, deep breath, and then looked down at his right hand where it still lay on the table. He opened it, palm up.

"She's blocking me, somehow," he said reluctantly. "I can feel it. But I don't know why."

"Really," Scorpius said sarcastically, rolling his eyes again. "You have no idea, do you?"

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"And I suppose you do?" James challenged, looking Scorpius in the eye.

"Now, now. Don't let me steal your thunder. Although I am rather curious how you can be so certain of Morganstern's plans if she has apparently turned off your mysterious *third eye* into her thoughts."

James deflated a little. "I could never read her thoughts, you know that. I just got glimpses into her dreams sometimes, through the cord that connects us. I don't understand it any more than you do. But up until recently, no matter how far apart we were, if I concentrated on that cord, I could sort of send my thoughts out on it, to wherever she was, and get an inkling. A mood, maybe. Or just a sort of fuzzy image. No words. No complete thoughts, unless she's very close. Usually just... feelings."

Zane frowned from the Shard. "But not anymore?"

James shook his head slowly. "No. She's still there. I know that much. But she's shutting me out. She's blocking her end. She doesn't want me to know what she's doing."

Lily furrowed her brow. "Well, that's rather worrying. Don't you think?"

Albus made a scoffing noise and studied his own hands on the table. "Petra's shutting James out because he's a nervous busybody who's all besotted with love, not thinking about whatever's best for the whole world. Just his poor little 'Astra'."

"It was him that said it," Scorpius observed quickly, raising an eyebrow. "Not me. I only thought it."

James flopped forward and rested his chin on his crossed forearms. "You've said it enough in the past, I expect."

"I think it's very sweet," Rose smiled. "Even if it is perhaps a bit hopeless and tragic."

"It's not tragic," James said, pushing back in his chair again. "You're all daft. I care about Petra, yes. But I'm not just thinking of her. I'm thinking of the whole world. In fact..." He paused and drew a deep breath, considering what he was about to say. In a lower voice, he went on. "I think her plan is probably for the best. Even if it does mean... that she'll leave our world forever."

After a long, silent moment, Scorpius looked around the table. "Well, then. That *is* rather a change of heart."

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James refused to meet anyone else's gaze. "There's just too much going wrong. Too much at stake to worry about just one girl's life." *Even if*, he thought, but didn't say, *that one girl is Petra Morganstern.*

"That does leave one lingering question, though," Rose said on the heel of a reluctant sigh. "If Petra is blocking your connection to her, how do you know that this is still her plan? To replace the other version of herself, the Morgan version, from that other dimension? How do you really know that Petra has become the new Crimson Thread?"

James finally looked up. Without a word, he raised his right hand, palm up, fingers splayed. Slowly, he half-closed his eyes and began to concentrate.

He imagined Petra. In his mind and heart, he felt the ephemeral cord that bound him to her, that had connected them ever since that fateful moment on the Gwyndemere, when Petra had asked James to let her fall to her doom in the waves, and James had refused. The cord was a cool ribbon that rooted in his very heart, ran down his arm, and condensed on his palm like a ball of ice. From there, it wafted away into the space between them, extending and thinning, to wherever Petra was at this very moment.

She was blocking him. He could sense the pressure of her pushing back against him. It was frustrating. But it also meant, if nothing else, that she was thinking of him.

James opened his eyes again and looked down at his open hand. The others in the room did as well, eyes wide, speechless and spellbound.

The cord was transparently visible in the darkness, brightest and thickest in the centre of James' palm, fading and thinning upward in a shimmering ribbon, a thread that drifted up into darkness, not ending, just falling from sight.

In the still shadows of the Room of Requirement, the cord was no longer merely the pale silver of moon-glow. Now, the silver pulsed and flickered with traces of burnished red, the color of deepest sunset, forming a grey and scarlet ribbon that ascended and swirled up into dimness.

There could be no question. Without a doubt, the silver cord was slowly, gradually, becoming a crimson thread.



For James and Ralph, the first day of classes was like reacquainting with an old friend for the last, raucous time. James knew the entire castle by memory now. He could navigate the corridors with his eyes closed. He knew which shortcuts could be counted on to be too well-known and crowded to save any time between classes. He knew which bathrooms were prone to have their pipes clogged after lunch, requiring the blackly grumpy ministrations of Mr. Filch and a large rubber plunger. He knew when it was safe to cut through Professor Heretofore's empty classroom, and the potions closet beyond, to cut several dozen yards off an otherwise wearying trek through noisy, cramped corridors.

In short, he was a seventh-year. The school was like home. Better than that, Hogwarts was his native domain. Unlike home, where the rules were his parents' and they made the decisions, Hogwarts school existed for him, belonged to him nearly as much as it belonged to its teachers and administrators. And as he passed through its halls between classes, laughing with his friends, soaking up the camaraderie that he had so missed throughout the summer, the younger years did (as McGonagall had predicted) seem to look up to him and his fellow seventh-years as sort of minor demigods. As James and his friends walked by, the youngest and most timid students even backed up against the walls to watch, their eyes wide and somber with awe, like rowboats rocking in the waves of passing yachts. James didn't feel quite entitled to such attention, but he enjoyed it nonetheless, knowing that even those shy first-years would someday be in his shoes.

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According to James' class schedule, Mondays were light, but brutally rigorous. His morning period included a double Arithmancy class, which was quite the marathon, considering that Arithmancy was one of James' weakest subjects. Fortunately, he navigated to a seat next to Rose, who, like her mother, was a natural at the subject and had tested into the advanced classes during her very first year. Unlike her mother, however, Rose felt no obligation to assist James and Ralph in any way, and in fact did her best to shield her fastidious notes from their prying, sidelong glances. At one point, near the end of class, Professor Shert called Rose to the chalkboard to illustrate a particularly lengthy equation, and James, in a burst of inspiration, had quietly drawn his wand.

“Geminio!” he rasped as quietly as possible, directing the spell at his cousin’s notes. With a tiny puff, he conjured two identical copies of the parchment and quickly, triumphantly, distributed one to Ralph and jammed the other into his knapsack.

It wasn’t until after class, when he and Ralph paused in the halls to examine the copied notes, that they noticed that each neat, back-slanting paragraph of Rose’s handwriting had transformed into a single sentence, repeated over and over:

*This content protected by ROSE WEASLEY'S  
PATENTED ANTI-DUPLICATION JINX, meant  
exclusively for JAMES POTTER, who is a lazy Niffler, and  
maybe ALBUS POTTER, too, except I don't think he even  
knows the Gemini spell yet, even though that's first-year  
magic for morons.*

Without a word, James and Ralph balled up the copied parchments and tossed them into the nearest trash bin. Rose passed them with her chin raised in the air, smiling smugly.

The remainder of the day was devoted to History of Magic with the ghostly Professor Binns, which was perhaps even tougher than Arithmancy. James knew that the subject was very important for potential Auror training. Unfortunately, he had barely avoided a (*D*) *Dreadful* on the subject’s most recent N.E.W.T. examination. He

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determined to be resolute in paying painstaking attention to the famously boring Professor Binns, to take copious, detailed notes, and to study steadfastly at every opportunity.

Ten minutes into the class, however, he was leaning on his elbow in the first row, his eyeglasses abandoned on the parchment before him, staring blankly at the mish-mash of chalk notes on Professor Binns' blackboard as the professor droned patiently on.

Even Rose took fewer notes in Binns' class, although James suspected that this was because she, unlike him, already knew the material frontwards and back. She doodled idly on the corner of her parchment. James slid an eye toward the scratching of her quill and was both pained and annoyed to see her completing a drawing of a fat heart around Scorpius Malfoy's name, written in looping cursive. She completed the heart, stared disconsolately at it for a moment, and then scribbled it out, pursing her lips silently.

Dinner in the Great Hall cemented the day happily, with James, Graham, and Deirdre completing the beginning-of-term ritual with a round of *de rigueur* complaints about the assigned homework and essays. Rose, as usual, had completed hers in her free library period and merely raised her eyebrows primly. None of them truly minded the homework, at least not yet. James' would be easily finished by the time ten o'clock rolled around, bringing the appointment with Argus Filch and the other Seventh-years. He saw the anticipation on Graham's and Deirdre's faces, but resisted the urge to discuss it, even in whispers. The tour of Hogwarts' most clandestine areas was a secret, of course. If Rose had any clue about it, she would find a way to get the information from James somehow or other.

As he made his way back upstairs to the common room for the evening, he wondered how many of the school's secrets he already knew about. In truth, he expected quite a lot of them. He knew about the underground passage between the statue of Lokimagus and the Quidditch shed—had learned of that one during the first night of his first year, in fact. He knew about the Chamber of Secrets, of course (although pretty much everyone knew about that by now). He knew of the Room of Requirement, and its sister space, the Room of Hidden Things. He even knew of the passage that connected the Whomping Willow to the old Shrieking Shack outside of Hogsmeade. And yet

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perhaps—hopefully—there would still be a surprise or two on Filch's surely grudging tour.

Perhaps there would be something that not even his dad knew about. The thought made James smile a little mischievously.

James' dad, of course, had never had the seventh-year experience, instead spending his final school year camping, refugee-style, on the run from Voldemort and his Death Eaters, and battling them by turns. He had received his diploma, of course, granted by Headmaster McGonagall the following year, in lieu of actual classwork "for actions illustrating an effective grasp of all magical principles and practices in the honourable defence of life and civilization against terrible powers." As a result, however, unlike all of James' other years of schooling, his father had been unable to provide a primer on what to expect during his seventh year.

Secretly, James was rather content with that. He had long since shrugged off the shroud of living under his father's legendary shadow. But still, not having any such shadow to live under for his seventh year was remarkably freeing.

That evening, he could barely concentrate on his History of Magic book, musing instead on the upcoming meeting, watching the clock on the mantel as its minute hand crawled infuriatingly slowly around the dial. Gradually, the common room crowd thinned as, one by one, the younger students went up to their dormitories.

At a quarter 'til ten, James met Graham's eye across the room. The other boy nodded curtly. Simultaneously, they stood and angled as nonchalantly as they could toward the portrait hole. James scanned the room, making sure no one noticed their departure. Rose was nowhere in sight, fortunately. He was certain that she would have observed the departure of the seventh-years and known something was up, possibly even following them at a distance.

Once through the portrait hole, neither James nor Graham spoke as they trotted lightly through the darkened halls and stairways, making their way to the entrance hall. Ahead and around them, they caught glimpses of other seventh-years flitting in the shadows, passing at intersections, all wending their way variously to the appointment.

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Deirdre caught up with Graham and James at the bottom of the main staircase, where the rest of the seventh-years gathered beneath the night-dark chandelier.

"Excited, are we?" Deirdre asked, apparently trying to conceal her own enthusiasm.

James nodded and shrugged. "Could be fun. That is, if there are any real secrets we haven't already discovered."

"Even so," Graham said darkly, "It's an evening with Filch. I still haven't gotten over the way he was in our fourth year, back when Grudje was Headmaster."

James nodded, remembering it well. "You think *he'll* ever retire? Like Flitwick and McGonagall?"

An unexpected female voice answered softly, coming up from behind, "Filch will *never* retire. It would mean spending the rest of his natural life in his own stinky company."

James glanced back and his cheeks suddenly heated at the sight of Millie Vandergriff, accompanied by Julian Jackson and a Hufflepuff boy, Patrick McCoy. As they congregated, Millie smiled openly at James in the dimness.

Graham nodded at Millie's comment. "Yeah, Filch will die here and his body will probably just keep limping around the halls out of pure habit, muttering threats and pointing out gum stains on the floors."

"How do we know that hasn't already happened?" Deirdre asked, arching an eyebrow. "I don't think anyone would be able to tell the difference."

As if on cue, the echo of Filch's cane announced the caretaker's arrival. He ambled crookedly across the entry floor, seeming to avoid the pools of light cast by the wall sconces, until his stern, stubbly features loomed before the gathering, eyeing each face with obvious disapproval.

"Just in case it wasn't clear," he enunciated carefully in his gravel voice. "I lead this tour as part of my duties. *Not* because I believe it is in any way a worthy tradition. Bear that in mind, should you ever be tempted to breath a single, solitary word of what you are about to see to any other students." He smiled grimly, showing all of his crooked, yellow teeth. "Not that I'd mind one bit revoking your—ahem—*privileges*." He glared at the group beadily, meaningfully, and then his

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smile clicked off like a lamp. Resentfully, he twitched his head toward a side corridor. "This way, then."

Without looking back, he turned and limped away, his cane clacking hollowly on the stone floor.

As it turned out, James did, in fact, know about most of the school's secret passages, rooms, and amenities.

Filch began with the newest passage, a stairwell that led to a doorway halfway up the Sylvven Tower, which was (as no one dared to point out) not a place students typically went. James followed along with the rest of the troupe, noticing that Millie Vandergriff sometimes walked right next to him, brushing him with her elbow, and other times drifted to the front of the line, where she whispered and giggled with Julian and the boy, McCoy, whom James remembered from the Hufflepuff Quidditch team, where he played Beater.

He tried to dismiss the sight of Millie and McCoy laughing quietly, their heads together, but the image stuck in his brain, somehow prickly and irritating. Perhaps the bigger boy was also a member of the Hufflepuppet Pals. James doubted it, noting the boy's huge square hands and dull eyes. Finesse and wit were definitely not McCoy's strong suit.

And why, James asked himself suddenly, was he spending so much time thinking about this?

Deliberately, he turned his attention back to Ralph, Deirdre, and Graham, who drifted along near him, following Filch's tour with increasing tedium.

As the trek around the castle ambled on, Filch showed them the tunnel to the Quidditch shed and several connecting passages between classrooms, a moving bookcase in the library that opened onto a hidden reading room, a pair of strangely sumptuous bath and steam rooms on the seventh floor, and finally, oddly, the laundry. There, the house elves watched the tour from a distance, their gazes wary and grim, completely unlike the expressions they wore on the rare occasion that they were seen in the castle proper.

James was becoming tired and bored. "I wonder, could we just slip away without being seen?" he whispered aside to Ralph.

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"Fiona Fourcompass and George Muldoon did that ten minutes ago," Ralph answered behind a raised hand. "I almost joined them then. But I sort of feel like I have a duty to stay."

"Ah," Millie rasped, peering at Ralph around James' shoulder. "That's a Head Boy's duty, for sure. Also, to tell the rest of us what we missed if *we* decide to scarper around the next corner."

Millie grinned aside at James and winked.

"One final stop," Filch said, his rough voice echoing back from the narrow dungeon walls. "And for this one, we shall need a key."

Without turning, the caretaker raised his left hand. James glanced up at it in the torchlight. An emerald ring glittered on Filch's knobbly-knuckled middle finger. James recognized it.

"Looks just like yours, Ralph," he nudged the big boy. "Your Slytherin ring-key."

"Makes sense," Trenton Bloch muttered. "We're nearly to our common room. I'm going to dodge in and call it a night."

"He's wearing it on his left hand, though," Ralph commented. "You're supposed to wear it on your right. House rules. The door won't unlock otherwise."

Ahead of them, Filch glanced back over his shoulder, pinning Ralph with one sharp eye. "*That's* if you want to get into the Slytherin common room," he said, lowering his voice to a mean growl. "Why anyone would want to get into *there* I couldn't begin to guess."

A scattering of muted laughter emanated from the crowd as all eyes glanced around at Ralph, Trenton, and the other Slytherin seventh-years. Among them, Nolan Beetlebrick and Fiera Hutchins frowned and narrowed their eyes. Slytherins, James observed, were not typically magnanimous in the face of taunts. None, however, dared to reply to Filch's unexpected jibe.

"*This* ring-key," the caretaker went on, turning back and approaching a broad doorway, "Takes us to a thoroughly more interesting place. Not that any of *you* should have need to visit it, I daresay."

The door to the Slytherin common room was a metal monstrosity of locks and deadbolts, dominated by an enchanted sculpture of a coiled snake, one eye glowing with a green gem, the other an empty black socket. Normally, the snake raised its head to challenge

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the entrant. Filch gave it no chance, however. With another glance over his shoulder, he plugged the ring-key on his left hand into the snake's empty eye socket.

The various bolts, locks, and clasps of the door clacked loudly open and the door eased loose on its heavy hinges. Filch paused, still glaring back over his shoulder at the gathering of older students, almost as if he might change his mind about this last secret and send them all back to their dormitories.

Instead, with a reluctant grimace, he heaved the door open and stepped through.

A push of cold, strangely misty wind rushed out around Filch's shoulders, flapping James' collar and lifting Millie's blonde hair.

"That's never been there before," Ralph commented, following the group as it pressed through the open door.

Ahead of James, Trenton Bloch suddenly stumbled, raising his head as he moved through the opening. He blinked rapidly, turning on the spot. When he spoke, his voice was a hushed tremolo.

"That's never been there before, either!"

Impatiently, James shouldered around Trenton, and then drifted to a stunned stop himself, his eyes widening as he took in the suddenly massive space before him.

Amazingly, inexplicably, the Slytherin common room was gone. In its place was a vast cavern with wet stone walls and a rough-hewn floor, terraced into broad descending steps. At the bottom of the steps, acres of black water spread away in the shape of a small subterranean lake, heaving with waves. Along the distant walls, nearly hidden in the darkness, broad archways led to what appeared to be canals or underground rivers. Huge torches hung in sconces between the arches, reflecting their flickering light on the waves.

The troupe of seventh years drifted down the broad steps in awe, trying to peer in every direction at once. Water lapped and splashed. The torches crackled.

A ship bobbed and creaked on the waves some distance away, moored to a stone bollard with a length of rope. The ship was old, but low and sleek, equipped with three tall masts and studded along its side with portholes and cannon ports.

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"That's a blockade runner," McCoy announced with a low whistle. "A smuggler's ship! What's it doing here?"

"Forget the *ship*," Fiera Hutchins said, adjusting her glasses as she looked around. "Where is *here*?"

"Look!" Graham called suddenly, his voice waking echoes all around the cavernous space. He stabbed a hand upwards, pointing toward the dark ceiling.

James looked, and swayed under a thrill of alarm and wonder.

The ceiling wasn't stone. It was water. Waves rolled and clapped together overhead, forming an inverted mirror of the enormous pool below, glinting blackly in the lofty heights.

"We're beneath the lake!" Deirdre suddenly proclaimed. "Aren't we?"

Filch's voice rang from some distance away, where he stood on the lowest terrace overlooking the waves. "The Black Lake is technically *not* a lake," he announced, and James thought that the old caretaker, for the first time, seemed to be enjoying himself. "It's an inversion of the underground harbor below. From here, vessels can travel to virtually any waterway in the world. So long as its occupants aren't prone to a wee bit of claustrophobia and don't mind getting a tetch wet."

"Hold on," Millie said, standing next to James again. "Are you saying that when the Durmstrangs arrived in their ship, back in the days of the Triwizard Tournament...?"

Graham continued, realization dawning on him. "They *didn't* just magically appear, bobbing up from the lake like it was some kind of portal?"

"Ach," Filch said, an edge of impatience coming back into his voice. "There's plenty o' magic involved. More than you lot could get your wee heads around. But the lake above is no portal. It's just the passage into the network of rivers below. From here, a ship can get anywhere, if they're willing to brave the endless tunnels and underground oceans between here and there."

"So whose boat is that, then?" Trenton asked, pointing at the blockade runner that bobbed secretively in the distance.

Filch opened his mouth to answer but another voice drowned him out, calling suddenly from the darkness.

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"And that's th' end o' th' tour, I wager," the voice said, unnecessarily loudly. James recognized it even before the huge man appeared from the shadows, hands raised in a warding-off gesture. "Mr. Filch is a busy, busy man. Make sure that you thank 'im gen'rously on the way out. Good to see yeh all. Yer dormit'ries await."

"Hagrid!" Ralph said with a puzzled smile. "But who's that with him?"

James peered into the dimness, past the disgruntled form of Filch as he began to ascend the steps again, irritably herding the students ahead of him. Alongside Hagrid, another much smaller figure moved slowly toward the light.

Filch gestured toward the open door at the back of the cavern. "The professor's right. Back to your dormitories, and be quick about it. No lollygagging. And bear in mind what I said at the start of the tour! Not a word to anyone!"

James walked backwards, stumbling up the rough terraces alongside Ralph, trying to hang back long enough to greet Hagrid and his mysterious friend. Filch was insistent, however, driving the group toward the door, brooking no hesitation.

As James pressed back through the doorway and into the waiting warmth of the dungeon corridor, he glanced back once more. Hagrid was standing on one of the lower terraces now, between the door and the dark ship in the distance, the look on his face both fretful and relieved.

The person standing with him was finally, plainly visible. She had a small smile on her face as she met James' eyes and shrugged.

*I told you I probably already knew all about it,* the shrug seemed to say.

As Filch pulled the door closed behind them, clanking the locks and bolts back into place, Ralph stopped in the hall and frowned, glancing back over his shoulder.

"What in the wide world is *Rose* doing in there with Hagrid?" he asked.

James heaved a sigh and shook his head wryly. "Come on, Ralph," he said. "You're not really all *that* surprised, are you?"

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## **4. SECRET OF THE DAGGER**

“To be fair,” Rose said as she, James, and Ralph navigated the crowded corridor late the following morning, “I only found out about the harbor beneath the lake last year. Hagrid needed help with something, so he let me in on the secret.”

James was skeptical, but pitched his voice low so not to be overheard by the between-class throng. “Hagrid needed help with something in some secret lake beneath the lake, so he comes to a fifth-year student instead of another professor?”

“Excuse me,” Rose said, stopping in the hall and extending her free hand toward James, “I’m Rose Weasley. I’m sort of pretty amazing at lots of unusual and difficult spells, even better than some professors I could mention. Have we met?”

“Ah,” Ralph said with a nod. “It’s a secret, whatever it is, but Hagrid needed some help with some difficult wand-work.”

“I bet it has to do with that boat,” James agreed, then glanced back at Rose. “Does it?”

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Rose continued walking, lowering her own voice to a hush. "He won it off some wizard in the Hog's Head. I warned him, nothing good has ever come from such things in the past, mysterious strangers betting dragon's eggs and entire boats over card games in dodgy pubs. And what does he say?" Here, she stood as tall as she could and adopted a rather dopey frown, clearly doing her best impression of the half-giant: "But th' summer's are long, Rosie! One can only weed a garden so many times afore it starts getting' to 'im! I gets lonely and bored and in need o' comp'ny!"

James couldn't help smiling at Rose's impression. "So his new boat may not be exactly legal, then. What's he need your help with?"

Rose turned a corner, propelled by the noisy crowd approaching the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom. "Well, it's not a wizarding boat, strictly speaking. A lot of unusual modifications need to be made to make it sea-worthy in wizarding waters. And it's not the sort of magic that one does on a day-to-day basis."

She unslung her knapsack outside the DADA classroom and rummaged in it briefly, producing a small but very thick book. The title, embossed in faded silver on green cloth, read: *The Essential Seafarer's Compendium of Nautical Enchantment, Boating Bewitchment, and Ship-shape Spellwork*.

"Looks..." James bobbed his head at the book. "Well. Looks like something you'd fall right into."

Ralph cocked his head. "So what makes a ship a *magical* ship, exactly?"

"Oh, you'd be amazed," Rose enthused, warming to the subject and flipping through the book. "Charmed hydrophobic varnish is what we've been spending most of our time on, so the ship repels water when it travels up through the lake to burst onto the surface. And then there're anti-Grindylow hexes, siren-repellents, navigational mastheads, not to mention the purely mechanical and clockwork apparatuses, like folding masts, deck domes, sea-monster harnesses--"

"Annnd I'm bored already," James sighed, bypassing Rose as he entered the classroom. "But bully for you for getting a sneak-peek at the harbor under the lake. I'm sure it was worth all the time slathering magic varnish all over Hagrid's secret boat."

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“*He* does the slathering,” Rose rolled her eyes, following James and Ralph inside. “I just charm the stuff. And unlike you, I *like* learning new things. One never knows when a hydrophobic spell might come in handy.”

The previous class was draining from the room, still muttering and collecting their books, while the next class filtered in around them.

“Boys,” Debellows said, raising his eyebrows as he settled behind his huge desk. “And Miss Weasley. I don’t believe I have you in my class until tomorrow’s advanced lesson. Or am I mistaken?”

James shook his head quickly. “No, sir. We came to ask something else. We were, uh, curious, sir, about using some of our Defence Against the Dark Arts class-time for our seventh-year field work in a related profession.”

Debellows stopped organizing the hopeless mess of paperwork on his desk and looked up, giving them his full attention for the first time. He looked vaguely puzzled, and then blinked and nodded. “Ah yes. I’m sure I must have received a notice about such a programme. I likely ignored it, as I do most intra-school communications. One can only be informed so many times about revisions to school dress codes and rescheduled meetings one has no intention of attending in the first place before all such notices start going directly into the rubbish bin. So. You three intend to pursue some practical experience in lieu of my class-time, is that it?” He seemed both open to the idea and slightly churlish about it.

“Not all *three* of us--” James began, but Rose overruled him suddenly, shouldering past him to stand directly in front of Debellows’ desk.

“Yes, sir, Professor,” she said quickly, clearly not intending to miss a serendipitous opportunity. “All three of us. James, Ralph, and me. Er, yes. We three.”

She glanced back at James briefly, her eyes stern. James closed his mouth with a small click.

“Well,” Debellows said slowly, looking back down at his desk and shuffling papers again, randomly. “I suppose it would depend upon what sort of practical field experience you intended to engage in. I can only assume that you’d like to participate in some preliminary training

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for the Harrier Corps. I should warn you, my young friends: it is an arduous journey, becoming a Harrier, but vastly rewarding in every respect. I shall contact my old commander, see if I cannot call in a few favors to--"

"Um," Ralph interrupted, sharing a suddenly wide-eyed glance with James. "Um. Not the Harriers, sir. Exactly. Quite..."

Debellows frowned and looked up again, his face etched with sincere puzzlement. "Not the Harriers? What could it possibly be, then?"

Rose answered, standing stiffly upright, almost as if she meant to salute the professor. "Auror training, sir. We wish to use the skills you've taught us to learn Auror methodology. To track down and capture dark wizards and witches, warlocks, hags, and other various threats to the good people of the magical world."

James blinked at Rose, annoyed but rather impressed. Glancing back at Debellows, he added: "Like my dad, sir."

Debellows turned his iron gaze from Ralph, to Rose, to James, and then drew a deep, skeptical sigh. "I suppose one can't blame you three for entertaining such designs, coming from the families that you do. It does strike me as a bit of a wasted resource. You, especially, Mr. Potter, show great potential not only in defensive spellwork, which we will be delving into much more deeply in your final year, but in your Artis Decerto and battle psychology. But..." he shrugged his massive shoulders—they were like continental tectonic plates on either side of his bull neck—and sighed again. "If that's what you have your hearts set upon, I suppose I cannot dissuade you."

"Sorry, sir," Rose said, still standing at attention in front of the cluttered desk.

"All right, then," Debellows looked down again, clearly reluctant but not quite invested enough to protest any further. "I suppose there is some... official parchment or other that I should sign." He shook his head dismissively. "I shall look into it. For now, assume my general support of your endeavor. I shall inform you when something has been arranged."

James backed away from the desk, pulling Rose and Ralph with him, anxious to escape before Debellows changed his mind. After a few clumsy backwards steps, the three thanked the professor, then turned

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and virtually ran from the classroom, threading past younger students who watched them go, bemused and curious.

“All *three* of us, eh?” James turned a sardonic look on his cousin as they hurried toward the stairs for lunch.

“You didn’t expect me to pass up an opportunity like that, did you?” she shrugged. “To skip out on Debellows’ annoying class and skive off to the Ministry of Magic to hob-nob with Uncle Harry and my mum? I doubt it’ll last long before somebody catches on. But it’ll be Professor McGonagall or Headmaster Merlin who do, not that mountainous lump, Debellows.”

“You really don’t much like him, do you?” Ralph commented as they turned to tramp down the stairs.

“If he taught the girls the same things he taught the boys I might feel differently,” she sniffed. “*He* thinks a woman’s best battle magic is a charm for cleaning blood off her husband’s robes. Believe me, I’ve learned more defensive magic watching a wizard chess match than sitting in his stupid class.”

James was familiar with Rose’s ongoing private feud with the current Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher, and knew enough not to debate her about it. She was right that Debellows divided his classes between boys and girls, ostensibly to make dueling practices fairer. As far as James was concerned, considering the competent fierceness of girls like Ashley Doone and Julian Jackson, he suspected Debellows might be exercising fairness more on the boys’ behalf than the girls’.

At lunch, James noticed Albus seated, perhaps for the first time ever, at the Gryffindor table. He was across from Lily near the very end, in the centre of a group of laughing fourth- and fifth-years, all leaning close and keeping their own confidences. Next to him, Lily’s friend Chance Jackson was watching him closely, smiling and blinking far more than mere physiology demanded. James wondered for a moment if Albus’ vaunted bachelorhood was being secretly challenged.

“Lily is a notorious match-maker,” Rose commented, glancing toward the end of the table to see what James was looking at. “She’d just love to see Albus and Chance together.”

James scoffed. “Never happen,” he grabbed his pumpkin juice and drank it down in three quick gulps, standing as he did so. He wiped

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his mouth with his sleeve and went on, “Albus will date from within his own house or he won’t date at all. Fiera Hutchins is more his type.”

“Hmph,” Rose replied, standing as well and gathering her things.

Somebody bumped James from behind, hard enough to make him fumble his glass as he leaned to place it on the table. The glass tumbled and sprayed the dregs of his juice onto his books. Annoyed, he wheeled to see who had been clumsy enough to bump him so hard.

A small, rather blocky boy, a first-year Ravenclaw, was standing there with another boy and girl. All three were watching James with smug, tight smiles.

“*Ooops!*” the blocky boy said with sarcastic emphasis. “Clumsy you!”

James frowned in stunned surprise. The boy, who was at least a foot and a half shorter, with a shock of greasy ginger hair and freckles so dense that they seemed to join forces in a single blotch around his nose, had clearly bumped James on purpose, and wanted James to know it. James opened his mouth, not even sure how to respond.

“Whassa matter, Potter?” the boy challenged, “Hinkypunk got your tongue?” He crossed his eyes and gawped his own mouth up at James in childish mockery. “Gah-gah-bwa-bwa-duhhh!”

The boy and girl with him snickered and glared up at James, their eyes sharp, glinting with baffling malice.

Before James could even begin to formulate a response, the trio turned and walked away, unhurrying toward the open doors, laughing loudly and nudging each other with their elbows.

“What was *that* all about?” It was Ralph, approaching from the Slytherin table, apparently having witnessed the interaction from a distance.

“James was just *bullied* by a *first-year*,” Graham said, a disbelieving laugh coming into his voice. “Did that really just *happen*, or am I dreaming?”

Rose looked equally consternated. “What did you do to earn *that*, James?” she asked, glancing from the departing trio to James. “And who *is* he?”

Belatedly, a pulse of embarrassed anger arose in James’ chest. He felt it redden his cheeks. “I’ve never seen that little prat before in my

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entire life!" he said, wonder and surprise turning his voice into a low rasp. "I don't even know his name!"

"Edgar Edgecombe," said a small voice. James glanced aside to see Shivani's young brother, Sanjay, still seated nearby, his eyes wide and serious. "He's a first-year, like me. Are you, you know..." he paused and glanced around the table, as if reluctant to be the one to say it, "going to let him get away with that?"

"I'd practice every jinx I ever learned on him," Graham nodded, turning serious and meeting James' eyes. "All at once. Twice over. Make an example out of 'im."

"James can't just go jinxing first-years," Rose said with a derisive glance toward Graham. "He'd just get hauled before the headmaster. Maybe even expelled. What's wrong with you?"

As a group, they began to drift toward the doors, following the baffling trio into the Entrance Hall. "But the little Ravenclaw prat just insulted James!" Graham insisted in a hushed tone. "And by extension, all of *us*!"

"It's James' problem," Rose replied loftily. "He may not feel free to discuss his response in front of the *Head Boy*—" she glared aside at Ralph, who looked mildly affronted, "—but he *will* respond." She turned her gaze meaningfully on James. "Won't you."

It was a statement, not a question. James blew out a breath and shrugged. This was the very last thing he needed—some inexplicable upstart berk embarrassing him during his final year. Whatever bee the little prat had in his bonnet, James mostly just hoped that the boy, Edgar Edgecombe, had gotten it out. James didn't enjoy comeuppance the way people like Scorpius Malfoy did. He didn't understand meanness, and was deeply baffled about how to respond to it.

Fortunately, by the time he and Ralph got to the third floor and their next class, they were distracted from Edgar Edgecombe by the young new Charms teacher, Professor Odin-Vann.

The professor was very thin, James noticed, and dressed to hide that fact in layers of dark robes and a high, stiff collar. His beard, though sparse, was combed and waxed into a point sharp enough to draw blood. As the class filed in, he sat behind his desk, bent over a sheaf of parchments and scribbling busily with his quill. James had a

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secret suspicion that the professor's busyness was a ruse to hide his nervousness. The young man didn't look up as the students found their seats, unusually hushed in the presence of a new teacher. When everyone was seated, Odin-Vann put down his quill and finally raised his head. A lank wing of his black hair covered one eye. He raised a hand and pushed it aside in what was certainly, by now, a purely automatic gesture.

"Welcome, class," he said in a reedy voice, sitting up slowly in his seat. "As you all know by now, I am Professor Donofrio Odin-Vann. I replace your previous teacher, the esteemed Professor Filius Flitwick, whom I sat under myself when I was in your place not that very long ago. I am sure you, like me, are sorry to see him go. But I also hope that you, like me, will make the best of a new opportunity." He smiled, and although it wasn't entirely a genuine smile, James sensed that it was less insincere than anxious.

The professor stood then and brushed his robes off, moving from behind his desk. He glanced back at the chalkboard behind him and started slightly, apparently surprised at the drabble of handwritten notes remaining from his most recent class. He produced his wand reflexively, and then paused, the wand raised awkwardly in his hand.

"Er, Mr. Potter," he said, scanning the class and fixing his gaze on James. "If you would, ahem, please clear the chalkboard for us?"

He waited, his eyes imploringly on James. James blinked at the professor, and then drew his own wand from the pocket of his robes, suspecting that the professor had called on him not because of James' potential magical competence, but only because he happened to know James' name. Why the professor didn't clear the chalkboard himself, James had no guess whatsoever.

"Correptus," James called from his seat, giving his wand a flick toward the chalkboard. With a puff of white dust, the scribbled words and diagrams vanished, leaving the board clean, if nominally smudged. It wasn't a spell he'd had much practice with.

"Thank you," Odin-Vann nodded with palpable relief, glancing back at the board. Stiffly, he put his own wand away again. "To begin, then, please turn in your textbooks to chapter one, 'elemental transcenders and transmutations'."

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“Well that was weird,” Ralph said an hour later as they made their way to the library for study period. “He didn’t do a single spell himself until nearly at the end of the lesson.”

“He knows his stuff, though,” Deirdre commented appreciatively. “There’s more to Charms than wand-work. There’s theory and new spell writing, charmed objects, wand reflexology--”

“What’s wand reflexology?” James asked.

“Training a wand to do stuff on its own,” Rose explained, joining them at an intersection. “The witch or wizard has to have it in their hand for the magic to work, but it saves time. A wand can reflexively complete a chain of pre-incanted spells or some especially hard magic, so long as the witch or wizard has embedded it properly.”

“Well that’s sort of the point, innit?” Ralph shook his head and glanced aside at Rose. “It all still ends up with a wand in a hand, doing magic. That new bloke, Odin-Vann, barely touched his wand until class was almost over. Although when he did, he was brilliant with it. Made the coatrack scuttle-dance around the room to the beat of a Rig Mortis song on the wireless.”

Rose shrugged. “He’s probably just nervous, what having the Head Boy in his class and all.”

“You’re never going to let that go, are you?” the bigger boy grumped, nettled.

“Actually, I’m very happy for you,” Rose softened her voice and patted him on the shoulder, which was quite a reach. “So this will be the last thing I say on the subject: it’s a worthy accomplishment, and you’re like a brother to me. But the Weasley in me insists that I warn you: if you ever pull rank on me, I’ll pull wand on you. And even that overgrown broom-handle of yours is no match for me in a duel.”

She smiled sweetly up at him and batted her eyes. Ralph blinked at her, then at James, who merely raised his hands in a *keep me out of this* gesture.

At dinner that evening, James watched Cedric Diggory’s ghost flit happily over the Hufflepuff table. He was happy for Cedric, but joined his own house in bemoaning the lack of an official Gryffindor Ghost. As they discussed this, their gazes roaming over the other tables and their attendant spectres, James’ eye was caught by the glare of Edgar

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Edgecombe. The small, blocky boy was seated in the middle of the Ravenclaw table, flanked by his two friends, whom James now recognized as Quincy Ogden and Polly Heathrow, both first-years. He vaguely remembered them from the Sorting. All three craned to peer at James, to assure he saw them looking. Edgecombe grinned and his brow lowered. Pure spite beat from him like waves of radiation. Then, still staring at James, the ginger boy leaned and muttered something to his friends, who burst into shrill, nasty laughter.

James shook his head dismissively and looked away. What was the deal with the little prat? Maybe he would find out later. He hoped it wouldn't come to a confrontation. He wasn't particularly good in such situations. The stress of confrontation always muddled his mind, blew away his words, made his reactions feel clumsy and stupid.

And suddenly it occurred to him: perhaps that was what it was like for Professor Odin-Vann. Perhaps the nervousness he'd shown at the beginning of class resulted in the magical equivalent of stage-fright, the way some people developed stutters or nervous tics when under stress. Maybe the professor couldn't trust himself to do magic when he felt tense or self-conscious. Later, of course, when the professor had warmed to both the class and his subject, he had used his wand naturally, and with great skill.

Still, James thought, if an extremely competent witch or wizard couldn't rely on their magic in stressful or confrontational situations, that would be a rather debilitating limitation. It was no wonder, perhaps, that the young man had gone into teaching instead of, say, magical law enforcement.

James, on the other hand, may be unaccustomed to confrontation, and he may lose his wit momentarily when surprised, but he could do magic if it came to it. Edgar Edgecombe had surprised him once, but the obnoxious little twit wouldn't do so again. As Graham had suggested, James did know enough jinxes to put the boy in his place. Mentally, he checked them off-- *the Jellylegs jinx, Levicorpus, the Bat-Bogey hex, stinging spells, the Toe Biter*-- and decided that he could do most or any of them without getting into too much trouble with the administration. If, that was, the little berk was the tattling type. Maybe instead he was the type of wanton little bully who respected a hard shove back more than conciliatory words or appeals to authority.

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Over the years, James had confronted and battled monstrous powers, maddened ghosts, mythical beings, and even doomed love. But up until now he had never had much experience with bullies. Somehow, this nemesis seemed, if not the most difficult, at least the most potentially annoying.



That night, for the first time in months, James dreamed of Petra.

He heard her voice through a fog of what felt like great time and distance. He couldn't make out her words, but the tenor and lilt of her voice was unmistakable. It awoke in him the unguarded truth, irresistible and implacable in the uncomplicated core of his sleeping heart: he loved Petra. He had loved her for years, despite rarely seeing her, despite the complexities of her mysterious past and her uncertain future, despite even the doubt that sometimes haunted his waking mind. He loved her with the sort of hopeless, unabashed devotion that surpassed reason and intellect and shot straight to the bright solar centre of his heart, charging and dominating it like a permanent lightning bolt.

Petra owned and occupied his deepest love. He could pretend otherwise while awake. But here, in the depths of the dream, the truth was an iron weight, heavier than the world.

He approached her through the fog, tuning her in, following the silver and crimson cord that bound them, and her voice began to clear. There was another voice as well—a man's voice? Was it the Muggle private detective she had partnered with back during the intrigue of the Morrigan Web? James thought not. Marshall Parris was an American.

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This voice was British, and a bit younger. James recognized it, but only vaguely.

Gradually, their voices became clearer, closer, although still hidden behind great heaving masses of fog. James propelled himself onward, whumping through the cold greyness.

"I won't dissuade you," the man's voice said, still thin with distance. "In fact, you'll recall that it was my idea, almost two years ago, when you found me again."

"I do recall," Petra said. "But I dismissed the idea as your usual foolhardy blathering. You've always tended to be a bit emotional and thoughtless when it comes to protecting me."

The man seemed unperturbed by this. "So what's changed?"

"What you suggested thoughtlessly, *I've* given serious consideration."

James pressed on, and finally the fog broke into tatters. Silver-frosted clouds stretched around him like arms, blocking the moon, casting shadows over a dark landscape: a small town with only a scattering of glowing windows, a scarcity of lit streetlamps. And then, past this, a huge building on a hill, encroached on all sides by forest and bramble, almost claimed by creeping vines and tangled roots. It was a mansion, though very old and utterly dark except for a single upper window, which flickered with the faintest suggestion of light. James approached it, slowing, listening, wanting nothing more than to hear Petra's voice again, to see her, even if it was all merely a figment of his sleeping mind.

"You have what you need," the man's voice said. "What do you require me for?"

"No one grasps the underlying magic and spellwork like you do," Petra said. "It's your particular genius to understand the magic behind the wand."

The man's voice, even more familiar now, seemed to smile doubtfully. "Petra, your visit to the Armory of Forbidden Books provided you everything you need to know regarding 'the underlying magic and spellwork'."

"Then maybe I just need a friend," Petra sighed. "Someone who's known me long enough to tell the truth. Someone impartial

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enough to see my real intentions. You know why I'm doing this, don't you?"

James slowed as he neared the window. His dreaming mind rippled through the old glass without a sound. He entered a dark room with nothing but a small fire illuminating it, guttering and spitting in the hearth. The rug, as James' bare feet touched it, was greasy and threadbare with age. The walls were filthy, cracked, leaning. James brushed them and his fingers came away thick with damp grime. The only furniture in the room was a pair of high-back chairs, facing the fire. Between them, sitting close to the light of the flames, collecting their glow and glinting brightly, was a silver tray.

Something sat on the tray. Not a cup or saucer. A butter knife? James drew closer, not sure he wanted to see. Mostly, he just wanted to approach Petra, to look upon her face, to see the glimmer of her eyes and the dark lustre of her hair. He missed her. His heart burned for her.

"You're doing it because the world needs you," the man said soberly. "But the world doesn't know it. The world wants to stop you, by whatever means necessary, even if it means killing you. They blame you for everything."

Petra sighed deeply. "They may not be entirely wrong in doing so."

"That's beside the point," the man went on. "Even if you are the problem, you are also the solution. They cannot be allowed to stop you. For the good of all, both the Muggle and magical worlds, you must survive. Your life is more than yours. It belongs to the world. To the universe. No matter what, you... must... *survive*."

James occupied the deep shadows of the room, creeping closer. He could see the top of Petra's head over the back of her chair now. The firelight flickered on it like burnished bronze.

"I must survive," she repeated the words with mingled regret and resolve. "So, even though we are here, in the house of the one whose bloodline I am cursed with, even though I am willingly calling on his power now instead of thwarting it, as I've struggled to do at every step so far..."

"*He* did this for his own selfish aims, for power and destruction. *You* do it for the good of the world."

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In the darkness, James blinked, as if coming fully awake in his own dream. What was happening here? Swiftly, he replayed the conversation he'd been barely hearing, having been too enthralled by the sound of Petra's very voice to attend to her words. He glanced around at the room he was in. The smell of mold and rot filled his nose. What was this place? What had she just called it? The house of the one whose bloodline she is cursed with...?

James suddenly understood, knew with the unshakable certainty of the dream: this was the mansion of Tom Riddle's father, long abandoned, overgrown, and falling to rot.

He looked down, toward the silver tray that glimmered in the firelight. Upon it was a dagger, its handle encrusted with jewels, its blade dark and sooty, tarnished almost black. He recognized it immediately. It was the dagger that had killed Morgan, the Petra from another dimension, wielded in the hand of Judith as part of her chaotic plan. How had Petra gotten it? More importantly, why?

Fear and horrible suspicion suddenly welled in James, and yet he crept forward still. *It's just a dream*, he told himself. *I'm only dreaming... none of this is real...*

Petra finally came into sight as she leaned forward, reaching for the dagger, collecting it into her thin hands. She cradled it in the firelight, her eyes wide, bright as she looked down at it. She drew a deep breath and shuddered as she let it out. Without raising her gaze from the dagger, she began to speak to it. As she did, James' eyes widened in horror. The fire responded to her words, first growing restless in the hearth, and then flaring with bursts of hungry green, almost seeming to breathe. As Petra reached the end of her recitation, wind entered the room, coming from nowhere and everywhere, lifting the limp curtains, carrying dust and grit into the dank air, moaning throughout the dim, empty rooms of the decrepit mansion.

James could scarcely believe the words that came from his beloved's lips, spoken with slow, undeniable emphasis:

*"Extinguished soul's essence risen,  
Final breath from murdered host,  
Enter now, this, your prison,  
Slave to my fragmented ghost."*

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Petra held the dagger higher, her voice rising even as the rushing air combined with the flames of the hearth, carrying them around the room and illuminating it with green fire. She ignored this, her voice becoming a low boom through the growing tempest.

*"If I should die before I take,  
The course of my intent design,  
Then from this prison re-awake,  
Immortal now... my dread Bloodline!"*

Petra's voice became thunder, not shouting, but amplified over the sudden cyclone of wind and fire that burst throughout the room, lighting it, tearing at the ancient wallpaper, whipping the curtains, condensing into a whirling maelstrom around the slight girl, now standing with the upraised dagger in her hands.

"Petra!" James called out, breaking his paralysis and finally finding his voice. She couldn't hear him, of course. This was just a dream, despite how terribly, frighteningly real it felt.

And yet, from the midst of that swirling, horrible cloud, even as it caught her hair, whipped it about her face and flashed in her stern, glowing eyes, Petra *glanced aside at James*. She saw him, blinked in a sort of waking flutter, and her face changed. Fear, and shame, and heartbreak suddenly filled her features, clouded her eyes.

The man in the other chair stood then, blocking James' view. He turned toward James, his own face full of surprise and wariness and more than a little fear.

It was, bafflingly, Donofrio Odin-Vann. He recognized James, opened his mouth to call out to him, but no sound could be heard over the roaring vortex of Petra's spell.

The whirl of fire and green light sucked all light into itself and contracted, taking both Petra and Odin-Vann and even the sprawling, dead mansion with it. Everything condensed into one brilliant, terrible point, and the point was shaped like a dagger, as blinding and merciless as the deaths it had caused.

And then, with a shock that was both icy and deafening, the point exploded.

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James shocked awake at the sensation of it, as if thrown the many miles and leagues back into his bed by pure force, nearly crashing through it to the floor at the strength of it.

He flung himself up instead, and gasped as if he hadn't drawn a breath in minutes. His eyes blinked blearily around the dim silence of Gryffindor tower. His fellow Gryffindors were still asleep, sprawled variously across their beds, completely immune to the horrendous vision that James had just returned from.

But *was* it a vision? Had it truly only been a dream? Helplessly, he remembered the look on Petra's face as she had seen him, recognized him in the midst of the spell she had conjured.

He looked down at his hands in the darkness. Something was smudged on the tips of his fingers, dark and greasy by the moonlight. He touched his hands together and felt the filth of the mansion's walls on them. The smell was still in his night-clothes, the reek of ancient rot and mold and death.

Somehow, he had not only dreamed of Petra. He had *gone* to her. He had physically stood in the same room with her, touched its grimy walls, taken its air with him upon his return.

What he'd seen had not been a dream or a vision at all. Somehow, James had seen Petra and the inexplicable figure of Professor Odin-Vann perform some terrible spell, make some momentous decision that James sensed was irreversible, terrible, and portentous.

He tried not to know what that spell had been, but his deepest heart told him what his brain resisted. Petra had gone to the abandoned mansion that had once been the home of her cursed soul's-twin, Tom Riddle, the Dark Lord Voldemort. She was no longer resisting his poison influence, but channeling it, using it, bending it to her own will.

And with it, she had repeated that villain's most awful, damning spell. James flopped back onto his bed again, still breathing hard, his eyes wide and unseeing in the darkness. He could barely believe it. It was too awful to consider. And yet there was no question in his mind, even now, fully awake and in the comfort of his own bed in Gryffindor Tower.

Petra, the young woman that he loved, the girl who had once doodled happy fairies in the corners of her textbooks and sucked on the tips of her black hair during examinations, had done the unthinkable.

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Amazingly, dismally, she had fulfilled the black promise begun by the death of her step-mother years earlier, a death that Petra herself had caused in a fit of blind, righteous rage.

Petra... had created a Horcrux.



## 5. JUNIOR AURORS IN TRAINING

At breakfast the next morning, James considered telling Rose and Ralph—or even Albus or Scorpius—what he'd learned via his previous night's dream. It wasn't a matter of whether they would believe the part about how he'd actually been transported to a different place, travelling the mysterious thread between himself and Petra like a sort of high-speed conduit. It was the simple, damning reality of what she had done. He was afraid of the looks that would appear on their faces, the shocked disappointment, the suspicion that perhaps the rest of the magical world was right in opposing Petra, that James and his friends may have been on the wrong side all along.

Worst of all, he didn't want to have to defend Petra to them. Because deep in his heart, despite the love he harbored for her, he wasn't sure he *could* defend her. Horcruxes were the worst sort of dark magic imaginable. That's why she'd had to learn about them via illicit break-in

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to the Armory of Forbidden Books. The Unforgivable Curses were one thing. But Horcruxes were another level of dark magic entirely.

He couldn't eat, merely pushed a smattering of scrambled eggs around his plate until he heard the noise of the morning post. He looked up at the flutter of owls as they swooped through the upper reaches of the Great Hall. One, a small tawny barn owl that James recognized as the Weasley family messenger, swooped low over the table and dropped a newspaper before Rose, thumping it neatly between her juice and a platter of toast.

She glanced at it, as did James. The headline, even upside-down, was plainly visible:

**POTTER PROGENY ON MERLIN HEADMASTER: *HE CAN BE SCARY SOMETIMES!***

Without raising her head from the newspaper headline, Rose tilted her eyes up at James.

"I didn't say any such thing!" James declared, pushing back from his uneaten breakfast. "Seriously!"

Rose scooped up the paper and flipped to below the fold. Her eyes flicked as she scanned. After a moment, she began to quote from the article. "'He can be a bit scary sometimes,' the young Potter answers, clearly concerned about reprisals for his honesty. 'He knows how to keep order, *that's* for sure. And he does it with more than just rules.' His downcast eyes flick nervously up, as if begging me to imagine the alternative methods the Headmaster might choose, clearly worried about incriminating himself. Being familiar with Mr. Ambrosius' rather infamous past, I can all too easily imagine what the poor young man faces on a daily basis. Fortunately, being a seventh-year, Mr. Potter's ordeal is near an end. It is his younger classmates that he worries about. 'Ask them,' he suggests, clearly hinting at their corroboration."

"I said no such thing!" James insisted again, grabbing at the newspaper. Rose jerked it away from his grasp and folded it again.

"It's rubbish," she shrugged, stuffing the newspaper into her knapsack. "Nobody knows how to twist a person's words like Rita Skeeter. Frankly, I expected better from her."

"Headmaster Merlin won't even give a thought to it," Graham nodded. "If he reads it at all, which I doubt, he'll probably like it."

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Nothing breeds order quite like a fearsome reputation. I think that's an exact quote from him, in fact. When you look at it that way, seems like Skeeter's doing him a favor."

Cameron Creevey leaned across the table to be heard over the clatter of silverware. "I know my parents would just love it if they thought the headmaster was bringing back the thumbscrews and stretcher racks. Keeps out the riff-raff, they'd say." He grinned, showing an expanse of pink gums and teeth.

From nearby, a yodel of derisive laughter pierced the air. James turned to see Edgar Edgecombe and his friends reading aloud from their own copy of *The Daily Prophet*.

"Regarding the magical world's enemies," Edgecombe read loudly, raising the newspaper and snapping it open for all to see. "The young Potter grows misty-eyed at the remembrance of his former schoolmate, turned Undesirable Number One: 'Yes,' he sniffs, 'Petra is my friend,' and turns away to hide the tears that tremble on his lashes..."

Quincy Ogden and Polly Heathrow dissolved into gales of laughter as Edgecombe raised his head over the newspaper to peer at James. He frowned and trembled his lower lip, as if about to burst into tears himself. He had an audience, as many students from around the Great Hall perked up to watch, some with confusion, others with bemused smiles, watching to see what James would do.

James drew his wand.

He expected Rose to stop him, but she merely watched, her eyes bright, even eager, as she awaited his reprisal.

It was Ralph that stopped him.

"Don't do it, James," he said, coming from behind and placing a large hand on James' arm, not to restrain him, but merely to give him pause. "The little git's not worth it. Let him have his laugh."

"Easy for you to say!" James hissed from the corner of his mouth. "It's not you he's quoting in front of the whole school!"

"Yeah," Graham nodded. "Stay out of this, Deedle. This is Gryffindor business."

"Or join in," Scorpius suggested from further down the table. "All for one and one for all, eh?" He wagged his own wand, one eyebrow cocked provocatively.

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Ralph ignored Scorpius and Graham. He looked at James, offering no more warnings, merely letting the weight of their friendship speak on his behalf.

Feeling a mixture of frustration and relief, James slid his wand back into the pocket of his robes. Rose, Scorpius, and Graham deflated visibly.

A squawk of anger erupted from Edgar Edgecombe as someone jerked the newspaper from his hands. James looked up to see Professor McGonagall standing behind the boy, the newspaper held in her upraised fist. She was glaring down at Edgecombe, who wheeled around angrily, saw the Professor's steely gaze, and then shrank beneath it, turning his face back to the table in front of him. James saw the boy's expression, however. He was neither afraid nor ashamed, merely caught. His eyes flicked back and forth between his friends, and he smiled smugly, secretively.

"You three are new to this school," McGonagall announced archly, glaring down at the backs of the three Ravenclaws' heads. "But I can assure you, everyone in this room already knows how to read. We do not require your services on our behalf."

Crisply, she folded the newspaper, glanced piercingly around the room, and then dropped the bundle back onto the table before Edgecombe's bowed head. He snickered silently, still flitting his eyes back and forth between his cronies.

Gradually, the noise of conversation filled the hall again.

James' face was hot. He knew he was blushing and hated himself for it. Keeping low in his seat, he watched Professor McGonagall stride toward the open doors. Students began to drift to their feet and gather their things, heading disconsolately to their classes.

"That's two points for Edgecombe, zed for you," Scorpius muttered in James' ear as he stood. "Sanjay is right. You can't allow it to go on. The longer you let the teacher's fight your battles, the worse you look."

James pressed his lips together in anger and embarrassment. Scorpius was right, but he wasn't about to admit it aloud.

"What do *you* think, Ralph?" he asked with a sigh as they made their way to the greenhouses for a double Herbology class.

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Ralph shrugged and shook his head. "Makes me wish Zane was still here."

James smiled weakly at that. Ralph was right. Zane would know exactly what to say to put Edgecombe and his little entourage in their place.

He slowed in his pace as an idea came to him.

Edgar Edgecombe wasn't the only person Zane might have some half-decent advice about.

Considering it all throughout the day, James waited until dinnertime, and then dashed up to the Gryffindor dormitory, knowing that the common room would be deserted at this hour. Retrieving the Shard from his trunk, he tramped back down the stairs and flopped onto the sofa before the cold fireplace. It was several hours earlier in America, which meant that there was a good chance that Zane was either in class, at Quidditch practice, or just skiving around the campus of Alma Aleron with his friends. Still, James spoke the incantation that summoned the view into his friend's dormitory room.

The silvery clouds of the Shard's face cleared, as always, but the view that appeared was not the cluttered dormitory desk and perpetually unmade bed. It was, in fact, perfect blackness.

James shook the Shard in his hands. It was apparently malfunctioning somehow, although he wouldn't have believed such a thing was possible. The glass of the mirror remained perfectly blank. And yet, James thought he could hear faint voices coming from it. He raised the Shard to his ear and listened intently. Sure enough, there was the faint murmur of a voice. Zane's? Had he taken the Shard down from his closet door and stuffed it into his backpack?

"Zane!" James called, placing his face close to the Shard. "It's me, James. Can you hear me?"

A faint scream came from the Shard. James withdrew suddenly, his eyes widening. It had been a girl's voice.

A moment later, the blackness of the Shard fluttered, and then fell away. In its place was Zane and the sunny mess of his dormitory room. The boy was dressed in his Zombie house white shirt and yellow tie, but the tie was loosened and his blonde hair mussed. A black tee shirt draped from his right hand, having apparently been hung over his side of the Shard only moments before.

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“James,” he rolled his eyes with a smile. “Don’t you ever knock?”

“Kind of hard to do,” James replied, “but I’m glad you’re there. Isn’t it about lunch time there in the States?”

“It’s make-out o’clock, if you must know,” the blonde boy grinned. He turned aside. “It’s OK, Cheshire. It’s just James.”

James was slightly mortified to see the face of Cheshire Chatterly, Zane’s longtime girlfriend, appear in the Shard. She patted down her own blonde hair and smiled. “Hi James,” she called with a quick wave. “Good timing.”

James had a moment to think that suddenly everyone but him seemed to be leading an exciting and romantic dating life. “So I hear,” he shrank a little on the sofa. “Sorry.”

“We snuck past Yeats to come up and study for a Mageography quiz,” Zane bobbed his head and gestured toward a pile of books on the nearby desk. “But what can I say? My animal magnetism got the better of her.”

Cheshire poked Zane sharply in the ribs. “I should get down to the caff anyway,” she said, turning back to James. “I can’t face Professor Wimrinkle without at least one butterscotch brownie under my belt.”

“I’ll meet you at the dome in a few minutes,” Zane nodded. “Bring me one of those brownies.”

The view of the room swept sideways for a moment as Cheshire opened the door, then swept back with a clunk.

“So what’s Petra up to?” Zane asked, pushing his tie back up and threading his fingers through his hair.

“What makes you think it’s about Petra?”

“Oh, did you interrupt me in the middle of the day to get my recipe for Salsa Grenado?” Zane raised his eyebrows. “You’re going to have a hard time finding Peruvian Plimpy-Peppers in the Hogwarts cupboard, and believe me, salsa without Plimpy-Peppers is basically just chunky ketchup.”

“All right, fine,” James sighed impatiently. “It’s about Petra.”

“And you don’t want to talk to anyone else about it because they *already* think she’s got one foot in old Voldy’s boots.”

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"Zane," James said, meeting the blonde boy's eyes through the glass of the Shard. "She's made a Horcrux."

Zane took a step back from his own Shard, his eyes widening and his hand frozen in the act of finger-combing his hair. Slowly, he lowered his hand and stepped closer to the Shard than before.

"But," he said, more seriously than James had heard his friend speak in a long time, "Horcruxes mean you have to kill someone."

"She *did* kill someone," James said in a hushed voice, sinking lower on the sofa. It wasn't a topic they discussed much, but they all knew it. "Her step-mother, Phyllis. She was a perfectly horrid woman by every account. Hated her own daughter, Izzy. Drove Petra's grandfather to suicide and may have been responsible for her first husband's death, according to some. She and Izzy killed her together, somehow. They sent a tree after her."

Zane was nodding, his eyes deep in thought. "But it was an impulsive thing. She didn't do it *in order* to make a Horcrux. She did it because she was angry and broken-hearted about her grandfather. She lost control."

James shook his head. "I don't think that matters."

Briefly, he explained to Zane how he had travelled along the silver and crimson thread between him and Petra, how he had found her in Tom Riddle's family home, seen her raise the ugly dagger and pronounce the incantation that infused it with the fracture of her soul.

When he was done, Zane gave a low whistle. "You need to tell everyone," he said after a moment. "Rose and Ralph, at least. It doesn't look good for Petra, but there's no getting around that now. You don't do well trying to handle this sort of thing all by yourself."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," James allowed the Shard to fall flat onto his lap.

"That's why you came to me," Zane went on, now talking to the ceiling of the Gryffindor common room. "I tell you the hard, ugly truths that no one else will say. Like, it's high time you got over your puppy love for Petra and started seeing her the way she really is."

James startled and raised the Shard again, angrily. "Not you, too!" he exclaimed. "First, Scorpius, and then Albus, and now you?"

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Zane shrugged in the Shard. “OK, so maybe I’m not the *first* one to speak that particular hard, ugly truth. But it’s true, and you know it.”

James slumped again. “If only it was that easy.”

“Just as long as you’re thinking about it,” his friend nodded. “But in the meantime, there’s another person you need to talk to, as soon as you let Ralph and Rosie in on Petra’s latest excursion into the Dark Side.”

“And who is that?” James asked limply.

“This new professor of yours, Van Odin or whatever. The one you said appeared with Petra.”

“It’s Odin-Vann. And he couldn’t really have been there. My mind stuck him there because I’d been thinking about him, that’s all. There’s no way he could’ve gotten all the way from Hogwarts to wherever Petra was last night.”

“Maybe,” Zane agreed doubtfully. “But maybe not. Sounds to me like none of what you saw last night was technically a dream. You have to ask Odin-Vann to be sure. He might be your best bet to help Petra, if help is still possible.”

James nodded reluctantly. Zane was probably right, although he, James, would look a fool—perhaps even a dangerous fool—if he confronted the new Charms teacher about meeting Petra Morganstern and Odin-Van had no idea what he was talking about.

“I have to go,” Zane said soberly. “Time and Professor Wimrinkle wait for no man, especially not Zombie students who are already barely passing his class by the skin of their teeth. But keep me informed. And if you need anything, you know where to find me. Experimental Communications has some cool new techniques, so I can always find a way to be there if you need me.”

“As long as it’s not make-out o’clock,” James smiled wanly.

Zane nodded. “Precisely.”

A moment later, the Shard filled again with silvery waves of smoke. James sighed and tossed the glass aside onto a cushion, contemplating what he had to do.

It was hard enough to consider asking Professor Odin-Van about Petra.

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Much harder still was the prospect of somehow, someway, abandoning his love for her.



James waited until the following weekend to share his latest secret, although by then Rose and Ralph knew that something was up just by looking at him, since he had never been especially good at hiding his thoughts. When Saturday afternoon came, he accompanied Rose to the Room of Requirement once more, knowing that it was the one place they could speak of such things without even the slightest chance of being overheard. Now more than ever, secrecy seemed absolutely imperative, not only for Petra's security, but their own.

"Why couldn't we have met down by the Lake?" Rose groused. "It's too nice outside to be stuck in the musty old Room of Requirement. And we don't have many warm days left, you know."

"The Lake makes me nervous now that we know there's a big hole at the bottom that drops down into some underground harbor. Anyone could be down there. You said yourself that sound travels clearly through water if you know how to listen."

"The portal is very small compared to the bottom of the whole Lake" Rose said, not exactly disagreeing with James. "Otherwise where would the Merpeople live?"

"Them, too," James said. "I don't trust those creepy water-dwellers much, either."

"That's speciesist," Rose commented without much feeling as they met Ralph near a large painting, where he seemed to be engaged in a discussion with the portrait of Barnabas the Barmy.

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"So you aren't barmy after all," Ralph said doubtfully, frowning and scratching his head. "S'just a title?"

"Indeed," the portrait replied in a high, nasally voice. "Before the twelfth century, 'barmy' merely meant 'inventive or prone to overheat if one wore a wig in the sun'. I'm just as sane as you or the potted plant or that rather fetching girl behind you."

Ralph glanced back and was relieved to see Rose approaching,

"Of course," the portrait went on, its face clouding slightly, "there *was* the matter of my attempt to teach trolls to perform ballet..." Around and behind the painted visage, pale elephantine legs in pink silk slippers rose and thumped down, shaking the ground in a clumsy, prancing circle.

"I've *got* to stop getting into conversations with paintings," Ralph breathed, stepping to join Rose and James. "So what's this all about, then?"

Rose summoned the Room of Requirement, which materialized, as usual, opposite the portrait of Barnabas and his prancing trolls. The portrait still mumbled to itself uncertainly, and then gave a tittering laugh.

"Inside," James nodded toward the door as Rose opened it.

The sound of lightly running feet echoed from the hall and James glanced aside, alarmed. A shadow capered into view, preceding the form of his sister, dressed in weekend jeans and a maroon jumper.

"Oh good," she said, "I'm not too late again."

"Who invited *you*?" James exclaimed, taken aback.

"*I* did," Rose answered challengingly, poking her head back around the door of the Room of Requirement. "It gets a bit boring being the only real brains in the room, especially since you didn't bring Walker along this time."

James sighed. "That's because he already knows. He's the reason I'm telling you lot. It's fine," he said, turning back to Lily, who gave him a slightly petulant look.

Following Ralph, the group filed into the Room, which looked just as before: smallish and private, dominated by a round table with several chairs and a large Foe Glass on the rear wall. Just as the door started to swing closed, it bumped and swept open again, admitting the

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figure of Scorpius Malfoy, who blew out a disgruntled breath and flung himself languidly onto the nearest chair.

"I had to interrupt a perfectly good chess match for this, Potter," he commented importantly. "I was beating Nolan Beetlebrick rather handily. And I had a galleon riding on it."

"You didn't *need* to interrupt anything," James declared, knitting his brow in annoyed surprise. "Because I deliberately didn't *invite* you!"

"Ah, because *you're* a good enough wizard to block the Protean charm from any ducks except the ones you want to quack." The blonde boy produced his own Weasley duck from his pocket, showed it to James and gave it a brief squeeze.

"*Sod off!*" the duck quipped in its squeaky voice. Written on the duck in blue ink was James' own handwriting: *OotP meeting Saturday 3:30 PM. NO SCORPIUS.*

James sank in his seat and muttered under his breath.

"Excuse me, Potter?" Scorpius clarified innocently. "I didn't quite catch that."

Ralph blinked in surprise and glanced from James to Scorpius. "I think he said 'duck yourself...?'"

"Shall we get underway, then?" Rose said, raising her voice suddenly. "I'm sure we *all* have things we'd rather be doing."

Behind Rose, the door clicked and shoved open again, admitting a push of air and another figure. Exasperated, James jumped to his feet.

"Hey everyone," Albus said, stopping in the doorway and looking around. "I figured I'd find you all in here."

"Anyone *else* out there we should invite in?" James asked, glaring around the room. "Mrs. Norris the cat? The Wyrd Sisters? Myron Bleedin' Madrigal and Wizarding Wireless News?"

"Cool your cauldron, James" Albus said in a bored voice, closing the door and falling into a chair. "I'm just here with a message from Professor Debellows. But first, what's the big news this time?"

With the door finally closed and everyone who could enter accounted for, if not invited, James drew a deep breath, suddenly unsure if he really wanted to share the secret, despite Zane's advice. He fell back into his chair and studied the tabletop.

"Petra," he said simply, "has made a Horcrux."

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There was stony silence in the room as everyone seemed to absorb this in their own way. Scorpius studied James sharply, his eyes narrowed tensely. Ralph looked both bewildered and horrified. Lily covered her mouth with both hands, her eyes shocked wide. Albus, however, merely stared into the shadows, his face thoughtful but unfazed.

“Are you certain?” Rose asked breathlessly. “How could you know that? Last we spoke...?”

“I hadn’t even seen her,” James nodded, unable to meet his cousin’s gaze. “She was locking me out. But that’s all changed. I don’t think she can keep it up. I think the harder she freezes me out, the harder the Thread tries to connect us.” As briefly as he could, he explained his experience with the dream, traveling to Petra and observing her, actually standing in the same room with her, transported purely by magic.

“But Horcruxes are seriously specialized dark magic,” Lily said, her voice nearly a whisper. “I heard Dad talking to Uncle Ron about it once, and they both agreed that no one had created one ever since Voldemort’s time. Uncle Ron said that no one alive probably even remembered how it was done anymore. How can you be certain that Petra...?” She couldn’t bring herself to finish.

“I’m certain,” James nodded dourly. “There was no mistaking the meaning of the incantation. And once Petra saw me, the look on her face made it clear. She was ashamed of what she had done. But...” He didn’t want to say it, but even now in his memory he could see her eyes. There had been shame and sadness there, yes. But beneath that, almost buried in the depth of her surprised gaze, there had been defiance.

Ralph asked, “But, why would she do it?”

“Well that, at least, is obvious,” Scorpius said, giving the table a sharp rap with his knuckles. “She needs to survive long enough to replace the Crimson Thread in the destiny that the now-dead Morgan came from. With every Auror, Harrier, and vengeful git with a wand out looking to cut her down, she needs assurance that she won’t be killed before she can complete her task and save the universe.”

“But a Horcrux,” Lily said, dropping her eyes gloomily. “Ever since Voldemort, people *know* dark magic like that stains a person’s soul,

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makes it twisted and broken. Can her goodness survive those effects long enough to finish her plan?"

"You forget," Albus said suddenly, glancing from face to face. "Petra was born with 'twisted and broken' already in her. The last bit of Voldemort himself survives in her blood. She can call on his dark strength to make the Horcrux. *And* she can transfer the poison of that dark magic to *him*. The last shred of Voldemort is sort of like a magical tapeworm, sucking up all the toxic effects and giving back strength and resolve."

"Eww," Lily grimaced and shuddered.

"And what makes you such an expert in these things all of a sudden?" James couldn't help asking, sitting up in his seat to glare at his brother.

Albus shrugged, refusing to make eye contact. "Stands to reason, is all." He flopped back in his chair and crossed his arms.

"Well there're really only two things we can do," Rose said after a long, meaningful pause. "First of all, James, you must use your dreaming connection to Petra to watch her as closely as possible."

"I will if I can," James nodded. "I don't think I have a lot of say about it, either way. Petra, neither, no matter how hard she tries. But why?"

Scorpius answered, "Because little Albus might be wrong about Morganstern's ability to stay pure as the wind-driven snow while tapping into the mouldy-Voldy bloodline. The tapeworm, as he calls it, may grow fat enough to take her over completely. If that happens, she won't care about finishing her mission. She'll become the enemy that the magical world already believes she is."

James wanted to argue. He wanted to point out that Petra, being a sorceress, was stronger than Voldemort had ever hoped to be. The guttering shred of that villain caged in her soul was a mere flickering candle compared to her roaring bonfire.

But he remembered that look in her eyes, underneath the shame and sadness—that buried, ironclad spike of defiance. *You won't understand why I must do this, James*, the look said. *You can't understand. And I don't blame you. But please, don't dare try to stop me. I won't allow even you to stand in my way...*

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“What’s the second thing we have to do?” Ralph asked, turning to Rose.

Rose sighed deeply, resolutely. “We have to help Petra,” she answered with a slow nod. “Any way we can. We have to assist her in completing her mission to take the place of the Crimson Thread. Because Scorpius is right. If Petra is tapping into the power of the Bloodline of Voldemort, that shred of ghost won’t be content to merely help her. It will seek to rule her. It will persuade her to give in more and more. If it succeeds, Petra may well lose the will to complete her task. She may truly become the She-Voldemort.”

James shook his head firmly. “That’s crazy,” he insisted. “Petra isn’t like him--”

“James,” Lily said, her quiet voice interrupting him more effectively than a shout. “The worst thing Voldemort ever did was kill and create Horcruxes. Petra is the only other person who’s done the same thing. I don’t like it any more than you. But the fact is, she is *already* more like Voldemort than any other living person. She isn’t thwarting the Bloodline anymore. She’s *using* it.”

“We have to help her replace the Crimson Thread in that other dimension,” Rose finished, watching James’ face intently, “before she changes her mind about doing it at all.”

James didn’t agree with Rose. But he didn’t argue.

Resolved, if unhappy, the troupe began to stand. There were no sounds other than the scrape of chairs on the stone floor and the creak of the door as it opened.

They were halfway down the hall before Albus suddenly piped up.

“I almost forgot why I was looking for you in the first place,” he glanced aside at Ralph, James, and Rose. “Debellows said your first duty as ‘junior Aurors in training’ has come up.”

“But, it’s Saturday,” Ralph protested, slumping. “This is supposed to be a replacement for *class* time, not weekends.”

“Hush, Ralph,” Rose said, shouldering the big boy aside. “What’s Debellows want us to do?”

“Search me,” Albus shrugged. “He just said to meet him outside the headmaster’s office at four this afternoon.”

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Rose stopped in her tracks, her eyes going wide. "And you just *now* remembered to tell us!? You do know that it's..." She consulted her watch frantically, and then nearly shouted, "five past four already!"

Albus shrugged again. "I'm a messenger, not your bloody secretary."

His words were lost on Rose, however, who had spun on her heels, already retreating back along the corridor at a dead run. James and Ralph glanced at each other, and then scrambled to follow, pelting as fast as they could in Rose's wake.

They would have made it to the headmaster's office only slightly late if they hadn't been stumped, of course, by the gargoyle that guarded the spiral staircase. There, they spent several agonizing minutes attempting every Old Welsh and Celtic former password they could remember, all to no avail. Eventually, steps rang from above as people began to descend the staircase from the headmaster's office. Debellows himself came into view first, followed by Professors Votary, Heretofore, and McGonagall.

"Ah," Debellows commented, spying the students standing around the gargoyle. "And thus your first foray into Aurorship goes much awry." He clucked his tongue and gave a condescending smile.

"We'd have been on time, er, more or less," Rose said, slumping back onto a windowsill, "If your messenger had remembered to give us the password."

"Ah, but I didn't provide it to him," Debellows chided, raising a pedantic index finger. "One never shares passwords with those whose duties do not require them. No, your instruction was to meet me here, outside the Headmaster's office, where I would have escorted you inside at the proper time. Alas, when the proper time came, you were not to be found. Methinks there is some small lesson here."

James, along with Rose, was about to protest, when another set of tramping feet rang down the spiral staircase, revealing the last person James expected to see: his own father, wearing his official robes, apparently in close conversation with the headmaster himself.

James ran to meet him at the bottom of the stairs, and then paused, suddenly aware of the presence of so many observing teachers. He attempted to replace his expression of breathless curiosity with one of mere professional interest, and knew that he was not exactly succeeding.

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"James," his father smiled at him and clapped him on the shoulder. James was nearly as tall as his father now, though both were still half-a-head shorter than the imposing bulk of Headmaster Merlinus nearby. "I'd been told I might see you upstairs. Delayed, were you? No matter. Here you are now."

"Yeah," James answered, exquisitely aware of the many watching eyes nearby. "We've officially begun a sort of work study, exchanging class-time for on-the-job Auror training. Er, all three of us." He indicated Ralph and Rose as they joined him.

"Hi, Uncle Harry," Rose said perkily, ignoring the mutter of nearby voices as the teachers drifted away, led by Headmaster Merlinus.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. "All *three* of you, eh? Your mother will be so proud that you've managed a promotion to seventh-year, Rose."

"Hush!" Rose said, turning grave and slitting her eyes toward the departing teachers. "I'm not doing a thing you wouldn't have done, Uncle, and don't you dare say otherwise."

Harry nodded wisely and mimed locking his lips. He seemed as cheerful as ever, James thought, and yet something seemed to hang in the air about him, muting his mood and darkening his eyes. Perhaps only James, having grown up with him, could sense it.

"What was that all about, Dad?" he asked seriously. "What'd we miss?"

Harry nodded, turning serious as well. He seemed to consider for a moment. "You three," he nodded, marking each with his eyes, "you're all looking to become Aurors, are you?"

James nodded, as did Rose next to him.

"I suppose so," Ralph answered, frowning a little. "As such. I mean, I'm not all that keen on having loads of dark witches and wizards shooting killing spells at me all day long. But, you know. It's something to do." He shrugged as Rose rolled her eyes.

"Good enough, then," Harry said. "Walk with me."

They walked along the corridor, passing huge windows and moving in and out of the brilliant afternoon sunlight. Harry didn't speak, only marched along, knowing his own way along the halls and passages just as if he was still a student. They descended steps and finally

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passed through the old rotunda, heading toward its enormous but lesser used wooden doors. Only then, as they stepped out into the warm glare of the ancient portico steps, did Harry speak.

"You all were present when those Muggles stumbled into the Entrance Hall, I assume?"

James nodded, trotting down the steps to the brambly yard below. The lake lay beyond a low stone wall, shimmering copper in the lowering sun. "Everyone was. The whole school saw it."

Harry considered this dourly. "It's happening all over the magical world. The old protections are thin as tissue, if they exist at all anymore. Muggles are obeying the boundaries out of sheer habit, not because they are kept out. But bit by bit, some of them are wandering in. Just like that family on First Night."

Rose stopped next to the wall and peered up at her Uncle. "Is that why you were summoned here today? To talk about how to shore up the boundaries?"

Harry shook his head. "That's already been done, as well as it can be. Merlinus was more than up to the task, and I imagine his unplottability charms are better than any other living wizard today. No, I was sent here today by order of the Minister of Magic himself."

Ralph blinked in surprise. "Loquacious Knapp sent you? But why? What's he care about some wandering harmless family at Hogwarts when there's places like Gringott's Bank and the giants' mountain preserve at risk?"

"Because Hogwarts is well known to be one of the best and most heavily protected sites in the entire northern hemisphere," Harry answered. "Knapp wanted me to see for myself, to hear from those who witnessed it, that the breach is so bad even here that an entire family of clueless Muggles was able to simply drive up to the gate and walk inside."

James nodded. "Well, that's pretty much exactly what happened. So what do we do?"

"You mean, as junior Aurors in training?" Harry favored his son with a sideways smile.

"Well, yeah," James nodded, rising to the challenge. "If we can! This is all our problem, isn't it?"

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Harry gave a brisk sigh. "You're right, James. All of you, you'll have to do your part. I won't belittle that. But there's really only one thing the Minister believes we must do. Every official both above and below my rank agrees. Even Titus Hardcastle and the rest of the Auror department, they all know what must be done."

Ralph frowned. "And what's that?"

In answer, Harry reached into his robes. James assumed his father meant to produce his wand. Instead, he withdrew a small scrolled parchment. He unrolled it, looked down at it, and then turned it around for all to see.

James had seen copies of it many times before. Each time, it gave his heart a sick little jolt, although over the past few years, as the posters had aged and been pasted over by adverts and graffiti, the jolt had numbed slightly. Seeing the perfectly crisp copy now held open in his father's hands, the sick, sinking feeling came back stronger than ever.

Petra's face was printed in black and white, unmoving, not because it wasn't a magical photograph, but because the girl in the picture was unconscious. It had been taken by the American arbiter, Albert Keynes, during the brief time after they had succeeded in capturing her. They had kept her in a magical sleep, knowing that they could not contain her if she was awake.

Beneath the photo were words printed in huge black capitals:

# **UNDESIRABLE NUMBER ONE: *PETRACIA ZOE MORGANSTERN***

THREAT LEVEL 10+  
***DO NOT ENGAGE!***  
REPORT ON SIGHT

"We have to capture her," Harry said soberly. "She's where this all started. And before you begin, James," he raised a hand to his son, "I know. We all do. You don't need to remind me. She did it to save us, me and Titus, back during the parade in Muggle New York City. But that doesn't change anything. Everything began to unravel from that

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moment. Every Ministry Technomancy expert agrees. Petra started it. In order to stop it, we must find her.” He paused, and then went on in a low, firm voice, clearly repeating the orders he himself had been given. “We must capture her, by any means necessary.”

“But,” James began, although the piercing look on his father’s face subdued his tone. “But, what if Petra is trying to stop it all herself? What if capturing her will keep her from accomplishing the job?”

His father’s gaze was direct and probing. James recognized the look and the posture behind it, the keen alertness. His father was in Auror mode. James had rarely felt the intensity of it turned upon him, but he did now.

“She’s had over two years, James,” he said, unblinking. “If she intended to set things right—which I would very much like to believe—she’s had time to do so. Instead, things have continued to go further wrong, and there are many who believe that she is directly responsible for those things. Up to and including the potential disaster that was the Morrigan Web. Even you have acknowledged that she had a hand in orchestrating that.”

“But...!” James began, but his father overruled him again with a look.

“I know. You also tell me she had her reasons, and that she helped to stop it in the end. I want to believe you. If you’ll remember, it was me and your mother that put Petra up the summer her grandfather died. It was us who supported and hosted her during Keynes’ investigation. I’ve always wanted to believe the best of Petra, despite how it made me look to many of my peers and superiors. And that’s the problem, really. Now, people are watching *me*. They believe I won’t work as hard as I must to capture Petra. That’s why I must work all the harder.”

He sighed harshly and slumped a little, then looked up at James again with only his eyes. “She’s had two years, son. She’s had every chance I can offer her. Things are unraveling too fast to wait any longer. And that’s why I must ask you, all three of you...” Here he looked aside, turning the intensity of his gaze briefly upon Rose, and then Ralph, before bringing it back to James. “If any of you know anything about Petra—about what her plans might be, or where she might be found... if any of you have had contact with her in any way... you must tell me.

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Not because I am your father, and uncle, and friend. But because withholding such information is now a crime punishable by law. Not even I would be able to protect you. Even if..." Here, he hunkered down and drew the three students into a close huddle around him. He went on in a near whisper. "Even if, when I was in your shoes, and knew things that no one else did, I might have chosen to keep that information a secret myself, despite every warning to the contrary."

"You never were one to bring lots of adults in on your plans," Rose agreed.

"You won't want to hear this," Harry breathed reluctantly, "but I'm going to say it because it's true. Things are different now. When I was your age, I didn't have grown-up allies in positions of power. Or if I did, I didn't know who they were, and wasn't certain if I could trust them, at least not until it was all over. Things are different for you lot. You have me, and Hermione and Ron, and Professor McGonagall, and Neville Longbottom. And Headmaster Merlinus, for heaven's sakes."

James tried not to smile, even in the midst of his consternation.  
"You sound like Grandma Weasley when you say 'for heaven's sakes'."

The Auror mode on Harry's face softened a little. "That's not a bad thing. Never a bad thing. But I'm serious. All of you. This is no longer the time to do things on your own. Besides placing the entire magical world in jeopardy, and possibly the Muggle world as well, it's a Ministry crime. And people I don't control *will* assure that such crimes are punished to the fullest extent. We have to end this. If you hear anything, learn anything, know anything... I need you to tell me. The sooner we can capture Petra..." He shrugged and his eyes drifted uncertainly. "Well, if she does intend to end this, same as we, then the sooner perhaps we can work together to accomplish that goal."

James wanted to tell his father everything he knew. But in that moment, he saw the doubt on his father's face. The Ministry wasn't interested in partnering with Petra. Capturing her meant punishment, imprisonment, possibly even total obliviation, or worse. The entire magical world blamed her for everything that was going wrong. They wouldn't be satisfied with anything less. In fact, considering how powerful Petra was, the worst outcome—her own death, or those who opposed her—was the likeliest outcome of all.

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Suddenly, darkly, James was secretly glad that Petra had created her Horcrux. In order to preserve and repair the magical world, she had performed the riskiest and most damning spell of all. All James had to do to help her... was lie.

Or not *lie*, perhaps. Merely omit. For a time. He glanced around at Rose and Ralph.

"We'll tell you if we hear anything," he said, still looking at Ralph and his cousin, not quite prepared to meet his father's probing, knowing eyes. He considered his words carefully, quickly. "If we learn anything that will help you put an end to all this... then we'll tell you straight away."

This, he told himself, was not a lie, exactly. Because in his heart, he didn't believe that anything his father did *could* put an end to the degrading destiny of the world all around. Only Petra could do that now.

His father studied him intently, his eyes neither suspicious nor gullible, merely watchful, as if he was recording every syllable for future consideration. James finally met his father's gaze again, knowing that it was a mistake not to. After a moment, cryptically, the elder Potter nodded once, slowly.

"Good. That's all I expect of you."

The three straightened out of their conspiring huddle. Harry tucked the Petra poster back into his inner pocket, and then patted his robes, looking for something and muttering. "Where did I put that, then? Ah." He produced a tiny black velvet bag that James recognized. It was weighed down from the inside by a single dense object—a pewter chess king of the non-magical variety, from a set once owned by James' grandfather, Arthur Weasley. The piece normally decorated the corner of Harry Potter's desk in the Auror department at the Ministry of Magic, except for moments like this.

"One benefit of the diminished boundaries around Hogwarts," Harry said, bouncing the small bag on the palm of his hand. "Portkeys work much closer to the school than they used to. There was a time I'd have to walk halfway to Hogsmeade before this would have functioned." He looked up at the three gathered students again. "I assume I'll be seeing you lot soon enough, now that you're all officially junior Aurors in training?"

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Rose nodded. "Until any of the teachers catch wise on my part, at least."

"But hopefully only during class-times, from here on out," Ralph added.

James only nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

"I'll give your love to everyone else," Harry said, his smile fading slightly. "And they send theirs to you. Until next I see you, then, remember: you know how to contact me, both personally and officially. I trust that you will, should anything... come up."

The three nodded as Harry watched. Apparently satisfied, he bounced the black velvet bag on his palm again, caught it, and then turned and walked several paces, as if he meant to stroll into the evening shadows of the Forbidden Forest beyond the old courtyard. Wind blew and switched through the tall grass at his feet. As James watched, his father upended the bag onto his open right hand, catching the pewter chess king as it fell out. With an eye-bending whoosh and a whip-crack of collapsing air, he was gone, leaving only the impression of his footsteps in the field grass below.

"We've crossed the Rubicon now," Ralph breathed fretfully, running a hand back through his hair and collapsing against the stone wall. "We're withholding valuable information from official Ministry investigation. Your dad's right, James. We could go to prison for this. Seriously."

Rose shook her head, more uncertain than denying. "We don't know any valuable information. Not yet. At least not so far as the Ministry's concerned. James just had a dream, that's all. Uncle Harry might understand the significance of such a thing. But his bosses would think he was daft if he brought it to them. James probably did him a favour, not telling him about it."

Thinking about it that way, James felt slightly better. Not a lot, but a little. Wordlessly, for lack of anything better to do with the remaining hours before dinnertime, the three clambered over the stone wall and meandered down toward the lake, watching the stiff breeze as it skated over the treetops and rippled the mirror of the lake, listening to the companionable, if somewhat tense silence between them.

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It wasn't that James had never lied to his dad before. He'd lied to him on loads of occasions, regarding everything from windows broken while playing Winkles and Augers to who had left the Quidditch rulebook lying outside in the rain after an argument about blatant blatching.

But he had never lied about anything as serious as this, about anything that might get both he, and perhaps even his father, into serious trouble with people who could imprison all of them.

A pit of unease lay in his stomach, nagging at him, growing even as the evening rolled over the edge of the world and pulled the night behind it, cloudy and cool and wet with fog, like a portent, a damning shroud that chased James silently, even as he finally climbed the steps to his dormitory and fell into bed, restless and worried.

He hoped he would dream of Petra again, perhaps even go to her, as he had the previous week. He wanted to talk to her, to gain some assurance that she really did mean to set everything right, and that he, James, had done the right thing by guarding her secret even from the man whom he loved and respected most in the whole wide world.

When he finally slept, however, he did not dream of Petra. She had closed the conduit once more, even though it cost her much energy, and she could not maintain it forever. James knew this, even in his sleeping mind. The unplugged thread of her sorceress powers glowed between them, shifting from grey, to white, to deepest red. It pulsed. Even as she closed her end, James felt the strength of the thread banking inside him, storing up in him like a battery.

He had absorbed her powers before, even called on them from time to time, usually without even intending to. Her powers were foreign to him, and completely uncontrollable. And yet he comforted in feeling the connection, the slowly intensifying energy that pooled inside him like a cycling dynamo.

Even in his dreaming mind, he mused: perhaps someday he would be able to use that banked strength to protect Petra again, just as he had on the back of the Gwyndemere those several years earlier. Only better, and more confidently, because he had absorbed so much of that weird energy in the time since. Petra was a sorceress, but unlike Merlin, her element wasn't the vast expanses of nature. She was a new kind of sorceress, and her element was the humming hive of the city.

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James' dreaming, untethering mind mused with some tentative comfort: since he had first connected to Petra on that fateful ocean voyage, he had visited many, *many* cities. All of that absorbed sourcery strength was inside him, banked away, just waiting for the proper moment to be unleashed. When it came, perhaps—just perhaps—James could use it for good.

If, of course, it didn't kill him first.



## 6. ORDINANCE THIRTEEN

Despite Zane's advice, James had deliberately left out any reference to Professor Odin-Vann when he told the others about his dream visit to Petra. This was because, deep down, he was still half certain that the appearance of the professor was the vision's only truly imaginary element, culled by his dreaming mind from thoughts earlier that day.

And yet, as the next week began, James became suspicious that the professor was giving him furtive, sharp-eyed looks at unexpected moments. He noticed it for first time during Monday's breakfast, a decidedly gloomy affair beneath an iron-grey caul of autumn clouds. The low sky hulked both outside the windows and in the upper recesses of the Great Hall, hiding the rafters within a fog of fine rain that, while never quite reaching the candles or the tables below, left the students hunkered, their voices subdued. James glanced toward the dais and caught the skinny young professor eyeing him sharply, his chin raised

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and craning, his hair combed in a glossy black wing across his forehead. He saw James' look and his head retracted between his shoulders like something on a spring, his eyes darting away. As James watched, the professor maneuvered a carafe of pumpkin juice slightly, as if to hide behind it.

It happened again that afternoon, in the halls between classes as the professor stood in the doorway of his classroom, his eyes sharp, watching James as he shouldered through the throng of students toward History of Magic. And again, unmistakably, in the library that evening, as James caught a glimpse of the professor between the bookcases, ostensibly reading a thick book but peering furtively at up from beneath his lowered brow.

The following day's Charms class was cancelled at the last minute with no appearance by the professor at all. James and the rest of the class were informed, after waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour, that Professor Odin-Vann had unexpectedly taken ill.

"Merely a trifle," Professor Votary assured them from the Charms classroom door, the irony in his eyes clearly editorializing the new teacher's absence as well as announcing it. "I'm sure he shall bounce back in a trice and feel quite the dandy for cancelling class at such short notice." He lowered his voice beneath the sudden noise of hastily packing bags and scraping chairs. "Something I never would have done, of course, cancel a class over a mere sniffle and cough. But, alas, young men these days don't seem to be built with quite the same constitution as those of the older generation."

And it seemed that the Ancient Runes professor was right after all, for as James and a few dozen other students gathered around the a notice board that evening, discussing the Quidditch tryouts announcement that had just been posted, he saw Professor Odin-Vann at the end of the hall, seemingly perfectly healthy, standing with his wand in his hand, pointed at the floor. The man seemed to be watching James, and this time, when James met his gaze, the professor didn't glance away. James did not have on his spectacles, of course, so he couldn't quite make out Odin-Vann's expression. But he seemed to sense a sort of watchful resignation in the man's posture and the set of his face.

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James was tempted to disengage from the group near the notice board and approach Odin-Vann right then and there. The professor must have sensed James' thoughts, however, for at that moment he turned, his robes flowing beneath the angles of his sharp elbows and knees, and stalked away, turning along an intersection and vanishing from sight.

James glared at the now empty corridor where Odin-Vann had stood a moment before. Was the man actually *avoiding* him? Impulsively, James launched along the hall in pursuit of him, using his long legs to carry him swiftly and quietly without resorting to an outright run. He reached the intervening corridor quickly, knowing that Odin-Vann would have disappeared into any of the myriad side passages, stairways, and doors. Instead, he nearly ran into the professor, who had stopped just beyond the angle of the corner, his shoulders slumped as if he had been magically turned off.

"Professor!" James said, skidding to a halt, the surprise in his voice sharpening it to a half-shout.

The young man startled so violently that he fumbled the wand in his hand. It clattered to the floor and rolled, even as the professor dropped to a squat and scrambled for it, his shoulders cinching up next to his ears like the wings of a vulture. He tried to stand and spin around at the same time, wheeling on James, but the movement was clumsy and James had to reach out an arm to steady the man before he stumbled sideways into the wall.

Footsteps echoed behind James, following him. He didn't need to look to know that it was Ralph and Rose, curious to see why James had run off.

Odin-Vann attempted to compose himself as quickly as he could before the newcomers arrived. He brushed a hand frantically down his robes, straightening them, and then smoothed his fingers compulsively over the thick hank of hair on his forehead, pushing it back into place.

"Mr. Potter," he said, raising his chin as if he meant to wield his pointed beard like a dagger. "You shouldn't startle people so. You never know how a trained witch or wizard might respond." He gripped his wand tightly, as if to imply that only practiced control had prevented him from reflexively turning James into a frog.

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“You were there, weren’t you?” James asked quickly, his voice lowered. “I saw you, and you saw me. That’s why you’ve been watching me. You’re trying to figure out if I was really there. Just like I’m doing with you.”

James had to give the young professor credit. The expression on his face didn’t change a tick, but the color drained from it so quickly that he swayed on his feet. His fist relaxed on his wand.

“What’s this?” Ralph asked, breathing hard as he caught up. “Hi, professor. Feeling better, I hope?”

Rose had heard James’ question, however. She moved next to him and studied Odin-Vann’s face. “You were *there*?” she said, a suspicious lilt in her voice. A second later, her eyes blazed and she turned on James. “He was *there*?! Why didn’t you *tell us*!?” She pointed at the thin man, who heaved a deep, resigned sigh and sagged slightly.

“Let us *at least* not discuss this in the halls,” he growled, rolling his dark eyes. “My quarters are nearby, such as they are. Come.”

He turned and swept away, moving into the dimness of the corridor, nearly vanishing into it. James glanced back at Rose and Ralph, surprised into silence. After a moment, Odin-Vann paused and glanced impatiently back over his shoulder.

“Come!” he called, inserting a note of impatient command into his otherwise hushed voice.

Speaking volumes with her eyes alone, Rose glared at James, and then trotted to follow the teacher. Breathlessly, James and Ralph hurried to join her.

The professor’s quarters were not, in fact, around the next corner, as the man had inferred. Odin-Vann led them briskly through turn after turn, into narrower hallways and down short flights of steps, into a section of the castle that James had never before seen. Here, there were no classrooms or offices, only ranks of doors, small and warped in their stone frames, squat and close together. Finally, stopping in a damp, nondescript corridor, the professor tapped a tarnished door handle with his wand, causing the door to unlatch loudly and creak partway open.

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"Home, sweet home," he said, pushing the door fully open and ducking slightly to enter. He didn't invite James, Rose, and Ralph inside. He merely left the door open and assumed they would follow.

James had been in several of the teachers' quarters before, but this was by far the smallest and most spartan of any of them. The room seemed barely larger than a maintenance closet, crammed with a single bed against the far wall, beneath a single narrow window, next to a single, albeit very large, open leather trunk on a rickety three-drawer bureau. Across from this was a sagging Chesterfield sofa and a tall desk nearly obliterated beneath mounds of paperwork, tools, a huge magnifying glass on an articulated stand, a precariously leaning tea tray, and a thick book James recognized as the Charms class textbook: *The Caster's Lexicon of Spells, Charms, & Hexes*. The professor's copy was dog-eared, fat with use, and crammed with bookmarks and slips of parchment.

"I'll make this brief, and I shall deny every word should you choose to repeat it," Odin-Vann announced, remaining standing but indicating the sofa with one hand. With the other, he flicked his wand at the door, which swung shut with a sweep of air and a heavy clap. Once again, James noticed the Professor's magical prowess in the wake of a moment of stress. He wondered, perhaps unfairly, if the professor would have been capable of something as simple as closing the door a few minutes earlier, when James had first confronted him in the hall.

Ralph plopped onto the couch, which moaned under his weight. Rose lowered herself onto the other end. James, however, stood in front of the closed door, observing the professor in the cramped space.

"So you really were there, then," he confirmed, cocking his head.

In answer, Odin-Vann turned to the desk and began to shuffle papers, seemingly randomly. "How long have you three known her?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he went on, "I met Petra right here in school. I was a seventh-year, like you. She was a first year. A strange bridge for friendship to cross, but it happens sometimes. We had similar family situations, you see. She was being raised by her grandfather, who loved her, and his new wife, who did not. It was an unhappy arrangement, and Petra rarely spoke of it, but I recognized the silence. I had a similar home life, being raised by an uncle and his wife and his much older children. None of them wanted me there, and took

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pains to make certain I knew it. I had come to terms with it, having lived it all of my school years. I had hardened a bit. Petra had not yet hardened. And in my heart, I didn't want her to. So I befriended her. We became secret allies. I watched out for her. It was a brief but important acquaintance. I expect she shared more with me during that one year than she did with any other school mates over the following six."

He handled the magnifying glass on its articulated arm, moving it into a new position, apparently merely to give his hands something to do. He glanced back toward the three students, but not at them, exactly.

"I knew she was powerful, even then. Although I had no idea how much, or why. I just knew that she was special. Later, when I heard about what happened in Muggle New York City, on the Night of the Unveiling, I trusted, deep down, that Petra had had a good reason for whatever she did. She was always powerful and passionate, and she has a lot of buried anger—one can't blame her for that, what with her upbringing—but she was never driven by it. She may use her anger sometimes, like a healer uses a blade, to lance and excise, but never like a villain with a dagger, to threaten and kill."

"Is that why you went to her?" Rose asked from the couch, leaning forward with interest. "To help her, once the rest of the magical world turned on her?"

Odin-Vann finally looked at Rose, and blinked. "Oh, I didn't go to Petra. How could I? No one knew where she was. And frankly, despite everything, I wasn't even positive that she'd really remember me. Both of us have changed quite a lot in the many years since we were friends. She was just a child then. I was..." He shrugged and shook his head faintly. "Well, I was just a gawky teenager, more full of ego than wisdom, but willing to spew either to anyone who would give me an ear." He continued to shake his head wryly, and then looked back at Rose. "No, I didn't go to Petra. She came to me. It was only a few months ago. She needed help, you see. She has all the power, does Petra, but she doesn't have all the knowledge, and she is smart enough to know it. It turned out that she remembered her old friend Donofrio after all. She came to me, and asked for my help. And I granted it, of

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course. But in secret." He pressed his lips together tightly, eyeing all three students with an air of wary annoyance. "Until now."

"We're safe," Ralph said pointedly, glancing around at the others. "In case you were wondering."

"Oh, I know," Odin-Vann admitted. "Petra told me whom I could trust, should I have need to. I believed her, and yet I wasn't certain I really *could* trust any of you. Not because you weren't on her side, but because you're, well..." He stopped abruptly and blinked at the three students.

James suddenly understood. "Because we're just teenagers," he prompted. "It's OK. You can say it. Maybe we aren't trustworthy because we're just clumsy, loud-mouthed students who don't have any clue about how the grown-up world works."

Odin-Vann shook his head at James. "No, not like that. I mean... yes. A little like that. But you misunderstand me."

"That's good," Rose commented a bit archly. "Because believe it or not, we've been through the gauntlet more than once in our years. You've no idea."

"Actually, I do." Odin-Vann said in a different voice. James looked at him and saw a new expression on the man's face. All the suspicion and caginess had finally gone out of it. He looked at them directly, settling his gaze on James. "Petra told me some of the things you lot have gone through on her behalf. She told me about the World Between the Worlds. She told me about the Gatekeeper's curse, and how you intervened to protect her from herself. She said that you three, and some American named Zane Walker, have always been there for her, that you've faced things that most grown witches and wizards would run screaming from. I didn't quite believe her, I admit. Because there's so much at stake, you see. If we trusted you, and you didn't come through—if you got caught somehow, or blabbed to the wrong schoolmate—well, I was just thinking of Petra's mission. She mustn't be stopped, you see. You know that as well as I. I had to be absolutely certain that you were exactly as competent and trustworthy as Petra said. So I watched."

Ralph shifted on the end of the couch, narrowing his eyes slightly. "And what did you decide?"

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Odin-Vann cocked his head at Ralph's question, as if surprised and bemused by it. "Well. You didn't give me much of a chance, did you? You three chased me down and proved you were as quick and observant and bold as Petra said. I hadn't yet made up my mind, but I suppose I have now. Whether I like it or not."

"I lied to my dad today," James said. There was both guilt and defiance in his voice. The words cost him something to say. He sank onto the arm of the sofa, his eyes still on Odin-Vann. "I've done loads of things for Petra. Faced demons from another world. Battled Salazar Slytherin in another time. Been cursed and frozen and threatened. But lying to my dad..." He shook his head and finally dropped his eyes. "That was the hardest thing of all."

"Your dad," Odin-Vann mused, half to himself. "Harry Potter, yes? The man of myth and legend, of course. But most importantly, the current head of the Auror Department, chief of wizarding law enforcement." He nodded at James soberly. "That must have been very difficult for you. But let me assure you, you did the right thing. The necessary thing. And I can promise you, were he in your shoes, knowing what you know, he would have done the same thing."

"You know that, do you?" James said wearily, glancing up again.

Odin-Vann shrugged and gave a tiny smile. "I do. I've read Revalvier's books. At least a dozen times, in fact."

Rose spoke again, this time in a hushed voice. "You helped Petra make a Horcrux."

Odin-Vann startled and turned to Rose, his eyes blinking rapidly. A flash of something like anger reddened his cheeks, and then he reconsidered and slumped to the bed, producing a loud squeak from its old springs.

"She didn't really need my help. Not with the spellcasting. All she needed was my encouragement. And in that respect, I did indeed help. And why not? She'd already committed the murder. Justified and right as it may have been, it was still a murder. The blood has stained her ever since. There was no point in her *not* using it. You were there when she summoned the power, James, converting her dagger into a talisman of immortality. You saw and heard. Or am I mistaken?"

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James shook his head. "She had to do it to protect herself. She has to live, no matter how many people want to kill her. She has to survive so she can replace the Crimson Thread and set everything right again."

"Yes!" Odin-Vann hissed, pointing at James with enthusiasm. "Nothing must stop her! The Horcrux isn't to prolong her life for her *own* sake! It's for the good of the world!"

James was taken slightly aback by the strength of the man's words. He was nearly spitting with the force of them. For the first time, James wondered if there was something more than civic duty motivating the young professor. Was he, perhaps, secretly in love with Petra? He was several years older than her, and yet James knew very well that differences in age were of little consequence to the blind compulsion of love. A worm of jealousy moved deep inside him.

"But it doesn't end there," Ralph said, his eyes still narrowed at Odin-Vann, calculating, measuring him with something that almost looked like cautious suspicion. "It doesn't end with the Horcrux. Does it?"

Odin-Vann shook his head, growing somber again. "No. I'm afraid it does not. And that's why I was watching you." He chewed his lips and drew a deep sigh through his nose. Finally, almost reluctantly, he went on, now speaking in a near whisper. "Petra won't be able to accomplish her task on her own. She will need help. There are very few people she can call on. She's already reached out to me, and there are two others she has mentioned. But she will need you as well. If you choose to help. She did not wish me to ask. But I'm asking anyway."

A mixture of worry and anticipation brewed in James at Odin-Vann's words. The reality of Petra's plan took hold of him firmly. She would assume her role as the Crimson Thread from that other dimension, vanishing forever from her native destiny. He would never see or hear from her again. And against every passion and desire of his heart, he had to help her accomplish this task. He nodded slowly at Odin-Vann.

"We'll help. We'll do whatever we have to."

"Good," Odin-Vann said, restraining his excitement with some effort. "Because it won't be easy. For some of us, it may be the hardest thing we ever do." He eyed James as he said this, and James wondered if

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the professor knew. Probably he did. Petra may have told him, or she may not have. According to Rose, Albus, Scorpius, and even Zane, James' love for Petra was as plain as the nose on his face.

Odin-Vann nodded again, quickly and resolutely. As he spoke, he climbed back to his feet. "So be it. I will summon you when the time comes. It won't be easy, but I am trusting your cunning and resolve."

"Who else did she reach out to?" It was Ralph who asked. He was still sitting on the couch, his head cocked, his eyes intent.

"I don't think I am quite at liberty to say—"

"Zane," Ralph interrupted. "It has to be. I'm right, aren't I?"

Odin-Vann slumped impatiently. "If so, only in the past day. She had considered it when last we spoke, but had not acted on it. The other person, she has been in correspondence with for several weeks."

James wondered for a moment if the other person was him. That couldn't be it, though. He could connect to her via their shared thread, but it could hardly be said that she had corresponded with him. The worm of jealousy in his heart fanned out and became a hooded snake. Who could it be? Why was it *not* him?

"So you see Petra regularly, then, eh?" Ralph asked, lifting his chin. "That's a pretty keen interest for a bloke who knew her for exactly one year, and nearly a decade ago at that."

"Ralph," Rose asked from the corner of her mouth, leaning to nudge the boy as he glared at Odin-Vann. "Enough with the questions. What's wrong with you?"

"I've a keen interest," Odin-Vann answered, standing straight and cooling his voice. "Because the fate of the magical world—indeed, all worlds—hangs in the balance. I would think that was obvious."

"Ralph," James muttered, reaching for the door latch and tugging it open behind him. "Let's go, eh?"

"You say you didn't know if we could be trusted," Ralph said, standing now, but not moving toward the door. "And for good reason. You're right. There's a whole world at stake. But what about you? Petra may trust you, Professor. But that doesn't mean we have to. Not yet, at least."

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James didn't know whether he felt more proud of Ralph's stubborn suspicion or mortified by it. Odin-Vann, for his part, merely met Ralph's eyes, unflinching, but neither offering any defence or argument.

Rose tugged Ralph's sleeve, pulling him toward the door. At first, James didn't think Ralph was going to come. Then, finally, the big boy submitted, turning and following Rose and James from the room, offering no word in departure. As they filed into the hall, the wooden door clunked shut behind them.

"Way to go, Ralph," James breathed, shaking his head as they strode back the way they'd come. "Insult the one grown-up who seems to be on Petra's side."

"He's no grown-up," Ralph muttered, his eyes still narrowed. "He's barely older than us, no matter what his actual age. And he's as dodgy as the day is long."

Rose glanced from Ralph to James as they paced into the evening dark of the corridors. "I don't know which one of you is right," she admitted. "Maybe both, maybe neither. But I do know this: Professor Odin-Vann is our best hope for helping Petra. We may not have to trust him. But we can trust *her*." She paused to consider this for a moment, and then gave an agitated shrug. "Hopefully."

With that hanging in the air between them, none of them spoke during the rest of the trek back to their dormitories.



No matter how prepared James believed he was to assist Petra on her final mission, he hadn't been prepared to hear from Professor Odin-

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Vann about it quite so quickly. He was at lunch that Friday when a stiff index finger poked him hard on the shoulder, startling him. He turned, half expecting to see the obnoxious twit Edgar Edgecombe and his first-year cronies grinning maliciously at him. Instead, he was met with the thin chest and faintly mouldy smell of Argus Filch, who was standing immediately behind him. James looked to see the man glaring down at him, his stubbly chin bristling.

“Detention, Mr. Potter,” he said from between gritted teeth. “Compliments of Professor Odin-Vann.” He stabbed out something in his left hand. James flinched back from it, and then saw that it was a rolled parchment, sealed with a blot of shiny red wax. Tentatively, he reached for it and plucked it from the caretaker’s horny fingers.

Filch leaned close and growled, “The professor invokes Ordinance Thirteen, Mr. Potter. You are familiar with that ordinance, I trust?”

James shook his head.

Filch clucked his tongue. “It means your punishment is not to be discussed with any other students. It’s a stipulation meant to avoid rumours during strict, unresolved disciplinary sentences. My, my, my, Mr. Potter,” he shook his head with mock concern. “What have you done *this* time?”

A moment later, the caretaker creaked away, leaving a pall of cold silence in his wake. James hunkered low and tucked the rolled parchment into his robes, anxious to read its contents but knowing he dare not in such a public place.

“What *did* you do?” Graham asked softly, morbidly impressed.

“Now, now,” Scorpius chided. “Ordinance Thirteen, you know. We wouldn’t want our curiosity to suck us into whatever fate is about to befall the young hooligan, would we?”

As James watched furtively, he saw Filch approach Rose where she sat further down the table. The caretaker didn’t need to tap her on the shoulder. She saw him coming, and her eyes were bright with glassy trepidation. James didn’t have to guess that Filch’s next stop would be at the Slytherin table.

But, in fact, that did not happen. After serving Rose her own small scroll, which she tucked quickly into her knapsack, Filch ambled

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toward the rear of the Hall and his customary place next to the doors. He turned and gave a nasty wink and nod toward the dais, content with the completion of his favorite duties.

James turned on his seat. Donofio Odin-Vann was watching from the head table. His gaze did not dart away this time as James looked at him, but neither did he show any sign of secret communication. Whatever James needed to know, it would apparently be on the sealed scroll currently in his pocket.

He ate as quickly as he could and stood to leave well before anyone else. Eyes watched him from all around, some impressed, like Graham, and others merely grimly curious. James ignored the stares and whispers as well as he could as he hoiked his knapsack onto his back, and was just shouldering through the double doors into the entrance hall when a girl's voice called out to him, surprising him in his tracks.

He turned around in the deserted entryway, expecting to see Rose. Instead, Millie Vandergriff followed him through the double doors, allowing them to creak shut behind her.

"What sort of trouble are you in?" she asked, her voice a mixture of warm concern and delicious conspiracy. "Does it have to do with that stupid interview? We did everything we could to keep you from jamming both feet into your mouth, but puppets can only do so much..."

James shook his head and rolled his eyes. "No. I can't really talk about it. Ordinance thirteen, apparently. It could get you into trouble, too."

Millie gave a wry smile. "How very noble of you to be so concerned with my welfare. Can you at least tell me about it when it's all over?"

"I suppose so," James shrugged distractedly, edging backwards across the entrance hall, anxious for a moment alone to read Odin-Vann's note. "If you really want to know. But, it might not be what you expect."

"I do want to know," Millie said with a firm nod. "And I imagine it's exactly the *last* thing any of us would expect. That's why I'm curious."

"What do you mean?" James paused, allowing Millie to join him in the centre of the floor.

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“You’re James Potter, aren’t you?” She smiled again and cocked her head. Her eyes were very blue, sparkling with something like mischief in the dimness of the entrance hall. “You went into the Chamber of Secrets after Petra Morganstern when she kidnapped your sister. You were in the Hogwarts Express engine with Headmaster Merlin when the train nearly went over a cliff, and you both saved it, along with the rest of us. You were right there in the middle of it on the Night of the Unveiling.” She arched one eyebrow sardonically. “You do seem to get into loads of trouble, James, but it’s not usually of the detention variety. Frankly, I’m a little jealous.”

“Of me?” James frowned in surprise. “Believe me, you wouldn’t want to be in the sorts of trouble I’ve been in.” He sighed briskly and ran a hand through his messy hair, adding, “And still *am* in, actually.”

Millie took another small step closer, drawing James into her gaze. “I’m not jealous of *you*, silly. Believe it or not, you aren’t just the son of Harry Potter anymore. When people talk about you in the dormitories and common rooms, they’re not telling stories about what happened a few decades ago to your dad. They’re talking about the things you’ve done yourself. You don’t know that, do you? You’re a bit of a legendary figure yourself these days. You, and Ralph Deedle, and Zane Walker, and Rose Weasley.” Her eyes ticked to the side and she reached up, combed a stray lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “It’s *her* I’m a little jealous of.”

“Why?” James asked incredulously, frowning. “*Her* biggest job seems to be constantly reminding us of how we’re going to ruin the whole universe by tinkering with super dangerous stuff and how she’d be so much smarter and quicker doing the dangerous tinkering instead.”

Millie tilted her head ironically, her eyes meeting his again. “I’m jealous of Rose Weasley because *I’d* rather be the one standing beside you when the next adventure starts. And I’d never tell you how you’d ruin anything. Except perhaps me for any other boys.”

James’ frown turned quizzical. He blinked at her sparkling blue gaze. She seemed barely inches from him in the shadows of the entrance hall. He could smell her shampoo and a hint of perfume. “What... do you mean?”

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In a whisper, she said, "Do I need to get out the Hufflepuppet Pals and have them spell it out for you?"

And then she leaned forward slightly, raising her chin to his, and kissed him. It was a light kiss, more playful than romantic, on the corner of his mouth. But the sudden sensation of her lips on his, both warm and soft, teasing and sensual all at once, exploded in his mind and body like magical fireworks, blotting out every other thought. He stood dazed as she took a step back from him, smiling faintly.

"Go read your note and attend to your detention," she prodded him. "But do tell me what you're up to later, if you are willing. I want to be a part of it. In whatever way I can. If you'll let me."

Behind her, the Great Hall doors pushed open again, disgorging a group of Ravenclaws, all chattering noisily. The lunchtime crowd inside was rising, gathering their books and knapsacks, preparing to return to classes. Millie turned to thread back inside, probably to retrieve her own books. She was lost in the crowd after only a few paces.

James didn't move. He could still feel the spot on the corner of his mouth where Millie had kissed him. It tingled like magic. Fleetingly, helplessly, he wondered if magic had been involved somehow. Had she used some illicitly charmed lip-gloss to stun him? Was it even now freezing him to the spot, turning him into a human statue of awestruck surprise?

He glanced down at himself. He could move, after all. Clumsily, he turned around, hefted his knapsack again, and hurried across the entrance hall toward the staircase, remembering the note in his robes, and Odin-Vann's supposed detention. Suddenly, all of it seemed slightly less important. Perhaps even a little fun. He would read whatever the young professor had written, and probably with Rose's help (or Millie's? The thought suddenly tantalized him immensely) he would do whatever was required.

Millie Vandergriff, he mused, had indeed worked magic on him. But it wasn't the sort of magic they taught in Charms class, or even Defence Against the Dark Arts. It was the oldest magic in a very old human book. And apparently, happily, there was no defence against *that* kind of magic at all.



## 7. THE TRYOUT HE DIDN'T MISS

James finally opened and read the note in the minutes before his afternoon Divination class, waiting alone next to the ladder that led up to Professor Trelawney's perfumed and poufed classroom. He could hear the professor moving above, rearranging things and humming tunelessly to herself, emitting a faint jingle from her omnipresent bangles, beads, and bracelets.

He broke the seal and unrolled the scroll between his hands. The words were handwritten and scribbled, as if the writer had been either careless or in a hurry.

*Detention tonight, 9 PM. Amphitheater.*

A surge of relief washed over James, despite the note's banality. A dreadful suspicion had come upon him as he traversed the halls to the North Tower. This evening, he'd recalled, was the Quidditch tryouts.

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As Deirdre and Graham had pointedly reminded him on First Night, James had been rather cursed over the years with being unable to attend the tryouts—or failing miserably when he did. With that in mind, he had become grimly certain that the detention from Odin-Vann (and whatever unavoidable mission it entailed) would conflict with his final Quidditch tryout, completing his perfect record of misses and failures.

Odin-Vann's nine o'clock detention, however, was happily past the time of the scheduled tryouts. He might go to the pitch distracted by what was to come later that evening, but at least he would go to the pitch, and that was what mattered.

He wondered for a moment why Odin-Vann had chosen the amphitheater. Probably it was because the large outdoor space would be completely deserted, as it usually was when night descended. If anyone was still lingering around (it was, if nothing else, a rather popular snogging spot, James knew) Odin-Vann could dismiss the surprised loiterers.

In Divination class, Rose sat next to James and scribbled notes, none of which, James knew, had much to do with divination. Professor Trelawney burbled on before her fireplace, tossing pinches of spices and powdered tinctures into the flames to create bursts of colorful sparks, inviting the students to “summon a trancelike state of receptiveness to the Fire Omens”.

James felt, as he usually did in Trelawney’s class, most receptive of all to a nap. He shuffled the scattering of Octocards on the small table before him, and then became aware of Rose glaring at him. He glanced at her and she darted her eyes toward her notes, which she nudged slightly toward him.

Written at the bottom in her neat, small handwriting, was:  
*Amphitheater tonight?*

James gave a small nod.

Rose used her quill to scribble out her note, and then added two more words: *No Ralph??*

James had observed the same thing, of course. He shrugged and shook his head.

Rose absorbed this with no change in expression. Dutifully, she scribbled out that note as well.

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James allowed his gaze to drift over the room until he spied Ralph seated next to Trenton Bloch on a pair of burgundy poufs. Ralph looked ridiculous and uncomfortable, of course, balancing his gangly body on the cushion, which seemed ready to burst beneath him. His book was balanced on his knees, but the boy was paying it no attention. His eyes were half-lidded, drooping as James watched. The Head Boy badge glimmered silver on his robes, catching the light of the fire and the bursts of colorful sparks.

Maybe that was what was behind Ralph's suspicions about Odin-Vann, and the professor's exclusion of him from tonight's so-called detention. Perhaps Ralph's position as Head Boy made him seem just a bit too institutional to be trusted with what was likely to be an extremely secret assignment.

James regretted Ralph's exclusion. And yet he reminded himself that Ralph had, as recently as First Night, expressed his deepest desire to stay out of any unexpected adventures during his final year.

Later that evening, James wolfed his dinner as quickly as possible, then ran upstairs to his dormitory to change into jeans and a sweatshirt against the cool of the evening. Grabbing his Thunderstreak from under his bed, he clutched the broom against his shoulder and tramped down the steps, taking two at a time.

He was determined to arrive at the pitch early, and at this, for the first time ever, he succeeded.

Beneath a sky dimming from azure to purple, a stiff breeze buffeted the grass of the pitch, which was already filling with students. Like James, most carried their brooms slung over their shoulders, while others bobbed on them low over the grass, congregating in excited airborne knots. The house grandstands were filling with observers, some hooting and calling cheerfully to each other. In the Gryffindor grandstand, James saw Professor McGonagall sidling into a seat next to Neville Longbottom, who saw James' look and nodded at him encouragingly.

With a practiced flip, James dropped his broom forward, allowing it to dip and bob up next to him. He caught it, threw a leg over it, and kicked upwards, letting it carry him into the cool air. Spying Graham Warton and the Gryffindor group gathering in the

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shadow of the burgundy grandstand, James piloted over to join them, making a long lazy arc around the goal rings.

“First-years,” Graham called out, raising a hand to his mouth. “Here’s your chance. Grab a broom, get it in the air, and let’s see if you can lap the pitch.”

The first-years tryout, James knew, was mostly just tradition, ever since his own dad had earned a spot on the team at the age of eleven. In truth, it was extremely unlikely that any of the youngest students would earn a place on the team, unless they were almost supernaturally talented.

Sanjay Yadev was among the few first-years who made the attempt, and the look of stubborn determination on his face was both inspiring and a little comical. The boy kicked off and succeeded in completing a single, swift lap about the pitch, easily overshadowing the other three.

“Not bad,” Graham called with a nod. “Now let’s see you dodge a Bludger.”

One of the leather balls was trapped under Graham’s foot, straining and wriggling frantically to get loose. Graham raised his foot and the ball squirted into the air. Graham used the bat in his hand to give the Bludger a directing whallop, aiming it for Sanjay where he slewed to a halt in mid-air, suddenly wide-eyed.

The Bludger angled up at the boy, emitting a low whistle as it spun.

Flustered, Sanjay seemed to attempt both a left and right feint at the same time, yelped in sudden terror, and then turned away, throwing both arms up around his head. The Bludger struck the tail of his broom, sending the boy into a spin. Secretly, James gave Sanjay credit for not being thrown from his broom entirely.

The gathered Gryffindors broke into laughing applause as Sanjay recovered and drifted down to the pitch, his cheeks burning in embarrassment.

“Next year, Yadev,” Graham called encouragingly. “You’ve got the control. Now you just need to get bruised a little. Have your sisters pelt you with apples all next summer. Get used to things flying at your head at deadly speed. You do that and maybe we’ll have a spot for you.”

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James felt his chest tighten, knowing that his turn was now up. He glanced around and noticed that, apart from him, almost everyone waiting had been on last year's team. Lily swooped alongside him on her trusty old Shuriken and gave him a sideways smile.

"You're here, at least," she commented with mock surprise. "That's a victory, whether you make the team or not."

"Thanks," James muttered, tightening his grip on his broom.

"Don't worry about it, big brother," she said, lowering her voice. "You'll do fine. I'll let you have a free goal if you like!"

James was tempted for a moment, but shook his head. "No. I need to own this. Don't do me any favours."

Lily nodded and leaned forward, propelling up toward the goals so fast that her cloak snapped behind her like a flag.

James sucked in a deep breath, held it, and launched upwards as well, joining the swirl of players overhead and doing his best to tune out the observers from the stands and the confusion of the other teams as they conducted their own tryouts all around.

As the ground fell away and the evening wind buffeted through his hair, the tension in James' chest was slowly replaced by a sort of eager serenity. He knew what he was doing, after all. Lily was right: he had made it to the pitch. Strangely enough, the most difficult challenge was already over. All he had to do now was show what he knew. And despite a late affinity to broom-riding (it was no skrim, after all), he now knew quite a lot.

As the evening sky compressed from azure to deep indigo, James performed his laps, each one faster than the other, flashing past the goal rings as Lily applauded and cheered him on. He dodged and feinted as Graham swatted Bludgers at him, and much to James' surprise and relief not a single one made contact. He took three shots at goal as Deirdre tossed Quaffles up to him. One missed, another bounced off Lily's broom handle as she spun to swat it away, and the third sailed through clean, neatly threading between her outstretched hands.

Finally, since James was trying out for Seeker, Graham released a Snitch, letting it swoop and circle up into the night sky, darting like a golden dragonfly in the dying light. James chased it, knowing that he had bare seconds before the tiny winged ball was lost amongst the rest of

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the swirling players from all four teams. He ducked and slalomed through Slytherins and Ravenclaws, who called out in annoyance at his passage. He barely avoided colliding mid-air with Julien Jackson, dropping beneath her like a stone before rocketing up again, swooping to meet the snitch as it streaked past her shoulder.

Dimly, James realized that someone was tracking alongside him, mirroring him like a shadow.

“Should I let you have this?” a familiar voice called, straining to keep pace but teasingly jovial. “Or do I take it now and save you from future embarrassments?”

James could think of no response as his brother careened along next to him, nearly shoulder to shoulder, also tracking the Snitch.

The golden ball dipped and angled downward like a missile. James dove, driving his broom straight down after it, committed to catching it even if it meant cratering himself in the pitch below. Albus whooped and lunged to follow.

James reached, straining, nearly climbing off the end of his broom, and felt the wings of the Snitch beating against his fingers. Next to him, Albus broke off the chase as the ground swam dreadfully up beneath.

At the last possible second, James snapped his fist closed on the Snitch and threw himself backwards on his broom, yanking it upright with all his strength. The force of the arrested motion made him feel as heavy as a boulder. His legs unhinged beneath him and his shoes nearly sprang from his feet before the unforgiving ground of the pitch flung up to meet them, smacking them back onto his feet. His heels thudded down, but rather than crashing, James’ feet skated along the earth, kicking up rooster-tails of dirt and torn grass, before swooping back into the air, slowing as gravity reluctantly gave him up.

He was panting, his hair wild and fluttering, his eyes as wide and glassy as crystal balls. The Snitch was held in his fist so tightly that James wondered if he’d need to pry his fingers loose one at a time. Dimly, he became aware of the sound of cheering and laughter.

“I thought for *sure* you were going to smash yourself flat as a dinner plate!” Deirdre cried, swooping alongside James and clapping him on the back. “That was the most recklessly brilliant flying I’ve seen in forever!”

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The rest of the team gathered around as James drifted to a landing near the Gryffindor grandstand. He could still scarcely believe that he had succeeded in catching the Snitch. As his feet touched the grass again, he forced his fist open, revealing the tarnished golden ball and its furled wings.

A woman's rather shrill voice spoke up from the nearby grandstand stairs. "I don't know whether I am more impressed by your resolve or concerned for your lack of self-preservation," Professor McGonagall commented, "But allow me to remind you, Mr. Potter. It is *only* a game."

James nodded at the professor faintly as she eyed him and then turned to leave, following the rest as they streamed happily out into the night.

A hand plucked the Snitch from James' palm. "As much as I hate to say it," Graham said, throwing an arm around James' shoulders. "McGonagall's right. Brilliant flying is one thing. But if you go and kill yourself first time out, we'd be in dire straits for a Seeker the rest of the season, wouldn't we?"

James glanced aside at Graham, and saw that, despite the boy's apparent concerns, he was grinning with barely concealed excitement.

Somewhat breathlessly, James asked, "So, do I make the team?"

Graham turned suddenly businesslike and gave a shrug, stepping away to slot the Snitch into its place in the Quidditch trunk. "I'll write up the roster tonight and make the official announcement sometime tomorrow. Lots to consider. But you made a good showing. A very good showing indeed."

James wanted to press Graham for an answer now, but sensed that it would be futile. Either the boy was enjoying stretching out the suspense, or he truly didn't know whether James would make the team or not. Either way, there was no point in trying to winkle an answer out of him now.

"Nice one, James!" Lily said, bumping James with her shoulder as she passed, drawing him along with her. "For a moment there, I thought I was going to end up an only child. Frankly, I could see an upside to it."

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The rest of the team gathered around jovially as the crowd poured away from the pitch and toward the glow of the castle. Many hands clapped James on the back and ruffled his sweaty hair, many voices congratulated him on an amazing, if manic, performance.

And as James joined in, laughing, glad to be, at least for the moment, absorbed into the camaraderie of the team, he thought to himself that he probably owed Albus a secret thanks. Whether his brother had intended it or not, his teasing attempt to steal the Snitch had been all the impetus James needed to risk life and limb to win it.

If James indeed made the team, he would do so on his own grit, determination, and merit. But there was no question that it would be Albus' brotherly rivalry that had sealed the deal.

Back at the common room, the evening's festivities were in full swing, what with tomorrow being Saturday and everyone's minds full of Quidditch and weekend cheer. James tried to adopt an air of dejected surliness as he eventually stowed his broom, ran a comb through his wild hair, and made his way toward the portrait hole for his "detention". Rose met him there, looking equally morose. But as the pair finally ducked through, leaving behind the raucousness and warm glow of the common room, their moods changed completely. They darted breathlessly through the halls and down the stairs, wending their way to the far corner of the castle and the arches to the outdoor amphitheater.

When they finally reached it, the huge doors were unlocked, leading out to a moon-filled natural depression lined with stone seats, all descending and arcing around the stage at the bottom. James had participated in several events here, not the least of which being his own performance as Treus in the Muggle Studies production of the wizarding classic, *The Triumvirate*. Unlike any of those times, however, the amphitheater was eerily empty now, silent and drifted sparsely with the first autumn leaves. Clouds scrubbed the starry sky, occasionally blotting the full moon and casting the amphitheater, and the forest beyond, into inky shadow.

Donofrio Odin-Vann arrived shortly after nine, finding James and Rose waiting in the back row, huddled in the nighttime chill.

"Right," he said in a hushed voice, glancing around to assure that they really were as alone as they felt. The only light was the silver moon-glow and a narrow band of gold that fell from the open doors of the

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castle. “I apologize for the ruse that I was forced to use to bring you here. Ostensibly, you shall be cleaning the aisles tonight, scooping up old candy wrappers and programs. But in truth, we have a much more important matter to attend to.”

“Without Ralph,” Rose said, standing and brushing herself off.

Odin-Vann blinked at her as if he didn’t immediately know of whom she spoke. “Oh. Yes. Without Mr. Deedle. We only need the three of us this time. Inviting any more would be to increase the risk of being noticed.” He paused and looked from Rose to James. “You don’t think I deliberately excluded him because of his words the other night, do you?”

James stood as well, brushing dead leaves from his jeans. “Well. The thought had crossed our minds.”

“I trust the three of you as much as any single one,” Odin-Vann said briskly. “Which is, I must admit, exactly as far as necessity demands, and little further. This is indeed dangerous business, as Mr. Deedle was very correct to point out. Feel free to tell him of tonight’s mission if you feel so inclined. I won’t prevent you, and it probably will be best for him to be kept up to speed in case of future developments. But believe me, his lack of involvement tonight is purely pragmatic.”

“So what’s going on?” Rose asked, hushing her own voice but unable to hide her anticipation.

“Right,” Odin-Vann said again, glancing around at the rows of dark, empty seats. James realized that the man was nearly crackling with nervous energy. “Tonight, we help Petra accomplish the first and most vital component of her plan to replace the Crimson Thread.”

The familiar sinking sensation fell over James again—the mingled hope and reluctance he felt every time he considered Petra’s mission. “What part is that?”

Odin-Vann looked at him directly. “We have to collect the symbolic Crimson Thread that was left in the World Between the Worlds. Without it, Petra cannot fully assume her role as Morgan.”

Rose blinked rapidly up at the professor. “We have to go through the Nexus Curtain? We have to visit the place where Morgan, the evil Petra, and Judith hid out and planned their W.U.L.F. attack on

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Uncle Harry and Titus Hardcastle?" Her tone was even more hushed, bursting with equal parts trepidation and heady excitement.

"Well, yes and no," Odin-Vann nodded vaguely. "*You* won't, actually, Miss Weasley. But you shall perform perhaps the most important task of all."

Rose looked taken aback but didn't object, at least not yet. Odin-Vann went on, turning to James.

"According to Petra, James, you have in your possession a singularly useful map of the school grounds. Is that correct?"

"The Marauder's Map?" James confirmed. "Yes, I still have it. Dad let me use it year before last to keep an eye on Lily and Albus, making sure they didn't skive off on Hogsmeade weekends before they were allowed. It's still hidden in the bottom of my trunk."

"And a particularly powerful cloak of invisibility?" Odin-Vann cocked his head, his eyes nearly sparkling with interest.

"Ah, no," James admitted, drooping his shoulders. "I tried, but Dad keeps that safe and tucked away at home. That's caused too much trouble in the wrong hands. He doesn't exactly trust me with it anymore."

Odin-Vann pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded curtly. "Ah. Well. No matter, then. The Map is the most important tool for tonight. Can you give it to Miss Weasley?"

James nodded and glanced at Rose. "Of course."

"Excellent," Odin-Vann went on, becoming intent. "Your job, then, Miss Weasley, will be to watch the Map tonight. It may require you to be awake all the way until dawn, but it is essential that you keep alert."

Rose looked deeply disappointed. "You mean, I'm staying here?"

Odin-Vann nodded patiently. "I need you to stay and act as sentinel. It is an absolutely essential duty. You must keep an eye on the headmaster at all times. Assure he stays inside the castle. And if he does not, if he vanishes from the Map, even for a moment, you must let us know somehow."

"The Protean ducks," James suggested, glancing at Rose. "I'll take mine. If Merlin leaves, you can duck me a message. But," he turned back to Odin-Vann. "Why are we concerned with Merlin?"

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“Because noble as he may be,” Odin-Vann sighed reluctantly, “he, like the rest of the wizarding world, will attempt to capture and stop Petra. Unlike the rest of the wizarding world, however, *he* may be capable of succeeding.”

Rose agreed to this with obvious reluctance. She had never been to the World Between the Worlds, and James knew that her curiosity about it must be nearly overwhelming.

On the other hand, as they both knew, it was where their cousin Lucy had died. James had a sense that this was the main reason Rose did not push any harder to come.

“What about me?” James asked. “Will we start at Alma Aleron? Will Petra meet us there? Is Zane involved?” At that thought, a jolt of nervous excitement fanned out in him. “That’s why she contacted him, isn’t it? I tried to ask him about it, but he’s been out whenever I try to raise him on the Shard!”

Odin-Vann was shaking his head. “All of those details will come to light soon enough. Your job, James, is to do exactly what you did a few weeks ago, when you appeared to both Petra and myself. Your job is to travel to her via the connection you seem to share. She has opened her end. She expects you.”

“You mean,” James said, deflating slightly. “My task is... to go to bed?”

Odin-Vann shrugged. “However you did it before, do it again. I am permitted to leave the castle. You are not. But you can make your own way to Petra, it seems. Do so this night. If it works as I believe it does, you will travel to wherever Petra is, without anyone knowing you’ve even left your bed. Accomplish that, and the rest will take care of itself.”

James did not feel anywhere near as certain of his ability to accomplish this task as did Odin-Vann, but he nodded slowly, his mind spinning.

Rose was clearly unhappy with the plan, but didn’t seem inclined to argue about it, at least not to Odin-Vann himself. With their business concluded, for the moment at least, the three returned to the warm glow of the castle.

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"We are clear on our roles, then?" Odin-Vann whispered, pausing beneath a hanging lantern.

Rose nodded soberly, still frowning.

James shrugged. "I'll do my best."

Odin-Vann studied his face intently, and then nodded. "Give me an hour. And then, just go to sleep. Petra will more than allow you to come through. She will summon you. It will work. Just be prepared."

James wasn't entirely sure what being prepared entailed under these circumstances, but he nodded anyway.

Odin-Vann parted from them at the next corridor. James and Rose continued on, each lost in the dense fog of their own thoughts as they made their way back to the common room. Outside the portrait hole, Rose stopped James and whispered, "Do you trust him?"

James blinked at her. Amidst his mingled worries and excitement about the night's plan, he hadn't even given that question any consideration. "I... I guess so. I don't see much reason not to."

Rose nodded slowly, her eyes drifting. "You're right, I suppose. Petra trusts him, apparently. Still..."

"I'll get you the Map," James said, nodding to himself. "And maybe you can hex me with a sleep charm before I go up. I feel about as far from sleep right now as I've ever been."

Rose agreed to this and the two climbed through the portrait hole, each filled with their own stew of excitement and worry.

The common room was still half full of students. The walls rang with loud chatter and the crackle of the fireplace. Almost no one noticed the two students' return.

James ran upstairs to retrieve the Map. When he came back down, he found Rose seated on the loveseat beneath the window with Scorpius. He could tell by the tilt of their heads that she had told him what was happening. James wasn't sure how he felt about that, but if it meant Scorpius would help Rose stay awake through the night, perhaps it was for the best. At least it meant that they weren't fighting for the moment.

Scorpius glanced up at James as he approached. James handed his knapsack past him to Rose. Inside it was the Marauder's Map.

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“Don’t forget to take your Duck,” Scorpius commented, arching an eyebrow at James. “Assuming you really can.”

“I think I can,” James nodded. “I brought some of the dirt back from the place I went to last time. I think I can take with me whatever I’m holding. My biggest problem is going to be getting to sleep at all.”

Scorpius shrugged. “Rose is a treat with a sleep charm. You’ll probably collapse on the stairs before you reach the first-years dormitory. Say hello to your daft American friend, should you see him.”

James smiled at the thought of Zane, even under these circumstances. Scorpius pretended not to like the blonde American, but James knew better. Wherever Zane and Scorpius weren’t complete opposites, they were extremely alike. “I’ll give him all your love,” he agreed.

The three whiled away a disconsolate half-hour as the common room crowd slowly thinned. James was anxious to be underway, assuming the plan would work, but tried to obey Odin-Vann’s timeframe as much as his patience would allow.

Finally, he stood and admitted that he could wait no longer. Rose nodded, drew her wand surreptitiously from the pocket of her jeans and flicked it at James, muttering something under her breath.

Nothing happened visibly, but James stumbled backwards a step as something soft seemed to whump him in the chest. He blinked and a wave of pleasant dizziness fell over him,

“Off with you,” Rose commanded urgently. “Scorpius is right. You’ll be dreaming on the stairs if you don’t hurry.”

James turned and made his way to the entrance to the boys’ dormitory. The floor seemed to tilt gently beneath him, pulling him off course so that he bumped the edge of the door with his shoulder. The sensation was muffled, almost pleasant. The stairs felt steeper than usual. He leaned forward and used his hands to pull himself up the flights, both steadyng and hurrying, nearly falling up the steps. Rose’s sleepiness spell was indeed immensely strong.

He almost forgot to collect his Duck after all—nearly threw himself onto his bed fully clothed before remembering that final detail.

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He fumbled in his open trunk, feeling more than looking. His fingers clutched the soft rubber and he clutched it to his chest, giving the Duck an accidental squeeze.

“Daft Dew-beater!”

James half-fell, half-crawled up onto his bed, his head swimming amiably, already dipping into a dreaming fugue.

His last incoherent thought was that the Duck in his hand was a Quaffle. He was flying over the nighttime pitch, preparing to score, but the goal rings were no longer guarded by Lily. Now, strangely, they were protected by the figure of Donofrio Odin-Vann, who opened his arms to block the shot. As he did, his cloak spread wide like dragon wings, seamlessly black, covering everything, covering the entire world.

James fell into the blackness, still clutching the Quaffle-Duck to his chest, and the blackness sucked him in. It streamed past him first like a wind, and then like a hurricane gale, and finally like smothering water, compressed and swift, carrying him helplessly faster and faster, breaking through the fog of Rose’s sleep charm with a stab of sudden fear.

Fighting against the rushing dark, he finally broke through, gasped urgently, and sat up.

He was no longer in his bed in Gryffindor Tower. Instead, he was sitting on a cushion of fresh grass beneath a dusky evening sky. A huge shape hulked next to him. James blinked up at it, still muddy-headed, knowing that he should recognize the shape but not quite able to do so. It wasn’t until the voice spoke up next to him, startling him badly, that it all began to make sense.

“Sheesh, James!” Zane’s voice rasped, full of shocked urgency. “Are you all right? Did that, like, hurt?”

“What do you mean?” James asked, clutching his head as if to hold it together. He turned to see Zane drop into an urgent squat next to him. Peering past the blonde boy, he asked, “Is that Apollo Mansion?”

“The very same,” Zane answered distractedly, leaning to examine James. “Seriously, you’re okay? You fell out of nowhere like a comet, hit the ground hard enough to rattle the windows!”

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James' head was clearing slowly. With Zane's help he climbed unsteadily to his feet. "I'm fine. I guess. Really good to see you, mate. Am I really here? Alma Aleron?"

Zane shrugged. "As here as I am, looks to me. I think you dropped your Duck, though."

James glanced around and saw the rubber Duck lying a few feet away in the grass. He retrieved it and pushed it into his pocket. Taking a moment to look around, he finally recognized the bulk of Apollo mansion, home to Bigfoot house. It still sat atop Victory Hill overlooking the quadrangle and the enormous brick shape of Administration Hall, with its imposing clock tower. According to it, local time was just past six in the evening. The only major difference to the scene since James had last been there was the lack of the broken werewolf statue, which had long since been cleared away now that the Wolves' reign of unnatural Clutchcudgel tournament wins had been ended.

Returning to Zane, James said blearily, "It's good to be back, even if it's only for a little while. But how is this supposed to happen? We can't just open the Nexus Curtain like we did last time, can we? The house has to be empty, for one thing."

Zane managed to look mildly wounded. "Like I can't manage the simple task of clearing a house for an evening? I just told them the place had come down with a sudden infestation of Streeler snails." He bobbed his head and glanced back at the plain, blocky façade of Apollo mansion. "Mainly because I infested it with Streeler snails," he added with a shrug. "But it wasn't hard to get everybody out. Tonight's the first Clutch match between The Bigfoots and the Vampires. The snails were just insurance. I'm supposed to be clearing them out while everyone's away. No problem. The Nexus Curtain works as a portal for every living thing from the cornerstone up. I hope those slimy, venomous little brutes are happy in their new home in the Double-you Bee Double-you." He looked a little wistful.

James nodded. "So you have the horseshoe, then?" The silver horseshoe, James well knew, was the key that opened the dimensional gate, converting the entire house into a portal.

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Zane nodded and patted the bulge in his jeans pocket. "I probably shouldn't carry it around like this, should I?" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Who knows what kind of trans-dimensional radiation the thing gives off, eh? Ah well, it'll either make it impossible for me to have kids, or make them super-powered mutants if I do. I should start thinking up possible superhero names."

"How did you come by it, anyway?" James asked, looking down at the darkly glimmering silvery shape. "That thing's got to be under a thousand spells of protection these days, doesn't it?"

Zane shrugged. "Got it from the same place we got it the first time we went through the nexus curtain. Remember that? Petra had it. Pulled it right out of her pocket. Normally, this thing lives under twenty-four-hour protection up in the Tower of Art. But Petra, you know," he shrugged in grave wonderment. "How does she do *any* of the things she does?"

"Where *is* she," James asked, glancing around. "Or Odin-Vann. Have you met him already? Tall, skinny bloke with a little pointy goatee?"

"Petra's inside," Zane nodded at the mansion again. "Along with Izzy. They have to stay totally out of sight until the last moment. That other dude is in there, too."

"Izzy's here?" James blinked. He knew he should have expected that. Petra rarely went anywhere without her half-sister, whom she protected intently.

Zane nodded. "They were talking about what will become of her once Petra zaps away into Morgan's dimension. I think that Odin-Vann guy means to take care of her. Adopt her, maybe."

James' head spun for a moment. He couldn't quite bring himself to imagine Petra abandoning Izzy, but of course it would be impossible to do otherwise. The Izzy in that other dimension, unfortunately, was dead.

At that moment, the door to Apollo mansion opened. Donofrio Odin-Vann stepped out, followed by a thin, young woman in jeans and a pale green jumper, her glossy dark hair pulled back in a ponytail.

At the sight of her, all the breath seemed to suck out of James' lungs. The color faded from everything in the world except for the

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young woman as she came lightly down the steps, meeting his eyes, smiling at him, faintly, but with genuine affection.

She approached him, reached for him, touched his shoulders. And then they were embracing. It was a brief reunion, but monumental in James' mind. He had not touched Petra in years. Had only seen her once, briefly, on the night that she had created her Horcrux. In his heart, she had become something almost mythical—a towering icon of both hopeless love and impending tragedy. And yet now, finally, here she stood before him, in his arms, half-a-head shorter than him. Her hair smelled of lavender. The embrace of her arms was strong, warm, utterly human.

And then she was letting him go, stepping back, looking up at him.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He shook his head at her, speechless. Was she sorry for the way she had recently blocked him out, closing off her end of the their shared thread? Or for including him on this possibly dangerous mission? James couldn’t tell. Possibly both. Or perhaps she was sorry for something else entirely.

“You should go now,” Odin-Vann said. “We have very little time.”

James frowned, finally tearing his gaze away from Petra. “You mean... you aren’t coming?”

Odin-Vann nodded and drew a brief, heavy sigh. “I would be of little help where you are going. My mission is to stay here. I will keep Izzy safe, and watch the house. Should anyone approach while you are in the World Between the Worlds, I will need to remove the horseshoe key. I will send them on their way by whatever means necessary and replace it once the coast is clear.”

There was something off-kilter about the way Odin-Vann spoke and avoided eye-contact, but James couldn’t quite identify what it was.

“Where will Izzy be?” Zane asked, drawing his wand out of his pocket.

Petra answered, “She’s in the basement game room. The cellar isn’t part of the portal. She’ll be safe there with the Disarmadillo and Don just outside. And she has her doll with her, Betsy.”

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James nodded hesitantly. It was strange hearing the professor referred to as Don, but he supposed that's what all of his old friends and classmates called him.

Zane tugged the horseshoe from his other jeans pocket and handed it to Odin-Vann, who accepted it reverently. He turned toward the cornerstone and the engraved shape that, James knew, fit the horseshoe perfectly. The young professor glanced back over his shoulder.

"You have your means of communicating with Ms. Weasley?" he asked James.

James nodded, patting the Duck stuffed into his pocket.

"You both have a very important duty," Odin-Vann said, looking at James and Zane meaningfully. "A grave duty more important than any other task on earth at this moment. Do you both know the true source of Petra's powers?"

James did know, but hadn't realized that Odin-Vann did. He nodded, a bit uncertainly.

Odin-Vann went on, more intently than James had ever heard him speak. "Petra is a sorceress. There may be none like her in all of history. Sorcery power is derived from a natural element. Petra's is the first of her kind: her element is the city. Where you are going, I need not remind you: there *are* no cities. There never have been, and there never shall be. While she is there, she will be at her weakest, drawing on her stored power alone, like a Muggle battery. You two are to be her protection. You are wizards. You take your power with you. Use it well. Find and collect the symbolic crimson thread. And bring it and her back here safe. Do you understand?"

"They understand, Don," Petra said. She placed an arm each around Zane's and James' waists, squeezing them both. "These two shall be my knights in shining armour, at least for the next hour. Open the portal already. As you say, time is short."

Odin-Vann still glared at Zane and James, turning the silver horseshoe over and over in his hands. James had time to wonder: if the task of protecting Petra was so important, why was the professor not attending to it himself? He remembered his suspicions about the professor, about how he seemed to be magically stymied when under stress. It was almost as if pressure flustered him into impotence, turned

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him into a temporary squib. Was that why he was choosing not go himself, remaining to perform the much more menial duty of guarding the house?

Finally, Odin-Vann turned away and approached the huge conjoined cornerstone of Apollo mansion.

Petra stepped toward the door again, bringing Zane and James with her.

"I'm sorry," she said again, glancing aside at both boys, first Zane, and then James. But then she smiled and added, "But it really is good to be together with you two rogues again. Tell Ralph I'm disappointed he isn't here as well. And Rose, too."

James nodded that he would.

A moment later, a blast of warm light exploded from Apollo mansion, silent but blinding, piercing from every window, keyhole, and door crack, even from the throat of the chimney.

Petra stiffened, drew herself up, and then gripped James' and Zane's hands on either side, squeezing. Together, the three stepped forward.

The door to Apollo mansion opened of its own accord, spilling a brilliance of colors, all fused into something rosy-golden, exerting subtle force against their bodies while simultaneously drawing them forward.

As one, they held their breath, stepped over the threshold, and vanished from the world they knew.



## 8. THE THREAD AND THE BROOCH

Absolutely nothing had changed since James had last set foot in the World Between the Worlds. He sensed it not just by looking around, but with something deeper and more pervasive inside his own heart and mind. He remembered someone commenting on it during their previous visit: *time doesn't take any time here*, they had said.

He hoped it hadn't been Lucy who'd said it. The thought of her made his heart as heavy and cold as stone.

Silently, James led the way out of the cave of the portal and up the curving stairs carved into the bare rock of the plateau. Beneath them, iron-grey waves crashed against the cliffs, sending up dull mists. They were the exact same waves as before, since unseen by any other human eyes. The wind was stiff but unscented by salt, strangely dead to the senses.

After a few minutes' climb (although it might have been hours or even days, considering the banal timelessness that gripped the terrible place) the stone stairs curved up onto a broad plateau, carpeted with hushing yellow grass. At the very end of the plateau jutted the black

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castle, its spires and turrets scratching at the sky, its hollow windows tall and staring like a hundred shocked eyes.

James took Petra's hand with his left, holding his wand at the ready in his right. In spite of everything, he exulted in her touch. It was fleeting, and soon she would be gone from him forever, but for now he soaked in the unspeakable comfort of their laced fingers, committing the feeling to memory.

The three walked in silence for some time, approaching the castle. Despite its looming turrets and dark stone walls, he felt no sense of foreboding this time. Unlike their last approach, the castle was now completely empty. Also, he now knew its story. The castle had been built as an escape route by friends of a certain dimensional traveler and his companion unicorn, both of whom had fallen prey to evil witches and wizards in the world of men. It was that unicorn's horseshoe, long parted from its bones, that had made this journey possible. The castle was a sort of way-station, filled with portals magically powered to take any travelers back to their native dimension. This, the builders wordlessly implied, was preferable to the risk of interaction with those that had killed the Rider and his Mount.

"That sky," Zane finally said, keeping his voice low in the endless, half-daylight. "Looks like a giant bowl beaten out of lead, turned upside down over the world."

"There are no stars in that sky," Petra agreed with a shudder. "It never gets dark. There's never a dusk or a dawn. It just never ends." She squeezed James' hand. "Let's hurry and get this over with."

The castle drew closer with teasing slowness. Wind whispered in the grass, and the sound almost teased at meaning. James found himself straining to hear words among the shushing hiss. He shivered and shook his head.

"Are you certain about all of this?" he asked Petra, half to distract himself, half because he really wanted to know. "I mean, are you absolutely positive there's no other way?"

Petra drew a long, silent breath. Letting it out, she said, "There's no other way. I wish there was. Donofrio and I have discussed it over and over. I'm the Crimson Thread. I'll need his expertise to assume the role of Morgan, that other dimension's version of myself. But once

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we're done, everything will finally return to normal. As long as I am in our own world, I tear it further away from its original destiny. Chaos takes more of a foothold. Who knows how many things are different now already than they should be?"

James shrugged and shook his head. "So there's a few Muggles stumbling into the courtyard of Hogwarts, is that such a big thing?" He knew he was oversimplifying things, but went on anyway. "Maybe the world really would be better off if the Muggles found out about us. Have you thought about that?"

She glanced aside at him, gave him a wry smile. "I've thought about it. And you have, too. You know how that ends. Conflict and war are inevitable in a combined world. But I'm talking about more than that. Maybe, in an untouched and untainted world, you won the Clutchcudgel tournament for the Bigfoots just because it was the right thing to do for the team, for pure fun, and sport, and honor, not because you had to for my sake."

Zane scoffed. "And maybe Professor Newt teaches cheesecakes to fly and it rains chocolate syrup on Thursdays."

Petra laughed a little. "And maybe James' Aunt Hermione is the new Minister of Magic."

James tried to laugh along, but another thought struck him, and he couldn't stop himself from saying it aloud. "Maybe my cousin Lucy never died here in this stupid, dead place."

Petra and Zane fell silent as they walked. Next to James, he sensed Petra nod slowly.

They spoke no more as they finally walked into the dull shadow of the castle. As before, it stood perched over the very edge of the far precipice, either because the cliff had eroded disastrously away beneath it, or because the structure did not rely on anything so prosaic as gravity for its foundation. Looking up at it, James saw the building now for what it really was: merely a totem, a monument meant to funnel wanderers into the main chamber, a cavernous hall surrounded by pillars and lined with empty archways. Each archway was hung with wafting curtains, and James knew that each formed its own dimensional portal.

As the three stepped into the space, their footsteps echoing up into shadowy, vaulted heights, they encountered the same scene that they had left years (or seemingly only moments) before. A broad stone

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floor was drifted here and there with dead grass, occupied in its very centre by an unmistakable, if surreal, arrangement of bedroom furniture. There was a low dresser and mirror, a bed, a chair, a woven Oriental rug. A floor lamp with a pink tulip-shaped shade lay broken on the floor. James remembered it falling as Petra had stalked through the arrangement, pushing the furniture aside without touching it, fueled by rage in pursuit of Judith and Morgan.

The symbolic crimson thread, plucked from the Loom of the Vault of Destinies, had accompanied Morgan here, waiting with her, twined around an opal brooch.

James remembered Petra's version of that same brooch. She had worn it on her cloak during their ocean voyage, apparently a gift from her dead father, purchased while she had still been in her mother's womb. Petra had lost her version of the brooch when she'd fallen from the back of the ship—and been so heartsick about it that she had nearly followed it to her own watery tomb.

Morgan, the Petra from another reality, had never gone on that ocean voyage, however. Her dimension's version of the brooch had never been lost at sea. Instead, it rested on this very dresser, glinting with the red of the strand wrapped around it.

James could tell even before they reached the disarray of the furniture, however, that the top of the dresser was now empty. Not even dust had collected on its flat surface.

Petra stopped in her tracks.

“Where is it?” she whispered urgently.

“I remember it,” Zane said, stepping forward, and then glancing back. “The thread was here, wrapped around a piece of jewelry. It must have fallen.”

James mused darkly, “Maybe Judith came back for it.”

But Petra was shaking her head. “No one can touch the thread except she who it represents. Remember?”

James remembered. He had tried to collect the brooch and thread himself, only to have his hand frozen solid all the way to the elbow.

“Look around,” Zane suggested. “Split up. Check every corner.”

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Slowly, the three began to circle the arrangement of scattered furniture, expanding in wider and wider arcs. James bent at the waist, his eyes wide, scanning the blocks of the stone floor, scrutinizing every crevice. Soon enough, he found himself moving around the portal arches and their drifting curtains. He realized that each portal emitted a faint noise: a low ribbon of whisper-song, like that which he'd fancied hearing in the grass of the plateau.

He kept a distance from them while examining around them as close as possible. Was it possible that the brooch and thread had rolled through one of the portals? Surely, the dimensional gateways only worked on living things, didn't they?

Still bent at the waist, studying the cracks of the floor, he nearly bumped right into Zane.

"It's not looking good," the blond boy whispered. "Something or someone must have gotten here before us."

James didn't want to admit that his friend might be right. In the pit of his stomach, however, he had the faintest, teasing sense of another presence in the castle. Not Judith this time, but a deepening sense of being observed. He glanced around helplessly.

Petra's voice rang from across the room, waking a stir of echoes in the high ceilings. "Found it!" she cried happily. "It was right here all along! It fell into one of the partially open dresser drawers and—"

The stone floor suddenly shook, so hard and violently that it kicked both Zane and James right off their feet. They fell backwards onto the stone blocks, which cracked all around them. Deep crevices appeared and snaked away in every direction, bursting with sharp grit. The entire castle seemed to sway at the ferocity of the quake. Deep, startled groans and creaks filled the room as dust sifted down, clouding the dark air.

"*Petra Morganstern*," a massive, booming voice announced, echoing so broadly that it vibrated in every surface.

James recognized the voice, and his stomach seemed to plummet all the way through the floor.

Light blared, illuminating the cavernous room like a flash of purple lightning, etching perfectly black shadows behind every pillar and archway, turning every spreading crack into a chasm.

Zane grabbed James' arm, clutching tight.

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“It’s Merlin!” he said, his voice thin in the disastrous noise.

In the centre of the floor, a figure stood tall, holding a staff aloft in its right hand. The staff burned with purple fire, roaring dully and emitting that blinding, cold glow. Beyond it, turning to face the sudden shape, Petra squared her shoulders, closing her fist over the brooch and thread in her right hand.

“Headmaster,” she said calmly, and her own voice reverberated throughout the room, though clear as crystal bells. “You shouldn’t have come. I don’t want to end you.”

“Nor I you,” Merlin declared with sincere regret. “I was summoned the moment you touched the thread, as rite of my guardianship of both you and our world. Give the thread to me. Return with me as your ally, not your warden.”

Petra was shaking her head. “You can’t hold the thread. Only I can. Because I now belong to the world and the dimension that it came from. Please, don’t oppose me.”

James still had his wand in his hand. He aimed it at Merlin’s broad back, not even sure what spell he meant to cast. Zane grabbed his wrist and pushed it upright, however.

“What are you doing?” he rasped in James’ ear. “We can’t fight Merlin! We brought *knives* to a *gun* fight!”

“Let me go!” James insisted, struggling, but it was too late. A shockwave of magical energy bowled both boys backwards, emanating from the point where Merlin’s and Petra’s powers suddenly collided. James struggled against the force of it, but it was a constant blast, streaming through his hair and battering at his clothing. He pushed laboriously to his feet against the howling gust and strained his eyes, desperate to see. Even as he did so, however, a wave of debilitating, inexplicable weakness washed over him. The world turned grey and he felt himself swaying, as if some secret force were sucking his energy away. Zane grabbed him, holding him upright as James’ knees went loose beneath him.

Across from them, Petra and Merlin were locked in sudden battle, she with her right arm outstretched, palm open, he with his staff extended full length. Connecting between them, dual bolts of blinding energy converged and obliterated each other, creating the constant

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magical gale. Petra's power was palest blue, blasting like shards of ice. Merlin's was electric purple, crackling with forks of lightning.

At the point where both bolts collided, terminating each other in apocalyptic annihilation, a tiny shape floated, revolving slowly in midair. It was the brooch with the thread twined tightly around it. As James watched, weakened and dreamy, the shape twitched, first jerking back toward Petra, and then lobbing again toward Merlin, locked in shifting stalemate.

They were fighting over it, engaged in a devastating tug-of-war. James had a moment to marvel: if this is how powerful Petra and Merlin were when separated from their elements—her from the city, and him from nature—then James and Zane were very fortunate indeed. They surely could not have survived otherwise.

And yet James himself felt strangely wasted, like a husk, drained and withering. He drew a gasping breath, willing himself back into motion. Clumsily, he broke free of Zane and trained his wand on Merlin again, hoping that he could distract him, if nothing else. He chose a disarming spell, spoke it as loud as he could, but the wand in his hand didn't so much as spark.

"It's no good!" Zane called against the torrent of magic and the quake of the castle. "They're drawing their power from every source, including our wands! There's nothing left for us!"

*They're not just draining power from our wands, James thought. She, at least, is draining it from me. From the invisible cord that connects us. I'm her battery!*

"GO!" Petra's voice suddenly blared, so loud and ringing that it shivered the air, setting up harmonics of reverberation in the very stones and blocks of the castle.

"She means us!" Zane cried, grabbing again at James' arm. "The whole place is coming down!"

James felt it now. The floor was canting disastrously, tilting further at every moment. The pillars creaked and leaned, beginning to topple as if in slow motion. And still James couldn't break his eyes away from Petra.

"We have to save her!" he shouted, and bolted forward, mustering every ounce of strength he could. He didn't know what he meant to do. Perhaps he would merely bowl into Merlin from behind,

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knocking the big man over. He knew he had about as much chance at that as he did of lifting Hogwarts castle with his pinkie finger, and yet he couldn't stop himself.

*This is exactly how Lucy died,* he realized as he ran. The thought was strangely comforting.

He was still ten paces away when it happened.

The brooch, still locked in the conflagration between Petra's and Merlin's bolts, began to revolve faster. As it did, the thread unwound from it. It streamed along Petra's icy stream, stretching toward her, while the brooch spun into a blur, drifting back along Merlin's purple bolt, drawn toward his power.

The two parts separated with an explosive blast that extinguished both bolts. The thread flung into Petra's open hand while the brooch streaked toward Merlin. And then both figures were obscured by a thunderclap of rebounding energy.

James flew off his feet and rolled, banging his elbows and knees painfully along the broken floor. A moment later, his face was full of dry grass. He scrambled, not even certain which way was up, and lunged clumsily to his feet on the edge of the plateau, in the shadow of the leaning castle.

His strength had returned to him, but he barely noticed. The noise of the blast had not diminished. It grew, and James realized why. Slowly, disastrously, the castle was toppling over the cliff. Its black turrets and spires still towered above him, but seemed to lean slowly backwards, crumbling into a gentle blur as every brick began to separate, every window dissolved out of true, every cone of its roof began to implode in on itself.

Zane's voice was a thin wail against the roar. "James!" he called, scrambling out of the collapsing ruin and waving both hands frantically. "Run! Run!"

"Petra!" James shouted, convulsively stumbling into the descending shadow.

But then there she was. Pillars collapsed and shattered behind her as she pelted forward, her face smudged with grime, her jeans torn, showing the bloody scrapes of her pumping knees.

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James reached for her, grabbed her hand as she lost her balance and began to fall. He tugged her forward, even as the castle utterly gave way behind her, contracting in on itself and descending beyond the plateau like a vertical freight train, taking much of the cliff with it.

"Go!" Petra panted as James pulled her onward, onto the hissing grass. "It's not over! He's still coming! *GO!*"

She struggled to regain her footing and pelted onward, now pulling James along beside her.

Behind them, an explosion of dull grey water, as high and broad as a mountain, roared into the air, blotting out the dull sky and casting gloom over the plateau.

Zane was running ahead of James and Petra, but glanced back over his shoulder at the noise and the sudden shadow. He stumbled, wide-eyed, and Petra caught his collar with her free hand dragging him forward as well.

Lightning shot prisms from the wall of water, which fell away in torrents now, revealing a bright nucleus beyond. James didn't have to ask what that nucleus was. The shape descended out of the air and set foot on the rubble of the castle's former footprint, shaking the entire plateau.

"*PETRA MORGANSTERN!*" Merlin called in a voice of thunder.

"Run!" Petra panted thinly, breathlessly. "*Run!*"

The three ran. They ran like they had never run in their entire lives.

They reached the stone stairway and nearly flung themselves over the ledge in their panic. Turning and taking two, even three, steps at a time, they bolted down, following the curve of the cliffs and descending toward the crashing waves below.

Merlin was coming. The plateau shook with the tremor of his footsteps. The light of his staff bloomed back from the low sky, throwing hard, moving shadows into every crack and fissure. Merlin, somehow, was his own battery. And his power, even if only temporary, was still terrible.

Finally, exhausted and panicked, the three stumbled into the cave of the portal.

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Only the portal, they now saw as they skidded to a horrified halt, wasn't there.

James' eyes boggled in the dimness. He knew what they should have found: the door of Apollo mansion, seen from the inside, hanging open and showing the comforting slope of victory hill and the quadrangle beyond. But there was no open door, no comforting evening light. No escape.

The ground shook. The angle of the purplish light outside changed now, reflecting directly down onto the crashing, heaving waves. Merlin had reached the stairs.

"Where's the door?" Zane cried, his voice an octave higher than normal. He stumbled forward and felt around blindly, waving his arms. "It should be here! This is the spot! Our footprints are still right there from when we arrived! Door, please! Pretty please, with sugar on top!"

A high-pitched, muffled voice suddenly squawked from James' right side.

*"Farty Fopdoodle!"*

It was the Duck in his pocket, of course. Frantically, he tugged it out and looked down at it. A single word was now scrawled on it in all capitals: *MERLIN!*

"Great," James nodded, stuffing the Duck back into his pocket. "Real helpful, Rose."

"He's had to remove the horseshoe," Petra said quietly, her eyes thoughtful. "Don had to close the portal for a moment. Someone must have come. He'll put it back. We just have to wait."

"I don't think waiting is going to be an option for much longer!" Zane exclaimed with manic cheerfulness.

"Come here," Petra said, reaching out to Zane with her right hand and taking James' in her left. "We have to be ready."

Zane came to stand next to Petra, but kept his face to the entrance of the cave. Trembling, he stretched out his wand.

"What's the best spell to use on a sorcerer?" he asked, his voice cracking glassily.

Petra considered this for a moment as the ground shook. "What's the worst spell you know?"

"Umm...!" Zane blinked.

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Petra nodded briskly. "Not that one."

A shadow moved outside the mouth of the cave. Pebbles and grit rained from the ceiling.

In the darkness of the cave, the door of Apollo mansion appeared, blooming with evening glow.

"Now!" James shouted, yanking Petra forward as he lunged. She dragged Zane behind her, even as a shape heaved in front of the cave mouth, blocking the light.

James' next footstep stumbled onto the porch steps of Apollo mansion. The door slammed behind him as Zane barreled through, nearly bowling him over.

"The horseshoe!" James cried, his breath nearly gone, barely producing a dry croak. "Take it out! *Take it out!*"

Standing next to the cornerstone, blinking in surprise with his hands still on the silvery shape, Donofrio Odin-Vann plucked the horseshoe from its engraved bed.

The brilliant rose-gold lights in Apollo mansion winked out.

The portal was closed.

James collapsed past Petra, down the steps and onto the lush grass of Victory Hill. Zane followed, panting and nearly laughing with hysterical relief.

"Someone came back for a scarf!" Odin-Vann breathed, rushing to meet them, the horseshoe in his hand. "Somebody named Perkins! I told him he couldn't go in yet because of the poison snails. He argued with me! Said that if that crazy zombie Zane Walker could handle them, so could he! I had to let him in! I put the key back in place as soon as I could!"

Wordlessly, James held up the rubber Duck in his hand, showing Odin-Vann the word scrawled across it in Rose's hasty capitals. The professor's face went slack and ashy with shock. After a second, his eyes darted from the Duck, to James, to Petra.

"Did you get it?" he asked, his voice a breathy husk.

Zane nodded wearily, still tittering with nervous laughter. "We succeeded. It was close, but we succeeded."

James looked up at where Petra still stood on the steps. The knees of her jeans hung in frayed strips, stained with her blood. Her hair was wild and matted with dust, clinging to her sweaty cheeks and

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hiding her eyes. She raised a hand and showed her open palm. In it, looking like nothing more than a ball of red lint, was the crimson thread.

“We got the thread,” she said, her voice a low, hollow monotone. “But we *didn’t* succeed.”

And suddenly James understood what she meant.

Petra may have told everyone, even Odin-Vann, that their mission was to retrieve the crimson thread. But Petra herself had gone to the World Between the Worlds for her own reason, a reason she may have cared about even more.

She had gone to replace her father’s lost brooch.

And in that task, sadly, she had failed miserably.



## 9. PEEVES PLAYS HIS PART

James slept long and late the following morning, awaking well past Saturday breakfast to an empty dormitory and feeling little inclined to get up. The leaden grey sky outside his window concurred with his lethargic mood. He stared at it from the rumpled mess of his bed, replaying the night's events. The grit of the destroyed black castle was still in his hair. Its dirt was grimed into the palms of his hands and beneath his fingernails. He was still wearing the jeans and tee shirt he had worn to greet Zane at Alma Aleron, only now they were sweaty and grass-stained.

He longed to spend an hour or three soaking in the fifth floor prefects' bathtub, and considered asking Ralph for the password. This, of course, would likely necessitate an explanation for why he was so grimy after a night's sleep, and while he did intend to tell Ralph everything that had happened, he didn't feel up to it just this morning.

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Thus, instead, he merely lay in bed blinking at the autumn clouds as they rolled dully past his window, grumbling with distant threats of rain.

He'd assumed that his dream-journey would end once he, Petra, and Zane returned from the World Between the Worlds, but in fact he had spent another hour or more there with them, in the basement game room of Apollo mansion, explaining their adventure to Donofrio Odin-Vann and discussing what still remained to accomplish.

Petra was morose and quiet throughout, seated next to James on a low, sprung couch with her feet splayed in front of her, her shoes kicked off. Izzy seemed to sense Petra's mood, and joined her, lying her own smaller body on the arm of the sofa beside her sister, crossing her arms over her chest, mimicking Petra's pose perfectly.

Odin-Vann was ashen-faced at the idea that Merlin had somehow discovered the plan, and had somehow been summoned to confront the three of them.

"Not *us*," Zane shook his head. "*Petra*. She said it herself. The only person who can touch the thread is the person who it represents. I expect that means even old Merlin Magic-pants." He tried to give the nickname his usual familiar irreverence, but even he was still shaken by the memory of Merlin's terrible pursuit. "Maybe he has his own way of getting into the Double-you Bee Double-you."

Odin-Vann shook his head doubtfully. "I *would* say that absolutely no one can access the World Between the Worlds without the dimensional key," he said. "But this is the great Merlinus we are talking about, he who spent centuries suspended in the Transitis Nihilo, who traveled beyond death for a year only to return at his own strange bidding. Even if he couldn't cross the Nexus on his own, he may well have been capable of establishing a sort of beacon to summon him should Petra ever touch the thread." He shivered at the very thought.

"But if that's the case," James realized, sitting up in alarm, "then that means we trapped him in the World Between the Worlds when we left without him!"

This time it was Zane who shook his head. "The black castle was full of portals," he said, standing and heaving open a nearby refrigerator. Bottles rattled in the door and he plucked one out, popping

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its top with a brief hiss. “Remember? They were escape routes for anyone who found themselves stuck there, taking them back to their own dimension. The castle may have ended up a ruin at the bottom of that dead ocean, but the portals are still there, and I bet they work just fine. Merlin will find his way back, somewhere and somehow, but drummels to donuts he’ll be as wet as a drowned Glumbumble when he does.”

“And as angry as a fire-demon,” James sighed.

“He didn’t see you,” Petra said dully. “All of his attention was focused on me. I made sure of that. He will be in a rage, but that rage will belong to me alone.”

James glanced at her. There was rage in her voice as well, albeit cold, banked to a deep-freeze of deceptive calm. She had run from Merlin, escaped from him, but only barely. How could that be? Shouldn’t the two of them have been very nearly matched there in the World Between the Worlds, each separated from their elemental powers? Was her strength divided, somehow? Had she spent a portion of it hiding Zane and James from Merlin, protecting them? Or was there something more to her seemingly reduced power?

He thought of the weakness he’d felt when she had summoned her powers in force. He thought, *I’m her battery.*

“Right,” Odin-Vann nodded curtly. “The point is, we’ve succeeded in collecting the crimson thread. All that remains now is to replace it in the Loom of the Vault of Destinies. This shall be my challenge, as it may well require some spell or enchantment to power it back up again, sending it back to its native dimension and returning us our original destiny.”

Zane shrugged. “Or maybe just getting the thread back in the same place as the Loom will cause it to magically snap back into place, like a stretched rubber band being let go, or two magnets getting close enough to get caught in their own attraction, snapping together. Professor Jackson said something like that, back when the thread was first stolen. The destinies *want* to realign, he said.”

Odin-Vann frowned at Zane. “Your professor Jackson spends too much time toying with theory and too little time in actual magical practice. He thinks he knows much more than he does, which is precisely why he must not be involved in this mission at all, or know

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anything about it. When the time comes, Mr. Walker, I will summon you to assist me in returning the thread to the Vault of Destinies. I understand that you are wily enough to procure a key to the Alma Aleron archive, where it is housed?"

Zane shrugged. "I'm wily enough to get you a live orchestra to play *The Blue Danube* while you do it, if you want. You just say when."

Odin-Vann agreed with a nod. "Once I am prepared, I shall indeed say when. If all goes as planned, the moment the thread is returned, Petra shall assume her new role as the Morgan of that alternate dimension. The original Morgan of that dimension, now dead and buried here, will become our version of Petra."

Still lying on the sofa arm next to Petra, Izzy rolled onto her side and buried her face against Petra's shoulder. She wasn't crying, James sensed—she had surely already shed more than her share of tears over the impending loss of her sister—but neither was she ready to allow it to happen just yet. Probably, she never would be.

James found he was shaking his head, finally hitting on an objection that had been brewing in the back of his mind for some time. "But it can't be that simple, can it?" He turned to look aside at Petra. "That other dimension's version of you, the Morgan version, was evil. She partnered with Judith to steal Izzy from you, since she accidentally killed her own dimension's version. She was willing to see my dad and Titus Hardcastle killed by the W.U.L.F."

"She *wasn't* evil," Odin-Vann corrected with grave certainty. "Morgan wasn't evil any more than Petra is, regardless of what the rest of the magical world may think. She was simply heartsick by the consequences of her choices. People will do surprisingly desperate things when they are heartsick. Morgan wasn't evil. She was simply broken, and crushed, and bereft."

"And when I go to replace her in her world," Petra said, still staring blankly into the shadows. "I will be broken and crushed and bereft as well. I will be more Morgan than Petra myself. I'll have lost the people I love the most. It will be exactly as it should be."

The chill in her words was terrible to James. She sensed this. Without looking at him, she felt for his hand between them, squeezed it, and held it.

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*You're one of those people,* the touch of her hand seemed to say. He didn't know if the thought came directly from her, via the invisible cord that connected them, but he didn't doubt the sentiment, either way. He squeezed her hand back and drew a deep, shaking sigh.

Odin-Vann suggested that he be the one to safeguard the crimson thread until the time of its final use. "For the very reason it was hidden in the World Between the Worlds by Morgan: because it is far too magical to go unnoticed. Despite recent events, Hogwarts is still one of the most magically fortified places on earth. There, I can keep it hidden."

"Just like Madame Delacroix did with the Merlin throne," Zane nodded and shrugged, "back during our first year, when we were all still just wide-eyed innocents, untainted by the tribulations of responsibility."

Petra rolled her eyes at Zane, but there was a ghost of a smile there as well.

Odin-Vann held out a small leather-bound jewelry box, open like a clamshell. Petra stood and placed the crimson thread in the box, which Odin-Vann snapped closed, never touching the thread himself. James had an idea that the professor wouldn't have been able to hold the thread even inside the jewelry box if Petra had not placed it there with her own hand, granting her unspoken permission.

James also had an idea that Ralph, were he there, would object strongly to Odin-Vann's possession of the thread.

"And this," Odin-Vann said, tugging the unicorn horseshoe from his pocket and handing it to Petra, "I assume you can return to its rightful place of protection?"

Petra accepted it with a weary nod. "The curators of the Tower of Art will never know it was gone."

Shortly, James felt the pull of the collapsing dream-visit. The walls of the game room darkened. Voices became insubstantial, like noises heard underwater. And then, for a long time, there was only darkness. He returned to his bed via the dark, much more quietly and subtly than he had left.

James spent most of that Saturday midday listlessly haunting the common room, making half-hearted attempts at his Herbology reading assignment and other homework. He had just begun an essay on the

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seventeen-point mental checklist required before Disappearance (he had only recently begun the class on the subject, but would not be making any actual attempts for several weeks), when Rose came through the portrait hole, followed by Scorpius.

Joining James at a corner table, she demanded explanations of everything that had happened the previous night, and James, in turn, berated her lateness in warning them of Merlin's departure.

"Late nothing!" she hissed at him, leaning close, her eyes stern. "He never left at all! At least, not in any way that the Map showed."

James frowned. "But you sent the Duck warning. One magical battle too late, of course, but you sent it. What do you mean he never left?"

Scorpius unslung his knapsack and pushed it across the table to James. "The Map," he gestured at it. "It's there inside. It shows the headmaster all right, just as expected. We followed his movements precisely, all night, from right here in the common room. He started out in the entrance hall. Then he went to the library."

Rose nodded. "And then he went down to the laundry. We wondered about that, but what do we know? Maybe he checks in on the house elves every night. He's the headmaster."

"But then he went to the girl's third floor bathroom," Scorpius went on, arching an eyebrow. "So we got a bit suspicious."

Rose counted off on her fingers as she recited, "*Then* he went to the Ravenclaw common room. Then a broom closet. The potions classroom. An empty teacher's lounge. The kitchens. A supply cupboard."

"And then he spent some time at the top of the stairs just down the hall," Scorpius said, tilting his head. "So we poked out to see what he was up to."

James looked from Scorpius to Rose, baffled. "So? What was he doing?"

"Who knows?" Rose said meaningfully. "All we found was Peeves defacing a statue with a stolen lipstick. Peeves *wearing Merlin's black ring on his finger!*"

James blinked at his cousin for a moment, trying to absorb the implication of this.

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Rose grew impatient. “Merlin gave his beacon stone ring to Peeves for ‘safe keeping!’” she made sarcastic air-quotes with her fingers. “We tried to take it away from him, told him it was a powerful dark relic, but he acted like we had insulted his dear beloved mum! Er, assuming poltergeists *have* mums...” She frowned a little uncertainly.

“So Merlin tricked the Map into thinking *Peeves* was *him*,” James finally understood with a thoughtful nod. “But how did Merlin know to do that last night?”

“He didn’t!” Rose perked up again. “That’s just the thing! Peeves told us Merlin entrusted him with the ring almost *two years ago!*”

James considered this for a moment and didn’t find it particularly surprising. “Well, I did tell him about the Marauder’s Map. Blokes like Merlin are keen on keeping an eye on everyone else, but not so keen on having any eyes kept on him. But it’s not exactly safe to let Peeves run around with the beacon stone, is it?”

Scorpius shrugged dismissively. “It’s probably the safest place of all. Merlin’s about the only person Peeves is afraid of. Also, the little imp’s too stupid and petty to understand the ring’s significance, and too fanatically jealous of his ‘sworn duty’ to let anyone else so much as look twice at it.”

Even Rose couldn’t argue with this logic.

Later that evening, James found Ralph in the library and attempted to explain Odin-Vann’s “detentions”, and the events that had followed. Ralph’s face was stoic as he listened, his arms folded across his big chest and his eyes glaring pointedly at nothing in particular.

“So, Odin-Vann invites you, Zane, and Rose on some secret, dangerous mission,” he finally said, still avoiding James’ eyes. “But leaves me out of it completely. And you believe him when he says it has nothing to do with the fact that I don’t trust him.”

James shrugged a little. “He said Rose and I were enough. And he was right, more or less,” he admitted reluctantly. “Zane only came because he was the one that emptied out Apollo Mansion. Other than that, we were just there to protect Petra. Turns out we were about as helpful as a pair of Flobberworms.”

“My wand’s a part of Merlin’s staff, if you remember,” Ralph said, raising his chin and finally turning his gaze on James. “If I’d been

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there, I might have been able to get Merlin's attention with it, at least. Did you think of that?"

James hadn't. Before he could think of any response, however, Ralph went on.

"You lot are keeping Merlin out of this, but I think that's a huge mistake. Everyone else might be mad with paranoia about Petra. Maybe even your dad and the Auror department. But Merlin's better than that. It's a mistake to keep him out. I think that's why Odin-Vann didn't include me."

James shook his head. "I really don't think so, Ralph," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. "I trust Merlin just as much as you do. But he's the head of the school, and that makes him part of the machine that wants to catch and stop Petra. He may be Merlinus Ambrosius, but even *he* has to obey the laws of the land now. Just like my dad. And besides," he added, trying not to be stung by Ralph's words. "Odin-Vann *wanted* us to tell you about it. He said it was best to keep you in the loop, just in case Petra needed us again."

This was a slight exaggeration of Odin-Vann's words, James knew, but he thought he could be forgiven for it. Ralph sighed and returned his gaze to the far wall.

"I don't trust him," he muttered. "And more importantly, I don't *like* him. I don't know what it is. But he's wrong for you lot, and he's wrong for Petra."

James leaned forward on the table dejectedly. "It won't matter much longer, it looks like," he murmured glumly. "They'll be returning the crimson thread to the Loom soon. Petra will be gone from our world forever. Odin-Vann may be dodgy and unpredictable, but when that happens, he'll just be a dodgy and unpredictable Charms teacher. Nothing more."

Ralph softened slightly. "So when's that going to happen?"

James shook his head. "Dunno. Zane has to get them into the Archive to do it, though. He'll tell us via the Shard just as soon as Odin-Vann gets everything ready and sets the date."

"Will we see Petra again before it happens?"

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James considered this, and then shook his head again, slowly. "She wanted me to tell you she missed seeing you, and Rose, too. I think that was her way of saying goodbye. Probably to all of us."

Ralph nodded sadly. There didn't seem to be anything left to say on the subject.

At another table across the library, Millie Vandergriff sat with a group of other Hufflepuffs, their heads together and whispering animatedly. Her profile was to him, and James considered it as he watched her. She was pretty, he realized. More, he wanted to go to her. He wanted to sit down with her and her friends, to lose himself in their conversation, and forget the sad worries that hung over his head like storm clouds. Millie didn't command his heart like Petra did—he had no illusions about that—but neither did she promise the inevitable heartbreak and regret that his love for Petra demanded.

He wished Millie would look over at him, perhaps wave him over. He would hold her hand under the table if she allowed him. Maybe later, he would walk her to the Hufflepuff common room door, and she would kiss him again.

Or maybe *he* would kiss *her*. And this time, he allowed himself to muse, it would be full on the lips.

She did not look around at him, however. She was too engaged with her friends, covering her laughter with one hand, pushing her blonde hair back behind one ear, completely oblivious of James' pensive, considering gaze.

Soon enough, he got up, gathered his things, said goodnight to Ralph, and left.

Graham was just posting the Quidditch roster on the notice board near the portrait of the Fat Lady, surrounded by a group of curious onlookers, when James approached. He almost asked Graham directly if he'd made the team, but realized he didn't want everyone to hear the response, just in case the answer was no.

He shouldered toward the notice board and scanned the names, his pulse suddenly thudding in his chest. When he reached the bottom of the list, his heart plunged. His name wasn't there.

But then he realized that he had skimmed the list too fast, scanning it almost without reading, searching only for his own name.

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It was there after all, but reversed, last name first, so that his eye had initially skipped right over it.

*POTTER, JAMES: SEEKER*

James' heart leapt upwards again, now trip-hammering. He felt such a deep, sudden sense of elation that he swayed on his feet, nearly faint with relief and surprise.

He had been waiting for this moment ever since his first year, and had begun to suspect, deep down, that it would never—*could* never—happen.

Only now did he realize just how much he needed this good news.

“Congratulations, James!” Lilly said, joining him and nearly hopping with excitement. “Mum and Dad will be so proud! Both of us playing for Gryffindor, me as Keeper and you as Seeker! We’re *destined* to take home the trophy this year!”

James’ face split into a helpless grin. He nodded, then shook his head in wonder, and then nodded again. Lily laughed and pulled him toward the portrait hole.

“Come on!” she enthused. “Let’s get the whole team together and start planning formations! *Oh*, this is going to be simply excellent!”

James was still speechless, but he agreed with a nod, allowing his sister’s enthusiasm to drag him along, into the warmth and light of the common room, where a round of spontaneous applause greeted him. James’ face reddened, but he didn’t mind. He saw Deirdre and Graham beaming at him, along with Xenia Prince, Marcus Cobb, Walter Stebbins, and the rest of the Gryffindor team. James had gotten what he wanted after all: something to distract him from the worries and sadness of the past several hours.

As the team surrounded him, patting him on the back and ruffling his hair, James thought: this might almost, possibly, be better even than kissing Millie Vandergriff again.

But only *almost*.



The school year finally began to settle from the exciting unpredictability of new classes and schedules to the familiar pattern of assignments and homework, busy week-days and too-short weekends. Autumn stole over the grounds like a thief, absconding with the hot afternoons and leaving footprints of mist, even curling frost, on the morning-bright windows. The Forbidden Forest began to replace its seamless green with hues of coppery orange, neon yellow, and glossy maroon. The wind became stiffer across the lake, which shivered into choppy waves, as if applauding the oncoming change of seasons.

For James, as the days turned into weeks, there was no more word from Petra, nor any night-time treks to see her via the invisible, private ribbon that connected them. He didn't sense that she was shutting him out so much as that she, like him, was simply in waiting mode, with little to do while Professor Odin-Vann prepared the recaptured crimson thread for its return to the mystical Loom from which it, as the symbol of Morgan, had been plucked. According to the Professor, there was a good bit of magic that needed to go along with the returned thread in order to reset the Loom and jump-start the Vault of Destinies again.

Or perhaps, James mused disconsolately, the young professor, like James himself, was simply reluctant to see his old friend vanish from the world forever, and was finding reasons to delay her departure. Zane believed this firmly, implying, via the Shard, that Odin-Vann and Petra were much more than friends.

"His eyes go all ablaze whenever he's around her," he insisted one afternoon, half-a-month after the debacle of the World Between the

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Worlds. “You saw it yourself. When they talk about what he calls her ‘final mission’, he gets so antsy he looks like he’s about to jump right out of his skin. They obviously have a thing.”

James, re-tying his tie after mid-day Quidditch practice, shrugged and shook his head at the Shard where it lay propped on his bed in the Gryffindor dormitory. He knew what Zane meant by “a thing”, of course, and didn’t like it in the least. Not because he didn’t think it was true, or even likely—it was far more plausible that Petra would fall for the worldly-wise older man than the younger friend still in school—but because he hated the thought so intensely. He hated the jealousy it provoked in his chest mostly because he loved Petra himself, but also because he liked Professor Odin-Vann. He liked the professor’s odd quirks and restrained fervor and his commitment to helping Petra.

Still, if the young man did harbor a romantic affection for Petra, how could James blame him? Maybe, at least, it meant that Petra would enjoy her last days in the world she was born into. If James’ love for her was true, he would want her to be happy, right? Even if that meant finding comfort and love in another man’s arms.

The thought made him prickle all over as he knotted his tie violently under his chin, his hair still damp from a cursory shower.

With a yawn, Zane said, “But I still think this whole ‘magical catalyst’ thing Odin-Vann’s on about is complete Doxie doo.” It was still morning, Zane’s time, and he was lounging in his pajamas—a pair of too-short bottoms printed with bright blue snowflakes beneath an orange tee shirt—seated cross-legged on the rumple of his bed with a steaming mug of coffee balanced on one knee. “I may not like old Professor Stonewall much, but I trust his gigantic noggin. If he says all that’s needed is for the thread to be put back into the Loom, then that’s the way it is. Snap, bang, and Petra is gone to her new dimension. But I guess there’s no harm in being overly prepared, right? Especially if it’s just an excuse for the pointy-bearded professor Odin-Vann to have a few more romantic evenings with his doomed love.”

James said goodbye to Zane abruptly and stuffed the Shard back into his trunk, not wishing to think any further about Odin-Vann and Petra having “romantic evenings”, no matter how doomed.

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The truth was, as the days began to tick by like minutes on a clock, James knew that he had to get over his own hopeless affection for Petra. It would only make it harder for both of them to do what needed to be done. And if Petra was indeed romantically involved with Odin-Vann, then perhaps that was all the better.

James, on the other hand, had Millie Vandergriff.

Almost without any official declaration, the two of them had become what Zane referred to as “a thing”, and subtly, the dynamic of James’ entire school experience had changed.

Millie met him occasionally in the halls and walked to classes or meals with him. Sometimes (though not always) she would reach for his hand and hold it lightly as they walked, talking breezily of this or that, pretending to ignore the electricity of their laced fingers, while other students (usually girls) watched furtively and whispered.

Millie often joined James, alongside Ralph and Rose and sometimes Scorpius, for study sessions and homework in the library. She even came, on rare occasions, to hang out with James in the Gryffindor common room. He returned the gesture once, going to see her in the Hufflepuff quarters, which were low and warm, accessed by a tunnel behind a stack of barrels near the kitchens. James was welcomed by the Hufflepuffs, but didn’t feel quite at home there, despite the mellow wooden furniture and the round dormitory doors reminiscent of a hedgehog’s warren.

Another thing James discovered, with a mixture of pride and consternation, was that dating Millie meant that she (accompanied usually by a small gaggle of her girlfriends) attended his Quidditch practices. She and her entourage would be seated high in the Hufflepuff grandstands, usually chattering obliviously, except when Millie applauded James for some well-executed maneuver. He was invariably embarrassed on these occasions, and yet the sight of her guileless smile and unabashed cheering warmed his heart, even as the air turned cool and crisp all around.

He liked Millie. He liked the way her eyes sparkled when she saw him in the halls, and her unselfconscious precociousness, and the way she didn’t *always* reach for his hand, or sit next to him in class, or accompany him into the Great Hall for dinner. If she had obsessed and fawned over him (the way Chance Jackson had begun to with Albus,

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although Albus himself seemed not to mind) James would have quickly felt stifled and overwhelmed. Instead, Millie maintained a sense of pleasant, teasing unpredictability and mystery.

Often, instead of joining James at his table in the library, she would breeze past and sit with a group of fellow Hufflepuffs. He would glance up at her throughout the evening, watching her laugh with her friends, or bite the feather of her quill as she read, or practice spell-motions with her wand while studying the diagrams in *The Caster's Lexicon*. But every now and then he would catch her glancing up at him, just as he was her. Usually she would look away, smiling sheepishly. Sometimes, however, her eyes would lock with his, briefly, sharing a surprisingly intimate moment across the hushed anonymity of the library.

James became aware that Millie's family was what Scorpius referred to as "old magic": exceedingly wealthy, historically pureblood, and aristocratically connected. Millie herself scoffed at any suggestion that her family was influential in any way, or that she took any cache from it if they were.

"I barely represent them at all, much to my mother's chagrin," she told James with a wry smile. "You'll meet the Vandergriff kith and kin soon enough, I hope. You can make up your own judgment about them when you do."

On some occasions James felt bold enough to kiss Millie, usually in the evenings after he walked her to the Hufflepuff common room, where they huddled in the nook formed by the stacks of barrels. He would kiss her until her lips formed a delighted smile and she withdrew, her face as flushed as his, whispering breathless goodnights. He would watch her duck into the hidden entry, and then walk back the way he'd come, hot and tingling beneath his collar, blaming it on the flickering torches that lined the walls around the kitchens.

Sometimes he thought guiltily of Petra. When he did, he would insist to himself that she was probably doing the same thing with Professor Odin-Vann. After all, it wasn't like James and Petra were, or had ever been, "a thing". Petra wouldn't feel jealous of Millie. She would be delighted that James was happy.

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He repeated this to himself, while simultaneously hoping that it wasn't remotely true.

Midnight Quidditch started up again, and as much as Graham had warned James not to be involved, he simply couldn't bring himself to stay away. It wasn't merely that it counted, in James' mind, as extra team practice. He also relished, more than anything, the chance to ride his beloved skrim, surfing the dark air in ways that no broom could quite duplicate.

Scorpius informed James of weekly matches via notes passed in Herbology class, which James quickly read and, per arrangement, immediately fed to the giant potted Cobra Lily.

He told no one of the Night Quidditch matches, especially Ralph, who would have felt exquisitely awkward knowing of such things in his new role as Head Boy. And yet, despite informal rules to the contrary, James was by no means the only official house Quidditch player who also appeared in the clandestine matches. His sister Lily had been on the night league even longer than she'd been playing for the Gryffindor team. Both Nolan Beetlebrick and Trenton Bloch appeared on the Slytherin night team. Julien Jackson had begun to play for the Hufflepuffs only after she had snuck out the previous year to chastise Stanley Jasper, the daytime Hufflepuff Seeker, about his extra-curricular involvement, only to become swept up irresistibly in the night league herself.

As usual, the teams compensated for their nights of lost sleep via a special potion brewed by Scorpius and Ashley Doone from a questionably legal plant called Somnambulis. Officially, Professor Longbottom had ceased growing the plant three years earlier. Unofficially, Scorpius was still able to "steal" a fresh supply every three weeks from a cluttered back corner of the greenhouse.

Professor Longbottom himself still attended some night league matches, albeit anonymously, dressed in a deep hooded robe and rarely speaking. Nor was he the only secret observer. On any given night, the grandstands were peppered with as many as two dozen robed and disguised figures, most seated well away from each other, all slipping away wordlessly as the matches concluded. James was quietly certain that one of the observers was, in fact, Professor McGonagall, as evidenced by her familiar purposeful walk and rigid posture.

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Unlike daytime matches, which were wild and deafening affairs, the night league was characterized by feverishly hushed matches, punctuated only by harsh whispers, the whoosh of the gently glowing Bludgers, and the occasional bone-rattling crunch and yelp as one of the balls struck its mark. The loudest moments were when rasped arguments broke out over the always nebulous and changing league rules, or when goals were made, whereupon hoarse cheers and jeers would waft over the pitch, accompanied by the dull thumping of gloved hands, applauding by moon glow.

At the end of the third match of the season, as Scorpius was summoning the blue-glowing Bludgers and forcing them into the old trunk, James approached with his skrim clutched under one arm, dripping sweat, his shoes soaked with pre-dawn dew.

“There’s one thing the Night League is still missing,” he said, half whispering in the misty dark. “Something to really set it apart from the daytime matches.”

“Playing in the pitch dark of the wee hours on one of those daft flying ironing boards isn’t enough for you, is it?”

“Game magic,” James nodded, ignoring Scorpius’ grumpy mood. The Gryffindors had just lost to Hufflepuff, after all, although James himself wasn’t particularly upset about it. The daylight teams were set to compete later that week, and James was confident of a solid win for *that* match-up.

“Game magic?” Scorpius scowled, his face lit blue by the glow of the struggling Bludgers. “That’s from that ridiculous American game. Cudgelclutch. We don’t do that.”

“We *don’t*, but we *should*,” James insisted. “All we’re doing now is playing Quidditch in the dark.”

“With skrims optional,” Lily suggested, coming alongside James and mopping her brow with her sleeve.

“And snitches only worth twenty points,” Julien Jackson piped up smugly. “Sorry James. A good catch isn’t enough to seal a victory when the moon’s up.”

James nodded, unperturbed. “Night league’s different enough, but it could be better still, while also keeping us sharp with our wands. When I first started, we used to use dueling spells, remember? But that

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got too dangerous, with people getting blasted right off their brooms or getting petrified and running into the grandstands. Game magic is specially *designed* for use during sport. Imagine using a gravity well charm to redirect a Bludger away from your head. Or a Bonefuse hex to make your opponent drop the Quaffle!"

"Gravity wells? Bonefuse hexes?" Lily frowned. "Those aren't in the Caster's Lexicon."

Coming alongside his team captain, Stanley Jasper nodded, warming to the idea. "Yeah, I've heard of that! Spells invented only for sporting matches! I've used magic during scratch games back home, playing against my older brothers, although it was never legal or anything. Just a way to keep things interesting."

"You're just looking for an unfair advantage," Julien suggested, narrowing her eyes at James. "You're already good at those spells. We'd all still have to learn them."

James shrugged, switching his skrim to his other arm. "Game magic isn't hard to learn. Most of it's just variations on traditional dueling spells. But if you don't feel like you'd be up to facing off against me..." He blinked up at the dark sky mournfully.

Julien frowned. "You'll have to try harder than that to bait me, Potter," she said, poking him in the stomach with her broom handle. "But if you want game magic, we're more than a match for you. You get us a Clutchcudgel rulebook with approved spells and watch what happens. You want gravity wells? We'll give you gravity wells deep enough to suck the paint off your skrim."

James grinned. "*Now* you're talking!" He realized as he said it that Zane Walker seemed to have rubbed off on him over the years, at least a little.

The only class James had any serious difficulty with—apart from his usual lackadaisical attitude towards studying and essay deadlines—was Apparition. Despite its only being a twelve-week optional course offered by the Ministry of Magic for qualifying seventh years, he'd become so bored with the class that he wished he'd never asked his parents for the nine Galleon laboratory fee to sign up. This was because the first ten weeks of the course, much to his disappointment, were devoted to an intensive study of Apparition technomancy, its myriad dangers, and the seemingly endless legal ramifications of improper use.

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The instructor, a Mr. Wilkie Twycross, was a very old man with white hair as fine as dandelion fluff and glasses so huge and thick that James feared an errant sunbeam might cause the man's eyebrows to burst into flame. He insisted, in his high, tremulous voice, that Apparition was "a binary process, allowing no luxury of a learning curve. You will either do it perfectly and properly, or you will fail abominably. There is no in-between. Apart, of course, from the very real possibility that you may Reapparate in-between two floors, or much worse."

He eyed James as he said this, his pale blue pupils magnified to the size of eggs behind his bulbous eye-glasses. James pretended to take notes. On the top of his parchment were the words *Destination*, *Determination*, and *Deliberation*. He had foregone any further note-taking, choosing instead to studiously apply more and more emphasis to Twycross' initial "three Ds", adding multiple underlines, quotation marks, circles, and arrows. As Twycross droned on, beginning again his prescribed pre-Dissaparation checklist, James sighed and lay down his quill.

He knew he'd be excellent at Apparition when the time came. He longed to try it for the first time, even considered attempting it on his own, outside of class. He sat up again at the idea, telling himself he could recruit Millie and Ralph to do it with him. Ralph was less eager to attempt Apparition himself, but he would probably be glad of the chance to practice it first without an audience.

He picked up his quill again and, underneath the Three Ds, wrote: *Who's ready to bunk all this and just try it?*

Keeping his eyes on Twycross, he nudged Ralph on his right and slid the parchment toward him. Ralph read the note and shrugged a little uncertainly. James repeated the gesture on his left, for Millie's benefit. He half expected her to give him one of her eager, precocious smiles, but she merely blinked at him in awed surprise, and then scribbled a note beneath his.

*Apparition scares the hair off me! I would pay NOT to do it!*

James was mildly surprised, but didn't press it. He supposed it was possible to be frightened of Apparition, especially in light of Twycross' hectoring warnings. But James knew it was mostly quite safe, if you understood what you were doing. He'd side-along Apparated

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with his mum and dad on many occasions, and they'd never been splinched, skunked, contrasected, unverted, or any of the other dire things Twycross warned about. They'd never left behind even a single fingernail or had so much as a sock turned inside-out.

At dinner, James suggested to Rose that the three of them sneak back to the classroom that evening to give it a try.

"Fine," Rose agreed, "But don't tell Scorpius. For once, I want to know how to do something before he does."

"You know how to do everything before everybody," James blinked at her, but Rose shook her head, glaring down the table toward her *on-again, off-again* boyfriend, with whom she was apparently back off-again.

"His parents hire tutors for him every summer to 'prepare him for the rigours of the next scholastic term'." This time she implied the quotes with a snarky tone, but James heard hurt more than nastiness in her voice. "But I doubt even *he's* been allowed to practice Disapparation before he's of legal age."

Regardless of Rose's reasons, James was glad of her accompaniment.

Seated a little further down the table from Scorpius was Albus, once again joining the Gryffindors to accompany Chance Jackson, whose crush on Albus was finally, apparently, being reciprocated. He allowed her to feed him strawberry slices with her fingers while he regaled her friends with some story or other. As James watched, the group dissolved into laughter and Chance threw an arm around Albus, leaning her head onto his shoulder.

"Ugh," James shook his head, turning away.

"Now you know how the rest of us feel whenever you bring Millie Vandergriff over for a snog," Graham commented.

"We study, that's all!" James insisted, surprised. He'd been very careful not to let anyone see him kissing Millie.

Deirdre rolled her eyes. "You two are snogging even when your noses are buried in books. It'd be adorable if it was a bit less painfully obvious."

James' face heated and he knew he was blushing fiercely. The truly embarrassing part was, deep down, he knew he wasn't as infatuated with Millie as everyone thought he was, probably even her.

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As he gathered his things and left the Great Hall, he realized that he felt, more than anything, like a total clod. After all, despite the heady thrills of kissing Millie and the tremulous mystery of dating her, he knew he was mostly using her as a sort of human shield, a distraction from the hopeless, doomed love that he felt for Petra.

He determined it couldn't go on. It wasn't fair to her.

But he also didn't want to break her heart. Not yet, at least.

The holidays were coming soon. Maybe he could do it then, while they were apart for a while.

He felt slightly better having decided this, and relegated the worries to a back corner of his mind until the time came for him to act on this new plan.

That evening, he and Rose met Ralph outside the Apparition classroom.

"What do you keep looking for?" James asked, noticing Rose's backwards glance for the third time as they gathered around the classroom door.

"I don't know," she whispered. "I keep thinking someone is following us."

"Who cares? We've got the Head Boy with us. We *can't* be up to mischief." James reached for the door handle and gave it a tug. The door rattled but didn't budge. "Oh. Well. Unlocking a classroom door isn't mischief, exactly. Especially the way Rose does it."

Rose hid a look of pride as she fingered her wand. "I might have left my notes in there, after all. Or we might have heard a suspicious noise. We're just doing our duty, checking it out."

A suspicious noise suddenly echoed from the depths of the hall behind them—a scrape and a thump, as if someone around a corner had dropped a book. Ralph jumped, and then ran a hand over his face in nervous annoyance.

"Stop winding me up," he nudged James with his elbow. "If we're going to do this, let's get it over with. There's no rule against practicing stuff we're learning. And this classroom is usually unlocked."

James had an idea that the classroom was locked right now because it was temporarily exempt from the anti-Disapparation spell that blanketed the school, but chose not to remind Ralph of that fact.

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Rose spoke the unlocking spell and her wand burst a spark of golden light. The bolt clicked and the door budged open. James gave it a push and the well-oiled hinges swung silently, revealing the darkened classroom. The three crept inside.

By moonlight, the empty half of the room looked like a haunted dance floor, decorated strangely with pale hoops, three ranged beneath the windows, matched with three more beneath the chalkboard. The class tables and chairs were pushed close together in the rear of the room, overlooking the as-yet unused practice area.

"Well?" James asked, glancing aside at Rose and Ralph with an unexpected stab of trepidation. "Who's first?"

"This was your idea, cousin," Rose said, prodding him forward. "You have the honours."

James nodded and swallowed hard. But then, suddenly, Ralph moved past him, stepping carefully inside one of the hoops.

"I'm Head Boy," he gulped. "It's, like, my duty to go first. To make sure it's safe and all. Also," he admitted, offering James a sheepish grimace, "if I don't get this over with now, my nerve will go right out the window."

James blinked at his friend, both impressed and suddenly worried. What if something *did* go horribly wrong? What if Ralph got splinched, or skunched, or contrasedcted? James realized he didn't even know what contrasecting was. He cursed himself for not paying more attention in class.

"Rose," he muttered out of the corner of his mouth, "what's contrasecting?"

Rose glanced aside at him and frowned. "Why do you ask?"

James raised a cautionary hand to Ralph, opened his mouth to offer a warning, but at that moment the big boy squeezed his eyes tight shut, fisted his hand on his wand, and gulped a breath. The over-sized wand in Ralph's hand sizzled suddenly with pinkish light, and then vanished, along with the boy himself, leaving only a bang of rushing air. An agonizingly long moment later, the pink light of Ralph's wand illuminated the opposite side of the classroom and Ralph reappeared with a pop. He thumped to the floor and his knees buckled slightly.

"Brilliant, Ralph!" Rose said, moving to examine him, her eyes sharp. "You look fine. No visible splinching. And only a little residual

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magic," she commented, glancing back over her shoulder. James saw it as well: a faint trail of pink light was still settling to the classroom floor, drawing a line from where Ralph had begun to where he now stood, breathing hard, his eyes wide and startled.

"Why did it do that?" Ralph panted, frowning worriedly at the settling pink glow.

"Magical exhaust," Rose nodded, as if she'd expected this. "It's all in Twycross' book. First timers rely too much on the magic of their wands, rather than their own intrinsic power. They propel themselves a little, like Disapparation is a spell to cast, not an ability to hone. It's perfectly normal. You'll learn to let go of the wand as you practice. Think of it as magical training wheels."

"Wow," Ralph breathed, and then gave a nervous laugh. "Look at me. I did it!"

James clapped his friend on the back, happy that his own momentary worry had gone unspoken. "I knew you were up to it, Ralph," he lied. "Just wait until we tell Zane you nailed your first Disapparation! He'll hate that he wasn't here to see it!"

Rose shrugged. "Ralph could just Apparate to Alma Aleron and tell him himself."

"No way," Ralph raised both hands and took a step backwards. "Let's not get crazy. A step across a classroom is way different than a trip across the ocean."

Rose rolled her eyes impatiently, "Actually, no, it isn't. Neither of you pay the slightest attention in class, do you?"

"Your turn, James," Ralph gave him a friendly push toward the rings beneath the windows. "If I can do it, it'll be a cinch for you."

James nodded and approached the windows, placing his feet carefully inside one of the white rings. He gripped his own wand in his right hand, happy to use whatever "training wheels" were available to him for his first solo apparition. He turned around to face the opposite side of the room, and blinked in startled surprise.

Behind Rose and Ralph, three figures stood huddled in the partially open classroom door. Despite their silhouetted shadows, James could still make out their nasty grins and beady eyes.

"What do *you*, want?" he asked, masking his surprise with anger.

Rose and Ralph spun on the spot to see the three younger students peering around the door frame. Edgar Edgecombe was in the middle, flanked as usual by his mates, Quincy Ogden and Polly Heathrow. Ogden's greasy black hair hid one eye as he glared at them, while Heathrow, the tallest of the three, narrowed her eyes with unmistakable glee.

"Get out of here, all of you," Rose said, jamming her fists onto her hips. "This is a closed practice. You won't even be in this class for six more years."

"*You're* not in this class," Polly Heathrow said, raising her pointed chin at Rose. "And practicing Apparition is against the rules. Surprised I need to remind *you* of that, *Granger*."

"The name's Weasley," Rose said, rising to her full height. "Granger is my mother, and I'm not her. Too bad for you, because she'd never even *think* of doing the things that *I'm* considering." She took a step forward, brandishing her wand meaningfully.

"That great lunk-head behind you is the Weasley of the threesome," Polly wrinkled her nose and pointed at Ralph. "The incompetent clod who's only along for comic relief. 'Head Boy' my grandma's knee-length knickers!"

"The Golden Trio, reborn!" Ogden sneered. "Potter, '*the chosen one*'; Weasley, the bumbling *prat*; and Granger, the insufferable *know-it-all*. Think they can do whatever they want. Even curse a bunch of precious first-years."

James raised his own wand now and took three brisk steps toward the door, opening his mouth, not even sure which hex or jinx was going to come out, hoping distantly that it wouldn't be something *too* awful.

"I'll tell you what, *Potter* and *Granger*," Edgar Edgecombe interrupted James, still smiling nastily. "You pocket your wands and do a little Disapparation demonstration for us, and we won't run off to the library to tattle on you for breaking into the classroom and performing illegal magic. Professor Heretofore's on duty, and she's in a detention sort of mood, I'd wager. Your call."

James still had his wand out, pointed at Edgecombe. He bit back the spell that had been forming on his lips (the *Dancing Feet* jinx--he'd been a bit too careful, perhaps) and glanced aside at Rose. She was

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still glaring at the three, her wand raised but tilted slightly up at the ceiling. Suddenly she shrugged and dropped her hand to her side.

"Fine," she said breezily. "I think you were up, James." She turned to look at him, her face carefully composed to display no emotion at all. James knew his cousin, however, and recognized that this was her most dangerous expression of all.

He nodded slowly. "Right. Fair enough, I guess." He glanced back at the three in the doorway. "But look, I don't know what you lot are on about, but you're completely mental. We're not anyone's 'Golden Trio'."

"Yeah," Ralph nodded. "And besides, if you count Zane, we'd be more of a... what you think? A silver rhombus?"

Rose shrugged. "A trapezoid, I imagine. And let's go with platinum."

James blinked rapidly at Rose and Ralph. Ralph was simply nervous and babbling, mostly worried about getting caught. But Rose was fuming with fury. It came off of her in palpable waves, despite her carefully blank face.

Lowering his wand, James turned and retraced his steps back to the white rings under the windows, stepping into the one in the middle. He turned around and tried to ignore the grinning glares of the three younger students in the doorway. It was impossible, of course. He could feel their eyes like hot little beetles, crawling all over him. He focused instead on Ralph and Rose, who stood in the shadows next to the chalkboard, near the matching three rings. Ralph offered him an encouraging nod, but his face was taut with worry. Rose's mouth was pressed into a tight line now that she'd turned away from Edgecombe and his crew. Her eyes sparked like flints, although James couldn't guess what she was planning.

He closed his eyes, fisted his fingers on his lowered wand, and realized with a cold shock that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. All the confidence and assurance had leaked right out of him.

*Destination*, he recited to himself, *Determination...* and...? He couldn't remember the third one.

Eyes still squeezed shut, he conjured a mental image of the classroom. He imagined the desks and chairs pushed together in neat

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rows on one side, overlooking the practice floor. There, he pictured three rings beneath the rank of windows, with him standing in the middle. Across the dim floor, three more rings lay in a neat row, powdered with chalk dust from the board above. James chose the middle ring, and concentrated on it, willing himself to go to it.

Something flexed deep in his mind. It didn't happen instantaneously, as he'd imagined it would. Instead, the world seemed to slow down all around, to grow insubstantial, to shrink away, taking all sound and sensation with it. Silence like the first snowfall pressed against his ears. James remembered enough technomancy to understand that he was entering a sort of flux-state now, becoming momentarily incorporeal, unfocusing from the here-and-now and refocusing on the there-and-then.

But then something startled him. There was an explosion of light and sound, illuminating the emptiness behind his eyelids and buffeting him with waves of force. He retreated from the noise and light, and his concentration faltered. His mental image of the classroom cracked, shattered, and he sensed his disorporated form falling back into himself. It happened too soon. He felt the wrongness of it even before his feet stumbled to the floor again, disconcertingly far apart.

He came back to himself with a shock and a gasp.

*TWO gasps.*

He tried to open his eyes, and realized that he was seeing double. Or rather, he was seeing the classroom from two entirely different perspectives, each perfectly overlaid over the other, obliterating each other into nonsense. He swayed and clapped a hand to his heads.

Somewhere nearby, Ralph yelped and stumbled backwards, slamming his shoulder against the chalkboard, which rattled and rained bits of chalk to the floor. Rose gasped in shock.

From the doorway, Edgecombe's voice was thin with mingled awe and laughter. "Look at that! Will you *look* at THAT!"

"James!" Rose said, moving urgently into the middle of the room, between the rings, and looking back and forth swiftly. "Are you... all right?"

"What happened?" James asked, and heard his voice twice, echoing from both sides of the room. Dimly, he saw himself. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror, one that both distorted your shape into

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something inhuman and doubled the view. In one view, he saw his own head and shoulders, one arm, one leg, standing before the chalkboard, wobbling slightly. In the other view, perfectly overlaid atop it, he saw an exact duplicate of himself still standing one-legged in the ring beneath the windows.

There were two of him, but only almost. He was stuck in mid-apparition, half-duplicated, with neither part completely whole.

*"Holy hinkypunks!"* the two Jameses cried thinly, staring at each other across the dark and dusty floor. "I'm still over there!" The two versions of himself pointed at each other with their single arm each, one an empty left hand, the other a right hand still fisted on his wand.

"Well," Rose said with a helpless shrug. "At least now you know what contrasecting is."

There was a hiss of hysterical laughter, followed by a thumping of footsteps as Edgecombe, Heathrow, and Ogden scrambled and ran from the door. Their laughter turned to mean hoots, echoing back from the corridor as they hurried away, surely eager to tell everyone what they'd seen.

"Stop them!" James said twice, but Rose was already striding to the door, her wand snapping up in her hand. She leaned economically around the door frame and fired three red bolts in quick succession. The hooting laughter choked to silence, followed by three messy thumps.

"Oh, this is bad," Ralph said, his voice an octave higher than normal. He wrung his hands fretfully, glancing from Rose's raised wand to James' doubled form. "This is so bad! We're doomed! We're seriously, completely, totally--!"

"Ralph, get a grip," Rose said firmly, pocketing her wand again. "Go drag those three into a closet or something. Get them out of the corridor until they wake up again. I'll..." She glanced back and forth between the two partial Jameses. He saw her glance at him twice from his two different perspectives. "I'll go get help."

"Not Twycross," James said with his oddly doubled voice, struggling to keep his two forms standing on one foot each. "Odin-Vann."

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Rose nodded, understanding. Briskly, she turned and bolted through the door, her robes flying.

"Oh, man," Ralph muttered again, his voice still unnaturally high. "Are you, like, OK, James?"

James rolled his eyes and felt a wave of dizziness at the doubled effect. "Never better. I love this. I can comb my hair without a mirror. Mum would be so proud. Go move those three twits before somebody sees them."

Ralph nodded briskly, as if suddenly remembering the stunned first-years in the corridor outside. He turned jerkily, his heels scraping in chalk dust, and hurried through the door, apparently relieved to flee from the disconcerting sight.

James steadied himself. It was easier to stand on one foot each than he expected, and he realized it was because both versions of himself were still somehow connected through empty space. His consciousness was split between them, stretched across the centre of the room like a rubber band. And some small sliver of his mind, he realized, was still floating in the disorporated ether of the flux. There, the view was not doubled, merely blank. Except not completely blank, now that he focused on it. He could see the faint glimmer of his and Petra's silver/crimson cord. It stretched off in floating curls, fading into distance. He could probably follow the cord if he wished, leaving behind the alarming split of his form. But he knew instinctively that that would be disastrous. If he fled from his doubled body, he might never be able to come back to it again.

He sighed harshly, fear and annoyance settling in his mind in equal measures. He tried to focus on the classroom again, looking from his strangely doubled perspective, and saw something lying in the centre of the practice floor between the lines of white rings. Bright blue shreds of wrapper surrounded a tiny scorched starburst. James shook his heads, realizing at once what it was. Edgecombe had thrown a Weasley Wizard Wheezes firecracker into the room just as James had attempted his Disapparation. The seemingly planet-sized explosion he had encountered in the flux was barely a crack of noise and puff of sparks from a harmless novelty.

Harmless under any other circumstance, of course.

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Ralph came back a moment later, huffing, with figures clutched under both of his arms. Ogden and Heathrow lolled like life-sized ragdolls as Ralph flung them onto a desk each.

"Not in here, Ralph," the Jameses sighed. "I don't want to look at their stupid faces. Especially twice at once."

"We have to keep an eye on them," Ralph shook his head, hurrying back to the door. "Odin-Vann will know what to do, right? He's a teacher."

"And you're Head Boy," James reminded him. "Use your, what do you call it, executive authority. Forbid them from talking about it. Give them punishments. Promise to take away a hundred house points if they blab."

"It doesn't work that way!" Ralph said with sudden strength, turning to glance first at one James, and then the other. He shook his head with harried annoyance. "Just shut it for a minute. The two of you are giving me a headache."

He disappeared through the door again. When he came back into view a moment later with Edgecombe's chunky body heaved over his shoulder, he paused, looking along the corridor. He backed up a step as Professor Odin-Vann approached the door with Rose close behind.

"You," the professor said, frowning uncertainly and pointing at the stunned boy slung over Ralph's shoulder like a lumpy bag of sand. "You didn't...?" He glanced back at Rose for a moment, and then shook his head. "Never mind. First things first."

He ushered Ralph into the room ahead of him, and then entered himself, stopping in the doorway and gripping the frame with both hands, as if for support.

"Son of a banshee," he swore under his breath, his eyes wide, flicking back and forth between James' doubled forms.

"We were practicing Disapparation," the Jameses said.

"Failing spectacularly at it, more like," Odin-Vann said, and gave a low whistle. "I've never *seen* a contraspection this complete. Do you... still think with a complete brain?"

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"I don't think he's *ever* thought with a complete brain," Rose sighed, approaching the Jameses with a shake of her head. She looked back and forth between them. "What can you do, Professor?"

Odin-Vann stood next to her, a studious frown creasing his face. "Normally this would take a team of healers from the misapplied magic wing of St. Mungos," he admitted thoughtfully. "But I see you have your wand with you, James. Did you, perhaps, use it to assist your Disapparation?"

"Rose said it was like training wheels!" James exclaimed defensively, his twinned voice louder than expected. "Ralph did it and only left a trail of pink exhaust across the room. I thought it was harmless!"

"It *is* harmless," Odin-Vann nodded, his own voice almost eerily calm. "But if you used your wand to fuel your Apparation, I may know a way to undo it."

The young professor glanced from James to James. James made eye contact with both glances.

"Which one's the original?" Odin-Vann asked, and then turned to the James still standing in front of the windows. "That one," he said, pointing. "Your wand made it across the room, to James number two. That's good."

As the Jameses watched, Odin-Vann raised his own wand and pointed it at the James standing in front of the chalkboard, his wand fisted in his single hand. Odin-Vann paused for a moment as a look of doubt crossed his face, and then he cleared his eyes. When he spoke, the word sounded more like a command than a spell.

*"Priori invertu!"*

A bolt of white lightning connected Odin-Vann's wand to James', snaking and arcing for several long seconds. James felt the wand vibrating in his hand, but held on tight, unsure if the spell would work if he dropped it. The vibration built to a thrum that nearly numbed his fingers. Then, with a sound like a whip-crack, the second James flipped back through itself and merged back into the first, who stumbled backwards three steps, struck the window hard enough to rattle the panes, and collapsed to the floor in a clumsy heap.

Rose rushed to James's side and grabbed his face in her hands, turning his head this way and that.

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“Get off,” he moaned impatiently. “I’m fine. Lemme be.”

Rose ignored his protests and continued to inspect him. Behind her, Odin-Vann turned his attention from the re-incorporated figure of James to the wand in his hand. He studied it with apparent satisfaction.

“Do your eyebrows always look like that?” Rose said, squeezing James’ cheeks between her palms and forcing his head up toward the moonlight. “All scrunched together and unruly in the middle?”

“I’m fine!” James insisted, finally batting her hands away. “Geroff me!” He began to struggle uncertainly to his feet, but his knees felt like rubber and his head suddenly spun with dizziness. He dropped back to the floor.

“It was their fault,” Ralph said, moving alongside Odin-Vann and pointing at the three younger students, who were just beginning to stir. “Edgecombe threw a firecracker at James just as he was beginning his Disapparation!”

Edgecombe moaned loudly, rolled, and fell off the desk where Ralph had tossed him. He hit the floor with a muffled thump and his moan turned into an affronted grunt. Polly Heathrow sat up blearily, her pigtails flopping. Quincy Ogden gave a sudden, snorting snore.

“So you stunned them?” Odin-Vann said, still calm, glancing from Ralph to Rose.

“Only when they started to run away,” she answered shrilly. “Believe me, they had it coming. And loads more!”

Edgecombe spoke up then, his voice mushy. “They were practicing illegal magic, Professor. They broke into the classroom!”

“Yeah,” Heathrow added, cupping a hand gingerly to her forehead. “And then they cursed us! They cursed us just because we saw them!”

“They *cursed* you,” Odin-Vann said, his voice as calm and pedantic as if he’d been standing in his own classroom in broad daylight, “because you startled them with a contraband incendiary device. You attacked *them*. They responded on instinct. You might consider yourselves fortunate that they merely stunned you.”

“But...!” Edgecombe spluttered, his eyes bulging as he glared at James, then Ralph and Rose. “But they were performing illegal magic!”

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"Mr. Deedle and Mr. Potter were practicing a prescribed class exercise. This is the only classroom they can do it in. I gave them permission to unlock the door. You, however, were skulking around the halls looking to cause trouble. Do you perhaps have any more Weasley Wizard Wheezes contraband merchandise in your pockets?"

Edgecombe's face clamped shut tight, clearly understanding that the odds had turned against him. Polly Heathrow slid her feet to the floor and gave Ogden a sharp jab with her elbow. He groaned and stirred.

"We were only having a little fun," she said sulkily, throwing James a black glare.

"Ah," Odin-Vann nodded sadly, "the myriad gleeful horrors that have been committed in the name of 'a little fun'. I suggest you three go directly back to your dormitory before I determine to investigate the matter any further. And if I so much as *sniff* that you've mentioned a word of James' misfortune to anyone-- a misfortune I would be careful to point out was entirely your fault-- I shall see that you receive every ounce of the consequences that you are due. Am I quite clear?"

Edgecombe got to his feet, his cheeks burning red and his eyes sullen. He deigned not to reply, but the angry submission in his eyes was answer enough. Head down, he stalked out of the room, followed closely by Polly Heathrow. Quincy Ogden, still swaying on his feet, bumped the doorframe with his shoulder as he ambled along after.

Odin-Vann hunkered down in front of James, pocketing his wand. "Feeling a bit more put together, are you?"

"A bit," James admitted. "Thanks for handling those three for us."

"Hush," Odin-Vann said, glancing back toward the door. "Nary a word. They had it coming, meddling in a first-time Disapparation. Things might have turned out much worse. Don't let it rattle you."

"What was that spell you used, Professor?" Rose asked, sighing and plopping to the floor next to James. "I've never heard of a *Priori Invortu* incantation."

Odin-Vann glanced at her, then down at his own wand again. "It's a... proprietary spell of my own devising," he answered vaguely. "It simply reads another wand's most recent spell and automatically performs a counter-spell, if one exists."

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Ralph leaned against the nearby desks and frowned. "So since first-time Apparators usually use their wands to help make the magic happen, your wand was able to undo James' attempt using a... what?"

Odin-Vann shrugged and pushed his wand into a pocket of his robes. "Couldn't tell you, precisely. Not because I don't know, but because the process is purely automatic. I've been programming counter-spells and anti-jinxes into my wand for months now, but tonight, I admit, was my first chance to really test it out. If I had to guess, I'd say it probably used a modified lanyard charm to retrieve James' doubled form and undo his interrupted Apparation." He seemed both quietly proud of this, and carefully evasive, as if he deeply wanted to talk more about it, but felt the need to protect his methods. Perhaps he didn't want to reveal too much until the process was perfected.

"I'm just glad it worked," James said, giving his head a firm shake, as if to clear his mind.

"One of you should probably follow our new friends," Odin-Vann said, glancing aside at Rose and Ralph. "Just to assure that they abide by my command and return directly to their dormitory. An evening with their thoughts should suffice in convincing them to keep their mouths shut, but if they should meet anyone in the halls tonight, their anger may still get the better of them."

Ralph nodded, pushing away from the desk. "I'll do it. They have to listen to me, at least." He tapped the badge on his chest and shrugged. "See you lot tomorrow. And let's *not* do this again sometime."

As Ralph left, James thought he could sense just the slightest spring in the big boy's step. Now that the disaster of James' botched Apparation was over and the trio of little prats had been put in their place, Ralph could at least enjoy the fact that he had succeeded at his own first Apparition, unlike James.

"You'll be fine at it, next time," Odin-Vann said, as if reading James' thoughts. He seated himself on the floor and held up a hand. "Don't try to get up just yet. Your body needs a few minutes to get reacquainted with itself. Tell me, James," he peered at him with a slightly cocked head. "What was it like?"

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"What, you mean being nearly split into two copies?" James asked, a wave of embarrassment washing over him again. "It felt like being a massive failure, that's what. But it also felt..." He paused and narrowed his eyes, "a little like being strung out between two cliffs, with nothing but empty space between them. Part of me was stuck there, floating in the nothing. I could feel it, and see into it a little."

Odin-Vann was nodding. "The *Transitus Nihilo*. The void outside of matter. Intriguing."

"But it wasn't a *complete* void," James sighed and slumped. "I could see the cord that connects me to Petra. It crosses the border of Apparation with me. I could see it trailing off into the darkness."

"Your connection," Odin-Vann said thoughtfully. "The means by which you travel to her when you're asleep."

"Whenever she lets me," James agreed, slumping back against the wall beneath the window.

Odin-Vann relaxed as well and went on in a different tone of voice. "You know, I've been curious about that connection of yours, James. We have a few minutes whilst you collect yourself. I wonder if you'd mind telling me about it?"

Rose interjected suddenly, a bit too loudly. "Oh, James has been besotted with Petra ever since his first years at Hogwarts. He's just a magical romantic and a poet. Not a very good poet, of course, but he's a Potter, so what can you expect?"

"No, Rose," James said, glancing back and forth between his cousin and the professor. "Look, if we're going to trust each other enough to steal back the crimson thread together and try to send Petra to be Morgan in some other dimension, then we have to be willing to trust each other with everything." He focused on Odin-Vann again, who seemed merely to be patiently waiting. "It happened right before my third year, when we were on our way across the ocean to America and Alma Aleron..."

As briefly as he could, James recounted the story of how Petra had climbed to the stern of the Gwyndemere just as a freakish storm descended on the ship, threatening to capsize it amidst mountainous waves. He described how Petra had been in a sort of confused funk, facing the storm almost as if she meant to let it take her. Thus, when lightning struck the ship, cleaving a mast and knocking her overboard so

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that she dangled perilously from the rigging, she had considered letting the broken mast drag her down into the depths. James had rushed to grasp her hand, but she had resisted, asking him to let her fall.

“But I couldn’t,” he said, losing himself in the retelling, staring down at the dark classroom floor, “I couldn’t let her die, no matter what she said. There was nothing I could do, though. She started to slip from my outstretched hand, and I realized she was letting go. She was loosening her grip, ready to drop into the waves below the ship and sink. She fell, and it felt like my own heart was falling away with her. And that’s when it happened.”

“The cord appeared,” Odin-Vann half whispered.

“It caught Petra, connected my right hand to hers, glowing like an acromantula web in the dark, vibrating like a harp string. It caught her and I was able to pull her back up.”

Rose seemed to have accepted the fact that James was going to share the entire story with Odin-Vann. She herself was now caught up in the retelling. “Lucy wrote me about that night when she was in the States. She was always a great one for writing letters. I remember it almost word for word. They were all below decks, in the Captain’s quarters, watching from the stern windows: Lucy, Merlin, Izzy, Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny, everyone. They saw Petra fall from the back of the ship and dangle in the rigging. But then Merlin clouded the windows so they couldn’t see what happened next. Uncle Harry was unhappy about it. He said they should do something, but Merlin said no. Lucy quoted him exactly. He said something like...” She squinted and thought for a moment. “He said that the storm would claim its own, but the rest of them had nothing to fear. And in the end, it turned out that he was right. James saved Petra by borrowing from her own powers.” She glanced up at Odin-Vann, suddenly unsure if she’d said too much, but he only nodded.

“I know of Petra’s strange and seemingly unlimited powers, as I’ve already said. She hasn’t told me as much as I wish to know about them—I don’t suppose she ever could-- but I do have some idea of what she is capable of.” He shook his head thoughtfully and turned his attention back to James, his eyes sharpening. “Petra was willing to die,

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you say? To fall to her death from the back of the ship? But why, do you think?"

"She was confused," James shook his head, probing his memory. "She'd just lost her grandfather and was under suspicion in the disappearance of her stepmother. She was homeless and lost and being chased by a... a..." He stopped himself from mentioning Judith, the Lady of the Lake, who had been conjured by the death of Petra's stepmother through a sort of poisoned bargain. Trusting Odin-Vann was one thing, but James didn't wish to complicate the matter any further-- or implicate Petra any more deeply. He went on a little lamely, "Well, she was being chased by her own guilt, in a way." Another memory struck him and he sat up. "But she had the brooch. It was sort of an opal thing with silver scrollly stuff all around it. She'd said it was a gift from her father. It must have come in the box of things that the Ministry sent her after he died in Azkaban. She was wearing the brooch on the night of the storm. When she fell off, it dropped into the waves, and she screamed. It seemed to represent a lot to her-- the family she'd lost. The life she never had. I think that's what finally broke her, losing that one thing that connected her to her dead parents."

Odin-Vann wasn't looking at James now. His gaze had drifted to the black window behind James' head, at which he nodded slowly, thoughtfully. There was a strange glint in his eye. "But *you* were there," he mused, half to himself. "And you saved her. You saved her from herself."

James sank back against the wall again. "I guess so. I spoke to my dad afterward. He said that it was more than Petra's magic that connected us and kept her from falling. He said that it was like when he was a baby and his mum was willing to die for him. Her death called on an older, deeper magic, and it made a sort of unbreakable protection, saving my dad from Voldemort's curse. Dad said that because I was willing to die for Petra when she fell, we made the same sort of bargain with the deep magic. That's what really saved her."

Odin-Vann glanced back at James, his face clouding slightly. "Really?" he said, and blinked. "Your dad, Harry Potter, told you that?"

James nodded. "He said he recognized the feeling of it."

"But," Odin-Vann said, as if reluctantly clarifying some small but important point, "Your dad's mum *died* to summon that deep

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magic. It was her death that created the bond of protection, or so the story goes. You..." he cleared his throat a little awkwardly. "You... *didn't* die for Petra." He shook his head and shrugged a little in confusion.

James sighed again, deeply. "That's what I told my dad. He didn't have any answers for me. Just said that because I was *willing* to trade places with her... that must have been enough. The deep magic caused the cord of her powers to appear, connecting us, letting me pull her back up. I didn't die. But somehow... being willing to was enough." Suddenly, to James' own ears, it sounded weak and unsatisfying. But clearly it had happened, hadn't it? The Deep Magic had saved Petra, had permanently connected them, just like his dad and Voldemort, even if James hadn't needed to die to make it happen.

At least... *not yet*.

The thought chilled him suddenly, deeply, all the way to the bone.

Odin-Vann seemed to dismiss the topic with another shrug. "Well, I imagine you've convalesced enough to stand now, James. I would expect no more trouble from our three young friends, Edgecombe, Heathrow, and Ogden. At least, not about this. I have known young people like them in my life, though, and they do always find new ways to spread their particular brand of viciousness."

Rose began to climb to her feet and shot a glance at the door, clearly remembering the trio of poisonous first-years. "I almost *hope* they cross my path again. I owe them more than a stunning. I can't begin to imagine what their gripe is."

"Ah," Odin-Vann said, rising and tugging James to his feet, "Therein lies your mistake, Miss Weasley. You assume people like Edgecombe have a specific gripe. Clearly it has not occurred to you that some people like to harm others simply for the pure, unadulterated power and pleasure of it. They may invent excuses to satisfy the diminished shreds of their consciences, but they are merely that: excuses. Beneath the lies they tell themselves, they fear you. They know you are better than they. And they hate it. This is the source of their guile. My advice is: don't engage them any further. You will only frustrate yourself

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trying to appeal to some buried sense of common decency. None such exists. Some poisoned apples are poison all the way to the core."

There was a coolness in the way that Odin-Vann spoke of Edgecombe and his cronies. James wondered if the man had had his own encounters with petty bullies, and then realized that the answer was obvious. It was in the way the Professor seemed unable to perform magic when under stress, despite his impressive skills and knowledge. He was a man who had once been a boy, a boy who had likely been teased mercilessly about his impotence under pressure, which would only have made matters exponentially worse.

As the professor bid them goodnight and relocked the classroom door, James didn't know if he felt sorrier for the boy Odin-Vann had once been, or angrier at the bullies people like Edgecombe always were. Mostly, he was just weak with relief that the evening was over, the disaster had been undone and averted, and thankful that Rose, for once, didn't seem to feel the need to discuss any of it with him as they walked and wended their way back along the dark corridors toward Gryffindor tower. She merely nursed a thoughtful frown, mulling her own thoughts, and James was glad.

Together, they clambered wearily through the portrait hole. Five minutes later, James was on his bed, barely half undressed, sleeping the sleep of complete exhaustion, not even aware that he was wearing two pairs of magically identical underpants, and that both of his socks were inside out.



## **10. HAGRID'S LETTER**

The first snow fell on Hogwarts even before the autumn leaves had fully abandoned the trees. The flakes fringed the remaining leaves with sparkling beards, and then cloaked the entire forest with fluffy brilliance. James awoke on the last day of November with grey brightness glaring from the window next to his bed. He sat up blearily, rubbing his eyes, only to find that it was not, in fact, breakfast time, but barely dawn. Outside, the snow had converted the world to a blanket of unnatural brightness, fooling even the birds in the forest, who sang and twittered in the muffling distance.

James was about to flop back onto his bed again when a shape moved silently nearby, accompanied by the stir of coals in the stove at the centre of the room. He was not alarmed, recognizing at once that it was the house elf assigned to Gryffindor tower. He had seen the tiny imp on only a few occasions over the years, but felt comfortable enough with it to whisper a good morning.

Surprised, the elf stiffened so that its shoulders hunched up next to its ears. Its head turned to look back at James with one enormous, crystal-ball-like eye. The iris was mossy green, surrounding a huge black

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pupil. James could clearly see the reflection of the open stove door reflected in the elf's eyeball.

"Sorry, Master Potter," the elf whispered back, hiding the squeak of its voice. It was a male, James was quite sure, his ears pointed like bat's wings and large enough to serve as an umbrella in the event of rain. Like most of the other Hogwarts house elves, this one wore a cloth napkin like a small toga. The napkin was embroidered with the Hogwarts crest. "Piggen didn't mean to wake Master Potter, sir."

"Piggen," James yawned hugely, so that his jaw cracked. "That's really your name? Piggen?"

"Piggentottenwuggahooliguffin, sir," the elf answered obediently, still in a thin whisper. "Son of Tottenwuggahooliguffinoogersham."

"Piggen it is, then," James stretched and flopped so that his head was at the foot of his bed. Arms crossed over his footboard, he studied the elf by the stove. "It's my last year, Piggen. Just thought maybe I should introduce myself while I still have a chance."

The elf's eyes widened and he took a step backward on his huge, bare feet. "No introduction needed, Master Potter, sir. Piggen is happy never to be noticed as he stokes the fire and collects the laundry and dusts and sweeps and cleans the bathroom—"

"My aunt Hermione wouldn't let me come home for Christmas dinner if she knew I'd had a chance to introduce myself to you and passed it up." James smiled ruefully.

"Ahh," the elf blinked, "Miss Granger, the founder of the Ess Pee Eee Double-you. We has her school picture hanging on the wall in our rooms, sir. We're very indebted to Miss Hermione Granger. She's the reason we has a coalition agreement with the school, making certain only elves do elf work, you see. The master of our guild, Dufferwunkin, has a term for it. He calls it jobsek-yurready. He says jobsek-yerready is very important for us elves."

"Jobsek..." James squinted. "You mean job *security*? I don't think that's quite what Aunt Hermione had in mind when she started SPEW."

"Well, we doesn't wish to become *freed*, sir," the elf said, wagging his head with slow emphasis. "Especially now that the Vow of Secrecy is weakened. Well-meaning witches and wizards speak of freeing

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all the house elves now, even outlawing our service. They say it will look bad to the Muggles, should the two worlds merge."

James was not a morning thinker under the best of circumstances. He closed his eyes and rubbed them with a thumb and forefinger. "Like, the Muggles will think you're slaves or something? But, like, *aren't* you basically slaves?"

Piggen stood up as straight as he could and squared his shoulders. "Piggen is in *service* to his masters, Master Potter, sir. Service is *not* slavery."

"So you get paid, then?"

The elf's eyes bulged so hard that they looked as if they might pop out and roll across the floor like grapefruit-sized marbles. "Payment, sir! No elf is ever *paid*, sir! It wouldn't be proper to take payment from one's master for service rendered!"

"But you can't just quit, either," James went on, frowning at the elf. "Can you?"

The elf seemed distressed and baffled by the concept. "I suppose, er, begging your pardon, sir, that such a thing would be technically possible. At least, here at Hogwarts. But..." He blinked rapidly, glancing around the dim room as if for help. The rest of the beds were filled with faintly snoring Gryffindors.

James shrugged, too bleary to press the issue. "Sounds like slavery to me, no matter how you slice it. But if it makes you happy."

"Oh, happiness doesn't come into it, Master Potter, sir," the elf said with a relieved sigh, as if content to put an uncomfortable subject behind him. "We elves don't have any truck with things like happiness, sir. Happiness is the mortal enemy of jobsek-yerready."

James knew he should abandon the conversation while he was still on moderately level footing, but couldn't help blinking curiously at the elf again. "What do you mean, happiness is your mortal enemy?"

The elf looked around again, as if worried about being overheard. When he returned his gaze to James, he couldn't quite look him in the eye. Nervously, he kneaded the knot of his napkin toga with his hands. "There's another picture we have hanging on the wall of our rooms," he said, lowering his voice to a whisper so thin and high that it

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was almost inaudible. “Another house elf, by the name of Dobbyfoggynpuddlenoff.”

James pushed himself back up to a seated position on his bed. “You mean... Dobby? The house elf my dad knew?”

“Dobby was *happy*,” Piggen nodded gravely, meeting James’ eyes again. “He made *friends* with Harry Potter. And then, Dobby was killed. He was killed outside of service, with no master or mistress. His head was placed on no one’s wall with the heads of those who came before and after. Dobby died a *free elf*.” He said this last with a hand cupped around his mouth, as if he was repeating the most offensive swear word imaginable.

“And that,” James said as realization dawned on him, “is why you don’t want me to introduce myself to you.”

Piggen looked miserably uncomfortable. “Begging your pardon, *please*, Master Potter, sir. Piggen doesn’t *wish* to be free. He doesn’t wish to be *happy*. He doesn’t wish to be master’s friend, sir, and no offense meant. He just wishes to do his duties and keep his jobsek-yerready.”

James shrugged wearily. “OK, Piggen. We’re not friends. I’ll pretend I don’t even know your name.”

The elf’s face broke into a grin of abject relief. “Oh, thank you Master Potter, sir. And I’ll be out of your way in just a jiffy.” He turned back to the stove, closed the door with practiced care, and then scampered away into the shadows toward the bathroom, making no sound whatsoever in the dawn stillness.

Scorpius rolled over, gave an uncharacteristically undignified groan, and lifted his head, squinting in James’ general direction. In a muzzy voice, he asked, “Who are you talking to?”

“Nobody, it turns out,” James answered, swinging his feet to the floor. “Go back to sleep.”

“If it’s Cedric,” Scorpius murmured, letting his head drop back into his pillow, “tell him to go back to Hufflepuff. S’too early for class...” His voice trailed away into incoherence.

James decided to get up and be early to breakfast for once.

That Friday, the Gryffindor Quidditch team faced off against Slytherin for the first time that season. James stoically took his position high over the field, his goggles strapped over his spectacles against the

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steadily falling snow, the world a seamless tableaux of white all around. The roar of the grandstands was interrupted only by the voice of Josephina Bartlett, who was calling the match from the announcer's booth, clearly enjoying the amplification of her own words far too much.

"An important contest is today's event," she said, pausing to allow her words to echo around the grandstands, "as statistically, the team to win their first match has a seventy-seven percent chance of defeating that same team, should they appear together in the final tournament. Much rides on this performance for both teams, in particular on the new players in key positions, such as Mr. James Potter, who will be facing off against his own brother as Seekers for their respective teams."

The roar of the grandstands increased to a fever pitch at this announcement. James knew he should feel abashed by such attention, and yet he secretly relished it. He'd been looking forward to this matchup for years, ever since Albus had been named Seeker for the Slytherin team. He was deeply committed to beating his younger brother and bringing home an important win for Gryffindor, and his assurance that he could do so was bolstered by the confidence that the team seemed to show on his behalf.

"We've got this!" Graham called through the snow, swooping into position. "Go crimson and gold!"

"Go Gryffindor!" Deirdre shouted in response, rallying the rest of the team into whoops and cheers.

James gripped his broom tightly, wearing the fingerless gauntlets he'd first worn three years earlier when he'd played Clutchcudgel at Alma Aleron, eventually accompanying team Bigfoot to their first win in decades. He looked wistfully at the slot on the right wrist, especially sewn into the gauntlet to store his wand. No game magic allowed in Quidditch, he mourned, although he had successfully brought it to the Night League, where Julian Jackson had proven herself right about quickly adapting and mastering the Clutchcudgel spells. All of the teams had borrowed and duplicated James' old Clutchcudgel rulebook, and subsequently made very good use of Gravity Wells, Bonefuse hexes, Knucklers, Inertia Enhancers, and many others that even James had not yet fully mastered.

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The slot on his gauntlet was empty now, however. No wands were allowed on the Quidditch pitch. James would have to defeat his brother using plain old grit, finesse, and determination.

Fortunately, as match official Cabe Ridcully blew his whistle and released the game balls, James was fairly brimming with grit and determination. He launched into motion, swooping immediately in pursuit of the snitch, even as it flashed its golden wings and flitted into the pall of densely falling snow, vanishing from sight.

It turned out to be a very long match, lasting well past nightfall. Josephina's voice grew hoarse as the evening progressed, with Slytherin maintaining a steadily growing, even daunting, lead over Gryffindor throughout. James began to dread the shrill ding of the scoreboard as more points accumulated, marked by green fireworks from the enchanted sign.

Slushy snow caked James' hair, freezing it to stiff fronds that slapped and battered his skull as he flew. His jersey and cape, like the rest of the players', was sodden with a mixture of melted snow and cold sweat, weighing him down as he slewed through the melee, dodging Bludgers that hurled out of the dark like malevolent comets, whistling dully as they whickered past. All around, the crowd had reached that point of stubborn weariness that reduced their cheers to a dull, constant rumble, strung out between a sturdy commitment to their team's victory, and the increasing desire for the match to be over so they could all return to the warmth and light of the castle.

James was wiping the slush from his goggles for what felt like the millionth time when a sudden roar lifted from the crowd. There was no ding from the scoreboard, no flash and pop of celebratory fireworks, which meant the roar could only mean one thing: the snitch had been seen. And if the crowd had seen it, that meant that Albus probably had as well.

James flung his gaze around the pitch desperately and finally found it: a streak of fluttering gold, zigging and zagging through the players. Albus was closing in on it already, his hand outstretched, banking and swooping in pursuit.

James threw himself low over his broom and it shot forward, dipping toward the golden streak as it angled nearer.

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The crowd was a seamless blare now. As James arced to intercept the snitch, he caught a glimpse of the scoreboard. Gryffindor was currently down by a score of twenty-eight to one hundred sixty-two. If James failed to capture the snitch during this sighting, even if Albus managed to miss it, the Slytherins would soon have enough points to win the match no matter who eventually caught it.

As James neared the whizzing golden ball, he watched it swoop directly over Deirdre's shoulder. She watched it go past, clearly resisting the urge to catch it herself, which would, of course, only result in a penalty. She whipped her gaze back to James as he swooped after it, reaching forward with his right hand.

Voces called in passing, some shouting him back or vying to distract him, others urging him on. James heard none of them, merely strained forward, dodging Bludgers that threatened to bash him from his broom, piloting as if through a tunnel of snowy white streaks.

Albus was ahead of James still. His cloak flapped and snapped behind him, flinging damp mist into James' face. The snitch dipped, however, and James saw it an instant before Albus corrected. James' broom dropped away beneath him at his urging, cutting beneath Albus and catching up to the golden ball. James reached, stretching so hard that his arm felt it would pop right out of its socket. His fingers brushed the snitch's buzzing wings. He grinned with determination, then snapped his hand closed onto...

*...empty air!*

Another hand had swept across his view from above, engulfing the snitch in an instant and sweeping away again, taking the golden ball with it.

James boggled at the empty darkness where the snitch had been, still reaching uselessly with his fisted right hand, then twisted his head to look up.

Albus was hanging upside down beneath his broom, dangling from his folded knees with his right arm fully extended, grasping the golden snitch just above James' head. He met James' gaze through his own slush-streaked goggles and grinned, shrugging his upside-down shoulders down at his brother.

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The crowd erupted into shocked—and perhaps even slightly relieved—applause. The match was over. Josephina Bartlett breathlessly announced the final score, but James deliberately tuned her out, swooping down to the field and not even dismounting, merely ducking his head and flying straight into the open doors of the locker area beneath the Gryffindor grandstand. His face was hot with mingled rage and embarrassment. He had no wish to speak to anyone or endure the cheering that even now still echoed from the pitch, celebrating Albus' amazing capture.

By the time James had stripped out of his wet gauntlets and half-frozen cape, the rest of the team came trudging along the tunnel, dragging their brooms, their heads down. Few spoke at all. None made eye contact with each other. James plopped onto a bench to pry off his wet shoes, the laces stiff with ice. He changed into a dry pair of trainers, tossed his Quidditch shoes into the bottom of his locker, and tugged his coat from a hook inside the door.

He was just turning to leave when he saw Lily near her own locker, disconsolately shaking frozen clots of snow from her pony tail. He walked over to her, straddled the bench that ran between the row of wooden lockers, and plopped down. He had some vague idea of walking back with the team, finding some nominal solace in their silent camaraderie. It had been a bad loss—there was simply no escaping that fact—but at least they could suffer it together.

Lily plopped next to him and grunted as she pried her own shoes off. The second one kicked from her foot and struck her locker, knocking its door shut with a bang. She glared at it, breathing angry chugs through her nose.

“You *might* have seen that coming, if you’d been paying any attention over the past few years,” she said quietly, still gazing at her closed locker door.

James frowned, replaying her words in his head. “What do you mean, if I’d ‘been paying any attention’?”

She turned to him but kept her voice low. “Albus loves those stupid aerial acrobatics. He’s always looking for reasons to try out some harebrained maneuver, like that thing he did tonight when he stole the snitch right from under your nose. You *might* have seen it coming, is all.”

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“Oh, so you’re going to pin this whole thing on *me*, are you?” James hissed, pushing himself upright. “And what about when Beetlebrick and Dvorek were drilling home goals all match long, right under *your* nose? Are you going to tell me *that* was my fault too?”

“I knocked more away than made it through!” Lily snapped, stripping off her gloves and throwing them violently to the floor. “It was snowing buckets out there, in case you didn’t notice. I could barely *see* the bloody Quaffle before it was too close to catch!”

“That didn’t seem to bother Lamia Lorelei at the other end of the pitch, did it?” James declared, heaving himself to his feet and pointing in the general direction of the Slytherin goal rings. “She was like a brick wall out there!”

“Well none of it would have mattered if you’d done your duty and caught the snitch in time!” Lily shouted, giving James a shove in the chest. “*I* was busy all night! *You* had *one* job, and you *blew* it, just because you fell for some *stupid* stunt your own brother’s been dying to pull for *months*!”

James felt like an icicle had been stabbed straight through his chest. He took a step back from Lily’s furious gaze, his mouth open in surprise and dismay.

“Now hold on, both of you,” Graham said with weary alarm, moving to get between Lily and James, but James smacked his placating hand away. He turned, grabbed his broom, and stalked away from the locker area, into the darkness of the tunnel, smarting from Lily’s words, feeling betrayed and furious at his brother, and most of all cursing himself as a complete failure.

Snow was still falling in steady, skirling clouds over the pitch, which was now criss-crossed with footprints. The grandstands were mostly empty as the last spectators trickled away. James moved to follow them, keeping his head down.

“James,” a girl’s voice called, the sound muffled by the falling snow. For a moment he thought it was Lily coming to apologize and his heart quickened, unsure if he would let her beg forgiveness, or scorn her and make her stew for a while. It was not Lily, however. He stopped and glanced back to see Millie plodding quickly toward him through the deepening drifts. She was bundled in her coat and Hufflepuff scarf with

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a fetching woolen hat on her blonde hair, now heavily dusted with white, but she carried a Gryffindor pennant in her right hand, drooped in defeat.

She stopped near him, her breath puffing in thick white clouds. "I'm so sorry," she said simply.

For a moment, he thought she had somehow divined what had happened with Lily in the locker area. The look of commiseration on her face was so heartfelt and unabashed that, for a fleeting second, it almost made him want to cry. He drew a deep, bracing breath instead and looked up at the mostly empty grandstands. "It was a rough match. I should have seen the snitch sooner. Albus beat me to it. He was the better player tonight."

Millie nodded soberly at James, her lips pressed into a thin line, and then drew a deep breath and said, "That's complete skrewt dooey."

James glanced back at Millie again, frowning. "Excuse me?"

"I say it's skrewt dooey, top to bottom. You were by far the better flyer out there. You had Albus beat square. He won by being a numpty showoff, not by being a better player."

"He *did*, didn't he?" James suddenly seethed, smacking a fist into his open hand. "I *completely* had him beat! He didn't see when the snitch changed direction, but I did! I cut him off!"

"He resorted to sloppy desperation tactics and got lucky," Millie agreed emphatically. "He won't pull that off again. That sort of thing only works once."

James shook his head at the injustice of it. "I wish you'd been down in the locker room with me and the rest of the team," he said with a roll of his eyes.

"Why?" Millie asked, threading an arm through James' as they turned and trudged toward the castle together. "Don't tell me they *blamed* you for what happened?"

James blew out a deep sigh. "Not most of them. Just... my sister..."

Millie chose to remain silent on that detail, which James thought was probably a very wise move on her part. They walked in silence toward the warm glow of the castle, which shone from its myriad windows onto the falling curtain of snow and the white blanket that was the grounds. James could just make out Hagrid's hut far to the right,

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shouldered up against the fringe of the forest. The roof was cloaked with snow. A grey ribbon of smoke arose from the crooked fieldstone chimney. The scent of burning wood was an ode to warmth in the crisp air.

“I was wondering,” Millie said, snuggling a little closer to James as they turned toward the open courtyard, “if maybe you’d like to come to Canterbury for the holidays with me this year?”

James stopped in the lantern light of the main entrance, turning to look aside at Millie, surprised at her offer.

She went on before he could answer, “I already asked my mum and dad and they were totally keen on the idea. Honestly, I think they’re more excited about it than I am. I just thought...” She shrugged a little and looked out over the dark courtyard, “maybe you’d like to meet my parents, and brother and sister. I mean... I’m sure you have your own holiday traditions and things that you’re looking forward to. So maybe this is absolutely the last thing you expected. And my timing is probably perfectly horrid, now that I think of it. Soooo... maybe we should just pretend I didn’t even—”

“I’d love to, Millie,” James interrupted. He very much enjoyed the look of surprised delight that crossed her face, bringing her eyes immediately back to his.

“Really? Seriously?”

He shrugged and nodded, glancing back toward the unseen darkness of the Quidditch pitch. “I’d love to meet your family. And I love Christmas in the city. It’d be nice for a change, since we usually have Christmas at the Burrow, out in the middle of nowhere.”

Millie’s enthusiasm was seamless. She squeezed James’ arm ecstatically and kissed him briefly on the lips. “Oh, but I love Christmas in the country! We should go to *your* family’s next year! Promise you’ll invite me! Even if we aren’t... well... I don’t want to assume...”

Her cheeks reddened, but James was feeling very cavalier in the wake of the evening’s disappointments. “Make all the assumptions you want. Sure, I’ll invite you next year. But you have to keep in mind that Headmaster Merlin is part owner of the Burrow and spends his summers and holidays there. That means when we go home for Christmas, even next year when we’re graduated, school sort of comes with.”

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"I'll love it no matter what," Millie enthused, dragging James onward again, up the steps to the main entrance. "I'll send an owl to mum and dad tonight telling them to expect us both. Oh, we'll have simply a grand time! But do pack your dress robes! It's traditional for the Christmas Eve dinner. And we attend a play every year, too, at the Theatre d'Extraordinaire! This year it's *the Triumvirate*, isn't that just perfect? And, oh! My grandmother Eunice will be there, too. She takes some getting used to. I'll tell you all about her on the way..."

As they made their way into the Entrance Hall, James allowed Millie to fill the air with excitement and planning, warnings of dodgy relatives and promises of amazing sights and experiences. Filch watched them go past with a malevolent glare, leaning on a mop, pausing in his futile attempt to sop up the slush that had accumulated in the wake of the evening's match. As Millie went on, James wondered if perhaps he'd agreed a bit too easily. He'd meant to break up with Millie over the holiday, not deepen their relationship with a visit to meet her parents. A dull, sinking feeling darkened his already dark mood, but he pushed it away. At least going to the city with Millie meant not having to spend the holiday with his showoff brother and blaming sister. At the mere remembrance of them, his resolve firmed and he determined to send a note to his own mum that night as well, announcing his new plan.

Millie was so caught up in her excitement about the upcoming holiday that she accompanied James all the way to the portrait of the Fat Lady, only then remembering herself. "Oh, I passed my own corridor, didn't I?" she laughed, and then kissed James again, impetuously. "We'll have a grand time. You'll simply love it. I can't wait!" She gripped his hand and squeaked with delight and James was once again both gratified and slightly worried by her enthusiasm.

A moment later, she turned and skipped back the way they'd come, humming Christmas carols happily to herself.

"Well," the Fat Lady indulged with a knowing smile. "It looks to me like *somebody* is in *love...*"

James was still watching Millie as she turned and capered cheerily down the stairs. "That's what I'm afraid of," he muttered with a sigh.

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James half hoped that his mum would forbid the trip to Canterbury over the holidays, although he knew it was unlikely. She was a born matchmaker, just like his sister, and would likely adore the idea of James partaking in some innocent romance over the break. Further, as hard as it was for her, James knew that his mum was making a conscious effort to respect her nearly of-age son, and honour his choices.

Thus, it was no great surprise when Nobby returned with her message later the following week, shaking snow from his wings as he landed on the breakfast table. James withdrew the message from the owl's leg while Nobby himself sniffed and pecked at the remains of a kipper, clearly hungry from his morning's flight.

The note in his mother's handwriting was brief but surprisingly illuminating.

*Dear James,*

*We'll miss you, but I'm certain you will have a lovely time. Your father and I are both familiar with Millie's family, as Mr. V was Ministry ambassador to the magical government in Norway for several years and Mrs. V is very charitable in central London with both her money and time. Since Albus is bringing his own New Friend home for the holiday, your room will likely be in use anyway. We will all send your gifts to you at the school—*

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*look for Kreacher before you leave—but don't dare make a habit of being away from us for future holidays!*

*I miss you very much, as does your father, who sends his love and says to be sure not to let things get TOO romantic during the break, for what that's worth. I reminded him that he married his school sweetheart and things turned out just aces for him.*

*Grandma Weasley sends her love as well. Oh, and she knows the Countess Eunice Vandergriff from her own days at Hogwarts and says to watch out for her, apparently because 'the woman hasn't washed a cauldron or folded a pair of socks in her entire blessed life'.*

"What's your dad mean about not getting *too* romantic with Millie?" Graham asked with a grin, reading over James' shoulder. James jerked the letter away, hastily refolding it.

"It means he doesn't want James getting too handsy with any of the Hufflepuppet Pals while away from school supervision," Deirdre said wisely, turning to glance back at the Hufflepuff table where Millie sat with a group of her friends.

"You're all missing the main point," Rose said, leaning back from the table as Nobby unfurled his wings with a puff of cold air and launched toward the upper windows again. "Apparently Albus is bringing 'a new friend' home with him for the holidays."

Scorpius pointed his chin toward the end of their own table, where Chance Jackson and her friends giggled and conspired in the shadow of the Great Hall Christmas tree. "Indeed, I know at least *one* Gryffindor who wasn't too broken up about last week's big loss to Slytherin. Could that be little Albus' guest?"

"Got it in one, I wager," Rose said, vaguely disgusted. "He and Chance have become quite the little item. But still, letting *romance* come before team..." She shook her head and wrinkled her nose.

"Where's Hagrid?" James asked, attempting to change the subject as he stuffed his mum's letter into his knapsack. "We have Care of Magical Creatures this afternoon, right?"

Scorpius shrugged. "Maybe he finally got eaten by one of the monsters he keeps out in that barn of his. All I hear is 'class dismissed'."

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Rose jabbed Scorpius sharply with her elbow. “The menagerie is mostly empty now, as you well know. The Ministry made him get rid of most of his creatures, just in case any more Muggles come sniffing around the grounds. Ridiculous, of course. Merlin’s fortified the secrecy charms all around. But still, poor Hagrid’s had to send most of his best beasts to some magical preserve in Australia.”

“Wait a minute,” Deirdre said, leaning back and staring up at the teacher’s table. “He’s up there after all. Just... well *that’s* why we didn’t recognize him at first.”

“He’s...” James furrowed his brow, craning to look up at the dais. “Is he... reading?”

Sure enough, the top of the half-giant’s head could just be seen behind an enormous book, which sat propped upright on the table before him. The book was bound in frayed green cloth, its edges worn almost through. There was no title embossed on the spine or cover, merely a large symbol, tarnished black and illegible.

“I have to say,” Graham said with genuine surprise, “I wasn’t one hundred percent certain that Hagrid *could* read.”

“Of course he can read,” Rose said tersely, giving Graham a reproachful look. “He reads more than *you* do, and not just Quidditch scores and Chocolate Frog cards, at that.”

Still, James thought, Graham was right that the sight of Hagrid with his prodigious nose buried in an even more prodigious book was a curious sight indeed, especially at the head table during breakfast. He decided to ask Hagrid about it during that afternoon’s class.

In that endeavor, however, James was disappointed. Just as Ancient Runes was concluding and Professor Votary was announcing the evening’s homework, a message arrived that Care of Magical Creatures was cancelled. The classroom broke into a babble of relief and even a few cheers, until Votary sternly called everyone to attention again.

“You are all still summoned to the South Barn to assist in cleaning duties,” he declared, peering over his spectacles at the note in his hand. “Mr. Filch will be there to supervise.”

The elation of the room immediately melted to dour grumbling. Ralph looked dolefully past James to the classroom windows, where snow drifted brightly against a dour grey sky.

"And here I thought we were avoiding a tramp out into the tundra," he sighed.

"Buck up, Ralph," offered Rose, buckling her bag and slinging it over her shoulder. "Maybe Filch will deputize you as junior muckraker, first order."

"Har har," Ralph grumped.

The threesome followed the rest of the class out into the chill of the day, hunching their shoulders against the steady wind and blowing, stinging wraiths of snow. Hagrid's hut was barely a mound of drifts, with only one window and the chimney visible, its smoke tattering in the wind.

"We should go check on Hagrid after class," Rose called into the wind, speaking James' thoughts. He nodded in agreement. Ralph would come along as much for one of Hagrid's mugs of hot tea and huge misshapen gingerbread cookies as for the visit, but he, James knew, was also curious about whatever was occupying their old friend.

The next hour was a smelly and unhappy affair, partly because the stalls and cages of the barn represented a daunting duty under any circumstance, and partly because Argus Filch enjoyed making every task as painstakingly fussy and difficult as possible. He ambled from corner to corner, stall to stall, clucking his tongue in righteous indignation at the unsatisfactory progress he encountered at every turn. He did little work himself, apart from when he yanked a broom or pitchfork from a students' hand to impatiently show how it was properly used, clearly wishing to use the instrument as a rod of punishment instead.

James endured one such demonstration, accepting the brush back from the caretaker with a tight frown and watching Filch's back as he stumped away, fuming gleefully.

"It's not like anybody's going to be eating out of this thing," he muttered, reaching inside one of the cages and resuming the awkward task of scrubbing its interior.

"Well," Ralph said, grunting with his own arm crooked into a cage, scrubbing its mesh ceiling, "*something* will probably end up eating out of it, eh?"

"Wargles don't count," James replied. "They lick their own nethers. I don't think they give a care about 'the excrement tarred into the crevices'."

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Ralph merely shrugged as much as his awkward posture allowed. James knew that Ralph, as Head Boy, felt a constant pressure not to criticize even the most odious of the Hogwarts staff. James felt no such pressure, of course, and found Ralph's clumsy discretion grating, at best.

By the time they finished and stepped back outside, weary and smelling of moldy hay and innumerable flavors of beast dung, the sky had grown dark and leaden, whether with early evening or another impending snowfall no one could tell. The tracks of their earlier footprints were already half consumed by the blowing snow, which shone slate blue in the gloom. Hagrid's hut, however, glowed from its single visible window with buttery lamplight and the flicker of the hearth. They angled toward it, not attempting to speak over the wind that buffeted across the drifts, blasting them with ice crystals.

The door of Hagrid's hut creaked swiftly open even before they reached it, letting out a push of deliciously warm air and firelight. Hagrid stood framed in the door, half lit by the interior behind him, half by the blue evening gloom, his breath pluming huge clouds into the wind.

"S'about time yeh three showed up at my door," he called out with such sudden impatience that James nearly stopped in his tracks. "What yeh waitin' for? No sense pretendin' I didn't know yeh was gonna come out and check on dim ol' Hagrid, with his silly umbreller wand and hardly enough wits t' read a simple letter. Come in, come in..."

He stepped back from the door and waved a slab-like hand into the warm clutter of his hut. James shrugged and tromped inside, doing his best to shake the snow from his shoes onto the mat. Ralph and Rose crammed in behind him, shrugging out of their coats and shaking snowflakes from their hair. Hagrid swung the door shut with a firm slam and shot the bolt before stumping back across the small living space and standing near his table.

The interior of Hagrid's hut hadn't changed much over the years. It was still a comfortable shamble of miss-matched, oversized furniture, bare wooden floors, and dusty rafters hung with all manner of baskets, nets, and traps. Trife, Hagrid's old bullmastiff dog, twined happily around the three students, snuffling their hands with his wet

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nose and nearly knocking them over with his excited greeting. The hearth roared, making the room almost uncomfortably hot, so that James immediately flung his coat onto a nearby bureau, which was already weighed down with nested pots and cauldrons. Hagrid merely glanced back and forth from the new arrivals to the huge green book open on the table, propped before a lantern. A mostly empty iron tankard of butterbeer sat next to it, and James could tell that it hadn't been Hagrid's first of the evening.

Rose spoke for all of them when she asked, "Are you all right, Hagrid?"

"Oh, Rosie," Hagrid cried, raising both of his hands to his face with such a sudden shift of mood that James was again taken aback. Hagrid folded backwards onto one of his kitchen chairs, which chalked a few inches backwards in alarm. "Oh, Rosie! Yeh remind me so much o' yer mum. That's 'ow I knew yeh three would come. Cuz *they* would'a. Ron and Hermione and Harry. They did, yeh know. They came t' see me back when Norberta was just a wee egg, not even 'atched. Did I ever tell yeh that story?"

"Only about a thousand times," James said, not unkindly, moving to join Hagrid at the table. The normal clutter of wooden plates, cheese rinds, and tea mugs had been pushed back in an untidy jumble by the enormous, musty-smelling book. "What is all this, Hagrid?"

"It's a letter from Grawpie, s'what it is!" Hagrid sniffed hugely, half embarrassed, half exasperated, and lifted the front cover of the green book momentarily, revealing a huge, heavy parchment unrolled beneath it. "An' I can barely read the blasted thing! I see the symbols fer dragon, which can only mean Norberta. And a few other symbols that are worryin', t' say th' least. But th' rest is complete gibb'rish to me. I was never partic'ly good at Giantish, and it's been so many years, I'm nearly useless. Can't even read a letter from my own dear brother an' his byootiful bride!" A fat tear trembled and ran down the side of Hagrid's nose. He swiped it away with a callused thumb.

Ralph shouldered closer to the table and lifted the cover of the green book again, closing it to reveal the letter beneath. "Can't be that hard, can it? I mean, Giantish is a language made up of, like, cave

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drawings and stuff. Stick figures and arrows and hands with not enough fingers..."

He paused as he looked down at Grawp's letter. It wasn't printed on parchment at all but an expanse of what appeared to be untanned leather, thin as a bedsheets, irregularly shaped and curling at the edges. The entire surface was scrawled with tiny pictograms and symbols, clustered so tightly as to blend into a nearly seamless mash. James turned his head this way and that as he leaned over it, trying to make sense of it and failing. The text of the letter—if text was what it could be called—didn't run in lines down the page, but along the top, down the side, then across the bottom. In fact, the line of symbols followed the uneven edges of the skin, turning upside-down and running back up the side again, twisting in on itself in dense concentric circles like a fingerprint, or the rings of a tree stump. James blinked at it and gave his head a shake, unable to follow the dizzying line of imagery.

"Right," Rose said slowly. "I don't think even a person fluent in Giantish could just *read* this letter, Hagrid. Do you have a quill and parchment ready? We can help decipher it if you like."

James wasn't certain that he was quite prepared to spend the rest of the evening hunkered over a musty-smelling book translating hundreds and hundreds of tiny hand-scrawled symbols, and the look Ralph shot him communicated the same. But Hagrid's response made it impossible to deny him. He nearly burst into relieved tears and scrambled to make more room on the table, retrieving a stack of damp parchment from a nearby drawer.

"Oh, Rosie, Ralph, James, that'd be just golden o' yeah! I was reachin' th' end o' my wits! And I know many would say that wa'an't a long trek, but still. I'll make tea! And thanks to yeh ever so much! *Ever* so much!"

James sighed to himself, unable to keep the smile from his face. Ralph settled onto Hagrid's abandoned chair as the half-giant hustled into his tiny kitchen.

"Well," he said, shaking his head wryly. "It's not like I had any plans for the rest of the year."

"Oh tosh," Rose said, climbing onto another chair, kneeling on it to lean over the table. She peered closely at the huge green book,

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which James could now see was a dictionary of giant symbology, with translations in English. “Giantish has no grammar, no spelling, no pronunciation. That’s one of the beauties of the language. It’s made entirely of pictograms, translatable to any other tongue. Once we get started and learn some of the basic recurring imagery, everything should start falling easily into place.”

“I don’t know what’s more daunting,” James sighed, tugging the huge sheepskin letter out from under the book and turning it this way and that, “how hard Hagrid makes it seem, or how easy *you* do.”

Hagrid made tea, serving it in his usual collection of chipped cups and mugs, and provided a platter of iced cookies in the shapes of hippogriffs, Christmas trees, and, inexplicably, Yeti footprints. Ralph transcribed what Rose and James translated, leaving crumbs on the sheepskin as they turned it round and round, following the line of symbols as it spiraled toward the centre of Grawp’s letter.

It became evident as they worked that the letter had been a group effort, written not only by Grawp, but also Prechka, his wife, and several other members of their mountain tribe, up to and including their local king. James began to recognize the drawing styles of each hand, simply by looking at the weight of the strokes, the straightness of the lines, and the relative artistic merits of the symbols. As they worked, he learned via Rose that the giants’ “ink” was a mixture of blood, tar, vegetable juice, and red clay. They painted the symbols with brushes made of bicorn eyelashes.

Ralph’s prediction that translating the letter would take the rest of the year turned out to be inaccurate, although James had to admit as the night wore on that it certainly *felt* like it was taking months rather than hours. Outside the hut’s square windows, the night turned inky black and snow indeed began to fall again. The wind gusted, rattling the panes and howling around the chimney, but the foursome stayed warm and busy, drinking tea until they could drink no more, dining on cheese, crusty bread with butter and peppery olive oil, cucumber slices, tiny blood sausage links, and more iced cookies for dessert. Tempers grew thin, and occasionally James and Rose would argue about the meanings of certain pictograms, especially when Grawp was their author, since his Giantish penmanship, as it were, was the most haphazard of all.

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“It’s clearly a sun rising,” James insisted, stabbing at the drawing with a sausage-greasy finger.

“It’s King Kilroy looking over a mountain!” Rose argued impatiently. “See the hair!?”

“Those are sunbeams!”

“You’re as blind as a cave nargle! King Kilroy is the symbol for authority! It makes sense in context!”

“The rising sun represents the future,” James persisted doggedly. “That makes *more* sense in context!”

Ralph, as usual, broke the stalemate. “Let’s just call it ‘authority in the future’ and move on, shall we? My bum’s going to sleep.”

It was nearly midnight by the time they finished the transcription. Finally, weary but gratified and curious, they retired to the chair and sofa before the fire to read the letter in its entirety. Hagrid stoked the coals to a fierce red glow, crackling and bursting with sparks, and eased into the huge easy chair, his stocking feet crossed on the rug, one big toe poking through a frayed hole. Trife turned three circles next to Hagrid’s knees and lay down with a contented snuffle.

James and Rose plopped onto the sprung sofa while Ralph remained standing as if he was about to give a presentation in class.

He began to recite the transcription, which, while written in his own handwriting, was still rather a task. As Rose had pointed out, Giantish is a language with no grammar or structure, leaving Ralph to fill in the blanks between ideas and concepts as he went.

“Grawp, Prechka, and the rest of the tribe send greetings and... the mountain-sized, ten-headed manticore of prosperity.”

“Ah, that’s a traditional giant’s greetin’, that is,” Hagrid nodded, his eyes half-lidded with happy anticipation. “Means riches and meat for endless seasons. Go on, go on...”

Ralph nodded uncertainly. “Time is hard as the year gets old. The future is foggy and full of danger. But smaller worries first. Dragon...” Ralph paused and looked up. “We’re sure he means Norberta here, right?”

“No other dragons in the mountain tribes,” Hagrid said. “He’s got to mean good old Norberta. She was their weddin’ gift, if yeh recall.

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I'd loved t' have kept 'er myself, but it's nice knowing she's still in th' family, at least."

Ralph nodded and frowned back down at the letter. "Norberta smells a different dragon on the wind. She is excited and hard to control. Her desire for the male dragon of her kind makes her disobey the command of the giants who love and keep her. She leaves her cave home to go find the male dragon, but Grawp and Prechka, with the help of the tribe, even the king, bring her back. Soon, she will go far enough and fast enough that they won't catch her in time. She goes always south and east, bypassing the small man places, heading toward the Sea of Light."

James asked, "Who are the small men?"

"All men are small compared to giants, silly," Rose said. "But that's not what it means. 'Small man places' means human villages. Norberta is going around little towns and such to get to the male dragon she smells."

"Oh," James said, his brow furrowed. "So what's the Sea of Light?"

Hagrid answered in a thoughtful voice, "That's the *big* man place. London town itself. Most giants have never been there, and won't ever go, not even to bring back Norberta. It's a mythic, frightenin' place in their lore. To them, it's just a huge ocean of lights shining up on the nighttime clouds."

Ralph grimaced in confusion. "But how could Norberta be smelling a male dragon from that far away?"

"Gor'," Hagrid said, sitting up slightly in his easy chair. "We covered that two years ago in class, din't we? Dragon pheromones are th' strongest in th' whole animal world, so powerful an' deep that humans can't even smell 'em. Same way our ears can't hear a dog whistle. Dragons are known t' seek each other over hunnerts of miles, across leagues of seas. It's 'ow they find love and make baby dragons."

"Oh, yeah. I remember that," Ralph lied, scratching his head. "But there can't be a male dragon in London, of all places, can there?"

James' eyes suddenly widened as a memory struck him.

"Montague Python!" he said, grabbing the arm of the couch as he sat up straight. "Deirdre told me about him on the way up to the school at the start of term! Her parents took her to see a magical

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traveling circus and there was a male dragon in the show. She said they'd be setting up in Diagon Alley soon enough. It must be Montague that Norberta smells."

"Aye," Hagrid said sadly. "Poor girl's just missing dragonish comp'ny. She wants what any living thing wants. To love and be loved back. Why, her poor huge heart must be breakin' from bein' able t' smell another dragon and not being allowed to get to 'im."

After a moment of ruminating silence, Rose prodded, "Go on, Ralph."

Ralph nodded and continued, reading studiously. "They say they will all try to keep Norberta safe. But the tribe is busy with bigger worries. The human places reach out to the giant places more all the time. Unrest fills the air as men can be seen crossing boundaries never before crossed. Sometimes the men come to hunt. Sometimes to explore. Deeper and further they travel, often in their roaring metal beasts. Er, he must mean trucks and off-road vehicles, I assume," Ralph shrugged without looking up. "Some tribes prepare for war with the men, and plan to fight to keep their place. Grawp and Prechka's tribe will not fight against the humans, though. The king of their tribe says they will go away, find new mountains farther north, beyond the big coasts. But Grawp and Prechka don't want to travel to new mountains. They want to come..." Ralph's face blanched and his eyes widened. "They want to come here, to Hogwarts. They believe it's the safest place. They remember their cave in the Forbidden Forest, and want to live there again."

"They can't be serious," James said, surprised. "That's, like, hundreds of miles away. There's no such thing as giant trains or planes. They'd get lost for sure."

"Nah," Hagrid said, reaching forward on his chair to poke at the hearth with the metal tip of his umbrella, flaring the coals to light again. "Giants is dead smart with directions. Yeh know that. It's like a sixth sense they 'ave. Once they've been a place, they can always find their way back to it again. That's th' way they find their ways around the mountains, from cave t' cave and peak t' peak."

Rose looked from Hagrid to James, her face alarmed. "But that would have them walking the whole way themselves, through loads of

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Muggle villages and towns, right out in the open! They'd be seen for sure!"

"It'll never 'appen," Hagrid said, leaning back into his easy chair again, wrenching a long creak from its innards. "Grawpie would never take such a chance. I 'spect he's just missing his ol' home here in the Forbidden Forest is all, talkin' about it all wistful like, the way some people talk about the olden days. Giant language is tricky with concepts like the past. The real problem is poor Norberta."

"Hold on a sec," Ralph said, lowering the finished letter and cocking his head. "Two giants say they're planning to waltz across hundreds of miles of Muggle land to come to Hogwarts, possibly bringing loads of Muggles following along with them out of pure amazement, and you say that's no big deal?"

"I say it'll never 'appen," Hagrid waved a ham-like hand. "Things may be getting' tetchy in the mountains, but we're nowhere near that point yet. Grawpie's smarter 'n that."

James grimaced and widened his eyes. "I remember Grawp pretty well myself. Lovable enormous bloke he may be, but 'smart' isn't the first word that comes to mind."

"Yer all missin' the point," Hagrid said with a huge sigh, staring glassily into the low fire. James glanced back at the half-giant, who hiccupped and sniffed deeply. "Poor li'l Norberta's all alone. She needs companionship, she does. She's not tryin' to be bad. She's just doin' what nature and 'er own dragonish heart demands of 'er. We've gotta help 'er, we do."

"No, Hagrid," Rose said, mustering her mother's firm, implacable voice. "Hagrid," she said the professor's voice again, commanding his attention. "What are you thinking about doing?"

Hagrid blinked aside at Rose as if snapping out of a deep reverie. "Hmm? What? Oh, nothin'. Nary a thing. I'm jus' thinkin' of poor Norberta."

"That's what we're worried about, I think," Ralph sighed.

"Hagrid," James said, tilting his head at the big man. "We can't have Norberta tramping off into London in search of a trained circus dragon. You know that, right? It's bad enough thinking about Grawp and Prechka stomping through Muggle villages on their way to

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Hogwarts. A dragon sniffing around London would be completely disastrous."

"Catastrophic," Rose agreed meaningfully.

"But," Hagrid protested, narrowing his eyes. James could almost see the wheels spinning inside the professor's shaggy head. "But, she's got *needs*, she does. I'm not sayin' Grawpie and Prechka should set her loose to run rampant through th' city looking for this performin' dragon. But maybe there's a better way. And then, when there was a new dragon egg, I could 'atch it myself! Yeh three could help! It'd be jus' like old times!" His beetle-black eyes nearly sparked with anticipation.

"No more dragon eggs!" Ralph declared, glancing rapidly from Rose to James as if for support. "I mean, right? That's perfectly daft from every direction!"

"Ah, yer right, yer right," Hagrid deflated reluctantly. He reached up and rubbed the back of his neck, still staring into the fire. "But like I say, maybe there's a better way. A way that'll keep Norberta from gallivantin' off unsupervised into London while also givin' 'er what nature demands. But I'll need help. Yeh three would come along, wouldn't yeh? After all, yeh've come this far already, translatin' the letter an' all. Yeh've earned it."

"You make it sound like it'd be a sort of happy holiday," Ralph shook his head wonderingly.

James tried to imagine what Hagrid was planning. "Ralph's got a point. This won't be some half-crazy, potentially dangerous, completely unworkable scheme that will land us all either in Azkaban or dead, will it?"

"O' course not," Hagrid shot him a reproachful look that James could clearly see through.

Rose shrugged. "I'm in."

Ralph boggled at her, his eyes wide with betrayed surprise.

"Of course I'm in," she repeated to him firmly. "And you are, too! If it keeps Norberta out of the city, then it's our obligation as citizens of the magical world."

Ralph's eyes bulged even more. "You're as nutters as *he* is," he pointed at Hagrid. Rose merely shrugged.

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"My uncle Charlie works with dragons in Romania," James suggested. "I bet if we could somehow get Norberta to him, he'd know how to introduce her to a real male dragon, not some tamed, performing giant snake named *Montague Python*." He rolled his eyes.

Hagrid was nodding vigorously, leaning forward in his chair again. "At's right! Charlie Weasley would know *jus'* what to do! All we'd need to do is get Norberta to 'im!"

"Oh, that's all, eh?" Ralph said with mock relief. "All we need to do is transport a five ton Norwegian Ridgeback across international borders while keeping her secret from both the Muggle world, who would faint in droves at the mere sight of her, *and* the magical authorities, who would arrest us on sight for transporting an illegal beast and endangering the Vow of Secrecy."

Rose shrugged and suppressed a smile. "You make it sound so easy, Ralph."

"It'd be one thing if she could fly," James mused. "One of us could just ride her. But her wing's never fully healed, right Hagrid?"

"Over land is the only way," Hagrid nodded, grimacing at the thought of the dragon's handicap. His eyes sharpened as a thought struck him. "Over land *or...*"

"Or what?" Ralph clarified skeptically.

"Er, nothin'," Hagrid said, suddenly pushing to his feet. "Nothin' at all. Ferget I said anythin'. For now, it's late. I should'a sent yeh three back to yer dormitories hours ago. What kind o' teacher am I? A ruddy irresponsible one, t' keep yeh out like this." But he was merely babbling. James could tell that the big man was caught in the unaccustomed grip of an idea. The mad glint in his eyes was almost comically intent. James half-expected steam to burst from Hagrid's ears.

"You won't do anything stupid without us, will you?" Rose asked, shrugging into her coat as Hagrid virtually broomed them from the hut.

"Don't listen to her," Ralph countered. "Feel free to do all the stupid things you want without us."

"G'night, yeh three!" Hagrid bid them, smiling tightly through his bristly beard. "Straight back to th' castle with yeh now. No lollygaggin'."

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A moment later, the door boomed shut, closing off the glow of the hut. The warmth of it still surrounded the three students, but James could feel it tattering away in the snow-flecked wind.

“Come on,” he shrugged. “He’ll call on us when he needs us.”

Ralph shook his head as they started their tramp toward the wintry-frosted castle. “You make it sound like you’re looking forward to it.”

“You don’t *have* to come along when the time comes, Ralph,” Rose said primly.

“You’d think that, wouldn’t you?” Ralph moaned in a terse voice. “But I know how these things go. I’ll end up getting sucked along anyway, somehow. I always do. And James will end up needing my wand for some reason because he lost his or broke it somehow. Or there will be some task that only I can do because, I don’t know, I’m the right height, or the rest of you are in mortal danger, or busy battling mythical beasts of terror or something.”

“And that seriously makes you *not* want to come?” James grinned.

“It won’t be like that this time,” Rose said firmly as they shuffled into the courtyard, kicking snowy powder before them. “It’s a simple enough job. Uncle Charlie will know exactly what to do. All we have to do is get Norberta to him.”

“Ah, I know all about simple, easy, totally safe jobs with you lot,” Ralph sighed dourly. “Turns out they never are.”

James didn’t say so, but he expected that Ralph was more right than even Rose was willing to admit.



## 11. BLACKBRIER QUOIT

No word came from Hagrid before the Christmas holidays, leaving James free to attend to his packing and planning and general trepidation about his trip with Millie. He remembered to bring his dress robes and secretly dreaded having to wear them. He thought about being alone with Millie outside of school and felt both nervous and feverishly excited about the prospect. Would they be unsupervised a lot of the time? Or even more supervised than they were at school? What would her parents and family be like? Millie had attempted to describe them and warn him of certain eccentricities, but he hadn't absorbed much of it. The only thing he understood for certain, based on her descriptions, was that the Vandergriffs had a much different lifestyle than any James had ever encountered. Scorpius had summed it up when he had described them as "old magic", although James had only the vaguest idea of what that meant.

The train ride back to London was typically raucous, the compartments filled with happy students, the corridors decorated with

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pine boughs, colourful enchanted light globes, and foot-long candy canes. The cart lady's wares consisted entirely of holiday cookies, miniature mincemeat pies, sugar snowballs, cocoa cockroaches, and pepper-imp snaps. Millie bought several of everything and distributed them to the crowded compartment they shared. James accepted a palm-sized mince pie with a sheepish smile. He barely knew any of the people crammed into the compartment, most of them being Millie's friends, her fellow Hufflepuffs, although a few were at least familiar faces from Night Quidditch. For their part, they seemed to accept James as one of their own, based solely on his connection to Millie.

She sat next to him, hip to hip, holding hands, bouncing excitedly with the conversation. Outside the window, the winter sun descended over pristine white fields, snow-decked forests, and mountains dim and hazy with distance. The light turned dusky and purple and the shadows grew long. Eventually, the lanterns of the Hogwarts Express lit themselves with soft popping sounds, bathing the entire train in golden light, and James knew that the journey was very nearly over.

A pang of trepidation came over him as he remembered that, with their arrival at Platform Nine and Three Quarters, the familiar part of the holiday would be over. Suddenly, he missed the comfortable banality of the Burrow, the gingerbread smell of his mother's frantic baking and the warmth of Grandma Weasley's hugs, the homely live spruce Christmas tree decorated with beloved family ornaments and the bullfrog croaking voice of Kreacher.

Kreacher, at least, he didn't have to miss very much. He had just seen the ancient house elf only the morning before, awaking to his patiently grave stare and drooping watery eyes as the elf stood on the foot of his bed, a stack of wrapped presents at his feet.

James had decided that he couldn't open the presents yet, despite Kreacher's monotone holiday benediction.

"It's not Christmas yet," James had said, yawning and stretching, his hair still prickling from the shock of waking under the elf's unblinking glare. "I'll open them when I get back. It'll give me something to look forward to."

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The elf had accepted this with stoic grimness, vanishing shortly thereafter with a snap of his bony fingers, leaving a scent of pine needles and peppermint in his wake.

Now, as the train steamed slower and slower, the chug of the engine dropping from a staccato rhythm to a descending bass drum-beat, with the dark brick walls and chimneys of the city sweeping past the windows, James cursed himself for agreeing to go with Millie for the holiday. He knew now that he had mostly done it just to spite Albus and Lily. But now he felt that he was only punishing himself, and digging himself into a deeper hole with Millie, with whom he still intended to break up just as soon as the moment was right.

If the moment was *ever* right.

He scanned the crowd of waiting parents and families as the train slowed, hissed, and shimmy-rattled to a halt. He knew he wouldn't see his own parents there. It had become tradition for he, Albus, Lily, Rose, and the rest to travel via Portkey directly to the Burrow. The enchanted Christmas sweater Portkey had arrived only a few days earlier, addressed to Albus and Lilly. James had seen it and acted disinterested—had even made a snide comment about how much fun *he'd* be having in the city instead. Albus hadn't cared, but Lily had looked sincerely jealous, and James felt nastily gratified by that.

The platform milled with people in coats and hats, scarves and boots, festively dusted with snow and watching bright-eyed as the travelers began to disembark. James saw Scorpius' parents, Draco and Astoria, standing in long dark coats near the edge of the crowd, looking just as severe and haughty as always. Other vaguely familiar faces shone like moons in the lantern light. As James climbed down onto the cold footpath, he scanned the crowd for anyone who might be part of Millie's family.

For her own part, Millie made a huge show of saying goodbye to her friends, hugging them one by one, clasping their hands earnestly, as if she wouldn't be seeing them again for months or years, rather than mere days. James tried not to feel impatient and forgotten.

"So which one's your mum or dad?" he finally asked when she joined him again.

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"Oh, mummy and daddy don't meet us at the platform," she said breezily, smoothing her hair and tugging her yellow gloves onto her hands.

"Ah," James frowned. "So... your grandma Eunace then?"

"Grandmother Eunace!" Millie laughed and shook her head. "Don't be silly! Grab your bag and come on."

She slung her own bag onto her back and shouldered into the throng, leaving James to catch up. After a moment, she reached back with one yellow-gloved hand, found his, and pulled him eagerly onward, threading through the crowd and eventually out through the brick wall portal into the Muggle reality of King's Cross station. Still she did not look back but wended this way and that along the broad concourse, her boot heels clacking over the sound of recorded Christmas carols and toneless announcements of arrivals and departures. Muggle travelers milled all around, some happy and festive, meeting relatives and friends, others frowning and harried, checking their watches or pocket telephones, flowing in all directions.

Finally, Millie led James to the lofty, echoing expanse of the main terminal, flooded with light and seemingly as huge and crowded as a football stadium. There, she stopped momentarily, looking this way and that.

James, however, saw the man a moment before her.

"Um," he said, squeezing Millie's hand to get her attention and pointing with the other. "I assume he's for us?"

Millie followed James' pointing finger, and then smiled and nodded excitedly. She began to tug him forward again.

The man James had seen held a large sign at chest height, clutched in black-gloved hands. The sign read **VANDERGRIFF AND GUEST** in neat copperplate letters. It was not the sign, however, that made the man stand out. It was the fact that he was at least ten feet tall, with a head so huge and blocky that it might have been hewn at Stonehenge. His thinness was almost freakish, emphasized by a double-breasted black uniform so snug that it appeared to have been sewn directly onto his body. The double row of brass buttons on his chest glinted in the overhead fluorescents, as did the patent-leather brim of his chauffeur's cap.

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None of the other travelers seemed to notice the mantis-like man who towered over them like a telephone pole, his grey eyes unmoving and patient in the shadow of his cap. But even that was less amazing than what sat behind the chauffeur, completely unnoticed amidst the flowing, busy, hectic throng.

It was a car, but not like any James had ever seen. It was very old, immensely long and low, its fenders sweeping back like smooth metal waves over fat white-walled tyres. Chrome gleamed from the spoked hubcaps, the gigantic round headlamps, and the tombstone-like frame of its grill. The passenger compartment was so long and regal that it looked as if it might contain a ballroom. Jutting from the moon-grey slope of the hood was a silver figure, a robed woman leaning forward as if into a gust of delicious wind, her chin raised, her arms thrown back so that her sleeves trailed like wings.

The throng of travelers flowed around the car like water around a rock, giving it not so much as a sidelong glance.

"Good evening, Mistress Millicent and Master Potter," the chauffeur said as Millie approached. His voice was deep but surprisingly melodic. He touched two fingers to the brim of his cap and offered them a stately little smile.

"Hi Balor, happy Christmas!" Millie called up to the giant man, and then surprised James by throwing her arms wide, as if in expectation of a hug. Balor lowered the sign and hunkered to one knee, allowing Millie to throw her arms around him, although not exactly returning the embrace himself. When she disengaged, he straightened again, rising so tall as to blot out the overhead lights, and ran a platter-sized hand over his uniform, straightening nonexistent wrinkles.

With a faint clunk, the boot of the car swung open. Balor deftly collected James' and Millie's bags and loaded them into the car, then opened the rear passenger door. Millie clambered inside. More tentatively, James stepped in after her—the interior was so large that he barely had to duck his head—and joined her on a sumptuous burgundy leather sofa that served as the rear seat. Speechless, he looked about, taking in the paneled walnut furnishings, the silver fixtures, the gently curving side seats and thick plush carpeting. A miniature crystal chandelier hung from the gentle dome of the ceiling. There was no ballroom, in fact, but the front of the passenger compartment was

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divided from the driver's seat by a polished wooden bar decked with crystal decanters, wine and cordial bottles, and rows of glasses hung upside down in neat racks.

"That's Balor," Millie said, fitting her hand into James' again and giving it a squeeze. "He's been in the family for, oh, centuries probably."

"What," James asked, watching over the bar as the enormous man folded himself behind the driver's seat, wrapping his black-gloved hands around the ring of the burled wooden steering wheel, "what is he?"

Millie blinked up toward Balor as if she'd never really considered the question. "A cyclops, I think," she answered with a shrug.

The engine of the car started with a subtle, throttling thrum, almost like a butler clearing his throat.

None of the Muggles looked at the car, and yet they moved aside before it, clearing a channel for the car to travel through. It began to roll with understated grace, the prow of its engine preceding it like a red carpet. The chandelier barely swung, merely turned its crystal pendants gently, adding prisms to its distinguished glow.

James had ridden in the Knight Bus through this very terminal once. But that ride had been wild, frantic, like dancing with a banshee. By comparison, this was like riding on the shoulders of a giant black panther as it calmly stalked the jungle.

"But..." James said faintly, "I thought Cyclopses only had one eye?"

Millie shrugged again. "We haven't read that section in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* yet."

The car, Millie told James almost off-handedly, was a Rolls Royce Wraith, though admittedly equipped with distinctly magical options. The engine required no petrol, for instance, running instead on liquid Goblinfire, and the hood ornament statue projected its own unplottability field everywhere it went. Even more impressive, James thought, was the car's ability to bend space around it wherever it rolled, allowing it to fit through small openings, such as one of the revolving door entrances of King's Cross station. The car didn't do anything so undignified as shrink itself. Instead, it seemed to press reality aside as if

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the world itself were made of plastic, or the metal and glass doors were mere curtains, drawn back by hidden cords.

The Wraith merged into the dense holiday traffic, but wasn't in the least affected by it. Ranks of taxis, cars, lorries, and vans crowded the slushy boulevard at a near standstill, lurching forward one by one like impatient animals at a feeding trough, but the Wraith merely slipped between them, riding the centre line like a rail, bulging the space so that the narrow aisle became a grand, empty thoroughfare. Balor did stop the car at traffic lights, but James noticed that the Rolls was always the first in line, its engine throttling patiently, until the light on the falling feathery flakes switched from red to green, whereupon the vehicle would ease forward again, preceding the traffic all around like a general leading troops on parade.

The drive to Canterbury took some time, and James was reminded once again of how immensely large London really was. They passed through shopping districts crowded with travelers on foot, most loaded with bags and boxes. They skirted industrial areas dominated by brick walls and filthy windows, tall smokestacks and metal garage doors. Finally, they came to a neighborhood of large homes set far back behind carefully pristine gardens. Trees lined the double boulevard, most decorated with understated white Christmas lights. No cars were parked on the streets here, and the snow was no longer tramped down by endless intersecting vehicle and pedestrian tracks. Instead, the boulevard was striped with two neat black tyre marks, repeated carefully by the few cars that drove here. The Rolls Royce followed the tracks discreetly while James peered from the huge side windows, wondering which of the large, impressive-looking homes might be their destination.

"We're not there quite yet," Millie said with a smile in her voice.

James waited, his chest tight with a blend of anticipation and trepidation that was becoming all too familiar. The only other vehicle on the road, he noticed, was another large luxury car, though of much newer vintage, following the Wraith at a respectful distance, its headlights bright as diamonds on jeweler's velvet.

As they neared the end of the boulevard, James realized that there was something unusual about the houses lining the left side. The spaces between and behind them were seamlessly dark, stretching off into foggy flatness. With a jolt of mild surprise, James realized that the

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flatness was the sea, mostly frozen over, so that the blue-white edges blended into smooth black over the depths. The rear yards of the homes sloped down to stony beaches, some dominated by the blocky silhouettes of boathouses, all dark and shut tight for the winter.

A line of trees obscured the shore view as the Wraith reached the end of the boulevard, which angled toward the sea and terminated at a neat round cul-de-sac with a curving metal guardrail. Trees lined the rail, crowding directly up to it, blotting out the sea view and the night sky beyond. The streetlamps ended at the last house, leaving the cul-de-sac thick with shadow, like a giant paved period at the end of a formal sentence.

The Wraith stopped in the centre of the period.

“Are we,” James asked, leaning forward on the seat to peer through the windscreen far ahead, “like, here yet?”

Beyond the windscreen, the dark line of trees began to shift. The trunks moved as if in the teeth of a stiff wind, and yet James could tell by the falling snow that the air was perfectly still. Faint creaks and pops emanated from the wood as the trees shuffled aside, crawling on their roots to reveal a dark opening. The opening did not reveal the sea, however, but a long wooded passage, shadowy and mysterious.

With a screech and creak of metal, the guardrail shimmied, shuddered, and rose up into the air, its posts growing like tentacles. The rail transformed as it stretched upwards, changing from a rust-spotted barrier to a wrought-iron archway, complete with more copperplate letters arranged over complicated iron scrollwork:

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The Wraith rolled forward again, passing beneath the sign the moment it rose to its full height.

Speechlessly, James watched, leaning close to the window on his side. Millie still held his hand between them, herself paying almost no attention at all.

The car should have rolled past the tree line and down onto stony beach, if James’ understanding of the local geography made any sense at all, and yet it proceeded instead onto a long, perfectly straight

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drive lined and roofed with birch trees, their branches knit overhead like revelers holding hands over a dance. Beyond the trees, on either side of the drive, James could just make out flat, grey ice, as if the drive occupied a very narrow peninsula stretching out into the sea.

Gaslights began to glow along the drive, flickering to life atop tall iron poles, illuminating the birch branches and creating golden pools on the snowy path. After a minute, the drive widened, still bordered by trees, and opened onto a broad park-like expanse, blanketed with snow and decorated with winding, illuminated pathways, stands of trees on small hills, meticulous hedges, and regal statuary. Situated on the rear quarter of the park was a stone house so broad and square, so lined with windows and pillars, ranks of steps and corner towers, that it was more castle than mansion.

“Home sweet home,” Millie sighed, not quite affectionately.

James barely heard her. He was just now noticing that, despite the size of the park and its gardens, the trees that surrounded it still somehow met overhead, lacing their branches together into an unbroken dome a hundred feet high, effectively shrouding the house and the entirety of its grounds from outside view.

The Wraith swept into a curving drive and angled toward the glow of the house, coming to a gentle halt before its grand front doors. The doors opened as James watched and a line of three men in formal black tailcoats and white shirts came out, descending dutifully into the cold to take up positions on the steps, where they stood at attention.

Balor opened the passenger door and Millie prodded James to get out. He did, stepping speechlessly into the cold, his feet crunching on gravel beneath a frosting of snow.

“Good evening Mistress and Master,” the nearest of the formal-clad men announced, bowing his double chin with jovial good humour. He was rotund but sturdy, with black hair pasted severely over his scalp. “I trust your journey was pleasant and without event.”

Millie climbed out after James and nodded to the man. “It was fine, er...?”

“Topham, M’Lady,” the man provided his name with no hesitation, and then indicated the others with a sweep of his hand. “And this is Hedley and Blake.” Hedley was middle-aged with a pleasant, clean-shaven face, while Blake was only a little older than James and

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Millie, dark haired with sharp, handsome features. He smiled at Millie and then James in a perfunctory manner. James noticed that the man's smile did not at all affect his eyes.

Millie nodded and opened her mouth to say something, but the arrival of a second car interrupted her. James turned, surprised to see the luxury automobile that had been following them earlier draw to a halt behind the Wraith. The driver's door swung open as Hedley and Blake descended the steps to retrieve the luggage from both vehicles.

"Millie!" the driver of the second car called cheerily as he hopped out, his teeth showing as he grinned toward the steps. He was thin and sandy haired, dressed in a grey tweed suit and gold tie.

"Bent!" Millie called back, dropping James' hand and running to greet the newcomer. They embraced, laughing, before Millie drug the man back by the hand. He allowed himself to be pulled along, smiling gamely in James' direction.

"Bent, this is James Potter, from school. James, this is my big brother, Benton Ford."

The thin man stripped off his driving gloves before reaching to give James' hand a firm shake. "A Potter at Blackbrier," he proclaimed cheerily. "Will wonders never cease! A delight to meet you, James."

"And you, too," James grinned, helpless not to return the man's happy enthusiasm.

"Mattie," the man called back over his shoulder, still gripping James' hand, "Come meet Millie's new friend, James Potter."

James glanced back toward Benton's car as a woman ascended from the passenger's seat. She was dressed in a pale coat and a slim golden gown that did not exactly bless her bony body. She had large, protuberant eyes and a chin sharp enough to open letters. Her red hair was drawn up into a complicated arrangement of waves beneath a furry ivory hat. She peered at James with cool, professional courtesy.

Millie nodded toward the woman in gold. "And this is my sister, Mathilda Constance."

"Welcome to Blackbrier Quoit, Mr. Potter," Mathilda said, gazing at him down the length of her blade-like nose before turning her attention to Topham. "And who shall it be this time, dare I ask?"

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"Miss Jillian, M'Lady," Topham answered immediately. "I believe she served you during your most recent visit. I hope her efforts were satisfactory."

"It isn't her fault," Mathilda sniffed, ascending the steps past the butler. "No outsider can compare to a *true* house servant."

"As you say, M'Lady," Topham nodded, averting his eyes tactfully.

"Come," Benton said, deliberately ignoring his older sister and smiling again. "Let's go inside and show James here around the old place. It looks impressive until you realize that it's really just a stuffy old museum that *some* people insist on living in. Right, Millie?"

Millie agreed and followed her brother up the steps toward the open double doors. The interior of the house was brilliant with golden light, revealing a long corridor of vaulted ceilings, chandeliers, and darkly gleaming wood.

"Speaking of museums," Benton announced with a laugh in his voice, "here we find the best exhibits of all! Mr. and Mrs. Vandergriff themselves!"

"Oh, do stop, Benton, you embarrass yourself," his mother said, but she was smiling, her white-gloved hands outstretched to him. He embraced her while Mr. Vandergriff turned his attention to James and Millie.

"Welcome home, darling," he said, smiling as Millie trotted up the steps to hug him in the doorway.

"And her young friend," Mrs. Vandergriff said, turning her twinkling green eyes on James and giving him a secretive smile. She was lithe and athletic, appearing almost ten years younger than her thinning-haired husband. Her own hair was dark, swept up and held in place by an emerald and silver comb that accented her forest green dress.

Mr. Vandergriff clapped James on the shoulder, turning him toward the door. "I've met your father on several occasions," he confided briskly. "Someday I shall succeed in coaxing him and your mother to visit us here at Blackbrier. I do hope your stay here will speak well of us."

James nodded, not quite sure what he could say to express his response thus far. His first impression was that, with the exception of

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Millie's sister Mathilda, Blackbrier Quoit was both the richest and warmest household he'd ever visited.

"Dinner in mere minutes, I'm told," Mr. Vandergriff exclaimed, turning to address the gathered family. "Isn't that right, Topham?"

"Indeed so," Topham answered with a nod. "If the family would like to convene in the drawing room, we may begin with hot cocoa and liquorice toddies, wherever age appropriate."

"Age appropriate nothing," Benton jibed, walking backward along the marble-tiled hall, his arms held wide. "It's Christmas! Toddies for everyone who wishes!"

"Oh Benton," Mrs. Vandergriff rolled her eyes with the weary affection of the mother of a born rogue.

"The servants," James whispered to Millie as the family moved into the high bookcases and upholstered couches of a long library-like room, "they're all... Muggles?"

Millie nodded. "Happened about a year after the Night of the Unveiling," she answered behind an upraised hand. "All the upstairs house elves were replaced with Muggle staff. Topham's the butler. Blake's a valet, along with the other bloke. I always forget their names. There are two ladies' maids and a footman or three. Of course all of them have to sign secrecy contracts and that sort of thing." She sighed, glancing back toward the door where Topham stood respectfully at attention. "Mattie and Bent and I all grew up with house elves caring for us. It's a little hard getting used to having actual humans around. But time marches on, apparently."

"I guess Piggen was right," James muttered.

"Who?"

"Piggen. He's the Gryffindor house elf. He says all the elves are worried that they'll lose their jobs. I told him it wasn't that bad a deal, since they were all basically slaves anyway, but they don't see it that way."

Millie nodded and shrugged. "Mummy says that hiring Muggles is a way to spread goodwill for when the Vow completely breaks down. She says that keeping unpaid servants around is a relic from a darker age, anyway."

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James considered this, but his reply was drowned by Topham, who suddenly spoke to the room at large, announcing another arrival.

"The Countess Eunice Vandergriff of Blackbrier," he proclaimed loftily.

James turned to see a woman so ancient and wrinkled that he wondered briefly if she was older than the manor itself. She walked imperiously in a sweeping burgundy dress, her back ramrod straight as she clacked a cane to the marble floor, seemingly more for effect than support.

"Mother," Mr. Vandergriff said grandly, moving to kiss the old woman on the cheek. Millie and Benton followed suit. The Countess accepted this with stoic patience, eyeing the room severely. Her gaze alit upon James like a set of weights and he had to resist the urge to shrink back from her stare.

"Please introduce me to our guest," she said, nodding once toward James. Her voice was high and tremulous, painstakingly genteel.

"Of course," Mrs. Vandergriff said, stepping back and smiling aside at James. "This is Mr. James Sirius Potter, Millicent's new friend from school."

The Countess' eyes crinkled slightly at the corners and she seemed to suppress a small, knowing smile. "Millicent's new 'friend', indeed?"

James stepped forward, his mind racing as he wondered what was expected from him under the circumstances. "Nice to meet you, er, ma'am."

"In this house, you may call me Lady Blackbrier, which is my less formal title," the Countess said, extending her gloved hand, palm down. James shook it tentatively by the fingers. She seemed content with this. "And I shall call you James, rather than by *your* more formal title, I think."

James blinked up at the woman, who regarded him with slightly raised brow.

"*My* more formal title, ma'am—I mean, erm, Lady Blackbrier?"

"Certainly yes," she answered smoothly. "You are the first-born heir to the master of the Black estate of Grimmauld, are you not?"

"Er..." James frowned, replaying her words in his head. Was it possible that she meant Grimmauld place? "I... guess so?" he answered.

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“Then by law that makes you the future Earl of Black Downing, if I’m not mistaken. And I’m quite certain that I am *not*.” She cinched her left eyebrow a notch higher, giving James the impression of a regal wink. A moment later, she turned away and said in a louder voice, “What does a lady need to do to get a toddy to warm her poor bones from the cold?”

Topham bustled, and the conversation in the room gradually resumed.

James stood exactly where the Countess had left him, his eyes wide, completely flummoxed.

“Well,” Millie said brightly, half a smile cocked onto her lips. “Does this mean I must start calling you ‘M’Lord’?”



## 12. MIDNIGHT RENDEZVOUS

The answer to James' early, idle question—would he and Millie, while visiting her family, be more or less supervised than they were at school—was answered over the course of the following hours and days. Every moment was scheduled, it seemed, and there were always people around. It was less like being supervised, exactly, and more like attending a sort of school for aristocrats, where the lessons were tea time, formal receptions, incomprehensibly dull party games, and long-winded introductions to this visiting family or that impressive dignitary or the other guest foreign ambassador whom James had only ever seen in photographs in the *Daily Prophet* but whose knee Millie remembered sitting on when she was five years old, and whose children she asked after with sincere fondness. It took James awhile to realize that many of the people that appeared in the paintings decking the manor house walls were real, living people, albeit much older, who frequented the home over the holidays.

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Every meal was a nearly three-hour affair for which everyone changed into their best clothes and went through a sort of multi-room procession, beginning in the drawing room for aperitifs (expertly presided over by Topham the butler), then moving to the long, regal dining room for the actual courses (with carefully assigned seating that Millie had to coach James through) whereupon more Muggle servants in tailcoats and white ties served the food and poured the drinks, and ending eventually in the parlor (for the ladies) and the library (for the gentlemen).

After dinner on the second night, James joined the men as they gathered around the enormous library hearth, which was large enough to park a car in, drinking a brownish-ruby liquor called cognac (James himself received a glass of warmed butterbeer with a sprig of holly on the rim), and talked loftily of weighty matters of which James had little understanding: upcoming changes of justices at the Wizengamot; revised regulations about magical flight in Muggle places; breaches of international magical secrecy in places like Tibet and Istanbul. At first James felt awkward and out-of-place, but soon enough he realized that not only was he interested in the topics, he was welcomed into the discussion by Mr. Vandergriff himself, who always stood in his dinner jacket with his back to the fire, swirling his cognac in a round bowl-like glass.

“Your father was on the scene when the wizarding monks of Lijiang City threw open their doors for their Muggle counterparts, if I am not mistaken,” he prodded James with a nod. “I envy the conversations your family must have of an evening!”

“We don’t talk about it much as a family, actually,” James admitted. “But Dad and I did talk about it in his study. He said that the monks of Lijiang had wished for centuries to combine the methods of their magical lifestyle with their non-magical neighbors. They believe that even the Muggle monks are secretly magical, but that theirs is a magic of the inner-world of the mind. They call it the *in-scape*.<sup>1</sup>”

One of the evening’s dinner guests, a fat Ministry official with huge pork-chop sideburns, grey as iron, and a mottled red nose, now redder from cognac, snorted into his glass. “Everyone knows the

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wizarding cannot merely *teach* magic to the Muggles. Well-intentioned codswollop.”

“Dad says the wizard monks don’t intend to *teach* magic to the Muggle monks. They want to be *taught by them*, about their own more subtle disciplines of inner magic. The only reason they waited until the magical boundaries were weakening was because it felt selfish to them to want to know both.”

The Ministry official harrumphed at this, but Mr. Vandergriff (whose actual title was Lord William of Blackbrier) smiled and raised his glass in a toast. “To the wise wizarding monks of Lijiang, and all the rest of us who will hopefully make the best of this brave new world we find ourselves on the cusp of.”

James raised his own glass, enjoying the grown-up feeling of taking part in such a proper-sounding toast, but the effect was marred shortly by the late arrival of another wing of the family, accompanied by a gaggle of three small children. The children had heard of James Potter (or, more accurately, of his famous father) and were immediately enthralled. The two boys and one girl, all under six years old and immaculately dressed in miniature versions of the adult formal wear, immediately claimed James as their own and circled him like happy butterflies, demanding he play with them, acting out the stories they’d been told and retold about his legendary father.

James played along gamely, reluctantly giving in to their insistent rambunctiousness, until Millie emerged from the parlor and intervened on his behalf.

“You know,” she said, dipping her head secretively, “James is rather famous himself. He once played Treus in ‘the Triumvirate’.”

The two boys’ eyes widened in newfound amazement as they looked up at James. The girl, who was the eldest cocked her head dubiously. “No, he couldn’t have,” she protested with flinty-eyed certainty. “He’s too young.”

“It was a production at our school,” Millie explained. “Everyone in it was young. Even Donovan, the villain.”

“I want to be Donovan the villain!” the youngest boy, Nigel, suddenly shouted. “Edmund can be the king. The king doesn’t do anything. He’s just a fat old numpty.”

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And with that, for better or worse, it was apparently decided that the children, with Millie's and James' help, would put on their own version of *the Triumvirate*, acting it out in the drawing room for the benefit of the adults and even the Muggle servants two nights hence, on Christmas Eve.

"What a charming idea," Mrs. Vandergriff announced, giving James a warm, surprised smile. He started to protest that it hadn't at all been his idea, but then he understood her expression: half grateful and half sympathetic. The Lady of the house was secretly relieved that *someone* would be occupying the children, who could, at times, be quite a handful. He glanced at Millie, who merely shrugged and nodded at him. The children cheered this development enthusiastically.

It was nearing eleven o'clock before the family and guests all began to trickle up to the second and third floors where the many bedrooms ranged down long hallways. James met Millie at the bottom of the grand staircase to say goodnight. She pecked him chastely on the cheek in the sight of her parents in the hall below and the painting of a stern-faced Vandergriff patriarch on the wall above.

"Meet me in the dining room in half-an-hour," she whispered into his ear, so close that her breath tickled. A moment later, she turned and ran up the steps, her dress flouncing around her ankles. He watched her go, uncertain what to make of her suggestion. Did she want time alone with him? Somehow he expected that she had more in mind than a brief snog in the dark.

He waited in his room for twenty minutes with the door closed and the fireplace roaring, filling the room with golden light and warmth. The four-poster bed was as high as a table and wide enough for his whole family to sleep on. The curtains bracketing the windows were twelve feet from floor to ceiling, held back by golden cords as thick as his wrist. A clock on the mantel stood square and upright, like a soldier at attention, its brass face gleaming, its soft tick cutting the minutes into precise, paper-thin slices. James waited and watched. When the clock struck eleven, it emitted a faint ratchet and whirr, stood higher on its wooden legs, and raised a pair of articulated brass arms. It struck its own bell with one arm and wound itself with the other, twisting a tiny key in what, for all intents and purposes, now looked like its bellybutton.

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Just as it had the previous night, the fire diminished in the hearth as if someone had turned down a dimmer switch, shrinking from a flickering roar to a sleepy bed of red coals which danced with only a few tongues of flame. The cords of the curtains untied themselves and the curtains swept shut over the windows, closing like sleepy eyelids.

The effect made James himself blink with tiredness. Even without house elves (at least upstairs, he reminded himself) the manor was clearly deeply enchanted.

He shook himself before he could drift into a deeper doze, got up, instinctively grabbed his coat from the wardrobe by the door, and slipped silently out into the darkened hall.

The portrait of the stern-faced Vandergriff patriarch presided over the grand staircase, now dim in the glow of a few remaining candles. The figure was much larger than life, seated in a straight-backed wooden chair and wearing a red top-coat resplendent with medals and epaulettes and rows of brass buttons. Its mutton-chop bearded face was wide and somber, with regal eyes that seemed to own everything it gazed upon. A fat hand with hairy knuckles absently patted a huge St. Bernard dog that sat panting next to the chair, its tongue dangling like a carpet in need of rolling up.

"You're not going to tell on us, are you?" James whispered up at the huge face as he slipped down the landing.

"You're not up to something that needs telling on, are you?" the portrait replied consideringly, raising a patient, bushy eyebrow at James.

James shrugged and padded onward, down the carpeted stairs. He honestly didn't know *what* they were up to.

Millie was already waiting for him in the dining room, merely a girl-shaped shadow on the other side of the long, gleaming table. She had changed out of her poofy evening gown into a pair of jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt. Her coat was slung over her shoulder.

"Come on!" she whispered eagerly, and darted toward a rear door. James recognized it as the door Topham and the servants used during mealtimes. She pushed through into a narrow hall, turned toward an equally narrow stairwell, and flitted down, taking the steps two at a time. James followed, trying to match both her speed and her stealth, which was no easy task. She had apparently done this many, many times before, *whatever* this was.

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The downstairs was clearly the domain of the house elves. Everything was smaller and far more austere. James spied his first house elf as they passed a diminutive kitchen. The elf was scrubbing the top of a wooden butcher block but paused to look up as he and Millie darted past. James sensed more than saw other elves moving here and there throughout the warren of lower rooms. There was a laundry, a pantry, a sewing room complete with an ancient treadle-powered sewing machine, and a wine cellar decked with racks of dusty bottles.

Finally, Millie pulled open a door at the end of a short hall. Cold air and flecks of snow rushed in with it. She glanced back for the first time, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Oh good," she said in a quick, low voice. "You remembered to bring your coat."

"What are we—?" he began, but she was already gone, vanished into the darkness beyond the door. James darted to follow, tugging the door closed behind him with an impatient thunk.

Millie ran ahead again along a fieldstone path, neatly cleared of snow, which curved down the slope of the rear yard. He heard her laugh faintly on the cold wind and felt a moment of annoyance at her for not explaining what they were up to or where they were going. It occurred to James, and not for the first time, that Millicent Vandergriff enjoyed teasing and mysteriousness just a bit too much.

Like many of the smaller houses on the boulevard that led to Blackbrier Quoit, the manor's back garden sloped away to a shingle of rocky beach and a boathouse. This one, however, was nestled snug among the boundary of trees, poking through them like a hedgehog through a shrubbery. The building was squat and grey, built of sturdy stone and adorned with deep-set, perfectly square windows. Millie reached the green-painted door and heaved it open onto pearly darkness. James slowed to a trot as she turned her face back to smile at him. Her lips were very red in the darkness, and her cheeks glowed with color.

"Have you ever ridden a snowmobile before?"

James blinked at her as if she'd just spoken in a different language.

"It's OK," she went on, reading his expression. "I hadn't either until a year ago. Blake showed me how. It's easy, actually."

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She turned away again, nearly bursting with excitement, and her boots knocked on the wood of the boathouse floor.

"Wait!" James called hoarsely, following her with deepening trepidation. "Did you say a... a *snowmobile*?"

The interior of the boathouse was dim with the preternatural glow of the snowy world outside, bathing the old shelves and workbench and hanging anchors and coils of rope with a moony softness. The opposite end of the space was a huge garage door, closed and locked tight. The floor was a wooden frame around a huge rectangular hole. A boat hung over the hole, floating by pure magic so that it bobbed slightly, as if haunted by the ghost of swells past. The hull was gleaming varnished wood, long and sleek, with brass portholes, its top wrapped in blue tarp and yellow rope, sealed for the winter, hiding its glory.

Millie ignored the boat, stopping at a railing and leaning over to peer into the dimness beneath the boathouse.

"Blake?" she whispered, her voice suddenly tentative.

"Vroom, vroom, M'Lady," a voice called up.

"Ugh, I told you never to call me that outside of the house. It's embarrassing." As she spoke, she turned back to James, reached to take his hand, and led him to a ladder that ran from the ceiling down through the hole in the floor.

"Millie," James said impatiently, tugging on her hand to get her attention. "What is this? What are we doing? We're not going to get into loads of barney for this, are we?"

"Oh, don't be silly, James," Millie soothed, returning to him and nestling into his arms. She batted her eyes up at him. "You've seen what my life looks like here. A girl needs to escape sometimes. She needs to be reminded that life isn't all white gloves and cucumber sandwiches. Why, you should hear the dickens my mother says *she* got up to when she was my age. A little sneaking out is to be expected. Why, it's nearly a tradition."

"So that means if we get caught," James ventured tentatively, "we *won't* be in any sort of trouble?"

Millie's eyes widened and twinkled with excitement. "Oh, it would be completely *scandalous*! My father would go absolutely through the roof! It would make the newspapers and everything! *That's* what makes it so much *fun*!"

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She tugged him again to the ladder and began to clamber down herself. James could see the dull grey expanse of ice beneath, skirled with tendrils of snow. Three black shapes huddled there, one distinctly man-shaped, the other two long and low, looking like motorbikes cross-bred with thestrals and fitted onto skis. The rear “legs” of the machines knelt on looped treads like miniature tanks. James had heard of snowmobiles and even seen a few photographs, but never imagined encountering one in real life.

Blake was no longer dressed in black tails and a white shirt. He now wore snow-dusted jeans and a hooded sweatshirt beneath a leather jacket. His hair and eyes were hidden beneath a cap and mirrored snow goggles. “It’s easy,” he called up in what James couldn’t help thinking was a nasty lilt. “You accelerate with the right hand, you brake with the left.” He demonstrated with hands encased in thick black gloves, then tilted his head provocatively. “It’ll be a cinch for you, after riding a broom.”

“Oh stop, Blake,” Millie said, jumping to the ice beneath the boathouse.

James didn’t want to climb down to the ice. He didn’t want to attempt to ride one of those daft Muggle machines. And mostly he did not want to share the evening with Blake, whose smile, even while serving in the manor house, struck him as disingenuous and even a little mean.

And still he found himself leaning to clamber down the ladder, hopping to the surprisingly solid ice below, and approaching one of the black snowmobiles. He didn’t fully understand why he went along, except that the thought of Millie riding pillion behind the young man, holding onto him as they raced along the frozen bay into whatever heady nocturnal adventure lay ahead, filled him with bristling, angry heat. It was much too similar to what he felt whenever he imagined Professor Odin-Vann and Petra together—a thought that even now poisoned him with jealous bile.

“I *told* you he’d try it,” Millie said smugly, nudging Blake with her elbow.

Blake accepted this with a half shrug. “We’ll see. Helmets, everyone.”

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He distributed what appeared to be motorcycle helmets to Millie and James before dropping to straddle the leading snow machine with practiced ease.

James wished he had his Thunderstreak with him, or better yet, his skrim. He had a sudden, irresistible urge to show up the Muggle prat, to blow past him and his stupid snowmobile at top speed, trailing a storm of white powder like a force of nature.

Instead, James felt he had no choice but to clamber awkwardly onto the second snowmobile. Millie fitted herself onto the seat behind him and laced her hands around his belly, holding tight and leaning in eagerly. Her helmet bobbed briefly against his and James heard her giggle.

The handlebars of the machine were black, wide, and complicated with red buttons, throttles, and triggers. James had no idea what to do but refused to ask. He watched as, ahead, Blake twisted to look back.

"Stay close," he called. "We're only going a mile or so. I'll take it slow."

"Don't do us any favors," James answered, sounding much more confident than he felt.

Blake smiled beneath his mirrored goggles, and then turned back. James watched the young man grasp the handlebars of his own machine and thumb a throttle on the right grip. The treads spun, spewing a cloud of ice shavings, and the machine lurched forward, driving out from beneath the boathouse.

James found the throttle on his own machine and thumbed it, just as he had seen Blake do.

It was a fortunate thing indeed that they were on ice. The machine jolted forward so hard and fast that James nearly lost his grip on the yoke. Millie squealed and tugged at his midsection, very nearly pulling them both backwards off the snowmobile as it bucked away. Had they been on soft snow, the grip of the machine would have been much stronger, causing it to leap away beneath them like a bounding cat. On the ice, however, the snowmobile spun its treads, accelerating swiftly but gradually. It slewed toward one of the boathouse's wooden pilings and James steered frantically away. It was like trying to control a swinging millstone. The rear quarter of the machine struck the piling,

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juddered against it, and then squirted out into the moonlight of the lake, picking up speed.

Millie laughed again and squeezed James' midsection. "I knew you could do it!"

"I'm not doing anything yet!" James called back, unsure if she could hear him over the whine of the engine and the scrape of the treads on the ice. "Just hold on!"

She held on. James twisted the yoke experimentally, threaded the throttle with his right hand, and the machine lunged forward again, following nominally in the direction of the other snowmobile. Blake raced ahead without looking back, cutting across the expanse of flat, grey ice while keeping a discreet distance from the shoreline and the dark houses that presided over it.

James had expected disaster. He had expected to spin the machine into the rocky shore, or somehow crash it through the ice, or otherwise completely endanger and embarrass himself in front of Millie and the smugly smiling Blake. For the moment, at least, that hadn't happened, and he was relieved. He pressed the throttle harder and the machine revved beneath them, leaping forward on the ice even faster. It was heady, even exhilarating, despite being (as he understood on some level, in the voice of his mother) completely daft and reckless.

*Ah well,* he thought with a mental shrug, *what else is being young for?*

Blake led them past the row of stately homes on the shore, around a promontory of spindly woods, and across a bay surrounded by hulking industrial buildings, smokestacks, and factories. Beyond these, a cluster of docks stretched like fingers out into the ice, now bereft of boats and drifted with snow. Blake angled toward these and slowed, eventually slotting his vehicle between the skeletal shapes of the docks. He ducked as he killed the engine, letting momentum push the snowmobile forward into the shadow of a cement pier, where he seemed to park it.

James followed suit, threading much more slowly around the dock pilings and humping over smooth dunes of snow. As he edged the machine close to its twin, Blake met them, reached across with a snow-

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crusted glove, and did something that caused the snowmobile's engine to cut off with a cough and a jerk.

"We *could* take these all the way into London proper right now if we wanted to," he said, showing his teeth in what James thought was the first genuine smile the man had offered. "What with the Thames being frozen over for the first time in a decade. But this should do the trick for tonight, I think. Now, let's have some *Muggle* style fun,"

He led them to a rusty ladder bolted to the side of the concrete pier, then up the pier and into a warren of ramshackle buildings, all clustered and leaning together as if for warmth. Some of the buildings were houses made of weathered grey planks, most with porches sagging under mounds of snow. Others were brick warehouses or wharves, garages with indecipherable graffiti spray-painted onto their doors and walls. Blake led them to a corner beneath a stuttering, buzzing streetlamp, where a tiny pub thumped with a dull bass beat and a rabble of loud voices. Neon signs glowed from its tiny windows, advertising brands and logos James had never heard of.

He gulped but forced himself to follow with no hesitation as Blake led them to the plain wooden door, which was covered in peeling paint the color of dried blood. He heaved it open, and a roar of heat and noise and laughter barreled out over the slushy footpath. The smell of cigarettes and beer was so strong he could nearly taste it.

"Millie here calls this 'slumming,'" Blake said, leaning toward James as they edged inside. "But for you and me, it's not slumming if it's the world we come home to every night, eh?"

"I guess not," James nodded, trying to take in every corner of the tiny pub at once. Along the rear was a crowded bar backed by rows of bottles and a cloudy wall-length mirror. A television flashed blue over the bar, presiding over the scene with its bright, blaring eye. Elsewhere, a billiard table clacked and knocked, glowing red beneath its own dedicated stained-glass lamp. A jukebox thumped and pulsed. People danced on a postage-stamp sized dance floor. The crowd was dense but strangely faceless, mere gyrating silhouettes in the pooling, smoky darkness. "I don't live like Millie," James said, raising his voice carefully so that only Blake would hear him, "but this *isn't* the sort of neighborhood I go home to every night."

"Thank your lucky stars," Blake said, nudging James jovially.

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The next hour and a half went by in a blur of thumping music, clattering bottles and glasses on a cracked wooden booth table (James tried a beer called Old Speckled Hen, which he nursed throughout the night but never developed much of a taste for) and trying awkwardly to dance amongst the constant bump of elbows and knees on the diminutive dance floor.

Millie seemed to love every minute of it. She smiled showing all of her teeth—something she hadn't done since arriving at her parents' home—and sipped a ridiculous pink cocktail that the bartender had happily provided when she'd requested "the girliest drink in the house". James had an idea that if they had not been accompanied by Blake, who seemed to be a very familiar face in the neighborhood, he and Millie might not have been served quite so readily, and surely not without any identification to prove their age, at the very least. In Blake's presence, they were dismissed as simply two more affectionate hooligans out for a night of harmless debauchery.

By the time they stepped back out into the blowing cold and dark of the street, James' ears felt like they were packed with cotton batting from the noise inside. Millie was giggling and reeling slightly from her drink, holding onto James as they followed Blake back down the street toward the docks.

"It's a good thing James here is driving," she said rather too loudly, her voice strained with laughter as she patted him on the shoulder with one hand, gripped his elbow with the other.

James' mood alternated between relief that the night was nearly over, annoyance at Millie for her cavalier attitude about getting into trouble, and cautious satisfaction that he seemed to have held his own against the seemingly far more dashing and mysterious Blake.

Without any more conversation, they shuffled down the pier, climbed to the waiting snowmobiles on the ice below, and started them up again. Within minutes, they were traversing the cold blue numb of the bay again, Millie once more gripping James tight around the waist, James following the speeding dark shape of Blake ahead.

The moon had come out, sheathing the world in preternatural blue light. It shone off the snow and ice so brightly that it made its own ghostly daylight, surreal beneath the sharp glitter of the stars above. The

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ice blurred beneath the snowmobile's skids, laced with ribbons of white against deep, cloudy grey.

The peninsula of Blackbrier Quoit hove into view, scratching at the low sky with its impenetrable dome of trees. James marveled at it. From the outside, the peninsula appeared as nothing more than a strip of wilderness, dense with birches and snow-laden pines, allowing no hint of the manor or grounds within. Even the stone boathouse at its tip was so overshadowed by trees that it was virtually invisible unless one knew exactly where to look.

Blake slowed and swung toward the structure, sliding into the shadows beneath. James followed, squeezing the brake lever with a modicum of confidence now, and cut the engine before Blake could come back and do it for him.

Millie clambered off the seat behind him and slipped on the ice, grabbing a nearby wooden piling for support and giggling again. Blake reached to steady her as James dismounted. He pried the helmet from his head, dropped it to the snowmobile seat, and stepped out from beneath the boathouse with a sigh, glad to be shut of the noisy Muggle machine. The expanse of the bay shone like polished stone in the moon glow, like blue-grey marble threaded with white. He breathed in the icy air, listening to Millie's and Blake's whispered words and laughter behind him.

"So, are we still a go for tomorrow night?" Blake asked in a hushed voice. Millie shushed him before he could finish his question.

"What...?" James began to ask, a flicker of jealousy flaring once again in his chest, but something caught his eye far out on the ice, distracting him even as he began to turn around.

It was a figure, but so distant, so fogged by blowing phantoms of snow that James couldn't tell if it was real or a statue. It didn't appear to be moving, only standing straight, alert, as if watching from the dead centre of the frozen sea.

Behind James, he could still hear Millie and Blake whispering. He glanced back over his shoulder as they made their way deeper into the shadow of the boathouse.

"Do you either of you see—?" he began, turning back to the mysterious shape, but a gasp of shock cut off his words. The figure was standing directly in front of him now, having traversed the vast, icy

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distance as if it were a mere footstep. James recognized the tall, lithe figure immediately. The strength fell out of his legs and he only remained standing because his knees had locked.

“She’s a very pretty girl, James,” Judith said in a low, confiding voice, a voice that was somehow both warm and brittle with cold. Her words made puffs of vapour from beneath a black cowl. Her face would have been hidden completely if not for the moonlight that reflected up from the ice. “I’m glad you’ve finally gotten over Petra. She was no good for you. For either of us.”

James took a single, halting step backward. He tried to call out to Millie and Blake, but the breath seemed locked in his chest. All he could produce was a sort of huffing exhalation, stifled with sudden shivers.

Judith stepped forward and raised her hands, open and empty, in a sort of conciliatory gesture. The effect was ruined, however, by the blackened, shriveled skin of her arms and fingers. The flesh beneath her skin seemed to have shrunken away so that only bones remained, mere skeletal hands wrapped in dead, mummified leather.

“I’ve gotten over Petra as well, you see,” she said, looking sadly down at her own hands. “She’s turned on me, poisoned me. She leeches the life right out of me. But perhaps it’s for the best. Sometimes we have to sever the relationships that formed us. Sometimes that’s the only path to forging *new* and *better* relationships.”

She stepped forward again, bringing her face closer to James. He backed up another unsteady, clumsy step, and felt his back thud against one of the boathouse’s support pilings.

The blackness of Judith’s hands and arms began to creep up her neck beneath the cowl. It cast veins of deathly purple around her mouth and eyes, sapped the color from her vibrant cheeks. Her eyes dulled, faded, darkened to inky black orbs.

“You’re a wise young man to stay away from Petra,” she said, and her voice was changing as well. It buzzed in her throat, as if she was full of wasps. “Despite what you may think, I loved her as well. But love can turn on us. It can be the sharpest dagger of all. Love can be either the blade that destroys us...” she raised her hands again, showing the decay in her spindly, ghastly fingers, “or the weapon that empowers

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us to do... what we *must!*" She was bare inches from him as she spat this last, rasping the words as the blackness claimed her entire face, sinking her cheeks and eyes, pulling her lips back from her teeth and gums in a grimace of deathly hate.

"Stay away from her, James," she rasped, writhing as if the words were like broken glass in her throat. "You cannot stop Petra. You cannot *win* her. If you try, all that you love will die. And still she will prevail! She *must* prevail!"

And then, horribly, a hoarse scream of pain and rage ripped from Judith's throat, forcing her head back, her chin up, so that her cowl fell away, releasing her hair. It was white, as dry as cobweb, flowing like seaweed into the suddenly rushing air.

"James?"

A hand gripped his shoulder and he jerked away from it, batted at the fingers as if from the clutch of death itself. Wind whipped through his hair, icy and flecked with mist, howling beneath the boathouse and shrieking in its drainpipes. He boggled and flailed and nearly collapsed to the hard ice in shock.

But suddenly there was no Judith. The Lady of the Lake was gone—if she had ever really been there at all. Millie stood with her hand still raised, frowning at James in surprised consternation.

He gasped deeply, drawing the cold air into his lungs as if he hadn't breathed in minutes. The noise of the gusting wind rattled the windows above. Millie had to raise her voice to be heard over it.

"Are you all right?" Her eyes were wide and startled in the dimness.

James tried to nod, to collect himself. "I... I just thought I saw... something. Out on the ice."

Millie considered this, glancing out over the flat expanse of the frozen bay. There was nothing but blowing ghosts of snow and moon-glow to be seen.

"We should go in," she said, bringing her gaze back to James with some concern. "Feels like a storm is coming in. Blake will take one of the snowmobiles back tonight. He and a friend will collect the other one tomorrow."

James nodded, as if the parking status of the snowmobiles had been of some nagging concern to him. In truth, he barely heard Millie's

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words. In his mind, all he heard was Judith's hoarse shriek in the howl of the wind. All he saw was the creeping purple-black emaciation of her hands and face.

*All that you love will die...!*

And suddenly he knew: it was not death or flame that was shriveling Judith's heretofore perfect skin. It was the scorch of a kind of existential frostbite. Without Petra's connection to root Judith in reality, she was slowly succumbing to the absolute zero of the waiting, hungry void from which she had come. But if so, why would she wish James to stay away from Petra, to assure that she, Petra, succeeded in her mission to leave this reality forever?

A shiver that had nothing to do with cold shook James from head to toe.

Millie took his hand.

Five minutes later, she kissed him outside of his bedroom on the second floor. He barely felt it. His lips were numb. The air around both of them was still a wreath of cold.

Twenty minutes later, James lay in the enormous bed staring up at the dark ceiling.

Outside, the wind wailed and moaned, hiding the voice of chaos and madness that seemed to surge constantly beneath it. James tried to tune it out, even pulled a pillow up over his head, but could not seem to drown out that keening, pained howl.

It was a voice that only he, unfortunately, seemed doomed to hear.



## 13. THE TRIUMVIRATE REVISITED

James slept in late the next morning, missing breakfast, so that by the time he came blearily to the table in search of tea everyone else was already gone for the morning, apparently on a final Christmas Eve shopping trip to Sartori Alley. The glare outside the broad windows was so bright with new snow that it was painful to look at. Cold light filled the dining room and reflected from the glossy wood of the table so that James had to squint as he plopped to a seat. To his embarrassment, he was waited on by Blake, who was once more dressed in his formal tails and white shirt, his hair combed severely and gleaming black.

"I trust Sir had a restful night," he commented perfunctorily as he poured hot water into James' cup.

James couldn't bring himself to answer or even to make eye contact. Blake, for his part, seemed to enjoy James' discomfiture.

"Toast, Sir?" he asked brightly.

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“Sure,” James answered dully, watching the steam rise from his steaming cup.

“Jam, Sir?”

“No. Thanks.”

“Honey, Sir?”

“No.”

“Butter, Sir?”

“No. Wait. Yes.”

“Straight or diagonal sliced, Sir?”

James finally turned and looked up at Blake where he stood nearby. “Tell the house elf who makes it that she can draw and quarter it for all I care. And while you’re at it, feel free to take it down a notch, why don’t you.”

It was like kicking a statue. Blake didn’t blink, merely smiled his small, insincere smile. “Very good, Sir. I shall have that for you in just a jiffy.”

When the toast came, it was diagonally sliced, perfectly buttered, sitting on a China plate without a single crumb visible, and decorated with a twist of orange and a sprig of parsley.

“I hope this is to Sir’s satisfaction,” Blake said, with just a trace of courteous doubt.

James sighed and gave up, stuffing a slice of toast into his mouth before anything he regretted could come out of it.

Blake went out a minute later, leaving the servant’s door to swing in and out on its hinge. His voice echoed back dully, impatiently, and as the door swung, showing regressively smaller slices of the hall beyond, James caught a glimpse of a female house elf standing just inside, observing him with her large, strangely somber eyes. She was probably the one from the kitchen, checking to assure that James found his toast acceptable. The expression on her face, however, showed less servile efficiency and more watchful intent. As the door swung one last time, showing only a few inches of dark hall and one large elven eye, James saw her face tilt back in the direction of Blake, her expression sharpening, her brow lowering with undisguised contempt.

James chewed his second slice of toast and thought about his conversation with the Gryffindor house elf, Piggen. Things seemed to

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be coming true just as he and his fellow elves feared. Humans were taking over house elf duties, all in the name of equality and progress. Aunt Hermione would heartily approve. And yet the house elves themselves were obviously painfully unhappy with this new reality. James wondered briefly what had happened to the former upstairs house elves that had been replaced by Blake and Topham and the rest. Where did house elves go when they were dismissed? Did they all still live in the downstairs warren of rooms, only without any purpose or duties to occupy them? If so, it seemed like an arrangement destined to end badly.

Impulsively, James jumped up, tossed the last bite of his toast onto the plate, and strode to the servant's door. He pushed it open with one hand, certain that he would be too late to speak to the female house elf, to ask her his questions, and he was right. The hallway was empty, dark except for the glaring light from one window at the far end, reflecting on the polished wooden floor, turning it into a blind, imperfect mirror.

James exhaled, slumped, and allowed the door to swing shut again.

He spent the next hour and a half haunting the house by himself, never fully alone (the servants could be sensed just out of sight at most times, slipping furtively from rooms as he entered them, leaving a feeling of half-finished dusting or half-fluffed pillows behind them, so that James felt underfoot at every turn) but surrounded by the somehow watchful emptiness of the house. The portraits observed him sleepily but James couldn't bring himself to talk to any of them. They were all just a bit too old and imperious for his comfort. In the ticking silence, his thoughts returned repeatedly to last night's confrontation with Judith, probing the memory like a tongue probing a loose tooth.

His first question was the most obvious one of all: had it really happened? Was it possible that he had imagined it somehow? Or, more likely, that it had been a sort of magical vision projected directly into his mind by Judith? Neither Millie nor Blake seemed to have seen her. But then again, they'd been chatting secretly in the shadows beneath the boathouse. The wind and blowing snow would have been enough to conceal Judith's form and drown her voice. The memory of her certainly didn't *feel* like a dream or a vision. He remembered the wasted,

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blue-black shrivel of her hands and arms. With a hard shiver, he recalled the way the deadness had crept up her neck and over her face, spreading in blossoming veins just beneath her skin.

He decided that it didn't matter whether Judith had physically appeared or merely projected a vision into his mind. By venturing out onto the frozen bay he had stepped into her domain—she was the Lady of the Lake, after all—and she had taken the opportunity to send him a simple, emphatic message: *stay away from Petra*.

But she had sent another message as well, perhaps unwittingly: over the past few years, Judith had clearly begun to lose her grip on this plane of existence. When Petra broke the connection between herself, Izzy, and Judith during the night of the Morrigan Web, she had apparently revoked Judith's right to occupy human reality. Without Petra's sponsorship, Judith was slowly being reclaimed by the void beyond life and death. It was sapping her, perhaps weakening her, but also making her mad, and desperate, and (James suspected) far more dangerous than ever.

This, he decided, was a good thing. Soon, Judith's grasp on human existence would collapse entirely. She would sift away back into the nothingness from which she had been summoned those several years before, when she had apparently arisen from the small woodland lake on the fringes of Morganstern farm, paid for by the murder of Petra's stepmother, Phyllis.

But in the meantime, Judith was restless. What had she said before vanishing into the wind and snow? *Sometimes we have to sever the relationships that formed us... sometimes that's the only way to forge new and better relationships...*

Was Judith seeking a new host? A different sponsor that could renew her right to occupy the human world, allowing her to continue her quest for chaos, death, and destruction?

James sat in the cold sunlight of the empty library and shook his head firmly. No one, he told himself, could be so foolish as to accept Judith's poison bargain.

But he knew better, of course. The world was depressingly full of people who would trade chaos for power, if the opportunity arose.

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His best hope, he determined, was that Judith would dissolve into the creeping black before she could find any new human sponsor, whoever such a person might be. And surely Petra was watching, guarding against just such a thing, assuring that the process she began when she broke from Judith continued to its final, inevitable end.

The thought of Petra was the one thing that finally took his mind away from the shivery chill of the Lady of the Lake. Despite Judith's intent, her words had had exactly the opposite effect on James. By comparing Millie to Petra, she had shown him just how different his feelings for the two young women really were.

The thought of Millie inspired desire, certainly, but that was a shallow affection, a thin sheen over a puddle of more conflicted feelings and emotions.

By comparison, thinking of Petra was like walking a tightrope across a chasm of unimaginable, dizzying height. He might fall off the tightrope on one side and drop to the most horrible loss imaginable—a loss so heartbreakingly soul-crushing that he could barely conceive it. But he might *jump* off the tightrope on the *other* side and soar into a bliss of fulfillment so deep and wide that it was an ocean of joy.

He knew, on some level, that he was young, and idealistic, and hopelessly love-struck. But knowing that didn't make the feelings go away. He couldn't make himself believe, no matter how hard he tried, that his love for Petra was childish. Or silly. Or merely a passing fancy. He suspected—he *knew*—that even if she vanished away into Morgan's dimension, leaving his world forever, he would still live his entire life thinking of her daily, missing her, pining for her silently and affectionately through the years.

The tragedy, he began to understand, was not in missing her every day for the rest of his life once she was gone. The tragedy was in denying his love for her while she was still, if briefly, walking the same world as him.

He was not, as Judith had assumed, “over” Petra.

He never would be.

He drew a deep, aching sigh, filling his lungs in the frozen stillness of the manor house, and let it out slowly. He knew once again what he had to do. He'd told himself it would be easier at some later date. But of course that later date was likely never to come.

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He'd done extremely difficult things in his life. He had faced demons and horrors, confronted monstrous forces and villainous powers. But now he felt that he would gladly face them all over again if only he could avoid the one task that now lay before him: breaking up with Millicent Vandergriff.

"After the holiday," he said to himself with a firm nod, his voice small in the tall, empty library. "No excuses, Potter. Make it happen."

He nodded again, resolved, and fisted his right hand on his knee.

Shortly, fortunately, he heard the sweep of the opening front door, felt a push of cold air that swayed the curtains slightly, as if they were sighing with relief at the family's return. Boots knocked on the hall floor, voices echoed loudly, cheerfully, and James jumped up to join them, sheepish at having missed the shopping trip, but grateful to no longer be alone with his troubled, worrying thoughts.

He and Millie whiled away the midday practicing parts with the younger children, Ariadne, Nigel, and Edmund, for their presentation of *the Triumvirate* the following evening. As it turned out, Nigel was to play Donovan the villain, Edmund took the role of Treus the hero, and Ariadne, after some argument, filled the parts of the Marsh Hag, the Page Boy ("Page Girl," she amended gravely) and various other roles, mostly to avoid having to play a romantic lead alongside her own brother—a conundrum that James, having a sister himself, could well understand. Millie accepted the role of Princess Astra, calling upon every ounce of her Hufflepuppet Pals histrionics to give the part the melodramatics it deserved. And James took on whatever parts were left as each scene demanded, sometimes acting as the King, other times as various soldiers, villagers, sailors, a ship's captain, and even the raging sea monsters of the dreaded Dagger Peninsula.

"You're not doing it properly," Edmund complained, breaking character as James hulked over him, his hands raised into hooked claws. "You're not scary in the least. You have to be scary or else Treus won't overcome his fatal flaw."

James frowned, still hunched in monster form over Treus' boat (an upholstered ottoman on a huge blue rug). "What's Treus' fatal flaw?"

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Edmund rolled his eyes, but it was Nigel who spoke up, observing from the backstage of a nearby sofa. “Everyone in a tragedy has a fatal flaw. Treus’ flaw is his naiveté. You should know all this, shouldn’t you?”

James slouched and looked helplessly at Millie, who sat forward on a nearby chair attempting to rework one of her old dresses into a Marsh Hag costume for Ariadne. She glanced aside at him and shrugged. “I don’t know how you missed that, either. It was on our Wiz Lit final last year.”

Ariadne gave James an indulgently patient look and crossed her arms. “Treus has the fatal flaw of being naïve. He *knows* that Donovan, the King’s advisor, has plans to marry Princess Astra so that he can become viceroy when the king dies. Treus *also* knows that Donovan has already used dark magic to trick the king into decreeing their marriage, against Astra’s wishes. And yet, when Donovan sends Treus, his only rival, off on some trumped up sea voyage, it never occurs to him that, hmm, this is probably a ruse to get me alone on the ocean so that Donovan and the Marsh Hag can send a magical storm to sink my ship and kill me.” She cocked her head at him and raised her eyebrows. “Naïve.”

“I know all *that*,” James said, glaring up at the ceiling and raising both hands, palms up.

“Then you know that, by sailing through the horrors of the Dagger Peninsula to cut around the Marsh Hag’s magical storm, he is also sailing through his own journey of growth into true manhood,” Nigel prompted in his squeaky voice, as if reading from a cue card.

“Of course,” James said, trying to give the words a patiently weary lilt. “Can we just get on with this? We have to get changed for the *actual* play soon.”

“And that’s why the Marsh Hag’s storm follows Treus all the way back to the castle of Seventide,” Ariadne finished, eyeing James critically. “It’s a representation of Treus’ noble foolishness, a lesson learned too late to save him. *Or* his love, the Princess Astra.”

Without looking up from her costume project, Millie said, “So what’s Princess Astra’s fatal flaw?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Edmund said smugly, still looking at James from his perch on the ottoman. “Princess Astra’s flaw is that she’s

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impulsive. She falls in love with Treus, who's just some random soldier. Not a bad thing, but an impulsive thing. Then she tries to attack Donovan with her own letter opener when she learns he's arranged to have Treus killed out on the high seas. Donovan nearly cuts her with her own knife as a result. Then, after Treus gets back to the castle and kills Donovan to save her, and the Hag's storm unleashes itself on the castle to kill Treus, she *stays* with him instead of escaping! *Totally impulsive.*"

"But that's what makes it so romantic!" Ariadne interjected, sighing solemnly.

"Your off your onion. Getting crushed under falling walls during your first kiss isn't *romantic*," Nigel shook his head dismissively. "It's daft as a drunken doxy. Escape and find yourself a *new* soldier, if you ask me. One without any stupid 'fatal flaws'."

"How did *you* three learn all this?" James asked, plopping to the ottoman next to Edmund.

"Old Mrs. Birtwistle, our tutor," Ariadne sniffed. "Three hours of lessons every day. Who was your tutor?"

James blinked. "Um. My mum, I guess?"

"I'd sack her, if I was you," Ariadne shrugged dismissively.

"James is right," Millie announced, standing and draping the dress in her hands against Ariadne, testing the fit. "This will do until tomorrow. For now, we should all get ready for the real play. We leave in less than an hour."

The rest of the evening was occupied entirely with the trip to the famed and ancient Theatre D'Extraordinaire in central London, and the play itself, which was nearly three hours long, including a half-hour intermission. James had seen wizarding plays on occasion, though never a fully magical production of *the Triumvirate*, and never in a theatre of the sheer size and grandeur as the one he now entered. Decked with gilded scrollwork, arched pillars, and flying buttresses that lined both side aisles, the theatre appeared capable of seating approximately half the population of London itself. The many balconies overlaid each other like drawers in a baroque dresser, opened into terraces. None were fixed in place, but floated, rising and lowering from the main floor like parade balloons, studded with purple velvet seats and crowded with richly

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dressed patrons. James watched as they drifted overhead, swapping places for loading and unloading, their undersides decorated with massive frescoes of ancient fictional scenes.

The one thing that detracted from James' experience was the woefully old-fashioned and hopelessly wrinkled dress robes he wore. Putting them on in his upstairs bedroom, he had briefly mourned their bedraggled state. Now, sidling into his seat in the grandest of the lower balconies with the Vandergriff family, he understood just how exquisitely ridiculous he looked amongst the coiffed finery that surrounded him. As James passed, a fat man with a monocle flinched back from him, blinking rapidly, as if James had flicked water into his face. The woman next to him, resplendent in a stiff jeweled dress, her grey-pink hair piled into a knotty beehive large enough for storks to nest in, frowned elaborately at him, looking him unabashedly up and down.

James sighed and shook his head to himself, feeling the too-short sleeves slap at his wrists, the moth-eaten fringe of lace flopping limply, embarrassingly ratty. The high burgundy collar and broad lapels had likely last been in fashion when Grandmother Weasley had been in school. Even worse than this, however, was the sadly wrinkled state of the entire garment, the result of spending the last several months crushed and damp in the bottom of James' trunk. He emitted an odor of old bananas and mould as he walked, trying as hard as he could to shrink, to become as small as possible, to blend right into the crushed purple velvet of the seat as he sank into it.

"I could have let you borrow one of Bent's old dress robes," Millie whispered aside at him as the huge chandeliers dimmed. "Or at least used an ironing charm to smooth that travesty out a bit."

"A little late for that, now, isn't it," James whispered back, trying to make it sound as if he was merely bemused, rather than completely mortified. He thought back to the look on Countess Blackbrier's face when he'd first come clumping down the stairs, his hair still damp from a severe, desperate combing, without a minute to spare before loading into the vehicles gathered along the front of the house. She hadn't said a thing—she was far too diplomatic for that—but her wrinkled eyes had widened slightly, her brow raised, and her chin dipped a tick. James understood that he had lost several points with her, and regretted it more than he might have expected. The children, however, had been far

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less discreet, collapsing into nearly hysterical laughter at the sight of James' trailing lace frill and the gown that stopped a full five inches short, showing his trainers and incongruous argyle socks.

As the lights dimmed over the theatre, James finally relaxed and sighed, sinking low in his seat. The stage shone like an illuminated jewel, surrounded by waves and terraces of shadowed balconies, and the play launched to life with a fanfare of horns, a trill of flutes, and a boom of timpani. The orchestra in the pit below the stage was nearly sixty members strong, according to the program in James' hand, and it sounded like it. Music filled the theatre like warm spring air, with barely any echo to dull its effect. On the stage itself, actors sprang into motion: dozens of peasants moved among a life-sized and perfectly captured medieval square. A line of soldiers marched into view. And there, entering from the right, was the King, and Donovan his royal advisor, and finally the regally beautiful princess Astra.

James remembered the scene well from his second year at Hogwarts, when he himself had been on stage in the guise of Treus, the Captain of the Guard. But this was different in nearly every way. The king was not young Tom Squallus with a pillow stuffed into his tunic. He was an actual large man, more stocky than fat, with a true beard and a stately demeanor and robes and crown that looked as if they'd come directly from a museum. Donovan was a tall, beardless man with sharp, angular features, so cunning in the very lines of his face and squint of his eyes that James had to remind himself that this was an actor, not an actual villain scheming against the jovial king and the young princess that followed them.

Astra, James saw, was barely older than himself. She was ginger-haired and stunningly beautiful, the pale pillar of her neck adorned with a glittering necklace of silver and deep blue gems, flashing in the brilliant stage lights.

Despite having been in a version of the play himself, James had never fully grasped the story of Astra, Treus, and Donovan. He'd been far too preoccupied with the extraneous details of production—the costume shop and props crew, the glowing painted markers on the stage floor, and the constant, droning repetition of rehearsals. Now, as he watched the full production in all of its theatrical glory, he began to see

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why it was the ultimate classic story of the golden age of wizard literature.

This was, of course, helped immensely by the grandeur of the deeply enchanted production.

When Donovan manipulated the king into granting Astra as his bride, the villain used an actual spell, conjuring a terrifyingly realistic (if somewhat over-wrought) hex of entrancement that illuminated the entire stage with vicious purple light and left the first few rows of patrons nodding and woozy in their seats. When the villain sent Treus and his crew on the ruse of a completely invented sea mission, the oily coolness of his lies was simultaneously compelling and disturbing. Around the theatre, several voices gasped, or cried out warnings, or angry insults at the oblivious, conniving villain.

When the Marsh Hag welcomed Donovan into her swampy lair and agreed to his paying request for a murderous storm, James momentarily forgot that he was watching from a cushioned velvet seat in a crowded theatre. He seemed to be dreaming the scene, watching from the flickering edge of the Hag's firelight, the stink of her cauldron and rot of fermenting moss filling his nose as she, in all of her extravagant ugliness, proclaimed her famous, cackling warning: "The gale ye conjure hungers great, its appetite is hard to sate. Feed it well and bid it sleep, lest its gaze to *you* retreat!"

"Of course," Millie sniffed during the intermission as they stood in the crowded lobby with glasses of spiced mead in their hands, James' head spinning dully, "every seat in the theatre is enchanted with a disbelief-suspension charm. The longer you sit there, the more real everything on stage seems. If they didn't have an intermission to break things up a bit, some of us would be charging the stage to join Treus on the Ballywynde every time he gives his rallying speech, deadly magical storm and raging Wraith river or not."

"Wizards and men, forth draw ye wands and wits!" Edmund cried, stabbing his own toy wand into the air.

"Stop!" Ariadne insisted in her most strident, motherly voice. "You're embarrassing yourself! Can't you at least *try* to act like a proper gentleman?"

By the time the fourth act was underway, the aforementioned magical storm was a pall of clouds and thunder boiling in the upper

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reaches of the theatre from wall to wall, flashing with gouts of bruise-coloured lightning. Treus gave his famous rallying speech, and while no one rushed the stage to accompany his quest, many in the audience did join in the recitation even from the first words—“Foul Donovan! Thou traitorous malcontent!”—some standing in their seats and raising their own wands in the air, pointing them at the magical storm overhead. Somehow, actual ocean waves crested and broke over the ledge of the stage, cascading into the busy orchestra pit, as the *Ballywynde* circumvented the storm via the treacherous Dagger Peninsula. It beached spectacularly on the shore of Seventide within sight of the castle, just in time to prevent Donovan’s and Astra’s cursed wedding. The villain was confronted and defeated by Treus’ sword, yet the castle itself quaked under the onslaught of the merciless storm as it tirelessly hunted its focus, Treus himself.

James gasped as the cyclone tore across the stage, shattering stained-glass windows with its icy mist and stabbing the walls with lightning, setting tapestries afire and cracking the stone floors into heaving, broken canyons. Treus leapt these, drawing Astra along with him, still in her wedding gown and streaming veil, now torn by the battering gale. Distantly, James remembered this scene from his own performance of the Triumvirate. Then, the pedal-powered wind machine had accelerated out of control, causing real and unexpected chaos. The scene playing out now seemed even less staged than that. Walls tilted inward, disintegrating into rains of brick and stone. Fire raced along the ceilings, wrenching rafters loose and heaving them like pick-up-sticks in the hand of a child in tantrum. And Treus wove through it all, sometimes leading Astra, sometimes tugged forward by her, until the doomed lovers were in sight of the castle entrance. A flaming rafter fell upon them, finally breaking the lovers’ grasp on each other, and crushing Treus under its weight. James simultaneously saw the remainder of the scene as both lines in a playwright’s script, and dim, heartbreak memories of Petra.

ASTRA [*returns to Treus’ wounded side despite the onslaught all around, pleads*]: “Advance! We’re nearly

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free! The castle's doom'd, but hope prevails! O Treus,  
curse it not!"

James heard the line in Petra's voice, untainted with melodrama and hysterics, speaking as if no one was listening but he himself, her expression stricken but stubborn with a thread of hope.

TREUS: "Dear love, I curse not hope. I've  
brave'd the tempest's watery wrath and fell that sorc'r's  
might. I've cursed them all to gaze upon your loving  
face. But hope? What life I've left I live in barricades of  
hope."

On the stage, Treus struggled to free his arm from beneath the burning rafter, flinging it out to grasp Astra's hand. Blood painted his fingers, stained the side of his face. Astra dropped to her knees as darkness closed slowly in on them, the castle collapsing and crumbling inward, tightening the space, making it tragically more intimate and desperate with each moment.

Treus went on, and James mentally said the words along with him, thinking of Petra. "Though God himself may shake this world to fall upon itself, my love and hope remain. Depart, my dear, and leave me now: I walk to death in peace."

ASTRA [overcome by futility]: "Pray *no*,  
beloved!"

The Astra on-stage flung her free hand against her brow, palm out, and sang the line with shrill hopelessness. But her voice was drowned out in James' mind by Petra, who claimed the words forcefully, not like an elegy, but like a sudden plea, hoarse and breathless, the spoken equivalent of a grasp about the shoulders, a desperate embrace that comes seconds too late. James' mind flashed with green, and in that flash he saw his cousin Lucy tumbling through the air dead, heard his own scream mingling with Petra's.

The scene on-stage blended dizzyingly with James' memories. Astra was Petra, and Petra was Lucy.

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ASTRA: "For months and years I've longed for  
thee alone: my dreams the home of thy desperate love!  
I'll not depart my place at body's side, lest unrequited  
dreams shall *crush my soul!*"

James sat forward in his seat and spoke the final words of the play aloud:

"Then give me a testament to love. A kiss to cure  
the pains of death, this one... to stand for all."

On-stage, Treus and Astra kissed, even as the castle finally collapsed upon them, buried them, ended them. The lights dropped. The entire theater vanished into perfect blackness. And James was kissed. In the seamless dark, it was Petra's lips on his. Strangely, disconcertingly, it was also Lucy's, chaste and brief and careful as a dove. Heartbreakingly, he smelled his lost adopted cousin, the warmth of her exotic, silky black hair, a hint of lavender soap, a tease of licorice on her breath.

And then the lights came back on, dimly, and it was Millie. Her face was close to his still, smiling faintly, one eyebrow arched.

"Wow," she whispered, "that suspension of disbelief charm *really* worked on you, didn't it? You *were* Treus for a second there." Her eyebrow arched a notch higher. "Was I your Astra?"

James couldn't answer. He couldn't think quickly enough to lie. Millie saw this on his face, but merely nodded, still smiling, and dipped her eyes.

James had very little memory of leaving the theater.



James was, in fact, in a distracted, charm-induced daze until dinner that evening in the grand dining room of Blackbrier Quoit. As the formal dinner of Christmas Eve night, the event was the most ceremonious private affair that James had ever attended. Fortunately, Millie's brother Benton rescued James from the embarrassment of his dress robes by raiding the mansion's expansive attic, tracking down one of his own old wardrobes, and providing from it a much better, if moth-ball scented, set of robes. James was glad to make the switch and arrived at the dinner table much improved in both mood and appearance.

"You'll sit between me and Grandmother Eunice," Millie whispered to him as they filed into the room, herself changed into a mermaid-shaped emerald green dress and a triple string of pearls. "And you'll be expected to make conversation with her at certain intervals."

"What do you mean, 'at certain intervals'?" he whispered back, a note of urgent worry edging into his voice. "And what am I supposed to talk about?"

Millie gave a bland, brief shrug. "She'll decide that. Just play along. And answer honestly, whatever you do. Grandma Eunice can smell a lie a mile away."

"But how will I know when I'm supposed to do what?"

Millie frowned and blinked at him, and James was reminded that, to her, this was just a traditional holiday dinner. "Just watch everyone else. It's easy."

"Merry Christmas, one and all!" called the booming, jovial voice of Millie's father as he reached the head of the table, his own formal robes resplendent with a high white collar and matching bow tie. He raised both arms grandly, gesturing at the lines of tall chairs, the glittering crystal glasses and goblets, glinting ranks of silver laid atop

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neatly folded napkins, and glowing, moon-like plates, saucers and platters. “Do be seated, and let us be merry!”

James tugged out his chair and sidled onto it, watching as the dozen guests sank into their own seats, descending into easy, polite laughter and murmured conversation. The young cousins, Ariadne, Nigel, and Edmund, flanked their mother and father, Susan and Otto, across from Mrs. Vandergriff. Facing James over the white table and candelabra, Millie’s elder sister Mathilda settled in, measuring him with her overly made-up eyes and thin smile.

Beneath James, the seat cushion was deep, covered in purple velvet, but the back of the chair was very high and mercilessly straight, forcing him to sit upright. He put his elbows on the table, saw that no one else was doing so, and immediately pulled them back again, dropping his hands onto his lap.

Muggle servants in black tuxedoes and white ties stood around the perimeter of the room. James counted four of them, including Topham, who stood near the outer door, and Blake, who began to circle the table, discreetly pouring ruby wine for the adults from a large crystal decanter. No house elves were in sight, of course, but James knew that they had to be around somewhere, performing whatever meager roles that were still assigned to them.

Soon enough, as the conversation progressed and the soup course was served (cream of asparagus with gillyweed croutons), James began to understand the protocol of the formal table. Mr. Vandergriff led the discussion, usually with a question directed at someone else at the table—“What think you of Bragdon Wand’s Swivenhodge chances this year, Susan?”, or “Otto, how is your mother faring in Turkey with her trading business?”, or “Have you seen much of Briny and the old crew since leaving University, Benton?”—and the called upon guest would answer for the benefit of the entire table, always in a practiced, articulate voice. Unlike dinners at Marble Arch or the Burrow, no one interrupted anyone, and if there was laughter, it was unfailingly polite and brief. After the initial answer, the conversation would descend for a time into smaller, related banters around the table. James watched to see which direction to turn when this happened. Just when he thought it was his turn to interact with Millie, Lady Vandergriff spoke up next to him.

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"How does your father manage to care for the Black Manor at Grimmauld Place while attending to his prodigious professional duties?" she asked primly, dabbing the corner of her wrinkled mouth with a napkin and ignoring the established table topic.

James turned to look at the old woman, but she merely raised her chin and lowered her eyes to the wine goblet as she raised it in her hand, studying its prism of crimson light.

"Oh, he um..." James began, treading as carefully as possible. The answer, of course, was that Dad *didn't* actually care for the old place, as such. He sent Kreacher on occasion, just to give it a once over and assure that it was all still secure. Kreacher was always content to go, of course, since he alone seemed to harbor a sort of stubborn affection for the musty, imposing mansion. "He has help. Our house elf makes sure it's in good shape, more or less, for whenever we go there."

"House elf," the old woman sighed to herself wistfully, ticking her chin a notch higher, still staring into her wine. "And how often do you go there, in fact?"

James shrugged. "A few times a year, I guess. Mum and dad prefer the house in Marble Arch, I think. It feels a little less... you know," he reached for his own glass, which was filled with sparkling water, "old and dank. Erm. If you know what I mean." He realized that this was unlikely to be the sort of answer that the Countess preferred, and quickly took a gulp of water to keep from saying any more.

Lady Eunice sighed briskly and set down her own wine glass without taking a sip. "The magical aristocracy is not like the Muggle variety, young master James. I cannot blame your father for not knowing this. He was not given the proper education in the responsibilities of his position, although one expects that he might have done some research in the years since." She turned an eye on James now, studying him before going on. "The threads of magical nobility are fewer and more tenuous with every passing generation. And yet, that only makes their remaining significance all the greater. The Black Manor is not merely an empty house, 'old and dank', as you have observed. Your father's title—which you shall inherit, unless he wills it to someone else, as his godfather did—is not simply a name and a document. Magical nobility is quite different from the Muggles in that

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way. Your title is a responsibility, because it is one that comes with a great and secret power."

James felt momentarily captured by the woman's penetrating gaze. "Power, Ma'am?"

She nodded, still studying him severely. "Power, indeed. But not the power of property, nor position, nor land. The Black manor itself is a mere symbol. No, when we of magical nobility speak of power, we mean it in the truest and most primeval sense. We are guardians, Master James. Our entitlement is the charge of certain deeply elemental forces. But they have not all been maintained. Some have been lost entirely, neglected to the point of impotence, and forgotten to history." She sighed deeply, resignedly.

James was intrigued despite himself. "What sort of forces?"

Lady Eunice relaxed slightly on her chair and allowed her gaze to drift over the table. "Few speak of it. Few, even amongst my peers, respect or remember. But once there was the Marquess of Rose whose endowment was the rapture of love. It was that title which guarded and preserved the tides of eros. Lost now to the ages, love still exists without the title's noble ministrations, and always shall, but ever more tainted and diluted, random and untethered from its deepest cores."

"And much longer ago there was the Greene Barony, endowed with the boundaries of ambition, moderating the supply and demand of jealousy, rivalry, greed, and envy. Now, without its accountancy, such influences run rampant, unchecked, overrunning human nature like an invasive weed."

"And up until the beginning of this century there was the Dukedom of Goldenrod, guardian of the scales of courage and cowardice..."

James stared at the older woman as she spoke, not quite grasping the magnitude of what she was saying, and yet one detail struck him. He blurted it out, interrupting her in mid-sentence.

"But, they're all colours..."

Lady Eunice ticked her gaze back toward him, narrowing her eyes. She waited, watching as the significance of this realization settled over him. James' mind spun. Finally, he looked up at the older woman again, meeting her gaze.

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"You're saying that Grimmauld Place isn't just an old house," he said in a hushed voice. "And Black... isn't just a name. Is it?"

Lady Eunice nodded once, slowly. "Black is the elemental colour of the force that is your family charge."

James blinked at her, his hair prickling. He furrowed his brow as he asked, "But, what kind of elemental force is black?"

Lady Eunice settled against the back of her own tall chair, as if content that James had merely asked the question.

"*That*, young Master Potter..." she answered, picking up her wine goblet again, "is your duty to discover. Once the day comes and the title passes onto *you*."

James' shoulders slumped, but his mind still whirled, considering everything that the Countess had told him. What did it really mean? Should he tell his dad? Would Kreacher know anything about it? And what elemental force of human nature could possibly be signified by the colour *black*?

Shaking him out of this reverie, an unexpected voice suddenly said, "And what plans do you have, James?" It was Mr. Vandergriff, asking on behalf of the entire table, who turned to listen.

James blinked rapidly, glancing up at the man at the head of the table, who smiled at him expectantly.

"Er... what? Sir?" James stammered.

Millie's older sister, Mathilda, offered him a chilly smile. "Upon graduation from your schooling, of course. Will you perhaps be following in the footsteps of your famous Auror father?"

"Or perhaps those of your grandfather, James the first," Benton suggested, grinning and elbowing Millie next to him. "If I recall, *his* biggest plan upon graduating Hogwarts was to marry his school sweetie and start a family."

"Now don't be gouache," Mrs. Vandergriff chided mildly. "I'm sure that young James has no interest in anyone's romantic predictions."

"Entertaining though they may be," Mathilda suggested, still eyeing James closely.

Millie shook her head and turned pointedly to James. "Don't listen to them. They've been scheming forever to get me married off to some ultra eligible, peered family."

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"And apparently you qualify," Susan, the young cousins' mother, confirmed with a sympathetic nod.

Benton agreed. "A member of the peerage, *and* not belonging to any pureblood family."

"Now, Benton," Mr. Vandergriff reproached, his smile thinning slightly.

James felt his cheeks redden as he glanced helplessly from face to face. Millie was still turned to him, but her eyes were on her mother. "Mummy becomes impatient with pureblood families. She's very progressive that way."

"I'm not impatient with anyone, except perhaps the lot of *you* at the moment," Mrs. Vandergriff commented primly. "I simply do not suffer the hang-ups of some other magical households regarding our heritage, and I harbor no shame about who knows it."

Lady Eunice sniffed, "Quite the reverse, one might think."

Mr. Vandergriff turned his attention to Millie. "And what of you, my dear? Still considering a year abroad? America, perhaps?" He dropped a quick wink to James.

"Actually," Millie said slowly, suddenly lowering her gaze. "I *might* consider going to America. But not for an extended holiday. I was thinking of continuing my schooling there. I've been looking into universities. Ilvermorny looks interesting, and Alma Aleron has a marvelous program that I've become rather interested in."

James, while glad that the attention was no longer on him, was surprised at the response Millie's comment elicited. The smile fell away from Mr. Vandergriff's face, while his wife looked both startled and puzzled. Mathilda's gaze sparkled with mean interest as she watched, but Benton merely rolled his eyes and folded his napkin onto the table.

Millie's mother asked, "More schooling, dearest? Why, whatever for? Do you not feel your schooling at Hogwarts has been sufficient?"

Mr. Vandergriff sighed tersely, "I *told* you she should have gone to Bragdon Wand."

"No, that's not it at all," Millie said, sitting up straight in her chair and looking at both of her parents. "I just... I want to do more than look pretty and say witty things at parties."

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"Well," Lady Eunice commented mildly, "one can't know that until they've *tried*."

"Mother," Mr. Vandergriff said, cocking his head slightly. "You're not helping."

"Or," Millie said, warming to the topic and aiming a pointed glance at her grandmother, "sitting around having fancy dinners while *real* people are serving us and then leaving here to go out and live *real* lives."

"Oh, now this *is* interesting," Mathilda said, her eyes avid as she leaned slightly over the table. "What sort of 'real' lives are they leading, Millicent?"

Benton shook his head at Mathilda. "Don't pretend that *you* didn't go through a phase exactly like this."

"It's *not* a phase," Millie said, firming her jaw, her own cheeks reddening now. "And I'll *tell* you what they do. They write plays, and make music. They go on daring adventures. And they... well they build things."

"*Build* things?" Mathilda repeated, barely concealing the mocking glee in her voice.

Lady Eunice recoiled in mild alarm. "Perhaps I am mistaken, but that sounds an awful lot like manual labour."

"I don't mean building things with my *hands*," Millie said, exasperated, "Although I'm not above that. I mean... designing things. Planning, and plotting, and drafting buildings. Things like museums and cathedrals, hotels and terminals. All on paper, where there are no limitations. And then watching it all come to life before your eyes!"

Mathilda blinked owlishly at her sister across the table, a mixture of teasing amazement etched onto her narrow face. "Do you mean *architecture*? Is *that* what you're on about?"

Their mother sighed. "I seem to recall that it was 'veterinary medicine' in your case, Mathilda," she said, laying a weary hand over her eyes.

"But," Lady Eunice interjected, perplexed, "Architecture is *dwarf* work. I may not know much about common workaday life, but I *do* know that."

"*Not* in the Muggle world," Millie said, steeling herself.

"*Oh*, bloody Nora," her father groaned under his breath.

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“More claret, M’Lord,” Blake suggested deftly, pouring wine into the man’s nearly empty goblet.

Mrs. Vandergriff rallied herself. “Now, Millicent, we like to be as open-minded as any modern wizarding family...”

“A human can be an architect in the Muggle world,” Millie insisted stubbornly. “A woman can work, just like a man. Ask our new ‘servants’!” She nodded toward Blake and Topham. Blake merely stood at attention, but Topham’s gaze fluttered at the suddenly watchful faces. Millie went on, “In their world, anyone can be anything they want.”

“And yet, somehow, *they* choose to be servants,” Lady Eunice observed archly, apparently to the candelabra.

“I don’t care what any of you say,” Millie proclaimed, calling on every ounce of her lofty upbringing and melodramatic dignity. “I shall go to America, attend Alma Aleron University, and I shall be an architect if I wish. Even if it means working in the Muggle world.”

This statement was met with a sharp gasp from Mrs. Vandergriff and awkward, stunned silence around the table. James could hear the faint clatter of dishes in the kitchen far below. Finally, young cousin Edmund spoke up for the first time, taking advantage of the break in conversation.

“Millie, after we do the Triumvirate, will you do a Hufflepuppet pals show for us tonight?” he asked eagerly, leaning over the table.

No one answered. Mr. Vandergriff coughed lightly and pushed away from the table. Lady Vandergriff dabbed her napkin at the corner of her mouth and glanced around brightly, diplomatically ignoring the awkward silence.

Edmund looked at James and frowned quizzically. “What? Did she leave the Voldy puppet back at school or something?”



## 14. THE ELVEN UPRISING

An hour later, still reeling from the dinner conversation, James was surprised to see just what a production the miniature presentation of "The Triumvirate" had turned out to be. The children, with Millie's help, had raided the attic wardrobes and returned with armloads of colourful old robes, feathered hats, boots, belts, swords and scabbards, ribbons and medals, and various other costuming. A small, makeshift stage had been erected in front of the fire, bordered by actual red velvet curtains hung from an enchanted, floating rod.

Somewhat more disconcerting were the number of people in attendance. Besides the entirety of the family, including many relatives who had arrived only that night, all of the servants were also invited to watch the performance. Balor the Cyclops was there, towering over everyone else in his intimidating slate grey uniform, his chauffeur's hat still pressed down low onto his huge cranium. James once again wondered how the skinny giant could be a Cyclops. The whole point of being such a creature, he thought, was that Cyclopi had a single giant

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eye that could see everything, including secrets and trickery. This is why, in ancient history, they had often been employed as bodyguards by wizarding royalty, since no plot or subterfuge escaped their monocular notice. Balor, however, appeared to have two perfectly normal-sized eyes, if solemnly cold and stoic, beneath the black brim of his ever-present cap. He did not sit, but stood stiffly behind the family, his back to a window.

Across from the chauffeur, the Muggle servants lined up behind a buffet table covered with platters of cucumber sandwiches, desserts, cupcakes, a crystal punch bowl, and a very large Christmas pudding, so sticky and redolent with sherry that James could smell it from the stage.

Blake sat behind the table in one of the chairs provided, along with several other servants, cooks, and maids. He caught James' eye and cocked a subtly sardonic eyebrow at him, seeming to refer to the entire room, the stage, the enormous pudding, and the immensely well-dressed finery of the witches and wizards as they settled into their seats. James remembered the smell of cigarettes and beer from the pub that Blake had taken them to the previous night. *Millie calls this 'slumming'*, the young man had said. Clearly, this was the opposite for him, and the irony was palpable. Dismissing James, Blake leaned back and threw his arms around the maids on either side, crossing one polished black shoe over his knee. The older maid elbowed his arm away from her. Topham, who refused to sit, cleared his throat meaningful in Blake's direction. Blake nodded obediently and sat up straight again, as if at attention. Topham accepted this with a satisfied nod, turning his attention back to the room at large.

As the children, along with James and Millie, took the stage, the lights of the room dimmed to shadows and the assembly applauded dutifully. Magical spotlights lit the stage from concealed wands. Most of the family and guests smiled with indulgent good cheer, the mens' cheeks flushed with brandy, the women sitting ramrod straight in their fine dresses, their gloved hands folded atop their knees. As the play began, the servants watched intently, many with brows knitted, themselves unfamiliar with the story, of course, and somewhat befuddled by the children's condensed, meandering version of it.

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James and Millie both managed several different roles, as well as performed clumsy but necessary scene and costume changes while an antique, charmed Victrola played accompanying musical overtures. They were just nearing Treus' famous rallying speech, with Edmund standing in his tri-corner feathered cap on the "ship's bow" of the upholstered ottoman, when James, standing at attention behind the ottoman as one of Treus' sailors, saw movement out of the corner of his eye, in the dimness just off-stage.

Beneath the buffet table, half hidden by its draped bunting, a house elf hunkered. James recognized her as the very one that he had seen that morning, outside the dining room door, watching Blake with undisguised contempt. Now, her bulbous eyes were turned up, as if she could see through the bottom of the table to the goods arrayed on its surface.

As James watched, the elf snapped her fingers.

On the table, the enormous Christmas pudding rocked on its platter. Slowly, subtly, the pudding rose an inch off the table, resting on a cushion of magic.

James blinked at the elf, alarm rising in his chest. Her eyes squinted with grim malice as she glanced out over the darkened room, toward the seated guests and family members. The pudding edged across the lip of the table, then floated into the shadows. None of the servants noticed, being too intent on Edmund's rousing speech.

Amazingly, inexplicably, the elf seemed prepared to dump the pudding onto the floor, or worse, onto the very head of someone in the audience. Blake, being seated nearest the pudding, would get the blame. With a start, James understood: the elf intended to sabotage Blake, and all of the Muggle servants by association.

James lifted his wand, drew a breath to call a warning, but the elf saw him. Her gaze sharpened, and she snapped her fingers again. James' wand hand twisted away, pointing toward the opposite wall. He gasped in surprise.

"Sailors and men!" Edmund cried, jabbing his own toy wand toward the ceiling, "forth draw ye wands and wits to fight the violent seas this night!" The family members and guests joined in, jubilantly reciting the famous lines with him: "That by the morn we'll hold our win, or lie in beds of ocean sand: our beaten glory's shrine!"

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A cheer went up throughout the room. Even the Muggle servants grinned and applauded, if a bit bemusedly. James tried to call out a warning as the pudding lofted through the darkness over Mrs. Vandergriff's shoulder, but his own voice was lost in the happy commotion. He struggled to aim his wand, but his arm was wrested firmly away, captured in an invisible vice, pointing in the opposite direction at a high window.

Pointing, in fact, toward Balor, who stood against the glass like a lanky statue.

And suddenly, with perfect clarity, James thought he understood the Cyclops' strange secret.

He stopped resisting the elf's magical influence and pointed his wand at the tall man-shape instead. With a flick of his wrist, he muttered the first incantation he had ever learned: "Wingardium leviosa!"

Balor's chauffeur hat popped off his head, freeing the man's wispy white hair in a dandelion-like fluff. More importantly, however, it revealed the huge, closed eye in the centre of the Cyclops' high forehead. Balor's two human eyes snapped shut as the giant Cyclops eye opened, revealing an inky black orb the size of a lemon. The eye swiveled immediately toward the buffet table, homing in on the elf's secret subterfuge.

"STOP!" Balor called, his voice a deep bellow that overrode the happy cheers, cutting through them like a knife. His arm pistoned up, pointing one long, bony finger at the elf beneath the table. Her own eyes bulged even more prominently in shock as the entire assembly turned to look, to spy her in her hiding place.

But it was too late.

Mrs. Vandergriff's sudden scream of surprise was partially muffled by the splat of the pudding as it dropped onto her, breaking over her head and squelching down her front, onto her lap, and all around the sofa on which she sat.

Mr. Vandergriff leapt to his feet, clapping his hands once so that the overhead chandelier flared instantly aglow, bathing the room with light. Every eye except Balor's swept toward Mrs. Vandergriff as she

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arose with a choked gasp, flinging goblets of pudding in all directions. The people seated nearest her gasped and recoiled, eyes wide.

On the makeshift stage, Millie clapped both hands over her mouth, her eyes boggling at her mother's predicament. James at first thought that she was horrified at the sight, but then he saw her shoulders convulse and realized that she was, just barely, restraining a bray of shocked laughter.

Mrs. Vandergriff shook her head, her own eyes blazing. Then, with a decisive jerk, she turned toward the buffet table. The elf had not moved. Her knobby shoulders slumped and her gaze dropped to the floor, but the set of her scowl, defiant and hopeless, did not change.

"Haddlebun," Mrs. Vandergriff called hoarsely, her voice only faintly trembling. "Would you please step out so I can address you properly?"

The elf complied with no hesitation. She seemed to know what was coming. Eyes still on the floor, she sidled from beneath the table and silently approached her mistress.

Mrs. Vandergriff raised her hands and, with as much dignity as she could muster, daintily tugged at the fingertips of her left ivory glove, which was now smeared with chocolate, studded with wet crumbs. She withdrew it, allowed it to dangle in her right hand, and then dropped it into the waiting hands of the elf.

It was Millie's father who spoke next, his voice low. "Haddlebun, I don't know why you've done this. And, quite honestly, I don't believe I care. You've served this family for as long as I can remember. But you are a free elf now. It breaks my heart to say it, but please be off the premises by midnight tonight. Am I understood?"

Haddlebun's voice was small and calm. "Yes, Master."

"I'm not your master anymore," Mr. Vandergriff said. The words seemed to pain him. "Please, take your glove and go."

"Yes, M'lord."

James thought that Haddlebun might offer some explanation for her action, but she did not. Holding the glove draped across her hands as if it were a dead frog, the elf turned and threaded for the door, her large feet making no noise on the carpet. Topham looked down at her, and then away, averting his eyes as if from a rude gesture. Mr. Vandergriff tilted an eye at Balor, who nodded gravely. Without a word,

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the tall Cyclops retrieved his cap from a nearby chair and moved to follow the elf, apparently to assure that she vacated as ordered. Heddlebun sensed this and paused at the door, waiting for Balor to escort her. She glanced back only once, but not at the Cyclops. Instead, her gaze landed on James, briefly but unmistakably. There was blame in her glare, but it was cold, strangely emotionless.

James couldn't help feeling sorry for the elf, in spite of the mess that she had made. Mr. Vandergriff may not wish for any explanation, but James thought that her intention had been painfully clear. Heddlebun had resorted to one final, desperate measure to regain her duties from the Muggle servants.

Instead, she had lost her service entirely.

Blake, for one, seemed to understand this. He watched the elf go with a placid expression, then looked askance at James. Silently, he mimed wiping a bead of sweat from his brow, and then winked. There was something conspiratorial in the gesture, as if James and Blake had somehow plotted for the elf to be sacked, rather than merely watched it happen. James frowned and shook his head.

Many voices began to speak now, in low, urgent tones. Millie still had her hands clamped over her mouth, but she seemed to have lost the urge to laugh. She swiveled her eyes toward James, speechless at what had transpired.

"I'm fine," Mrs. Vandergriff stated over the rabble of voices. "I'm fine, truly. It's nothing that a good tergeo charm won't fix. I shall summon Gennywik as soon as the play is completed. No, I won't hear a word of it, Topham. You stay and enjoy the remainder of the performance. It is, I daresay, just coming to the good bit."

Much to the consternation of her husband and their guests, Mrs. Vandergriff composed herself, brushed futilely at the mess on her shoulders and skirts, and then lowered back to her seat on the sofa, crossing her gloved right hand over her bare left.

There was a long, pregnant pause as the rest of the room stood by awkwardly, unsure how to proceed.

"The Lady has spoken," Mr. Vandergriff nodded briskly, changing his expression to a determined smile. "And so it shall be.

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Carry on then, loves! Lights, please.” He clapped his hands again, and the chandelier snuffed itself, plunging the room back into dimness.

On the stage, Edmund still stood atop his ottoman boat, his face blank in the spotlight.

“Shall I...” he asked in a stage whisper, looking around at Millie and James, “shall I begin again?”

“I suggest we skip directly to the fight scene with Donovan,” Millie whispered with a hard glint in her eye, cocking a glance at James. “And do let’s make it a good one.”



James lay in bed that night listening to the low crackle of the fire in the hearth, staring up at the dim shadows of the ceiling. He couldn’t sleep. His mind was full of chasing, whirling thoughts: the inexplicable sensation of Petra’s kiss during the climactic moment at the theatre; the Black estate and its mysterious, portentous title; the sacking of Heddlebun the elf in favor of paid, human servants.

The latter debacle had led to muttered discussion later that night, with the men gathered secretly in the den for cognac and cigars, discussing a word that James had never heard before.

“It’ll come up for vote, this Wexit business. It’s inevitable,” the Ministry official with pork-chop sideburns said matter-of-factly. “It’s the direction of the future. Britain must lead the charge.”

Mr. Vandergriff remained unconvinced. “I don’t know if it should come to that. It’s a monumental step, the entirety of wizarding Britain exiting the Vow of Secrecy. There is no reversing from that decision, should it come to pass.”

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“And yet, I wonder if there is any hope in fighting it?” Benton suggested, his voice uncharacteristically somber. “You heard what happened at Hogwarts on First Night. A Muggle family actually drove straight into the courtyard, purely by accident. The lot of them wandered into the Great Hall, for heaven’s sake. Ask James here, he’ll tell you all about it.”

James didn’t wish to recount the event, and didn’t need to. The story had made its way into *the Daily Prophet*, of course, and become national news.

“Mark my words,” the Ministry official insisted, raising a single, pudgy finger. “Wexit will come to vote, and it will pass. We cannot wait for the Vow to crumble down around our shoulders. This Elven uprising business is just the start. We must act now to minimize and control the revelation while we still can.”

James thought on the man’s words in the darkness of his room, unsure what to make of them, unsure if he agreed or not, knowing that Benton was probably right in saying that it didn’t really matter; the momentum was begun. The Vow was indeed crumbling.

And what, exactly, was the “Elven uprising”?

A low laugh echoed from beneath the bedroom door, as if from a long way off. James glanced toward the door, saw the narrow band of candlelight beneath it. It was unbroken. No one was moving in the hall outside.

He dismissed the sound, returning reluctantly to his sleepless reverie, but a moment later the sound came again, and this time it was accompanied by a shrill whisper.

After a moment’s consideration, James slipped to the floor in his pajamas and padded barefoot to the door. He gripped the brass doorknob and opened the door just enough to peek out.

The hallway was long, decked with gilt-framed portraits, flickering wall-sconces, and low sofas and side tables. At the end nearest the staircase, a figure stood half-hidden within an open bedroom door. It was Millie’s room, James recognized, but the figure standing there was not Millie.

Frowning in consternation, he recognized the shape as Blake. The young man was murmuring in a low voice, no longer dressed in his

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formal coat and tails. Now, he wore a leather jacket and jeans. Millie's voice was thin and secretive, tittering with laughter. James could make out no words. After only a moment, Blake stepped back to make room for Millie. She exited her bedroom dressed in a heavy jumper and winter hat. Closing her bedroom door with exaggerated care, she bounced lightly on her toes, and then pushed Blake playfully toward the staircase. Together, they crept down and out of sight.

James felt completely stymied. He stared down the now-empty hall feeling a mixture of confusion, jealousy, and surprised spite. What were they up to? Why hadn't she told him about it, much less invited him along?

Wounded resentment arose in place of his confusion, bringing a flush to his cheeks and pressing his lips into a firm line.

Leaving the bedroom door ajar, he retreated to the enormous wardrobe, yanked out his coat, pocketed his wand, shoved his bare feet into his trainers, and crept quickly out into the hall, closing his own door as quietly as possible.

Blake and Millie were in the main entrance hall when he spied them again from the shadows of the landing. They were still whispering as Blake swung open the front door, heavy but silent on its well-oiled hinges. Cold air carried a raft of snowflakes into the entryway. They alit on Millie's hair and hat as she followed the young man outside. With a faint clunk, the door closed behind them.

James trotted lightly down the steps, the confused umbrage in his chest heating into a boiling cauldron. A set of tall windows stood on either side of the front doors, each glazed with silvery frost. Leaning so close that his breath fogged the glass, James peered out.

An automobile stood on the curving drive, its exhaust putttering white breath as Blake opened the passenger door for Millie. The car was not new, but it was low and muscular, clearly immaculately cared for, shining a deep midnight blue, with fat racing tyres. Blake closed Millie's door quietly, then rounded the front of the car swiftly, drawing a hand lovingly across the bonnet before dropping into the driver's seat. A moment later, as the door swung shut, the car surged forward, crunching on the snow.

James could scarcely believe what he was seeing. She was sneaking out again, and this time without telling even him! Would she

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and Blake go to the same place that they had all gone the previous night? Why were they driving Blake's fancy sports car this time? What was Blake's intention with the rich blonde witch? Worse, what was *her* intention with *him*?

If only there was a way to find out.

James cast anxiously around the entry hall. A large coatroom stood on one side. On the other was a narrow door, closed but unlocked. For lack of any better idea, James took a lunging step forward and grasped the handle, yanking the door open.

It was a utility closet. A vacuum cleaner stood in the centre, surrounded by shelves of cleaning supplies, folded serving towels, feather dusters, spray-cans of furniture polish, a rack of hanging black coats for the servants to wear when greeting guests in bad weather, and a leaning collection of mops and brooms.

James began to close the door in frustration, and then stopped, his eye catching on the brooms.

Was it possible? He scanned the wooden handles. One of them was more curved than the others, dull with age but polished a deep chestnut, with a small brass plate screwed to one side of the handle. On the plate, curlicue letters spelled: *WoodSprite '75*.

James had never heard of a broom called a WoodSprite. He didn't even know which century the "75" referred to. He only knew, with immense relief, that the Vandergriffs had consigned someone's ancient broom to the servants for mere sweeping. He grabbed it, yanked it from its fellows with a clatter, and leapt for the front door.

It was bitterly cold outside, with fresh snowflakes falling silently through the dome of interwoven trees that canopied the Vandergriff's peninsula estate. James barely felt the wintry air as he tugged the door closed behind him and straddled the antique broom.

The taillights of Blake's car were mere red pinpricks in the distance, obscured by the falling snow. They brightened momentarily as James watched, showing a tap of the car's brakes. Then, the vehicle turned off the tree-lined drive, accelerated, and vanished into the Muggle neighborhood beyond.

James kicked off from the mansion's portico and drove the broom forward as fast as it would go. The WoodSprite felt like a

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Flobberworm compared to his own ThunderStreak, yet James knew that it would be plenty fast enough to catch up to Blake's car and keep pace with it. If, that was, he could overtake them before losing them in the warren of neighborhoods beyond the shore road.

Snowflakes streamed past, stinging James' cheeks and blurring his vision, but he only squinted and pressed onward, swooping low along the narrow drive, feeling the pulse of the trees as they rushed overhead. The fringe of forest began to close ahead of him as he watched, hiding the Vandergriff's drive from the cul-de-sac beyond. James hunkered low and drew in his elbows, and still he had to slalom dangerously through the contracting trees, bursting out of them only a moment before they twined firmly together, completely blocking the drive.

With a kick and a swerve, James angled upward, above the glow of the streetlamps, and sped into the night, following the boulevard below.

Blake's car was no longer in sight.

Angry panic throttled James' thoughts, but he merely leaned lower over the broom and pressed onward, glaring down at the snowy, illuminated road below. At the junction, he glanced frantically from right to left. There, much further away than he expected, was the same pair of taillights just turning right, passing behind a grand house. James kicked forward again in pursuit.

Soon enough, he caught up to the car, slowed, and followed it more sedately, staying well above the light of the streets below, watching as the car ambled through more junctions, tooled past flashing traffic lights, and eventually made its way into a nearby town, where it began to cruise the streets in a seemingly random, meandering path.

This went on for some time.

James pressed higher as he flew over apartment complexes, churches, office buildings, and parking garages. Snow gathered in his hair and eyelashes. He grew cold, and then began to shiver so hard that his hands shook on the broom handle. And still, far below, the sleek blue car drove on. It never really arrived anywhere, although it slowed often, pausing longer than necessary at stop signs and intersections, random corners and parks. Several times it pulled off to the side of the road and stopped entirely. And yet, as James watched, Millie and Blake

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never got out to approach any of the establishments they parked near. The car doors never even opened. Minutes would creep by as James shivered violently far overhead, chilled and crusted with snow, and then, invariably, the car would pull forward again, merge onto the street, and continue placidly on.

James tried very hard not to imagine what Millie and Blake were doing in the car during those parked minutes. In his mind, he heard Scorpius Malfoy sneering at him: "You really aren't *that* thick, are you, Potter?"

Finally, after what felt like hours, numb with cold and miserable with sick jealousy, James realized he was following the blue car back into the shoreline neighborhood overlooking the sea. He followed more closely now, caring less if he was seen, wanting only to be back indoors, to shake the crusted snow from his hair, and wallow in the stew of confused, indignant anger that now filled him from head to toe.

The car's headlights illuminated the cul-de-sac guardrail, but only for a moment. With a silent shimmy, the guardrail shot upwards and transformed into the wrought-iron gate of Blackbrier Quoit. The blue car surged through, and James swooped to follow.

He considered whether he should confront them right then and there, as they emerged in front of the mansion. It would be perversely satisfying, he knew, but it would also mean admitting that he had jealously followed them, and been miserably frozen and humiliated in the act. He decided, with some reluctance, to hang back, to swoop up toward the interlaced dome of bare branches high overhead, watching down silently as the car angled onto the curving drive, glinting in the glow of the mansion's entry.

Some tiny, timid part of him suggested that he should be grateful for this night. He had already decided to break up with Millie once the holiday was over, hadn't he? He had only to come up with a good reason. This made things all the simpler, didn't it?

And yet this voice was drowned out by the boiling, affronted rage in his chest, almost but not quite concealing the ocean of wounded pride beneath.

The car's engine idled, but the doors still did not open for several minutes. James' fury grew with the intensity of his discomfort. The

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snow was thinner here as it filtered through the dome of trees, but the air was nearly arctic with cold. James' breath fogged the air, shivering violently. His hands were numb on the WoodSprite's handle.

Finally, both of the car doors swung open. Blake and Millie stepped out into the dim glow of the portico lamps, looked at each other over the car's roof, and then moved to meet at the rear. Blake took Millie's hands briefly, and then turned to the car. He opened the boot, swung up the lid, and withdrew something from inside. It was small and squarish, a gift of some kind. James nearly vibrated with rage as he watched the young man offer it to Millie. She accepted it, looked at it, and then threw her arms up around his neck, still holding the square object in one hand. She hugged him, and then, as James observed with a wave of blinding, affronted rage, she kissed him.

The boot lid banged shut suddenly, slamming so hard that it rocked the car and sent echoes across the snowy garden.

Blake and Millie both jumped back from the car, startled.

James saw this with some satisfaction before realizing that his wand was in his fist, aimed at the car. His knuckles were white, squeezing hard enough to make the tendons stand out on the back of his hand.

A light popped on in an upstairs window of the mansion. Below, Blake saw this and swore urgently under his breath.

"Hide!" Millie rasped, and yanked her wand from a pocket. She waved it at the car and muttered a brief spell. The car wavered, and then took on the ephemeral color and texture of the snowy drive beneath it, effectively vanishing from view. James marveled reluctantly. He himself had never perfected the Disillusionment spell.

Millie ducked behind a stone balustrade at the base of the steps at the exact same moment that the curtains of the lit upstairs window twitched aside. A silhouetted figure appeared, peering down through the glass. From his angle high above, James could see that it was Mathilda, Millie's older sister. She gazed this way and that, her suspicious eyes narrowed. Then, apparently seeing nothing out of order, she withdrew.

Far below, Millie peered up from behind the balustrade. Next to her, a shadow moved. Blake was hiding there with her.

James fumed furiously. Wand still in hand, he flicked it and muttered a spell of his own.

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A snowball arose spinning from a drift near the steps. It hovered for a moment, and then arced up to the lit window, bashing against the glass with an audible rattle.

“What the bloody...!” Blake hissed, standing up to look around, annoyed and confused. Millie pulled him back down, but peered up herself, her eyes squinting. She was quicker, and knew what to look for. After only a moment, she glanced up toward the tree canopy just as James summoned another snowball.

“*James?!*” she called up in a harsh whisper.

James flicked his wand. The snowball arced toward Mathilda’s window and bashed itself to powder.

Blake followed Millie’s gaze, spying James overhead. “It’s your *boyfriend?*” he asked, annoyance and amusement mingling in his voice.

“James!” Millie rasped again, stepping out from the shadows. “Come down here! What in purple blazes are you doing!?”

James firmed his jaw and heaved a deep sigh. Resignedly, he swooped down and jumped to the top portico step as Millie ran up to join him.

“What are you *doing?*” she demanded again, so angrily that James’ own rage was dampened momentarily.

“What am *I* doing?” he rallied, standing up straight and hefting the WoodSprite between them like a shield. “What are *you* doing? Sneaking out and... and... and... *getting on with... with...!*” He flapped a hand vaguely, disgustedly in Blake’s direction. For his own part, Blake stood in the shadows at the bottom of the steps, arms crossed, a look of weary impatience on his face.

For a moment, Millie appeared angrily confused. And then an expression of dawning realization descended over her face. Her eyes narrowed. In a low voice, she seethed, “You think I was *copping off* with him?!”

“Well!” James blinked, and faltered slightly. “Well, weren’t you?”

“James!” she hissed, her face going livid. “He’s almost ten years older than me! He’s a university student, studying industrial design and engineering! I’ve been begging him *for months* to teach me what he’s

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learning! We spent the night driving around looking at *architecture!* Look!"

She thrust an object toward him. It was the squarish gift that Blake had just given her. James recoiled slightly, then glanced down at it, saw that it was a fat book, and read the cover: *HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURAL DRAFTING & DESIGN, Volume 1.*

"But," James said, still staring at the book's cover. "But, but... you *kissed* him!" He glanced up at her in time to see her eyes roll in angry impatience.

"I kissed him on the *cheek!* He's like a brother to me! You really think I would... I would..." She turned her head to look down at Blake, so fast that her blonde hair flung out beneath her hat. "Do you *really* think I would betray you like that? With *him*!?"

"Hey, now," Blake said, managing to look affronted.

James was about to respond when the unmistakable sound of an opening door interrupted him. Blake leapt out of sight behind the balustrade again as a band of light spread down the steps, brightly illuminating Millie and James.

"Well," a voice called, and James was not at all surprised to hear a nasty smile in it. "What do we have here? Out for a romantic evening stroll, are we? Mother and Father will be just *thrilled* to know that you two are so... *engaged*."

Millie didn't even look toward the door. Her eyes locked onto James' with a degree of furious pleading that took him a split-second to decipher. It wasn't the fact that she'd snuck out for the night with Blake, a servant, that she was suddenly terrified of having discovered. It was that she'd been out with him *studying Muggle architecture*.

James needed barely a second to decide what he had to do.

"Yes," he said, not breaking eye contact with Millie. "And it was all my idea."

Millie's eyes widened another fraction, but she managed, miraculously, not to gasp.

James finally looked up at Mathilda, not thinking, merely allowing instinct to take over. "I love this girl, you see. Millie," he looked down at her again, at her speechless, bulging eyes. "I'm completely smitten by you. I can't be without you. I've brought you out here this night, under this moon, to tell you that."

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He glanced upwards hopefully, tried to locate the moon through the lacework of trees and the pall of drifting snow. No moon was visible at all. Mathilda, fortunately, seemed oblivious of this fact.

“Really, now,” she stated flatly, cocking her head and placing one fist against her hip, causing her night robes to sway.

“But it’s too soon for you, Millie,” James went on loudly, interrupting, marveling slightly at his own inspired temerity. Fleetingly, he wondered if he was channeling Zane Walker. “I fear that you’re not ready to respond to my... er... romantic overtures. Go, Millie. Go!”

He dropped his eyes and flung the WoodSprite down the steps. It clattered nonsensically, and James noticed, with a moment of distraction, that while Blake’s car was disillusioned to invisibility, it still puttered a dancing puff of visible smoke from its idling tailpipe. “GO!” James cried again, raising his voice and throwing an arm over his eyes in a burst of hysterical inspiration. “*Go* to your sister. I will await you. And when the time comes—indeed, *if* it ever comes—that you are ready to love me as I love you...”

His motivation faltered. He glanced aside with one eye toward Millie, who was staring at him with undisguised, gape-jawed amazement. He glared at her meaningfully, and then flicked his eyes toward the open doorway and the suspiciously watching Mathilda. *GO*, he mouthed.

Millie blinked rapidly, and then seemed to recover herself. Her experience with the Hufflepuppet Pals took over, and she replied, “Yes, I must leave you, James. It’s too soon for me. But... but...”

“But I will await your word,” James encouraged, nodding, urging her away with his eyes. “And your love! Never fear! Never doubt!”

Millie backed up the steps slowly, somewhat awkwardly, toward the waiting shape of Mathilda, who watched the scene with narrowed eyes and thin lips. When Millie reached her sister, moved into the warmth of the open door, she spun on her heel and threw her arms around the taller woman.

“Oh, Mattie,” she cried, her voice muffled against her sister’s thin breast.

Mathilda looked down at Millie in surprise, her eyes still narrowed, her brows high on her forehead. Then, tentatively, she put her arms around her. It was an awkward gesture, like a stork attempting a card trick, but apparently genuine enough. She patted Millie's shoulder and the back of her head, and then raised her gaze to James, her lips pursed.

"You Potters," she said with a curt shake of her head. "Much too brash for polite society. It seems that you've bruised poor Millicent's sensitivities. I do hope you've learned an important lesson."

James still couldn't tell if the older woman was being quite serious or if she was, perhaps, goading him. He didn't really care. He simply nodded in dejection and dropped his eyes, hoping that Mathilda wouldn't hear the gentle puttter of the idling car, or notice its phantom exhaust, or wonder, for that matter, why James had been holding one of the servants' castoff, antique brooms.

A moment later, thankfully, the women's footsteps retreated back inside the house and the door swung slowly closed, cutting off the band of golden light from inside.

Without raising his head, James flicked his eyes up in time to see the door snick shut. He listened for the bolt to shunt into place. When it didn't, he assumed that he was still allowed inside, nominally.

"Now *that*," Blake sighed calmly, emerging from his hiding place, "is what I call a royal cock-up."

"Shut up," James muttered blandly. He retreated partway down the steps, retrieved the old broom from the shadows, brushed off the snow, and climbed dejectedly back up toward the front door.

Blake spoke again, this time in a voice both taut and smug, freezing James in his tracks. "I would have won her anyway, you know. Even if you hadn't proved yourself to be a jealous, clumsy little berk. Just so you know. I didn't need your help." He was smiling as he spoke.

James didn't look back at the older man, but his mind whirled, clouded with impotent rage, choked with jealousy. He could think of nothing to say. No comeback came to mind, no retort or pithy, withering insult. He considered using his wand to curse the arrogant Muggle git, or, failing that, to hurl himself down the steps and knock

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the bastard down. But even this impulse was overcome by numbing weariness and cold.

Instead, he simply pocketed his wand and said the only thing that came to mind.

“Good luck driving home in your invisible car.”

And he opened the mansion’s door, felt the push of warm air against his cheeks, stepped inside, and shot the bolt behind him. Through the window beside the door, he briefly saw Blake at the bottom of the steps, the grin gone from his face, groping blindly, clumsily for his precious car.

The women had already gone upstairs to their bedrooms. James was quite glad.



The train ride back to Hogsmeade was awkward. James found that he missed seeing his family over the break, and took some minor, jealous solace in Albus’ and Rose’s retelling of the holiday back home and at the Burrow. He avoided Millie, who rode in a different compartment some way up the train, but knew that he had to talk to her eventually. They had hardly spoken since leaving Blackbrier Quoit in the back of the family’s limousine, and when they did it was for mere practical necessity. They both seemed to know that it was over between them. All that remained was the actual breaking up, which James sensed (with no small foreboding) was his responsibility. He didn’t want to do it. He wished it could merely be over without any of the messy,

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awkward, official stuff. But she seemed to be in prim waiting mode, knowing it was coming, expecting it, even reveling in a sort of perverse anticipation.

Rose had no patience for James' predicament. "You're just a typical boy. All eager as beavers when it comes to the snogging, but thick as paving stones when it comes to talking about feelings like *actual* human beings. Next thing, you'll be blaming her just for *having* feelings, like it's some sort of female curse or something, while you act all high and mighty about being an emotionally constipated, coddled, stuck up little mummy's boy!"

"Things not going so well between you and Scorpius again, eh?" James nodded wisely.

"Shut up."

"I thought you two were back together again after he bought you that necklace for Christmas?"

Rose's lips tightened and her eyes narrowed. "His *mum* bought it and gave it to him to give to me. She even wrapped it and signed his name to the card. He says Christmas gifts are 'the woman's responsibility'." She glared aside at James accusingly, her eyes nearly sparkling.

"Don't look at me," James said, raising both hands. "I didn't even buy Millie any Christmas gift." He realized, a moment too late, that this didn't really make his case.

Rose crossed her arms like a shield and nodded once, firmly. "No wonder Millie's had it with you. You go find her right now and set her free of you. There are probably *dozens* of better boyfriends on the train right this very moment. *Hundreds!*"

James stood up and backed away, afraid to say another word.

He found Ralph in the corridor before he found Millie's compartment.

"What are you up and about for?" the bigger boy asked, clearly disgruntled.

James didn't have it in him to be annoyed at Ralph's tone. He slumped and leaned against a window. "Looking for Millie. It's over between us. I just need to pound the final nail in the coffin."

"Oh," Ralph said, taken aback. "Well. Sorry, then. What happened? Holiday a disaster?"

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James shrugged. "I bogged it all up. It's me, not her."

"People always *say* that," Ralph frowned. "But in your case, I think you may be right."

"Thanks, Ralph."

Ralph shrugged his huge shoulders. "So, you wouldn't mind if I asked her out, maybe?"

James glanced at Ralph in surprise. "Seriously? You're interested?"

"I dunno," Ralph sighed, not meeting James' eyes. "She's pretty enough. Rich, too, from what I hear."

James blew out a breath, half-laughing. "Rich doesn't begin to cover it. They're the most confusing people I've ever met. They're like the Progressive Element, but dipped in candy, and with all the nastiness sucked out."

"What do you mean?" Ralph seemed genuinely interested.

"Well, for starters, they're proud of being anti-purebloods. And they do all this stuff that seems all generous and forward thinking, like hiring Muggle servants instead of using house elves..."

Ralph nodded consideringly. "Your Aunt Hermione would approve."

"I guess she would," James admitted, frowning. "But they don't seem to consider any of the consequences of their choices. The house elves are all desperate for their work back. They don't feel set free, they feel abandoned and useless. And there's something else. Millie's family really are nice, and they take great pains, most of them, not to judge anybody, no matter who they are or what they do. But the moment their own daughter wants to study something other than how to be a rich wizarding aristocrat, they think it's beneath her station and not good enough for her."

Ralph looked mildly perplexed. "What sort of thing does Millie want to study?"

James shook his head tiredly. "Architecture, of all things. Like, the maths and designs of buildings and stuff. I don't really understand it. But her parents, they call that 'Dwarf work'."

"Well, it is, innit?"

"That doesn't mean witches or wizards can't do it, though."

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Ralph sighed briskly and nodded. He reached and clapped James on the shoulder. "Well, good for you for calling an end to it when the time came."

"I don't *want* to do it," James bristled slightly. "I'd avoid the bloody hell out of it if I could."

"I'm sure everything will work itself out," Ralph said, glancing about the corridor. "I better get back to work, though. Being Head Boy is harder than I ever expected. Somebody's been setting off dungbombs but nobody will tell me who's responsible. I've gone up and down the train twice now, trying to sniff them out."

James nodded at his friend's distracted earnestness. "Yeah, well, happy hunting, Ralphinator."

Ralph stood and squared his shoulders importantly. "Let me know if you hear anything. Or, er, smell anything."

With that, he stumped away, glancing into compartments as he went.

James watched him go, then, reluctantly, pushed away from the wall, resuming his half-hearted search for Millie.

He passed the Cart Lady and bought a box of Pumpkin Pasties from her, munching them as he went on. A little later, he saw his cousins Louis and Dominique, and barely avoided getting pulled into an argument between them over whose new Christmas socks were the best.

"I'd love to settle this for you," he said soberly, backing away, "but honestly, I'm afraid I couldn't possibly bring myself to give a toss."

He bumped into someone in the corridor and turned, relieved for the interruption.

It was Millie.

"You *could've* had the decency to tell me yourself!" she seethed. Her cheeks were livid pink with rage.

"What...?" James recoiled. "I don't—"

"I had no idea what a little blab you were!" she shook her head violently, her voice climbing to a shrill hiss. "So my family is a bunch of pompous hypocrites who don't think about the consequences of their actions, eh?"

"What...?" James spluttered. "I mean... what? Who said...?"

"I got your *message* from Ralph Deedle," Millie said, dropping her voice again to a near whisper. "He told me you were ending it with

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me, and then he said he thought it was really cool that I wanted to study architecture. I cannot *believe* you told him that!" She raised her hand to poke James in the chest, and then seemed to think better of it, as if she couldn't bring herself even to touch him. He saw, with real dismay, that she was deeply and sincerely hurt. "I trusted you, James! I'm just... I don't even have the words...!"

James was shaking his head. "But I didn't... I only said..." He struggled to rally his thoughts in the face of her wounded rage. "I was coming to tell you myself. I only just ran into Ralph and... and I told him..."

"You told him everything," she said resolutely. "And sent him to be your errand boy. Well, all I can say, James, is that your message is received."

There were tears standing in her eyes now. Tears of hurt as well as righteous anger. James was dumbfounded by them. "Millie, look. I don't... we don't have to end it like this. Maybe..."

"Don't say another word, James," Millie said, shaking her head again so that her blonde hair swung about her face. She swiped angrily at her tears and refused to look at him again. Composing herself with an effort of will, she added in an admirably even voice, "And to think, my father really liked you, too. Even Grandmother Eunace. How disappointed they'll be."

Leaving her words hanging unanswered in the air, she turned on her heel and stalked away, holding her head up, settling back into the practiced composure of her upbringing and heritage.

James opened his mouth to call after her, but realized he had no other words to offer. It wasn't that he had too little to say, but too much. And she no longer wanted to hear it. Helplessly, he watched her march away until she passed through the partition between carriages, slamming the sliding door as she went.



## 15. THE ONE TO STAND FOR ALL

It was the middle of the first day back at Hogwarts before James could confront Ralph about what he'd said to Millie. He caught up to the bigger boy in the hall between classes, amidst the clamor of voices and the frosty light of the high windows. Ralph seemed genuinely taken aback at first, and then sullenly offended.

"I thought that's what you wanted," he said, hoisting his knapsack and walking fast through the throng of younger years, parting them like a barge through a flock of gulls. "You said telling her was the last thing you wanted to do. Excuse me for trying to help."

"That wasn't helping! You told her I said her family were a bunch of hypocrites! How could you think that was helping?"

"I didn't say anything like that. I only told her it was cool that she wanted to study architecture, and that it was a shame her family wouldn't support her."

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“But that was a secret!” James sputtered, exasperated. “I made that pretty clear, didn’t I?”

“I don’t remember you saying it was a secret,” Ralph said, firming his jaw and refusing to make eye contact. “But even if you did, it wasn’t a secret from *her*, was it? And I’m not about to go blabbing to anyone else about it.”

“Wait a minute,” James said, stopping in the corridor and narrowing his eyes. “This is because you fancy her, isn’t it? You wanted to step on *me* so *you’d* look better in her eyes. Is that it? Well, it didn’t work, did it? She thinks you’re a right clod.”

Ralph stopped and half turned, glancing back over his shoulder. “You don’t have any bloody clue what she thinks of me.” He glared at James for a moment, and then deflated slightly. “Look, I’m sorry I said anything to Millie. The point is, *nobody* has any clue what they think of me. Not even me, most of the time. But I’ve been giving it some thought, and it’s time I start acting on my own. Not just as the Slytherin pal of James Potter, or the half-Muggle son of a squib. Me. So I’m trying to do the sorts of things I never would have done before. One of them was becoming Head Boy, and I think that’s turning out pretty all right. Another one was telling Millie you wanted to break it off with her, and maybe that *wasn’t* such a great idea. But it was *my* idea, and that’s pretty much the point. I’m trying to figure out the best way to be Ralph. I’m sorry for some things, but I’m not sorry for that.”

James opened his mouth to reply but was suddenly distracted by Ralph’s knapsack. The name stitched across the top in green block letters was different. James assumed that Ralph had mistakenly grabbed somebody else’s pack, until he read the name that was printed there.

“Ralph,” he said, squinting distractedly, “why does your backpack say ‘Dolohov’?”

Ralph jerked upright and took a step backward, turning fully to James as if to hide the stitched name. His face reddened, but his determination returned. “Well. It’s my name, innit?”

James studied his friend’s face in confusion. “But... but you’ve always said you liked the Deedle better. I mean, I can sort of understand wanting to make your own way and all, but you said Dolohov was the name of killers and Muggle-haters.”

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Ralph shrugged and looked away, toward the glaring white-frosted windows that towered on the corridor's north wall. "So maybe I changed my mind. It just took me a few years to get used to it. There's more to a name than the worst people who had it." He turned back to James again. "Do you have a problem with it?" It was a challenge as much as a question.

James took a step back, dismayed at this sudden change of events. "I don't... I mean, it's your choice, I guess. It'll just... take some getting used to. You know?"

Ralph nodded, his face stoic, the challenge still in his eyes. "Well, you do that, then. Get used to it. Dolohov's a good name. It has a great history behind it, going back loads of generations. So there are a few bad branches in the family tree. That doesn't mean I have to be one. And it doesn't mean I should be ashamed of my heritage."

James nodded, prickling a little at having the wind taken so effectively out of his sails. "Sure, Ralph. That's..."

But Ralph turned and continued on his way, stalking away from James, leaving him in the hall as doors began to creak and slam all around, announcing the start of classes. James realized that he still had his mouth open. He closed it, stared in confused surprise at his departing friend, and then remembered his own classes. With a start, he ran to catch up.

Defence Against the Dark Arts was just beginning as he slipped into the doors, attempting to make himself as small as possible as he ducked behind a knot of standing students. Graham smirked at him from over his shoulder. Across the room, Millie stood with her Hufflepuff friends, deliberately ignoring James' late entry, or so he imagined. Perhaps she simply hadn't seen him, or truly didn't care. He bristled uselessly at the thought.

The floor of the classroom had been cleared of desks, making room for a small dueling arena. Today was apparently going to be a practical session, with students facing off against Professor Debellows or each other. James dropped his knapsack against the wall and drew his wand. Dueling was one of his favorite school activities, and he welcomed it most especially on a day like today, with the thought Millie's aloof disinterest and Ralph's disconcerting new name nagging at his attention. The big boy himself stood with some fellow Slytherins on

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the other side of the door, his face hard as he watched Professor Debellows.

“Today, students, you will not be dueling each other. I intend to challenge you with a more demanding opponent. And no, this time that doesn’t mean you will be dueling against me.”

A sigh and murmur of relief swept over the room. No one had ever bested Professor Debellows in a duel, but many had limped away from such confrontations nettled, embarrassed, and occasionally trailing colorful smoke.

“No, today I wish to observe your technique closely as you do your best to face a more advanced challenger. To that end, Professor Odin-Vann has very graciously agreed to stand in as your opponent.”

James blinked and glanced around. Indeed, Professor Odin-Vann stepped out onto the dueling floor, looking barely older than the seventh years standing nearby. He wore a long black coat belted tightly around his waist, giving his thin frame a sporty, eager look. James, knowing something about the young professor’s spell-casting abilities, was surprised. Dueling definitely did not seem to be the man’s strength. In fact, from what James had seen, the professor seemed almost incapable of casting spells under even the most mundane pressure. Had he agreed to Debellows’ request simply because he hadn’t been quick enough to think of a sufficient excuse? Was he about to be dreadfully embarrassed by this demonstration of his stress-induced impotence?

If so, Odin-Vann was hiding his discomfiture very well. He turned on his heel, spun his wand deftly in his fingers, and then bowed with a rather strained smile, clicking his heels together.

“Mr. Warton,” Debellows called out, consulting a clipboard in his huge, meaty hand. “You are up first. Please take position.”

Graham shrugged and sidled out onto the dueling floor, moving opposite Odin-Vann. He bowed perfumtorily, and then lowered to an alert half-crouch, raising his wand diagonally at eye-level, focusing past it to his opponent, just as Debellows had taught them.

James glanced back toward Odin-Vann. The professor stood flat-footed, his wand at his side, his head tilted slightly, eyes narrowed. His posture suggested that he was contemplating a piece of obscure artwork rather than preparing to defend himself or launch an attack.

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Debellows watched impassively, his brow furrowed, a quill raised in one hand, held against the clipboard in the other. James knew that in Debellows' class there was no official commencement of a duel. It began when the first opponent cast their attack.

Graham struck first, sidestepping and jabbing his wand forward. "Confringo!" he barked, his voice echoing in the tight confines of the classroom.

The blasting curse was one of Graham's favorites, and he was particularly good at it. The bolt of sherbet-purple light lanced across the floor and struck Odin-Vann. The young professor stumbled backwards, knocked off balance. James winced, embarrassed on the professor's behalf.

And yet Graham hadn't scored the crippling strike that he had hoped for. Somehow, James realized, Odin-Vann had cast a repulsion charm, too late to deflect the blast completely, but just quick enough to avoid being blown completely off his feet.

The gathered students muttered, half surprised that Graham had gotten off such a strong, if predictable, opening shot, and half impressed that Odin-Vann had managed his weak parry without so much as raising his wand. It still hung at his side as he collected himself, resumed his position, and then lifted his chin toward Graham, as if challenging him to try again.

Debellows watched with no expression whatsoever. Would he call it off when it became apparent that Odin-Vann was no match for the students? James hoped so. He watched helplessly, dreading the young professor's humiliation.

Graham bobbed on his toes and moved sideways. *Always be a moving target*, James thought, reciting one of Debellows' first rules in his mind. Graham seemed to wait for Odin-Vann's attack, watching for the first tick of the professor's wand, preparing to predict its intent. But the professor made no move. Impatient, Graham sidestepped back the way he had come and lunged forward again.

"Petrificus Totalis!" he cried, speaking quickly but clearly. It was a bold move, and he got it off well. The spell shot across the room, illuminating the faces of the watching students, and struck Odin-Vann with a crack of magical impact.

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James stiffened sympathetically, waiting to see Odin-Vann fall backwards like a statue. Instead, the professor remained upright, his eyes wide, his mouth pressed into a tight frown. His wand was raised in his hand now, but at waist level. He had deflected Graham's spell somehow, without so much as a word.

The class muttered again, this time in hushed admiration. Non-verbal spells were impressive under any circumstance. Even Debellows only used them sparingly in dueling sessions.

Graham tried again, this time dodging right. "Expeliarmus!"

This time, Odin-Vann blocked the spell before it was halfway across the dueling floor. His defensive charm snuffed Graham's attack with a burst of golden light.

"Expeliarmus," Odin-Vann said, almost conversationally, repeating Graham's own spell. Graham's wand pinged from his still outstretched hand and twirled behind him, clattering against the door. Graham gawped, barely comprehending how quickly and easily Odin-Vann had beaten him.

James himself could barely believe what he had seen. Even Odin-Vann looked pleasantly surprised. He glanced down at his own wand and smiled. Then, he raised it to his shoulder and bowed again to Graham.

Debellows marked on his clipboard and called, "Spirited, if predictable, Mr. Warton. Ms. Doone. Please take position and let us see if you fare any better."

James watched as Ashley Doone faced off next against Odin-Vann. This time, the young professor parried nearly instantly, flicking his wand up even as the spells formed on Ashley's lips, snuffing them before they crossed the dueling floor. Ashley stepped back, dazzled by her obliterated spells, and Odin-Vann edged forward to close the space.

"Ascendio," Odin-Vann called, prodding his wand smartly toward Ashley. She lofted three feet into the air, dropping her wand as she flailed, pin-wheeling her arms.

"That will do, Ms. Doone," Debellows announced in a monotone voice, making more marks on his clipboard. "Ms. Fourcompass, you're next, if you please."

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Fiona Fourcompass moved reluctantly into position as Odin-Vann lowered Ashley back to her feet, depositing her neatly alongside her classmates. Frustrated, she raked her disheveled hair out of her face with her fingers, her cheeks brick red.

As James watched, the same scenario was repeated over and over. Student after student squared off against Odin-Vann, and he parried, blocked, and extinguished their attacks so easily that he barely seemed to be paying attention. Every time, Odin-Vann bested his opponent with a single, different attack, each more creative and obscure than the last. Patrick McCoy he overpowered with a tickle charm. Trenton Bloch, by turning his hair into antlers. Fiera Hutchins was unfortunate enough to have her fingers transfigured into jellywarts. And Hufflepuff George Muldoon was subjected to a clown-wraith so terrifying that it left him huddled fetal at Nolan Beetlebrick's feet.

"It's only a wraith," Nolan said, nudging Muldoon hard with his foot, rolling him over onto his back. "Just smoke and noise, you great baby. It's gone already." Millie elbowed Beetlebrick aside with a withering glance and reached to help Muldoon to his feet.

James' own hair was still standing up at the memory of the horrible clown monstrosity, wraith or not. He turned from Millie and Muldoon to Odin-Vann, who was holding his wand thoughtfully to his chest, buffing it against his lapel.

"And with that," Debellows announced dispiritedly, "I'm afraid we are very nearly out of time. I see we have very much to work to do, students. Very much work indeed."

James blew out a pent-up breath, not even realizing that he'd been holding it. He had begun to dread the thought of facing off against the suddenly unbeatable Odin-Vann, but now, fortunately, it seemed that he and a remaining untouched few had been granted a reprieve.

"In fact," Debellows called over the sudden shuffle of feet and murmuring voices, "Before we bid our thanks to Professor Odin-Vann, I'm afraid we have time for only one more duel."

A sinking sensation came over James. Instinctively, he tried to hide behind Graham and Deirdre Finnegan.

"No good," Graham growled, shoving James hard with his elbow. "If I have to do it, you do, too."

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Debellows swept his gaze over the class, squinting over his reading spectacles.

"You," he called, nodding decisively. "Mr. Deedle. If you would favor us with your best game."

James sagged in relief, exhaling another audible sigh. Across from him, Ralph was looking at Odin-Vann, hard-faced, as he said, "I'm Dolohov now, sir. I've decided to take my birth name."

"Ah," Debelloows said stiffly, consulting his clipboard again with the air of a man who had difficulty remembering his students' names under normal conditions, much less when they changed them all willy-nilly. "I shall, er, make a note of it, then. Ahem. But please, Mr. Erm. If you would quickly take position."

Ralph moved readily out onto the open floor, his eyes still locked on Odin-Vann, his wand held out at waist level. As always, Ralph's wand looked fairly ridiculous. Thick as a broom handle, its sharpened tip still bearing traces of lime green paint, the instrument would be laughable to those who didn't know that it was, in reality, a broken-off segment of Headmaster Merlin's legendary staff, gifted to Ralph after he had mastered it back during his first year.

Odin-Vann stepped forward to bow stiffly, a polite smile on his face. Ralph did not bow in return. Instead, he struck, suddenly and powerfully, before the professor had even straightened upright.

The bolt of red spat from the enormous wand in Ralph's outstretched fist. In response, Odin-Vann's wand jerked upright and slashed across the red spell, blunting but not quite deflecting it. The dulled bolt caught him in the shoulder and spun him around, stumbling and flailing, his coattails flying like bat wings.

Ralph stepped forward, sighting down the length of his arm. He fired again, an orange spell this time. The blinding streak caught Odin-Vann in the back of the knee and he buckled, his leg momentarily useless. His wand jerked upright again and he spun around on his good leg, following its movement, an uncertain gleam in his eye. He was surprised by Ralph's attack. James could see that. But he was also angered by it.

"He's using non-verbals!" Deirdre hissed aside, not taking her eyes from Ralph. "Since when does *Deedle* know *non-verbals*?"

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"That's not Deedle, don't you know," Graham answered in a low voice. "That's *Dolohov*!"

Ralph fired again, still stepping forward, closing the gap. This time Odin-Vann managed to block it, but the sheer force of the blow pushed him backwards several feet, scraping his boots on the stone floor as he leaned into the force.

"Deedle," Debellows called out, but his voice was drowned by another crack from Ralph's wand. An arc of pale green lightning writhed toward Odin-Vann, striking his chest even as his wand fired the counter-jinx uselessly into the air. The professor blasted backward and struck a bookshelf, which vomited its freight of books, peppering the professor and the shocked students nearby.

"That's quite sufficient," Debellows announced, raising his voice to a formidable boom. "Mr. Deedle, or whatever you prefer to call yourself—"

A blast of yellow sparks shot across the room, this time from Odin-Vann's direction. The spell ricocheted off the ceiling and floor, spraying its force uselessly, but distracting Ralph briefly. The professor flung himself upright from the tottering bookshelf, kicked a scatter of fat textbooks aside, and raised his wand again.

Ralph saw and fired another of the pale green lightning bolts. James assumed that it was a repulsion hex, although it was impossible to tell, since Ralph continued to fire without speaking any incantations.

*Non-verbal spells*, James thought, his eyes widening. *Odin-Vann has no idea what to protect himself against.*

And yet, this time Odin-Vann *did* protect himself, if only because Ralph cast the same spell twice. The professor's wand swept up, producing a shimmering shield at the very instant that the green bolt lanced across the room. Ralph's spell struck it and rebounded back toward him. The big boy strafed sideways, turning as he did, so that the bolt arced past and struck the door, leaving a blackened starburst on the ancient wood.

Ralph spun back toward his opponent and thrust out his wand once more.

"*Sectumsempra!*" he shouted, firing a blast of livid blue.

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James' blood went cold. Sectumsempra was a vicious attack, barely known and never used in dueling practices. Also, it was Ralph's first spoken hex. He seemed to have run out of non-verbals to attempt.

Odin-Vann slashed at the blue bolt, his wand-hand moving jerkily, as if it was spring-loaded. Ralph's spell obliterated in mid-air.

Ralph tried again, lunging aside as Odin-Vann trained his wand on him. "*Incarcerous!*" His voice was hoarse, strained with both concentration and inexplicable vehemence.

A spray of ropes snaked toward Odin-Vann, writhing to incapacitate him, but the professor had found his footing now and was striding forward himself, meeting Ralph's attacks head-on. His wand lanced upright, drawing a streak of flaming red in the air, and the ropes pattered to the floor as worms of ash.

Ralph struck again, and again, but Odin-Vann barely blinked now. He stepped forward with each deflection, closing the distance between them, forcing Ralph backwards toward the door. The professor was smiling now, or at least showing his teeth in a sort of mirthless rictus, his wand hand moving as if of its own accord, slashing and thrusting, jerking in his fist like a living thing. Ralph was breathless, calling every spell he could think of, faster and faster, but to no avail. Odin-Vann's wand met each one with its counter-jinx, so quickly that James could barely keep track. The crackle of spent magic, acrid and electric, filled the room and made James' hair prickle. The flashbulb pop and sizzle of the duel was almost too blinding to watch. By comparison, the rest of the room was a gloom of astonished, staring faces.

Finally, as the confrontation reached its breathless, explosive zenith, Ralph's back thumped against the classroom door. His elbow struck the wood and the wand fumbled from his hand, trailing sparks and steaming like a log in a fire. Odin-Vann swept his arm forward in a blur, stopping just short of Ralph's upraised chin, touching the tip of his own smoking wand to the boy's throat, and freezing there.

The room was suddenly thick with stunned silence. James blinked against green after-images of the duel, each spell momentarily burned onto his retinas. The only sound now was the huff of Ralph's

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hard breath as he stood against the door, pushed up onto his toes, his head tilted back from Odin-Vann's pointing wand.

"I daresay, to the both of you," Debellows exhaled, shaking his head slowly, "you might do well to learn less spell-work... and more when to *quit*."



James felt very alone that night at dinner. He sat across from Rose but didn't say much. She didn't need him to. Having made up with Scorpius again, she was in much better spirits and talked to the blonde boy incessantly about her classes, the upcoming Hogsmeade weekend, the many books that she was reading, and general school gossip (including, of course, Albus' ongoing relationship with Chance Jackson, which had not been remotely diminished by the intervening holidays). For his own part, Scorpius merely ate and nodded in a bored manner, letting Rose's words wash over him like waves on a beach. The sight of it made James angry, fueling his already sour mood. He was embarrassed for his cousin, since anyone could see that Scorpius was just a manipulative little berk toying with her emotions like a kneazle with a mouse. She knew better to put up with him, and yet somehow continued to put up with him anyway. He opened his mouth to say something, and then thought better of it, knowing it was no use.

"Something stuck in your craw, Potter?" Scorpius interrupted Rose's monologue, raising a sly eyebrow.

James shook his head. "Have another roll," he said, throwing the one on his own plate at Scorpius' chest. The blond boy caught it, not taking his eyes from James.

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Standing and grabbing his knapsack, James escaped before Scorpius could offer another word. If he didn't get away, James would likely be drawn into a row. About what, he didn't even know. He was simply in that sort of mood. And Scorpius was just the sort of person to sense a person's short fuse, and deliberately light it.

He went up to the common room, avoiding eye contact with everyone along the way. This tactic failed him as he entered the portrait hole and encountered Cameron Creevey in the common room.

"Hey James," the boy called, hopping up from a table near the window. "My mates and I have to write essays about a famous wizard for Wizlit and I was hoping to do mine on your dad! Can I interview you for it?"

James was shaking his head even before Cameron finished speaking. "Sorry, Cam. I've got too much homework myself. I'm just going to camp out in the corner and bury myself in it." He unslung his knapsack and gestured with it toward an empty table across the room.

"Oh," Cameron deflated, and then perked up again. "I can come sit with you! I won't interview you or anything. I'll just ask you questions as they come up. You'll hardly know I'm there!"

"Cam, honestly," James sighed, letting his knapsack dangle against his leg. "You already know more about my dad than I ever will."

"Nah," Cameron grinned and blushed crimson, as if he'd been given the highest compliment imaginable. "Let me just grab my things! I'll come and join you right now."

James closed his eyes helplessly and reached to rub them with his free hand. Cameron dashed away. Papers rattled and books slammed shut as he hastily gathered his things.

"You know what, Cam?" James said, dropping his hand from his eyes. "I just remembered. I need... my..." He gestured weakly toward the boys' dormitory stairs. "Things. From my trunk, upstairs. I'll just..." He was too annoyed and tired to attempt a more imaginative excuse.

Cameron frowned at him from the nearby table, his things half-stuffed into his bag. "Oh. Well, why don't I go set up over at our table, and I'll just wait for you. Sound good?"

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James nodded dismally. Turning on his heel, he stumped to the dormitory door and climbed up the spiral stairs into darkness.

A box was under his bed, just visible behind his trunk. With a start, he remembered: it was his Christmas gift from home, delivered by Kreacher before the holidays. James had never opened it.

Eager for a happy distraction, he heaved out the colourfully wrapped box, stripped away the ribbons and paper, and tugged off the lid, flinging it aside.

A note sat atop a mass of neatly folded black cloth. James picked it up and read his mother's neat handwriting:

*Happy Christmas, James!*

*I'm certain these new dress robes will come in handy over your holiday with the Vandergriffs. Those old ones are too horrid even to serve as hand-me-downs for Albus. Do us all a favour and donate them to Mr. Filch to use as rags.*

*Much love!*

*Mum*

Bleakly amused, he read the note again, and then allowed it to fall from his fingers to the floor. Without looking at the new dress robes, he pushed the box aside and flopped onto his bed, unsure if he felt more like laughing or crying.

Some small part of his mind (probably the part that belonged to his mother) scolded him for blowing off Cameron, whose only crime was thinking much too highly of James than he surely deserved. Another part of his mind (this one likely belonging to his father) halfheartedly reminded him that he did indeed have a stack of homework to do. And yet he couldn't bring himself to address either voice. Instead, he thought only of Ralph battling Professor Odin-Vann, and the increasing flash and sizzle of their furious duel. Ralph truly disliked the young professor. But why? Was there something more to it than distrust?

Further, what could explain Odin-Vann's suddenly expert dueling abilities? Surely James hadn't imagined the professor's earlier

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impotence. He recalled very well their first Charms class, when Odin-Vann had seemed unable to so much as magic his own chalkboard clean while everyone was staring at him.

*Dolohov*, he thought to himself, lying crooked on his bed, one leg kicked off and sprawled to the floor. *Ralph Dolohov. Get used to it...*

He didn't know when he fell asleep. It fell over him like a black cloak, dropping him into dreamless oblivion with no transition whatsoever. He didn't dream.

He traveled.

"James," a young woman said, her voice bemused and surprised in equal measure, though muted with solemnity.

James opened his eyes. He stood in a small space that was simultaneously enclosed yet open to the outdoors. Breeze lifted his hair and tugged at his untucked shirt. His feet stood on old wooden planks, rough with peeling white paint. From all around came the unmistakable shush and gurgle of waves. James had been here before, in another dream.

Only this wasn't a dream, anymore than it had been the last time he had visited this place. It was the gazebo on Petra's grandparents' farm, overlooking the secluded woodland lake in which Izzy Morganstern, Petra's stepsister, had almost drowned at Petra's own hand.

Izzy was there now. She lay sleeping on one of the two benches built into the gazebo's hexagonal railing. Across from her, pale in the last shreds of sunset, sat Petra. A heavy book was open on her lap, but she was looking up at him, a weary, affectionate smile on her face.

"Is this really you?" James asked, his voice unconsciously hushed beneath the gentle lap of the waves.

Petra shrugged. "As real as I get these days."

"So I'm not dreaming," he confirmed, looking around at the ruddy shimmering water, the distant wood filled with purple dusk and chirring crickets. "But I am, er..." he glanced back at Petra again, frowning, "asleep?"

Petra shrugged again. "Actually, I don't think so." She patted the bench next to her, inviting him to join her, and then moved an object that was sitting there in her shadow, covering it with her hand. "I

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think you come to me sometimes when you sleep, but for real. This is no vision, not for either of us. I think that somewhere in Gryffindor tower there's an empty bed with your name on it."

James moved to Petra and settled down next to her, but slowly, uncertain that any sudden movement might not break the moment like a soap bubble.

"Actually," he admitted, settling his hip and shoulder next to hers, feeling her warmth, "my bed still says 'whiny Potter git' on the headboard. A gift from Scorpius his first year."

Petra nodded and smiled. He turned aside to her. She looked out over the waves. The burnished gloaming reflected in her eyes, making them look as deep and vivid as the lake itself. Quietly, he asked her, "Is this place really here? Or are you making it?"

Petra considered the question. "I *think* it's real. But it's not in the world that we know, or at least not in the *time* that we know. I think this is a memory made real again. This is my grandfather's farm back before grandma died. Before I was a little girl here. Back before the gazebo had broken away from the dock and sunk to the bottom of the lake for all those years." Her eyes unfocussed as she went deeper into the thought. "This is the gazebo back before your grandparents died at the hand of Voldemort. Before any of the ugliness happened. Back when the world was simple, with beauty still to be found in it. When there was still the possibility of love and light and hope. I come here with Izzy every night. But I don't make it happen. I just know where to find it again, to reach it back in those long-forgotten days of the past. Maybe it's because of those secret hours I spent asleep in the World Between the Worlds, where there's no such thing as time. Maybe it happens just because I want it so much."

James listened to her words, but barely heard them. Part of this was because what she said sounded so bereft, so prosaically hopeless. Another part was because his mind was still reeling with the suddenness of his appearance in her presence, unprepared and inexplicable. But mostly he barely heard her because all of his attention was focused only on looking at her, soaking up the warmth and solidity of her presence, memorizing the smoothness of her cheek, the solemn vibrance of her eyes, the lustre of her dark hair as the wind teased it, trailing silky brown ribbons over her shoulders.

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He wanted to put his arm around her but didn't dare. He wanted to breath deeply the simple intoxication of her scent—floral soap and sun-warmed skin—but knew he could never get enough. So he simply stared at her instead, musing pointlessly on a fate that would bring them together like this, if only one more time, only for them to be taken apart again forever.

"I've been studying," Petra said, glancing down at the book on her lap. James followed her gaze. The book was huge and old, with pages as heavy as lambskin, covered in dense penmanship, most of which seemed to crawl and writhe before his eyes. Somehow, James knew what it was, even though he'd never seen such a thing before.

"It's one of the Volumes of the Unknowable Enigmas," he said, as if the information was coming into his mind from Petra herself, through the invisible ribbon that connected them. "The one you collected when you broke into the Armory of Forbidden Books and Artifacts."

Petra nodded. "But it's of little use. I took it mostly to learn about Horcruxes, but I also thought I could use it to learn how to break through to alternate dimensions without having to go through the Vault of Destinies and the Loom." She shook her head and closed the book on her lap with a thump. "But it's no use. There are theories, but none of them have ever been tried or proven. They're just ideas, and not very practical ones, at that. No one can break through. Not without the Loom. Not without the right key to the right dimension."

James sighed, deep and hard. This was the last thing he wanted to talk about with Petra. But he knew there was nothing else *to* talk about. This was all that was left.

"When will it happen?"

Petra shook her head blandly. "It's not up to me. And I'm glad it's not. I want it to be over as soon as possible. But I'm also afraid to go. I'm afraid to lose Izzy. Afraid to become another version of myself that I barely know. Morgan was broken by her choices. She didn't have any hope left. She had nothing to lose, but nothing to live for. I don't want to become her in the world that she came from. But I don't have any choice."

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James shook his head as he listened. “But why, Petra? You don’t have to do it. What do you gain by it?”

Petra turned to him finally and looked into his eyes, as if reading what she saw there. “I don’t gain anything by it. But everyone else does. I’m not going to that dimension to *become* Morgan. I already *am* her. You know that. When Morgan died in this world, she became a part of it. She stopped being the Crimson Thread. Now, *she’s* Petra, and *I’m* Morgan, the Thread plucked from another dimension. It’s how the balance of destinies works: corpses don’t count. This is no longer my world. It rejects my being here. Its destiny breaks down more and more the longer I stay. I *can’t* let myself be responsible for that. I have to go to the world that knows me, no matter how much I may hate it. It’s the only way to save *this* world, and the people that I love in it.”

“Like Izzy,” James nodded sadly, looking across at the sleeping girl.

Petra sighed and said quietly, “Not *just* Izzy.”

James turned back to her, unwilling to accept her version of the truth. “But, what if you’re wrong?”

Petra’s eyes hardened slightly. “I’m not wrong. I feel it. I know it. I’m certain.”

And yet, suddenly, James wondered: *was* she really certain? There was a stubbornness in her words that hinted that she was trying to convince herself as much as she was him.

“There *must* be another way,” James insisted, slumping next to her, turning his own gaze away, letting it rest again on Izzy’s sleeping form. Her breathing was slow and deep, her back turned to James, her blond hair bronzed with the dying sun.

“There’s no other way,” Petra said flatly. “I can’t stay here. I can’t be imprisoned here. And most of all, I can’t die here. That would be the worst thing of all. If that happened...” She shook her head, her eyes going glassy. She cradled the object that had been sitting on the bench next to her, placed it on the book on her lap and covered it with both hands.

“You mean,” James said, hating the thought, “that if both versions of you died in this world... there would be no hope of ever setting it right?”

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Petra nodded. And then shook her head. "It would be disastrous. Not just for our world, which would have two Petras in it, but the other, which would have none. How can we know what that would cause? Maybe a chain-reaction of collapsing destinies across the whole universe of realities?" Her face hardened at the thought. "That's why I can't allow anyone to stop me. No matter what. I can't be imprisoned here. I *can't die* here."

"That's why you made the Horcrux," James said, swallowing hard and looking down at the object under Petra's hands.

She looked down as well, and then uncovered it. The dagger glinted darkly. Its jeweled handle was possibly the ugliest and most garish thing James had ever seen. Petra was ashamed of the Horcrux dagger, and yet she did not flinch from it. James saw that, to her, it was a necessary tool, guarantee that her mission would succeed, no matter what it cost her.

"I'm Morgan now," she said, speaking as if to the dagger itself. "I've nothing to lose. And nothing to live for."

James couldn't approach that thought. His heart, even more than his brain, rejected it. He shook his head curtly, exasperated and heartsick.

"Maybe Odin-Vann will fail. Maybe he won't be able to prepare the Loom in the Vault of Destinies. Maybe he won't even be able to get in. Or maybe the magic just won't work. What then?"

"It won't fail, James," Petra said, a note of pity in her voice as she looked at him again. "And I've got more than Don helping me."

This surprised James. He snapped his gaze back to her. "What do you mean? Who's helping you besides Odin-Vann?" He realized, with a note of stupid frustration, that he was jealous.

"It doesn't matter," Petra said, not meeting his eyes.

"It matters to me, it does," James pressed. "I think I should at least be allowed to know who's helping rid the world of the girl that I—"

He stopped himself, just barely, from saying the last word—*the girl that I love*. Petra stood up, however, and turned her back on him, the fat book in her left hand, the dagger Horcrux in her right.

Quietly, she said, "I need *somebody*, James, and as much as you'd want it to be you, it can't be. For reasons that I can't tell you, it just

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can't be. And to be perfectly blunt, I don't think I *owe* you any reasons." She looked back at him over her shoulder, half challenging him, half begging him to leave it be.

He stood as well. "Who is it?"

She returned her gaze to the lake, not answering. The sun was still hovering just beneath the fringe of the trees, and James understood: it's wasn't a sun setting, it was a sun forever frozen. This was an orphan hour, replaying itself endlessly, fossilized in time except for the lap of the waves and the hush of the breeze.

"Who is it?" he asked again, daring to raise his voice.

"It's Albus," Petra answered, turning her head but not looking at him. "All right?"

"*Albus?*" James exclaimed, certain that he couldn't have heard her properly. Petra didn't move, merely waited. He had heard her correctly after all. A flash of memories swept into his thoughts: Albus on first night, sitting in the Room of Requirement, strangely quiet on the topic of Petra until someone questioned whether it really had been her that had broken into the Armory of Forbidden Books and Artifacts. *It was her*, he had said with strange confidence. He had *known*. Had Petra met with him even back then? Had she brought Albus into her confidence months before she had even informed James himself?

Worse, would she *ever* have told James her plan if he hadn't been able to visit her via the ribbon they shared, just as he was now?

"You can't be serious? *Albus?*" he exclaimed again. Next to him, Izzy stirred and murmured in her sleep.

"It's not all that shocking, if you think about it," Petra stated, raising her chin, still not turning back to him. "Albus and I became friends during the summer that Izzy and I stayed with your family. We're much more alike than you know."

James nodded derisively. "Albus says that, too. I just had no idea you *agreed* with him. Well, this is just fine then, isn't it? My own brother is working with you to send you off to some other cursed dimension."

"Not just him," Petra said quietly, as if committed now to telling James the whole truth.

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“Oh, that’s right,” James agreed sourly, throwing out his arms. “There’s your old pal Don, who’s been your bestie since way back before *I* was ever in the picture.”

“Not just Don, either,” Petra countered, dropping her voice even lower, shame and defiance mingling in her tone.

“Who then?” James demanded, taking a step closer to her.

She raised her chin and turned to him fully now, her lips pressed into a tight line, meeting his gaze firmly. She didn’t answer, but allowed him to look into her face, to read the truth revealed there.

And another memory came, unbidden, into James’ mind. It was not his own memory, but Petra’s, deliberately broadcast to him on the frequency of their secret connection. In it, a wheedling voice, high and insistent droned viciously, speaking only to Petra herself: *GIVE IN! All that matters is power... Embrace your destiny or die fighting it. You are not good. There is no... such... THING!*

James’ shoulders wracked with a hard shiver. He had heard that loathsome, hateful voice once before, and recognized it immediately. Back then it had come from a maimed painting, hissing with venom. Now, it was the voice from the back room of Petra’s mind. It was the cursed voice of the Bloodline: the last, fractured shred of Lord Voldemort himself, long dead, but captured, like a spark of poison flame, in the lantern of Petra’s mind and heart.

And for the first time, James understood the fatal connection between Petra’s twin identities. She was the *Bloodline*. And she was the *Crimson Thread*. Beneath the titles, they were both exactly the same thing: a scarlet vector pointing to one terrible, inescapable destiny.

“You’ve been,” James said, his voice hushed now to a whisper, “you’ve been... *listening to that?*”

“I don’t *listen* to it,” she answered, still facing him with stubborn defiance. “But I tap into it. There is power there. And something else... something I desperately need right now.”

James wasn’t joking when he suggested: “Evil?”

Petra shook her head in negation, but took her eyes from him again, turning away. “Conviction. I’m divided, James, don’t you see? I’m torn between what I know I have to do, and what my heart most

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desperately wants. I need the conviction that that part of me offers. It's like a dark magnetism. It helps me stay on the path I need to go down."

James simply stared at Petra, unable to formulate any response to her words. They were wrong on so many levels that he couldn't simply choose one. He flailed desperately in his thoughts, found nothing to cling to, and then simply said the first thing that came to his mind.

"But that voice is hate, Petra. Hate is never right. There *has* to be another voice. A voice that's truly yours."

Petra didn't move. She stood silhouetted against the petrified bronze sunset, the forbidden book under one arm, the dagger Horcrux dangling in her other hand. After a long moment, she shrugged slowly and shook her head, as if reaching a hopeless conclusion that she had reached a thousand times before.

"There is no other voice, James," she said with horrible banality. "That voice died with the other Petra."

James reached for her arm, took the heavy book from beneath it, and dropped it to the empty bench without looking. He turned her toward him, but she didn't raise her eyes to him, didn't look at him at all. She held the dagger Horcrux behind her back, as if she thought he might try to take that from her as well. Or as if she meant to stab him with it.

"I don't believe that," James said, taking Petra by the shoulders, looking down at her. "You're good. Good isn't a myth, as long as you believe in it."

Petra leaned toward James, pressed her forehead weakly to his throat, allowed him to collect her into his arms. She did not hug him back, but absorbed his embrace deeply, unwilling to ask for it, but desperate for it nonetheless. They stood like that for some time, warming in the eternal sunset glow, listening to the lap of the waves beneath the gazebo, and the softer, slower tide of Izzy's breathing behind them. It might have been a minute, or an hour. James had no way of knowing, and was content to stand there holding Petra forever, until she stirred against him. She twined her arms around his waist slowly, keeping him close, and then pushed herself up onto her toes before him. He dipped his head as she opened her mouth to whisper to him.

Instead, she kissed him.

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Her lips were shocking in their normalcy, their perfect warmth, and softness, and subtle expressiveness. There was no fantastic exchange of power between them, no spark of blinding enchantment.

And yet...

And yet it was the most purely, pristinely magical moment that James had ever experienced. He forgot who he was. His heart expanded and took up his whole body, crowding out every rational, waking thought.

And then, only a second and a lifetime later, Petra withdrew, keeping her face near his, looking up gravely into his eyes.

"We just had our first and last lover's quarrel, James," she said somberly. "Did you know that?"

James stared down at her, speechless, wanting nothing more than to kiss her again, or for the world to end at that exact moment so that her kiss would be his final memory. "No," he answered. "Was that... us making up?"

She smiled secretively and then shook her head. "No. That was because you were jealous of Don. He's just a friend. That's all he ever was, and all he ever could be. He's not like you. But your jealousy... it's sweet. And adorable."

James felt his face flush. He knew that she could see it, but he wasn't ashamed.

"Don't go, Petra," he said. The words came out before he could stop them. There was nothing more to say. That's all he wanted in the whole world. No matter the cost. No matter the consequence.

She closed her eyes. There was pain on her face, as if she was experiencing a brief but titanic inner struggle. And then she went rigid in his arms. When she opened her eyes again, they were different.

James shivered violently and recoiled, but Petra was still holding onto him. She stared up at him still, only now her eyes glowed with a ruddy inner light. Her pupils were thin, black snake-slits.

"I don't want to go, James," she said with low emphasis. Her voice was a cold furnace of conviction. "But don't make this harder than it is. I've warned you before. Don't try to stop me. *No one* can be allowed to stop me."

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“Petra,” James rasped, but his own voice was barely audible. Horror and dismay constricted his throat. And still she held onto him. James couldn’t tell if she was embracing him or strangling him.

“I love you, James,” she said. Her breath was an arctic breeze on his face, and yet it was the hopelessness in her tone that chilled him worst of all. These weren’t the words of young love.

This was an epitaph, a final inscription—a single kiss, first and final, the one to stand for all.

Darkness swept across the sky. It blotted the lake, snuffed the sun, and threw he and Petra into seamless black. He felt her holding onto him even as he fell away, dropped into the abyss of dreamless sleep, hearing her last words clang over and over in a senseless echo, like the tolling of a bell, as dead and cold as a January frost.



## **16. HAGRID MAKES A PLAN**

“It was a dream, James. Had to be.” Rose was distracted and agitated as they walked along the snow-mushy path to the greenhouses. Cold water squelched into their shoes as they hurried, blinking against the stunning winter sunlight. The snow was a damp blanket over the grounds, pitted and heavy, as if exhausted after the long winter, ready to melt away at the first breath of spring.

“It wasn’t a dream,” James insisted, keeping his voice hushed despite the constant pummel of the wind. “You know I can travel to Petra in my sleep. I’ve told you the whole thing, about how, on the night I saved Petra on the back of the Gwyndemere, a connection happened between us, and it’s been there ever since. You’ve seen it with your own eyes! I tell you, I visited with Petra last night. She was just as real as you and me right now. I could smell her. I could... um, touch her.”

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"Just because you can travel to her in your sleep sometimes doesn't mean you do it *every* time. You said yourself that you visited her in her grandparents' gazebo. Harriers and Aurors have been staked out all around that farm ever since the Night of the Unveiling, guarding it and watching for her. She can't put her big toe anywhere near there without being instantly surrounded."

"And I told you," James said, exasperated, "That it wasn't the gazebo and the lake as it is now. It was caught in a loop of time from decades ago, before any of us were even born."

"Right," Rose nodded. "Definitely not something that would happen in a dream."

"Rose, she's been in contact with Al! And she's tapping into the power of the Bloodline for strength and support! Whatever is left of Voldemort, she's talking to it. She's *listening* to it. And she's using its power."

"Look, James," Rose said curtly, tromping into the shadow of the greenhouse. Sunlight shot blinding arrows from the glass walls. "It's marvelous that you and Petra have this cosmic connection. Really, it is. And I'm just honest enough to admit that, quite frankly, I'm dead jealous of the both of you. It's all so bloody, tragically *romantic* that I can barely *stand* it. Worse, the fact that it's wasted on an emotionally constipated, immature clod like you—"

"Rose," James interrupted, "I kissed her."

Rose stopped in her tracks, sliding a little in the slush. She turned around, eyes wide. In a tight whisper, she said, "You didn't!"

"Well, actually no. I didn't. *She* kissed *me*." He blew out a hard sigh and squinted in the reflected afternoon sunlight. "It was the last thing I expected. It was..." He shook his head, speechless at the memory.

"But you kissed her back," Rose confirmed, her eyes still wide.

"Of course. And then, I just held her for awhile. Or... that might have come first. To be honest, the whole thing is almost too big to remember. It takes up too much space in my memory." He glanced quickly up at her again. "But that doesn't mean it was only a dream."

"No," Rose breathed wistfully, an almost pitying look melting her features, "that's the first thing you've said that convinces me it was actually real."

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Slowly, they continued on, rounding the greenhouse toward the entry. Mollified but suspicious, James said, “And why is that?”

“It’s simple,” Rose said, her tone wistful but condescending. “You’ve been completely besotted with Petra for years now. Have you ever dreamed of kissing her before?”

James shook his head firmly. “Never.”

“Of course not,” Rose said, dropping her voice as they pushed into the relative warmth of the greenhouse and the chatter of gathering students. “Dreams may toy with granting our wishes sometimes, but they don’t tease us with the things we want most of all. If they did, we’d be too heartbroken by reality to ever wake up.”

James nodded a little uncertainly. They made their way to a collection of wooden folding chairs arranged before the potting table. Behind this, Hagrid was bustling and humming to himself loudly.

“But it does leave a lot of unanswered questions,” Rose whispered as they settled into the front row. “Like, what will happen to Izzy when Petra leaves this dimension forever? And why would the last shred of Voldemort in her blood want her to go at all? And maybe most importantly, what does Judith have to do with any of it?”

“I...” James began, then paused and mentally kicked himself. “I didn’t even ask her about Judith.”

Rose did a subtle but pointed double-take at him. She rasped, “You didn’t tell her that Judith cornered you on the lake outside Millie’s home and warned you to stay away from her?” James had told Rose about the encounter, if no one else, since Rose most seemed to understand the mad power and ongoing threat of the Lady of the Lake. Most others, if they knew of her at all, assumed that Judith had been destroyed during the debacle of the Morrigan Web, over two years earlier.

“I was a little distracted,” James whispered defensively, “being zapped away to the gazebo in the first place, and learning that Petra’s been in contact with Al for months. And then there was the kiss...”

“James,” Rose sagged helplessly, “Zane Walker is right. You really are as dull as dishwater. You had a chance to ask the most important question of all, and you completely flubbed it!”

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James blinked and frowned again. “Zane said I was dull as dishwater?”

“Not in so many words, but come on. He was whatever passed for the brains of you three before *I* came along. Now think: the only reason Judith warned you away from Petra is because she knows *you* don’t want her to carry out her plan. That means Judith *does* want her to. And apparently so does the ghost of Voldemort’s soul that lives in Petra’s blood, otherwise she wouldn’t be tapping into it for guidance and strength. So, the big question is obvious, isn’t it? Why would the two most evil entities in the whole wide world want Petra to go through with her mission?”

James shook his head and slumped back in his wooden chair. “It *can’t* be that. Petra says that assuming the role of the Crimson Thread in that other version of reality is the only way to fix everything here in this one. There must be some other reason why Judith wants me to stay out of it.”

“*And* another reason why the demented shred of Voldemort in Petra’s head wants her to go through with it?” Rose shook her head firmly. “You’re making the same mistake you always do, James.”

He glared back at her, suddenly perturbed. “And what’s that, you’re so smart?”

Rose hissed, “Trusting people who don’t always deserve to be trusted!”

“Like Petra,” James nodded, as if confirming a suspicion. “Look, you don’t know her like I do. Nobody does.”

“Petra isn’t a bad person,” Rose acknowledged, the spark in her eyes unwavering. “But that doesn’t mean that she’s always right, James. She can be wrong, just like you and me. Worse, she can be *lied to*.”

James had no response to that. Not because Rose’s suggestion made him angry, but because he had honestly never even considered it.

Hagrid’s voice boomed through the greenhouse, interrupting their hushed conversation, “Settle down, yeh lot, and find a seat. We’ve got loads t’ cover today, so be ready with yer quills and parchments.”

A ripple of surprise swept over the students, and then came the shuffle of knapsacks and bags as parchments, books, and quills were produced, balanced precariously on knees in the absence of desks.

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“Professor Hagrid,” Trenton Bloch said, raising a peremptory hand. “We don’t usually take notes in this class. Does this mean today’s subject will be on a test later?”

“Wouldn’t yeh like to know,” Hagrid answered cagily, his beetle-black eyes narrowing. Then, with a start, he straightened. “Erm. I mean... o’ course yeh’d like to know. So, yes. Why, certainly there’ll be a test. This is a class, init?”

Apparently emboldened by Trenton’s question, Ashley Doone spoke up from the back row, “Only, we’ve never had a test in this class before, Professor. Just practical examinations. I’ve stopped even bringing an ink and quill to the barn with me when I go.”

“Yeah,” Nolan Beetlebrick added, glancing around for encouragement from the rest of the class. “And why this sudden move to the greenhouses for the rest of term? There’s no magical creatures here at all. Just plants.”

Hagrid raised both of his huge hands as the class began to murmur. “Th’ barn menagerie is off-limits until further notice. Nothin’ t’ be done about it. The barn’s bein’... er... cleaned up. Again. With dangerous potions an’ elixirs this time. Highly potent stuff, straight from Professor Heretofore’s laboratory, don’cher know. So no one’s allowed in nor out until further notice, not unless yeh wanna grow yerself a third ear and a hinkypunk tail.”

James sensed Rose’s sidelong glance. He slid an eye toward her and shrugged.

“Yeah,” Hagrid went on, warming to the topic. “As yeh know, I’ve had to ship off most of the menagerie’s biggest an’ most dang’rous beasts, jus’ in case any other Muggles come a-wanderin’ onto the grounds. Ridiculous, o’ course, but orders is orders, an’ these ones come straight from th’ Minister o’ Magic ‘imself. So there’s no point in havin’ class in there anyways, least until further notice. Yeah, that’s about right.” He nodded to himself with obvious satisfaction. “An’ that’s why I’ve asked Perfessor Longbottom to let us use the north greenhouse for the rest o’ th’ term, and he was gracious enough t’ say yes. So. Today’s lesson will be on Ambergoggins, a species o’ mimicking penguin indigenous to only a single unplottable cavern in th’ South Pole. Unlike other mimicking birds, such as common parrots, th’ Ambergoggins

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mimics only swear words and embarrasin' scatological euphemisms, thus their ban from p'lite society and even th' mos' dodgy o' magical zoos..."

An hour later, with pages of disjointed notes and a list of the Amberguggin's favorite vulgarities crammed into their knapsacks, the class filed muttering back out of the greenhouse, heading toward the castle and lunch in the great hall. James and Rose remained just inside the entrance, however, watching Hagrid as he hustled at the potting table again, humming too loudly to himself as he gathered his things. Finally, with a sweep of his huge coat, he rounded the table and tramped toward the door.

"And what, pray tell," he asked gruffly, "are yeh both standin' around for? I know fer a fact that Professor Votary is expectin' you in Ancient Runes in 'alf an hour."

Rose put a hand on her hip. "You're 'cleaning the barn' again, Hagrid? Really?"

"I won't hear nary a word about it," the half-giant said impatiently, waving both hands about his head as if to ward off a cloud of doxies. He pushed past James and Rose toward the door. "Jus' you both mind yer bus'ness an' stay away from th' barn. S'dang'rous, it is."

He pushed out into the cold and damp of the grounds with James and Rose following close behind. To James' surprise, Ralph was waiting just outside, leaning against the corner of the greenhouse.

"So what's in the barn, Hagrid?" he asked, pushing upright as Hagrid began to stump across the unbroken snow toward his hut.

"Empty stalls an' potion fumes," he called back, "Yeh've no idea how hard it is scrubbin' up decades o' hippogriff guano. Get yerselves off t' lunch now, an' not another word."

"Actually," Ralph countered, "I think we know plenty well how hard it is to scrub the barn, considering we just did that very thing with Filch back before the holidays."

Hagrid scoffed. "Yar, well what Argus Filch calls clean and *I* calls clean are two very different things."

James was both annoyed and relieved that Ralph had joined them as they trudged along behind Hagrid. He still hadn't forgiven Ralph for blabbing to Millie about the break-up, and he was sincerely dismayed about Ralph's dueling performance against Professor Odin-

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Vann, but things just felt wrong when he and Ralph weren't on the same side. For the moment, he decided to let everything else go.

Trotting to catch up to Hagrid, James said, "Ralph here is Head Boy, you know. He would've heard about some big plan to quarantine the barn. Wouldn't you?" He glanced at Ralph meaningfully.

"Er, yeah," Ralph nodded. "That's a need-to-know kind of thing, it is. As Head Boy, I should be keeping curious younger years away from the barn. *If it's as dangerous as you say it is, of course.*"

Hagrid only chuckled to himself as he strode through the snow, his boots leaving great, slushy plow-prints. "Wellnow, I appreciate th' offer, Mr. Head Boy, but believe it or not, I can secure a barn jus' fine on my own. Already magically sealed th' place up, top t' bottom." He paused and drew out his pink umbrella wand, brandishing it with a twinkle in his eyes. "I've come a long ways with my spellwork since yer parents' day. There's nary a soul gettin' in nor out o' that barn until further notice."

Pointedly, Rose asked, "And just who might be trying to get *out* of the barn, Hagrid?"

Hagrid's face snapped shut like a mousetrap. "Not another word," he said, stabbing a sausage-like index finger into the space between them, and then pointing it at the castle. "Back to th' school wit' yeh now."

Without waiting, he turned around and pushed through the gate, striding into the front garden of his hut.

"This is about that dragon of yours, isn't it?" Ralph called, following Hagrid into the yard. "About that letter you got from Grawp, talking about how Norberta's all tetchy because she can smell that male circus dragon on the wind."

Rose put a hand over her eyes. "Oh, no, no, no..." she said, her suspicions rising, "Hagrid, tell us you didn't run off and do something ridiculous without us, did you?"

The trio followed Hagrid to his door, where he stopped and turned around again, adopting a beatific expression of innocence. With deliberate calm, he said, "The barn's bein' cleaned, that's all. I can show yeh tomorrow if yeh like. Apart from a few heffalumps and a cage of

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wooly woozles, that barn's jus' as empty as Mother Carter's larder. If I do that, will it convince yeh that there's *nothin'* t' be suspicious about?"

James glanced aside at Rose and Ralph, who looked unconvinced. He shrugged and suggested, "Why not show us now, Hagrid?"

Hagrid's eyes flicked back and forth. "Well, cuz I'm a busy perfessor, I am. An' yeh lot have classes to get to. An' like I said, s'not safe at th' moment. I ain't kiddin' about those cleanin' potions. Right noxious stuff, that is."

Ralph raised his eyebrows. "In other words, whatever is in there now will be moved by tomorrow."

"Gor!" Hagrid protested, dropping his façade of calm and turning back to his hut. He unlatched the door and shoved it open. "Blimey! In all my years I can't say as I've ever met a bunch more doubtful, suspicious, or untrusting as..."

He took a step inside his doorway and then froze in place, halting as if he'd just spied an Acromantula crouched on his dining room table. James, Ralph and Rose peered inside around the huge man, curious to see what had caught his attention. There was no Acromantula. What they saw instead was, if anything, even more surprising.

"It's..." Rose breathed, ticking her eyes around the shocking sight within. "It's all so... *clean!*"

It was true. For the first time in James' memory—perhaps for the first time in forever—the interior of the hut was absolutely and utterly spotless. The wooden floor gleamed with polish. The rafters were scoured free of their customary cobwebs and layers of greasy, sooty dust. The dishes and cups were stacked and shining in the hutch. Even the ashes of the fireplace had been shoveled and swept, revealing the bare bricks beneath. Trife, Hagrid's bullmastiff dog, sat up on the rug before the hearth, allowing his tongue to loll out in a happy, doggy grin.

James was about to ask what had happened to the hut when the answer, such as it was, revealed itself.

A pair of huge eyes opened beneath the table. Then, cautiously, silently, a house elf stepped out into the light. It was a female elf, and James recognized her immediately. The last time he had seen her had been in the living room of the Vandergriff's house in Blackbrier Quoit.

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She wore the glove that her former mistress had given her. It drooped loose on her thin arm, still stained with dried pudding.

“I’m sorry, Master Hagrid,” Heddlebun said in her thin, high voice. “I finished cleaning the barn already. So I came here instead. I do hope...” Her eyes flicked around the hut, and then worryingly back to Hagrid, “that you don’t mind?”



Hagrid’s plan, such as it was, turned out to be just as nuanced and subtle as one might expect from a half-giant who had once hidden a man-eating spider in a school cupboard, feeding it kitchen scraps.

“So,” Rose sighed heavily, her brow knitted as she sat at his huge table, a cup of tea long-since cooled before her, “you’re going to take your magical ship to the edge of London on the Thames, collect Norberta by night from Grawp and Prechka, bring her back in the ship’s hold, and then hide her in the barn until the circus leaves London or you can arrange a new home for her.”

“*No!*” Ralph said for the umpteenth time, his face brick-red with impatient incredulity. “How many times do I have to say that this is all completely daft?!”

Hagrid covered his eyes with both of his enormous, ham-like hands and plunked his elbows onto the table. “I knows,” he said miserably. “I *knows* it’s daft. But what’m I s’posed ter do?” He dropped his hands to the table and looked from Ralph to Rose to James.

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"Norberta *can't* stay in the mountains! She won't! You heard the letter, same as me! Grawp and Prechka can't keep an eye on 'er, not with their own tribe dealin' with Muggles a-comin' onto their lands and all the stress o' stayin' hid or gettin' ready t' fight! B'sides, the arrangement's already made! They'll be there with Norberta tomorrow night, in an old abandoned wharf, at 'alf-past one in the mornin'!"

Rose nodded, merely confirming the details. "And you've got a house elf helping you for some reason, because she can..." She raised her eyebrows patiently.

"Soothe the savage beast," Hagrid sighed, glancing aside at Heddlebun, who stood in the corner on her chair, her shoulders hunched, her bulging eyes alert, ticking from one speaker to the next.

"Heddlebun is a beast-speaker, Miss," the elf offered, not for the first time. "Heddlebun learned it from her father, Bedderhum, who was in charge of our former master's stables, back when they *had* stables."

"So you can keep Norberta soothed and under control during the transfer," Rose nodded again, considering. "Since she'll be closer to the city, right close to the male dragon that she's been sniffing out for the past month. You have the ability to keep a Norwegian Ridgeback, who's in heat and smelling a male dragon, still and quiet within sight of a major Muggle city?"

Heddlebun nodded without hesitation. "It's an elfish talent, Miss, and Heddlebun is the best at it of her kind."

"Well, *that* certainly is convenient," James huffed crossly, folding his arms over his chest.

"James!" Rose scolded. "Are you accusing this poor elf of lying?"

"No," James sat up in his chair. "I'm accusing her of dumping a pudding all over Mrs. Vandergriff's head, all because she lost her job to a Muggle! The lying bit is just a strong suspicion, not an accusation."

A high, keening sound arose in the hut as James said this. He assumed that it was Hagrid's kettle preparing to whistle, and then realized, with some dismay, that the noise was emanating from the elf herself where she stood in the shadows. She was holding back a mounting wail of misery, but only just barely. Her lips trembled with the effort and huge, shining tears welled in her eyes, glistening in the firelight.

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"Oh, now look what yeh've done, James!" Hagrid reproached, reaching for the elf and patting her on one bone-thin shoulder, nearly knocking her over. "There, there, Haddlebun. He din't mean it..."

"Of course I meant it!" James exclaimed. "I watched it happen! I barely stopped her from blaming it on one of the Muggle servants! Not that he didn't deserve it, being a right obnoxious wazzock."

"Well, maybe you should've let her!" Rose countered. "The poor thing had lost her whole reason for being! Whole generations of her family have served the Vandergriffs, only to be swept under the rug in favor of... of... *paid help!*"

"MMmmmmWAAAAAHHHH!!" Haddlebun suddenly burst out, no longer able to hold in her wretchedness. "Haddlebun is a BAD ELF! Haddlebun ruined mistress' *dress!* Haddlebun was dismissed from service because she is a horrible, terrible, nasty, AWFUL house elf!"

To James' increasing dismay, the elf lunged and grabbed Rose's teacup, then smashed it over her own head. Even before the shards finished pattering off the walls, she swiped at James' own cup and repeated the action, smashing it to bits against her forehead and spattering cold tea in every direction. She reached next for Hagrid's stoneware mug, but Hagrid still had his fingers hooked into its handle. The elf only accomplished yanking herself off the chair she'd been standing on and collapsing beneath the table. James winced at the knock-tumble of her body as it hit the plank floor. A moment later, her wails resumed, only faintly muffled.

"Haddlebun!" Rose cried, scrambling from her chair and ducking under the table. A moment later, she collected the elf into her arms, cradling the spindly body as if were a kitten, and retreated to the hearth, where she turned back, tilting a baleful, warning eye at James. *Not another word,* her gaze commanded.

James crossed his arms again and frowned defiantly.

The elf continued to wail. "Put Haddlebun down! Haddlebun is a *horrid* creature! Haddlebun deserves *punishment!*"

"Wherever did she learn this?" Rose raised her voice over the elf's wails, addressing the question to Hagrid. "Surely the Vandergriff's never beat her?"

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James shook his head disgustedly. "It's an act," he answered, half to himself, although he saw that Ralph had heard him. "Got to be. She's not to be trusted."

Ralph saw this as further evidence of his larger point. "This is all a load of cobblers! You can see that, right?"

"There's nothin' t' be done about it," Hagrid declared, smacking the table with the flat of his hand, making the remaining dishes rattle. "Fer better or worse, the plan's goin' forward. Heddlebun an' I leave tomorrow night at midnight. By the nex' mornin', we'll either have Norberta in the barn, or I'll be in Azkaban."

"Ralph," James said seriously, looking aside at his friend, "You're not going to... you know... go to Headmaster Merlin or anything about this, are you?"

Ralph drew a hand down his face miserably. "I should, this time. I really should, and you bloody well know it."

Still holding Heddlebun's limp, hitching body in her arms, Rose said, "But you're not going to. Are you?"

Ralph glared at Rose fiercely for a moment, his jaw firm, and then sank back into his chair, defeated. "Of course not. I'm no tattletale."

"Not this time," James couldn't resist muttering.

"That's good to know, Ralph," Rose sighed, laying Heddlebun gently on the hearthrug next to Trife, who sniffed her head, and then licked her drooping, bat-wing ear. "Because if you tattle, you can't be allowed to come along."

Ralph spluttered, going rigid in his chair again. "Come along!? I'm not *coming along!* None of us is!"

"Of course we are," Rose corrected him firmly. "We went over this when we translated the letter from Grawp. Hagrid's like family to us. Has been since our parents were little. In fact, if James' and my parents hadn't helped Hagrid out with Norberta back when she was still baby Norbert burning char-marks on this very table, we wouldn't even have this problem, now, would we? Come to think of it, we're just finishing what they started."

Ralph shook his head derisively. "You've been reading too much of Revalvier's books."

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“No,” Hagrid commented with a shrug, “That part is all true. Perfessor Revalvier interviewed me special. There, you can still see the scorch marks from Norberta’s first flames...” He traced a finger along an old black stain and hitched a sniff.

“Seriously,” James said, trying to inject a note of calm rationality into his voice, glancing back and forth between Rose and Ralph. “You know Hagrid’s right. If this goes all pear-shaped, we’re not talking detention. We’re looking at actual legal trouble, the kind that doesn’t get fixed by a letter from our parents.”

“James, you and I both know that they don’t send school students to Azkaban for this sort of thing,” Rose chided, lifting her chin. “But they *do* send adult wizards who already have tetchy legal records. If Hagrid goes through with his plan alone—I’m sorry, Hagrid,” she offered the half-giant an affectionately stern look, “But you’ll get caught. You and Heddlebun both. You’ll go to Azkaban. And Heddlebun, I don’t know what they do to house elves that break the law, but it’s got to be even worse than losing your service. However,” she turned her gaze back to James and Ralph again, daring them to argue with her, “if we go along to help, nobody will face any consequences at all, because *we won’t get caught.*”

She met James’ eyes and a ghost of a smile twitched the corners of her mouth. James tried not to smile back, but the moment he made the attempt, the task became impossible.

Ralph glared at both of them in disbelief. “You’re *enjoying* this,” he exclaimed, shaking his head in dark wonderment. “Aren’t you!? You’re both completely off your onions!”

Rose quelled her smile and approached Ralph. Putting her hand on the table near his, but not quite touching him, she asked, “Are you in, Ralph? We need you. We’re not a team without you.”

Hagrid spoke up, “No, Ralph! I can’t ask yeh...” He shook himself and glanced around at the others, “I can’t ask *any* of yeh t’ risk—”

“Of course I’m in,” Ralph admitted, rolling his eyes and slumping onto his crossed elbows. “Who am I kidding? Oh, I’m the worst Head Boy *ever.*”

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"Maybe you are," Rose agreed gently, placing her hand on Ralph's shoulder. "But that's exactly why we love you."



## **17. CONSPIRACY OF THE DRAGON**

Friday's schedule was unforgiving under the best of conditions, and much less so, James realized, when awaiting a midnight adventure that, despite Rose's purported confidence, could well end in monumental disaster. The morning began with a double Astronomy class in the high tower classroom. The fire had been stoked against a late winter storm, making the room almost stiflingly hot as the ancient Astronomy professor, Aurora Sinistra, droned on and on, calculating endless triangulation charts and plotting the orbits of planets, moons, and comets in her cracked, wispy voice.

James leaned with his chin on his right hand, struggling to stay awake amidst the cloying warmth and the monotony of the lecture. Next to him, Ralph doodled aimlessly on his parchment, adding superfluous underlines, circles, and arrows to his half-hearted notes.

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James tried to imagine what they would find that night: Norberta hiding in an empty wharf warehouse on the edge of London, huffing the air impatiently between the nervous figures of Grawp and Prechka, who would be terrified themselves this close to the gleaming lights and noise of the city. How would the three of them get there in the first place? How would two giants (Prechka was over twenty feet tall, James knew) sneak through the outskirts of a major Muggle metropolis, especially with a forty-foot dragon in tow? The whole affair seemed preposterous from top to bottom. And yet, James had to admit, at least to himself, that it was the very preposterousness of the mission that gave it an air of tantalizing, haphazard exhilaration. It had been over two years since James had been on any adventure more risky than a midnight sneak to the kitchens for a bag of crisps. He was due. And Rose, it seemed, felt exactly the same way.

Ralph, of course, was having none of it. He groused about the plan under his breath the entire way to lunch, and then offered every conceivable worst-case scenario he could think up as they made their way to Alchemy.

“What if Grawp and Prechka can’t control Norberta while they’re waiting for us in the wharf?” he fretted, speaking quietly and rapidly as they walked. “What if we get there and Norberta’s already escaped into London?”

“Then I guess it won’t be our problem, will it?” James muttered with a shrug. “We come home and read about it in tomorrow’s *Daily Prophet*. ”

Ralph shook his head, clearly dissatisfied with James’ answer. “What if we get Norberta onto the ship and are spotted by, I don’t know, a police boat or something? Spotlights everywhere, and shouting bullhorns, and people with badges yelling ‘halt?’ ”

“Maybe we let Norberta take a swipe at them,” James suggested, aiming for Zane Walker style glibness. “If she gulps down one or two of them, the rest are bound to get the message and let us be.”

Ralph glared aside at him, obviously ill-amused. James wished Rose was along to rationalize away all of Ralph’s concerns, but she was busy with her own classes until dinnertime.

Fortunately, Alchemy and Divination occupied the rest of the afternoon, then, after a hurried dinner, Ralph announced his plan to

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return to the Slytherin dungeons for the evening, citing homework. James had a feeling that homework was the least of Ralph's concerns, it being Friday night, but was happy enough for a reprieve from the big boy's constant litany of frets about the upcoming mission.

Leaving him at the bannister, James whispered, "We meet just outside your common room at midnight, right? Hagrid will come unlock the moonpool beneath the lake."

"Don't remind me," Ralph groused, tossing up his hands and barely resisting the urge to clamp them over his ears. "Like, seriously, don't remind me! I want to forget about this whole bleedin' plan."

"No backing out now, Ralph," James prodded, leaning close to his friend. "Nobody knows when we'll need you and that unbeatable wand of yours."

"Yeah, yeah," Ralph rolled his eyes, reluctantly mollified. Then he added, "It sure didn't help me against Odin-Vann the other day."

James glanced at the boy where he stood on the first step down. "I was going to ask you about that. You were like a force of nature. What got into you?"

"Are you serious?" Ralph looked up, meeting James' eyes with a piercing glare. "You saw the way he was dueling. Where'd *that* come from all of a sudden? That isn't natural, and you know it. Something's up with him, and his wand, and... and... everything about him. I checked up on him, you know."

James had been about to comment on Odin-Vann's mysterious new dueling ability when Ralph's last statement caught him off guard. "You—you did *what*?"

"I checked up on him." Ralph repeated firmly. "Something we all should have done before traipsing off to the World Between the Worlds on his orders. I sent a note to Ted Lupin over in Hogsmeade."

James blinked at Ralph, realizing that his instinct, if not his suspicion, was dead-on. Odin-Vann had indeed gone to school with Ted at one point, along with a few others they could have spoken to, such as Damien Damascus, Sabrina Hildegard, and the rest of the Gremlins. He felt foolish for not thinking of the idea himself, but then shook his head, as if clearing it.

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"Petra trusts Odin-Vann, and I trust her," he said. "But you haven't liked him since you first clapped eyes on him, have you? So, what did Ted say?"

"Not much good," Ralph said, and then sighed and glanced away. "Not much bad, either. Apparently Odin-Vann kept to himself most of the time. A real bookish type. Quiet, shy, the kind of bloke that hardly gets noticed by anyone other than the sort of bullies who sniff out people like that. He got pushed around a bit, according to Ted. He was never good with a wand, so much so that people teased him, telling him he was three-fifths squib, saying he could do better just to poke people with his wand for all the good it did him in a duel."

James nodded reluctantly. "That sure hasn't changed much, has it? He can barely get off a tickling jinx if the pressure's on. And there's no pressure like being bullied all the time in school."

"I don't know if he was bullied *all* the time," Ralph hedged, "but apparently he *felt* like he was. That's partly why Petra made friends with him. Ted says that Odin-Vann and Petra were close from the moment they met, but he never thought anything of it. It was never a romantic thing. She was just a kid then. For her own part, she just seemed to feel sorry for Odin-Vann, especially when the older years gave him grief. They hung out in the library together mostly, since he could usually be found there surrounded by piles of books, almost like he was hiding behind them."

"Doesn't sound like much of a thing," James said with a shrug. "That could have been you if Zane and I hadn't met you that first day on the train and drug you kicking and screaming out of your shell."

"He's smart, though," Ralph added, his face firm. "That's what Ted remembers most. *Scary* smart when it came to potions and charms, any kind of magic he could do by himself, with no pressure. Ted says that Odin-Vann used to hang out in Flitwick's classroom for hours some nights, just writing out charms and spells, studying them, trying to modify them to make them more powerful or invent new ways of casting them. Flitwick himself apparently said Odin-Vann was his sharpest student ever, but Ted thinks even he was a little wigged out by the kid. He was too quiet and withdrawn to be that hyper-smart. Like, he'd be president of Igor house if he was an American, always secretly dreaming up crazy plans for how to take over the world."

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“Can’t hate a bloke for being smart,” James observed, “So what’s your problem with him?”

Ralph shook his head, eyes narrowed. “Well, for one thing, he sure isn’t bad with a wand anymore. What *happened* to him all of a sudden?”

James shrugged. The question had occurred to him as well. “I don’t know. Practice, maybe?”

“Maybe,” Ralph conceded doubtfully. “But there’s more to it than that. I can’t put my finger on it. But I don’t trust him. More, I think he knows it. And that’s what makes me the most suspicious.”

“Why, because he’s trying so hard to win you over?”

Ralph glanced up at James again, surprised. “No. Because he’s not trying to at all.”

A moment later, Ralph waved James goodbye and tromped down the stairs, clearly in a hurry. James watched him go, asking himself for the first time what Ralph might be up to at such an hour. It certainly wasn’t homework. Was it something related to his suspicions about Professor Odin-Vann? More, was Ralph right to be suspicious?

James shook his head, dismissing the question. It was only Ralph. He probably just had boring, tedious Head Boy responsibilities to attend to.

Without another thought, James turned and ran up the ascending staircase, jumping the trick step and taking the rest two and a time.



“This would be loads easier if we had the invisibility cloak,” Rose whispered as they skulked through the corridor at midnight, skirting the torches and ducking behind statues.

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"I know," James said tersely. "You can stop mentioning it."

"I'm only saying," Rose went on blithely, peering around the flank of a stone centaur, "A *true* gremlin would have found a way to nick the invisibility cloak without his father knowing, just for situations like this."

"No other gremlin's dad is head of the Department of Aurors," James grumbled. "Why are we stopping? The Slytherin common room door is just around the bend."

"Shh!" Rose hissed, flapping a warning hand toward James, still peering around the statue.

James held his breath and listened. A distant noise grew gradually louder: a sort of lilting rasp, a gravelly voice humming a very old tune that James knew from his grandmother Weasley's wireless programs, only this version sounded like it was being played on a broken kazoo in a hornet's nest.

Glancing back, Rose mouthed, "Filch!" She lunged back into the shadows, elbowing James aside.

"Ow!" James gasped. "Get off my foot!"

"Hush!" Rose breathed urgently, elbowing him in the ribs.

Footsteps accompanied the humming song now, shuffling closer, rounding the bend ahead. Amazingly, Filch seemed to have chosen the dungeon corridors to prowl tonight, and was headed right toward them. Then, worst of all, he began to sing.

"Oh, I've got a girl, a *beeyotiful* girl, the sweetest girl ever could be," he wheezed under his breath, singing in a near monotone. "And for that sweet girl, with raven-dark curls, I'll buy her a diamond and tea..."

The old caretaker's voice came from just past the statue now. His shadow lengthened along the stone floor, swaying, accompanied by the scratch-shuffle of his boots. Another shadow trotted alongside, and James' blood went cold. It was the ancient Kneazle cat, Mrs. Norris, sniffing the floor, her claws ticking and clicking lightly as she approached.

Filch's foot came into sight just beyond the statue's stone plinth and Mrs. Norris stole ahead of it. She turned immediately, swinging the lamp of her green-gold gaze directly onto James and Rose where they hid. She opened her mouth to hiss at them.

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And then, another voice joined in with Filch's song, this one rough and booming, echoing from behind him.

"An' we'll dance, we two, in a big curlicue, by th' light o' th' strawb'ry moon..."

Filch's boot stuttered in surprise, and then scraped the floor as it withdrew, pivoting back around. Mrs. Norris, however, didn't blink or turn toward the newcomer. She closed her mouth and a high, feline growl coiled in her throat.

"Rubeus!" Filch called gruffly, covering his surprise with anger. "Gods, don't torture me with your singin'. What are you doing about at this hour?"

James heard Hagrid's clumping footsteps and dared to relax ever so slightly. Next to him, Rose shooed silently at Mrs. Norris with her hands. The cat opened her pink mouth in a low yowl, showing all of her extremely pointy yellow teeth.

"Can't sleep a wink," Hagrid answered mournfully. "It's th' full moon an' the snowstorm. Too much white outside. Chases th' sleep clean away. Thought I'd come down to th' pool an' work on Gertrude."

"Ye gods," Filch moaned again in disgust. "How many times 'ave I told you, you can't name a ship 'Gertrude'. It's an embarrassment, it is."

Hagrid seemed unperturbed. "Tell you what, Argus, I'll consult you afore namin' the next one."

"We'll both be dead an' buried before you can afford another boat. O' that I'm certain," Filch wheezed. "Go on with you, then. I've got rounds to do."

With Filch's back turned, Rose dared to aim a kick at Mrs. Norris. The cat flattened her ears to her skull and swiped at Rose's trainer, drawing a ragged slash with her claws.

"S'fortunate I came across yeh, actually, Argus," Hagrid said suddenly, still unseen around the centaur statue. "Er, it seems I've come down to th' dungeons without my ring-key to the Moonpool, fool that I am. Would yeh mind?"

Filch hemmed and hawed, grumbled and scratched at the rough flannel of his trousers. Then, James heard the sound of footsteps

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shuffling back down the corridor. "You'll forget your own head one o' these days, I wager," Filch muttered.

"Prob'ly right," Hagrid agreed cheerily. "I suppose I left the ring with my keys in the greenhouse after class."

"Aye," Filch muttered, taking the hint. "*Professor* Hagrid."

There was a faint jangle, then the clink and scritch of the ring-key slotting into place. A clack of sliding bolts echoed down the corridor.

Rose kicked at Mrs. Norris again, this time connecting with the old kneazle's hindquarters. She spun, hissed, and batten onto the cuff of Rose's jeans with her fore-claws. Rose throttled her ankle desperately, trying to shake the cat off, but to no avail.

For lack of a better idea, James drew his wand from his pocket and aimed it at the hissing animal. "Acervespa!" he whispered.

The white lance of the stinging hex struck Mrs. Norris between her bulging eyes and she somersaulted backwards, paws and tail flailing. She writhed in mid-air and struck the floor facing backwards, her legs splayed, the fur on her back raised into bristling hackles.

"Mrs. Norris!" Filch barked, raising his voice impatiently. "Come along now. We're not huntin' mice this night."

"True enough, Mrs. Norris," Hagrid chuckled. "S'matter o' fact, I'm fairly certain I saw some students making their way t' the Astronomy tower with mischief in mind. I called after 'em, but they don't fear me like they do the two of yeh."

"That's because yer a great ol' softie, *Professor*," Filch growled. "Come along, Missus. We've got bigger fish t' fry this night."

Mrs. Norris shook herself, snapped her pink jaw at the air as if a cloud of gnats was circling her head, and then darted in a frantic circle, hissing at her own tail. The stinging hex had apparently scrambled the old cat's brain, at least for the moment. James couldn't quite bring himself to feel sorry for it. Finally, a little drunkenly, she trotted away, bumping the centaur plinth as she went.

As James listened, still cramped into the statue's shadow with Rose, he heard Filch's shuffling departure as the old caretaker hurried back to the stairs, Mrs. Norris clicking along behind. Hagrid resumed his song, singing in a gruff baritone, "An' happy we'll be, my Princess an' me, like the dish what run off with the spoon..."

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James and Rose emerged from behind the statue and ran lightly to meet Hagrid, who looked back at them with no surprise, still singing the old song. When they joined him, he bowed his head and muttered, "Saw yer foot kickin' at ol' Mrs. Norris, Rosie." There was a chastising note in his voice.

"She was about to get us caught," Rose whispered defensively. "All I did was try to shoo her away. James shot her with a stinging hex!" She turned and raised her eyebrows at him. He glared back at her reproachfully.

To change the subject, he asked Hagrid, "Did you really forget your ring-key?"

Hagrid chuckled drily and brandished the emerald ring on his left hand. "Course not. But I had to get Argus away from yeh somehow, din't I?"

He reached for the partially open door to the subterranean pool, but it suddenly clunked shut of its own accord. A second later, the latch rattled and the door pushed open again, this time revealing the golden firelight of the Slytherin common room. Ralph hustled out, bumped hard into Hagrid, and nearly rebounded back inside again, dropping something as he did. It was a rubber duck, once bright yellow, now faded and dulled with fingerprints. He recovered, grabbed at it, and blinked guiltily up at the half-giant.

"Sorry I'm late," he whispered, trying vainly to act nonchalant. "Mind if I bring along a... erm, little friend?"



"What do you mean, 'a little friend'?" James asked as the quartet hurried down the rough terraces of the subterranean lake. "That's your Protean duck. Who do you need to send a message to?"

Unlike the last time they were there, the air over the waves was icy cold, misted with snow crystals. The cavern waterway was fringed with a brittle crust of ice, but the inverted lake above was frozen completely solid, forming a bulging black depth, dense and inky as onyx. Hagrid's blockade runner, Gertrude, rocked low in the darkness, moored to a stone jetty. Waves slapped restlessly at its long hull.

"Well, like you and Rose said," Ralph huffed, his breath forming gray clouds, "we can't afford to get caught, no matter what. So I sorta thought there'd be safety in numbers. And... well, I made arrangements."

"Hold on," Rose said, turning around in front of Ralph and stopping him, barely, with a hand on his chest. "You made 'arrangements'?"

"What's all this?" Hagrid called, distracted, as he uncoiled the ship's rope from an iron bollard. "Yeh lot comin' or what?"

Ralph shifted nervously from foot to foot. "I just felt more comfortable with the idea of having a little back-up is all..."

James narrowed his eyes. "Your Protean duck?"

Ralph tried to conceal the yellow rubber duck in his big hands. "No, not the... look, it's nothing. Can we just get on with it?"

"Let's take a look, Ralph," James said, reaching for the duck. Ralph pivoted and pulled the duck away, inadvertently placing it within easy grasping distance of Rose, who plucked it from his fist.

"Don't squeeze it!" Ralph warned, turning in alarm and raising both hands, but he was too late.

*"Grotty blighter!"* the duck's squeaky voice declared.

Instantly, a burst of pale blue smoke exploded between Rose and Ralph. Out of it, a voice seemed to resolve out of immense distance, forming a single word: "*GeronimooOOO!*"

And a figure burst from the blue smoke as if in full sprint, plowing into James and knocking him clean off his feet. He landed on the cold stone floor with the figure atop him, knocking the breath from his lungs in a whoosh.

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“Ooff!” the newcomer exclaimed in James’ ear. “Who’d I land on? No way the Ralphinator would go down that easy. Are you a bad guy? I was told there might be bad guys.”

“Zane Walker?!?” Rose cried, her voice so high that it was barely audible. “How...! What...!?”

Ralph rolled his eyes and snatched the duck back out of Rose’s hand. “I asked him by floo to be ready if we needed any help,” he declared impatiently. “He was just *supposed* to be on standby in case we ran into trouble.”

“Brrr!” Zane shivered, clambering off James and dragging him back to his feet. “Cold here! Where are we? Antarctica?” He was dressed in his Zombie house uniform, but with the tie loosened and the sleeves of his shirt unbuttoned and flapping. “Good thing I wasn’t having a swim in the gymnasium, eh?”

James wheezed, “But... how are you here? No one can Apparate onto Hogwarts grounds!”

Zane straightened and hugged himself against the cold. “No Apparation required. It’s another Experimental Communications test project.” He raised his right hand and pushed back his sleeve. A yellow symbol was printed neatly on the inside of his wrist.

“Is that,” Rose squinted, and then pointed vaguely toward Ralph, “his Protean duck tattooed on your arm?”

Zane dropped his arm again. “Does the phrase ‘quantum chromodynamics’ mean anything to you?”

James merely stared at his friend.

“Me neither,” Zane agreed. “But old Stonewall’s been yakking about it for months. Quarks and gluons, freons and peons, I don’t even know. Point is, the ink in this here temporary tattoo is technomantically identical to Ralph’s duck. Squeezing it once causes the atomic waveform to collapse, bringing me here in an instant. I’ll need to warn Raphael about that re-entry. Phoo! You did explain it all to them, right?” This last he addressed to Ralph.

“This just goes to show,” Ralph said, glaring reproachfully at Rose, “Just because you *see* a duck, doesn’t mean you should *squeeze* it!”

“First rule of technomancy,” Zane agreed sagely.

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From the jetty, Hagrid called quizzically, "Walker? Is that you? What in purple blazes...!"

"Hi, Hagrid!" Zane said, turning and sauntering to the ship. "Nice place you have here! You don't happen to have a coffee maker aboard that thing, do you?"

Rose turned back to Ralph, planting her hands on her hips.

"What?" Ralph demanded, shoving the Protean duck into his coat pocket. "He was just supposed to be a back-up plan! I told him to be ready even though we probably wouldn't need him."

James sighed, "How much does he know about the plan?"

"Almost nothing," Ralph said, sagging a little. "He said he preferred it that way, and quoted something about crouching lions and hidden dinosaurs."

"That sounds like Zane," James nodded.

"And what sends him back, then?" Rose asked, still glowering at Ralph.

"Two squeezes of the duck."

Rose jabbed out her hand, palm up, silently demanding the duck back.

"Hold on," James said, gently pushing Rose back a step. "Now that he's here, he may as well come along. If he wants to. And of course he does."

"Are you serious?" Rose demanded, turning her glare onto James. "Is there anyone else you want to invite along? The Minister of Magic? Rig Mortis and the Stiff-tones, maybe?"

"There's safety in numbers," James soothed, pressing Rose down toward the jetty, where Zane had joined Hagrid. "Besides, it's Zane." He turned to Ralph and offered him a wink. Ralph nodded wryly.

"Hey guys!" Zane called up to them, pointing at the gangplank as Hagrid levitated it into place. "We're gonna go rescue a dragon! By boat! Pretty wild and crazy stuff, eh?"

Rose groaned.

Five minutes later, they stood on the bow of ship, blinking in the light of a single lantern and adjusting to the incessant sway and rock of the waves. Heddlebun was already aboard and waiting for them in the wheelhouse, nervously wringing her knuckly hands. Hagrid and Rose began bustling about the deck, tugging ropes taut and retying knots,

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closing and battening portholes, checking hatches, calling to each other in indecipherable boat jargon. They enlisted Ralph's help, since he was big enough to lug the coils of rope and swing the enormous booms. From James' vantage point, the ship looked nearly as long as the Quidditch pitch, but very narrow, divided along its length by a covered paddlewheel and the wheelhouse. Two masts jutted up, one each from the bow and stern, festooned with rigging and limp canvas sails.

"So what's the name of this tub?" Zane asked James, holding onto the railing for support.

"The Gertrude, apparently," James answered.

Zane nodded. "That's an atrocious name."

"Finally, something you and Filch agree on."

Zane lowered his voice, "So, what's the news from Petra?"

James glanced aside at his friend. Zane's American directness always took a few minutes to adjust to. He considered how to answer for several seconds as the boat rocked beneath them, Rose, Ralph, and Hagrid still calling to each other over the stern.

Finally, he said, "We kissed."

Zane nodded slowly, meaningfully. "That's sure not going to make things any easier, is it?"

James sighed and leaned against the bulkhead.

"And Merlin?" Zane prodded. "Any word from him since the World Between the Worlds?"

James shrugged. "Nothing. I don't think he saw us at all. He was too busy with Petra."

"She ended up with the crimson thread from the loom," Zane recalled. "But Merlin got her brooch. Do you think she'll leave this reality without it?"

James hadn't considered the question. The whole point of going to the World Between the Worlds was to capture back the symbolic thread, without which Petra couldn't hope to assume her new role in its native dimension. But he remembered now how quietly bereft she had been about losing her father's brooch. He shook his head uncertainly. "I don't suppose it matters. She'll be leaving this world forever."

"All the more reason to take the most meaningful memento of all with her," Zane said with uncharacteristic gravity. "Maybe Merlin

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knew what he was doing when he captured it. Maybe he sees it as a way to lure Petra to him.”

James wanted to agree, but couldn’t. “You haven’t seen her lately. She’s *committed*. She’ll fight anyone who gets in her way, including any of us. And she has the worst sort of help imaginable. Both Judith and the shred of Voldemort in her blood seem to want her to go through with it.”

Zane cinched up the corner of his mouth and cocked his head in the thoughtful expression that James knew so well. “But why would *they* want to help her? Judith especially? Petra is her toe-hold in our world. The only reason Judith can even exist here is because of the bargain that happened when Petra killed Izzy’s mother. If Petra vanishes away to some other dimension, Judith has no host here. She vanishes away, too. Right?”

James shrugged. “That’s the theory, I guess. So I don’t know why Judith would want her to go through with the plan. All I know is that she knows *I* don’t want Petra to leave, and she warned me to stay away from her.”

“Sounds like a no-win situation, doesn’t it?” Zane offered, studying James’ face by lantern light. “Either you lose Petra and Judith wins, or you win Petra and the whole world pays for it.”

James had nothing to say to that. He bowed his head and pushed a hand up into his hair, tugging at it.

Beneath them, the boat suddenly seemed to surge forward, throwing both boys off balance.

“We’ve got time to make up,” Hagrid boomed from the wheelhouse. “Ever’body inside or below decks! This is like to be a wee bit bumpy!”

Stumbling against the increasing momentum of the ship, James and Zane hurried to the wheelhouse, ducking in through the narrow metal door on its side. There, they found Ralph, Rose, and Heddlebun gripping a brass railing along a rust-stained rear wall. Before them, a console bristled with instruments, dials, and levers, dominated by an enormous ship’s wheel. Hagrid stood before this, gripping the wheel’s protruding handles and turning it this way and that with tense concentration.

“It’s a wee bit tight just through here,” he muttered to himself.

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"Just out of curiosity, Hagrid," Zane asked brightly, moving alongside Rose and gripping the brass railing with one hand. "How many times have you done this?"

Hagrid offered a quick sidelong glance. "How many times? Oh. Wellnow. Technic'ly..." He released one hand from the wheel, splayed his fingers, and counted silently under his breath before admitting, "Erm. Zero."

Outside the expansive fore window of the wheelhouse, the bow of the ship tilted and swayed, angling ponderously toward one of the giant tunnel throats that surrounded the subterranean lake. Engraved across a stone at its top was the word LONDON. On either side, iron braziers held goblinfire torches. Their yellow light played over the black waves and glimmered in the spray that pulsed on either side of the Gertrude's prow.

"I sorta figured that," Zane shrugged, firming his grip on the railing.

The ship began to accelerate as it neared the designated tunnel. James realized that the lake water was funneling into the tunnel's maw, drawing the ship steadily forward as it approached. Hagrid threaded the wooden wheel back and forth, muttering urgently under his breath.

"Hold on, now," he announced, reaching forward and tugging a large lever down with a thunk. "I'm told this is where it gets a bit hairy."

A resounding clank and a thud shook the entire ship. James gasped as the bow mast suddenly hinged ponderously backward like a falling tree, dragging its rigging with it in a series of twangs and whip-like whooshes. With a vibrating shudder, it folded over onto the wheelhouse, thumping into place, and James realized this was a necessary maneuver if they were to fit into the tunnel mouth without shearing the masts right off.

The ship sped forward, tugged into the rushing current, and the tunnel yawned before them, as dark and featureless as a well. Then, with sickening speed, the Gertrude plummeted inside.

James' stomach lurched slowly, inexorably, up toward his throat and he felt himself lighten in his shoes as the tunnel angled downward, drawing the rushing lake water into a roaring rapid, dragging the ship

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dizzily into its force. Hagrid kept his hands fisted on the ship's wheel, but now he seemed only to be hanging on for dear life, struggling to keep the ship steady and facing forward against the titanic momentum of the tunnel river. The only light was the lantern that swung from a post on the bow, now tilted backward and swinging, casting wild shadows in the pool of its dancing light. Dimly, spray erupted on either side of the Gertrude as its prow dug into the current. Droplets blew back and blattered the window like driving rain, blurring the view beyond, drumming loud enough to make speech nearly impossible.

James wondered how long the journey would take. London was quite some distance away. And yet he had some idea that this was not, strictly speaking, a journey of mere miles. He sensed forces in play, compressing time and space into something teasingly plastic. The Gertrude rocked precipitously to starboard, riding the current as the river curved right. The hull shuddered and jounced, and James had the terrible suspicion that it was scraping the tunnel wall, grinding wood against stone. A few moments later, this happened again, but to the left, with the ship rocking hard to port and hanging there, compressing beneath the power of its own inertia.

"How much farther, Hagrid?" Rose called, her voice a shrill ribbon against the shuddering roar and blat of spray on glass.

"We're a-gettin' close," Hagrid boomed back, leaning to consult a large brass dial. James saw an ornate arrow on the dial shimmying close to a heading printed in white letters: LONDON, THAMES. "We'll surface just around the Isle of Dogs, south of Canary Wharf!"

James was grateful to know that the rollicking journey was nearly over. He wondered briefly how Norberta would handle the voyage back. She would surely be terrified and cramped, lying low in the hold below decks.

Then, James' eyebrows shot up as he realized what Hagrid had just said.

"What do you mean," he shouted to the half-giant, "that we'll *surface*?"

Hagrid struggled with the wheel, his ham-sized fists bunched on the protruding handles. "Like the Durmstangs back during the

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Triwizard Tournament!" he bellowed. "We burst up to the surface! Don' ask me how it works. I jus' know it does!"

The tunnel suddenly slanted upwards at a steep angle, forcing James' knees to buckle. The river ahead compressed and narrowed, beginning to roar up over the bow in clapping waves, closing over it. The lantern snuffed out, leaving nothing but perfect blackness, violent motion, and deafening noise.

"But Hagrid!" James cried, struggling to be heard over the din, "The Thames is *frozen* right now! First time in a decade! The surface will be as hard as stone!"

It was too late to do anything about it. James didn't even know if anyone heard him. He felt small hands grasp onto his trouser-leg and realized that it was Heddlebun groping in the dark for something to batten onto.

When the bow struck, it hit with such force that every window shattered. Hagrid rammed against the wheel hard enough to splinter and snap it in two. James, Rose, Ralph, and Zane flung forward, stumbling headlong against the console and its array of dials and instruments. Shattered glass and freezing water sprayed in every direction, filling the air and peppering James' hair and face.

Blue light bloomed over the ship as it arroded up, and then, as its momentum exhausted, fell slowly forward, tilting down, down, as if it were falling right over the edge of the world. Finally, with a thudding slam, it smashed flat onto a heaving expanse, rocking, groaning deep in its hull, and crunching against some brittle, ragged obstruction.

James flung pebbles of glass and ice from his hair and grappled upright against the console. Cold air blew in through the broken window, carrying a freight of fluffy snowflakes and the unmistakable city smells of rotting rubbish, factory exhaust, and dead fish. Huge chunks of ice slid back and forth on the Gertrude's bow as the ship rocked, slowly coming to rest. Beyond this, James recognized the hulking shapes of warehouses and dark freighters looming in the fog. The Thames was indeed frozen over, forming a pale blue highway marbled with white, except for the scarred black hole that the Gertrude had smashed through.

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“Holy hinkypunks,” Zane breathed, steadying himself next to James. “I bet that was even better than the Aquapolis bubble tube you told me about.” He considered this, and then shrugged. “Or worse, depending on your perspective.”

“Worse,” Ralph moaned, clutching his head. “*Definitely* worse.”

“Everyone all right, then?” Hagrid said, climbing clumsily to his feet and brushing broken ice from his shoulders. “Rosie? You OK?”

“I think we’re going to have to realign the rudder,” Rose said breathlessly, shaking the hair out of her face. “If, that is, it’s still there.”

James glanced down in weary annoyance. “We’re here. You can let go of my leg now.”

Heddelbun turned her enormous eyes up to him in surprise, as if she’d forgotten where she was. Then, sheepishly, she released her death-grip on his shin and backed away, her ears drooping.

“Well then,” Hagrid sighed briskly, clapping his hands together. “I guess we won’t have t’ remember where we parked, now, will we?”



The damage to the Gertrude was much more visible from the ice of the Thames as they descended via Hagrid’s folding gangplank. Rose stalked fretfully along the jagged edge of the frozen hole, ignoring the precarious cracks and fissures, muttering to herself. Inside the hole, now surrounded by gently heaving chunks and shards of pulverized ice, the ship looked as if it had been squeezed in a giant fist. Sprung planks and splintered decking were evident from stem to stern, and the once sleek length of the hull now seemed to have a distinct and troubling angle to

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it, causing the bow and stern to point slightly up out of the water, while the mid-ship waterwheel and boathouse rode much lower in the waves than was exactly comfortable to James' eye.

"What were the odds, eh?" Hagrid said with a shrug. "This river freezes over, what, every few decades? And it just had t' appen this year, o' course." He seemed to view it as a mere humorous aside, rather than a potentially debilitating stroke of fate.

"We lost the bow mast," Rose called, her voice thin with distance as she rounded the front of the ship. "And the bowsprit and masthead. The rudder is hanging on by a toothpick, but that's sort of academic, since the wheel is smashed in two." Behind Rose, Heddlebun slunk along closely, wringing her hands, glancing around as if trying to see in every direction at once. The house elf appeared exquisitely uncomfortable this close to the Muggle city.

"We can *reparo* most o' that," Hagrid soothed, keeping his voice low over the expanse of ice. "An' what we can't, we likely don't need, at least fer the journey back home. It'll be fine, Rosie."

"We can't *reparo* what's been torn off under the ice," Rose said, clearly struggling to control her exasperation. "But assuming enough bits of the window glass are still scattered around the deck, we should at least be able to seal up the wheelhouse and mend the wheel. We *may* get back home, but just barely. Assuming there are no *other* unexpected disasters along the way."

Zane clapped Rose lightly on the shoulder. "That's the spirit, Rosie."

She gave him a withering glare. James knew that it was a short list of people who could get away with calling his cousin "Rosie", and Zane Walker was not one of them.

Ralph shook his head at the wounded ship, eyes wide. "Thanks, but I think I'll take a cab home, if you don't mind."

"It'll be fine, Ralph," James said, not fully believing it himself. "We've rode in worse. Er... probably." With some effort, he turned the big boy around and the group began to cross the ice, heading into the shadow of a ramshackle pier and the extravagantly derelict hulk of a warehouse beyond. The rusty walls and roof of the structure sagged ominously. The windows were enormous square sockets, fogged with

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grime wherever they weren't broken and gaping like shocked eyes. The decrepit building made even the bedraggled Gertrude look like a showroom model by comparison.

"If all went well," Hagrid said, boosting Rose onto the pier from the ice, "Grawpie and Prechka should be awaitin' just inside, along with Norberta. We'll get 'er out, onto the ship, and be home before the clock strikes two. Grawp and Prechka can be on their way back to the mountains under cover o' darkness. Neat as can be."

Shivering as he climbed a metal ladder onto the concrete pier, Zane said, "Your optimism is an inspiration to us all, Hagrid."

Heddlebun stole from shadow to shadow, her huge eyes bulging as she took in the unfamiliar sights. Rusted barges lined the pier, locked into the ice and loaded with gloom. Snow skirled and wafted all around, clouding the air and forming ghostly haloes around the security lights that lined the pier, erected on leaning wooden poles. Hagrid paused just outside the range of the nearest lamp and raised his right arm. In his hand he held aloft what appeared to be a cigarette lighter. He clicked the button on its barrel and the security light winked out.

In a low voice, James asked, "Where'd you get a Deluminator?"

Rose answered smugly, "I liberated it from dad's dresser over the holidays. *That's* how a Gremlin does things. Feel free to take notes."

Hagrid used the Deluminator to snuff the remaining lights along the pier one by one as the troupe made their way along. They climbed ramps of iron stairs to higher levels, and then followed a length of broken pavement toward a line of enormous bay doors. Every door was closed and locked with a rusted chain and padlock, except for the door at the very end, which was wrenched up and badly dented, its chain dangling and swinging in the low, whistling wind.

"That's the one, then," Hagrid nodded, clumping closer to the looming warehouse. Keeping his voice low, he added, "Stay close now. And keep quiet."

Hugging himself and huddling next to Hagrid, Zane asked, "How do we know they're in there?"

As if in answer, a huge, grating noise shook the warehouse. The metal doors rattled on their tracks and a few remaining windows tinkled, shattering in their frames. A burst of yellow light briefly illuminated the darkness inside, dissipating into orange flickers.

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“Either that’s them,” James gulped, “Or the boundaries of the magical world are *way* worse off than we thought.”

Hagrid crept into the shadow of the open bay door. Inside, just visible in the gloom, was a cavernous space surrounded by banks of high windows. A lacework of struts and girders crowded the upper reaches. From these hung complicated machinery that James assumed had, at one time, operated cranes for moving cargo.

Hagrid’s voice was an echoing rasp in the darkness as he called, “Grawpie?”

Another grating grunt filled the space, and James smelled the familiar chemical reek of Dragon breath. A burst of yellow flame illuminated the pocked concrete floor, piles of old shipping crates, the carcass of a lorry propped on blocks, and three dark bulks hiding behind it.

“Grawpie!” Hagrid cried, relieved, and hurried toward the lorry, the others following close behind. “Prechka! And sweet Norberta! You made it!”

James’ feet gritted on the broken concrete floor as he hurried to stay close to Hagrid, but he faltered as the giants stepped out from behind the lorry. He’d forgotten what it was like to be in close company with such gigantic people. Grawp’s head peered over the lorry’s cab, his hair as thick and matted as a thicket of briars, his Quaffle-sized eyes glimmering reflections of the high windows. Prechka, however, dwarfed even him. Looming amidst the girders high overhead, her head looked impossibly small on the mountainous bulk of her shoulders. When her feet came down on the concrete floor, it cracked and buckled. The rafters shook, sifting thick dust down onto the smaller people below.

Grawp spoke with slow emphasis, in what he clearly thought was a careful hush. “Brother Hagrid. Grawp and Prechka hide, but Norberta *loud*. Norberta smell other dragon in Sea of Light.”

“There, there,” Hagrid reached and patted his half-brother on the elbow. “Yeh done well, Grawpie. Both o’ yeh. We’ll take Norberta from ‘ere. Heddlebun?”

But Heddlebun, James noticed, was already about her work. The tiny elf had ducked under the derelict lorry and was now whispering to Norberta, who lowered her huge serpentine neck to listen. The

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dragon's breath, which had been short and chuffing with anxiety only moments before, now came in slower, longer gusts, with less reek of brimstone. James couldn't make out Heddlebun's words. He couldn't even tell if she was speaking a language he understood. But Norberta comprehended well enough, and that was all that mattered. A coil of tension unwound from James' shoulders, and only in its absence did he realize just how worried he had been about the prospect of leading Norberta back to the ship.

The ground shook as Prechka lowered to one knee behind the lorry. Impatiently, she pushed it like a toy, making room for her bulk. The lorry rocked as it slid on its blocks, scraping and crunching along the concrete floor. Zane had to leap backward as it reared precipitously near him.

"Prechka afraid," the giantess said, and the low throb of her voice caused more windows to rattle and shatter around the dark warehouse. She put out her hand and Hagrid reached up to take it. His fist was just big enough to grip the end of her grubby index finger, and yet he held it as if she was a child, and then kissed the back of one huge knuckle.

"Yeh can follow the same path back home that you took here, can't yeh?" Hagrid asked, looking up at her shadowy bulk.

James knew that giants had a special sense that allowed them to retrace their steps perfectly. And yet Prechka looked troubled.

Carefully, Grawp said, "We come back to old cave home now. We live by brother Hagrid at Hogwarts."

James glanced back at Hagrid in time to see the colour fade from his cheeks.

"Now we talked about this, Grawpie. Yeh can't come t' Hogwarts. It's not allowed, remember? Why, they've made me send away even my last few Skrewts. What would headmaster Merlin say if he learnt yeh two was back livin' in the Forbidden Forest?"

"Grawp and Prechka be quiet," Prechka said, raising her index finger to her lips in a gesture of solemn secrecy. The timbre of her voice could be felt through the soles of James' shoes. "Headmaster never know."

Hagrid was shaking his head sadly. "I'd love nothin' more, loves. But we just can't do it. Yeh have t' go back to the mountains.

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Yer tribe needs yeh. And yeh need them. It'll be all right. Maybe, when all o' this Vow of Secrecy bizness is cleared up, why I can make arrangements for yeh to comes an' visit then. How would that be, eh?" He gave the giants an attempt at a grin.

Grawp and Prechka looked at each other and seemed to commune for a long moment with their eyes. Finally, Grawp looked down again and said, "OK, brother Hagrid."

Hagrid sniffed, and nodded, and collected himself. "That's good, then." Perking up a little, he said, "So, yeh both remember how to summon the hidin' charm I sent yeh, right? Do yeh still 'ave it with yeh?"

Grawp reached up and rummaged in the thick burlap of his collar, retrieving something hung about his neck on a hank of rope. James was surprised to see that it was an old automobile tyre, threaded right through the centre like a ring. "We hide when hear people," Grawp said. "Like this." He squeezed the tyre between his thumb and forefinger and muttered, "Obscuro."

Nothing happened. Both giants remained exactly where they were. And yet, somehow, James' eye refused to see them. Where Grawp hunkered, James instead seemed to sense a huge grey trash bin half-buried in plastic bags of rubbish. Where Prechka knelt, he perceived a rusting water tower on thick iron supports.

"That's a camouflage talisman!" Zane exclaimed. "Maybe the best I've ever seen!"

"Hagrid," Rose said, clearly impressed. "Did you do that?"

"Now don't go acting all surprised, yeh lot," Hagrid answered, stifling a smile of sad pride. "Jus' cause I teach Care o' Magical Creatures doesn't mean I fergot how to use a wand. It's just a little somethin' I whipped up fer their journey here and back. Couldn't expect 'em to travel without any kind o' magical help, could I?" He glanced tentatively at Rose and added, "Do yeh really think it's a good one?"

"It's excellent, Hagrid," she nodded, still squinting at the disguised giants, trying to see them.

"Whoa!" Ralph said, backing away. "I think they're moving, but I can't really tell!"

James glanced up and was alarmed to see what appeared to be the trash bin tilting up onto its end as its rubbish bags rolled and clustered all around it, forming and re-forming into new piles. The water tower leaned on its iron supports, which creaked and moaned with the sound of wrenching metal.

"Give 'er another squeeze, Grawpie," Hagrid called up, cupping his hands to his mouth. "I could only pump so much magic into that tyre. Save it for when yeh need it, why don't yeh?"

A moment later, the disguises blinked away and James could once again recognize the monstrous shapes standing in the dusty gloom. Hagrid nodded in relief.

Ralph announced, "We should be off, then, right?"

"Before I freeze my tuchus off," Zane agreed. "Not that this hasn't been a great time. Seriously. Let's do it again next week."

Hagrid called to Heddlebun, "Is Norberta ready to go, then?"

Heddlebun paused and raised her head, her huge ears pricking up. "We're ready," she said, her voice very tiny after the boom of the giants.

Hagrid said his goodbyes and allowed the giants to leave first. Their hulking forms blocked out the blue night-glow as they lumbered through the broken bay door. Within a minute, the sub-audible thump of their footsteps blended into the constant thrum of distant traffic. They were gone, wending their way carefully back into the outlying villages, and the mountains beyond.

"They'll be safe," Hagrid whispered, staring hard at the empty bay door. "Makin' their way back home. They'll be just fine, won't they?"

James realized that Hagrid was trying to convince himself as much as anyone else.

Rose put her hand on Hagrid's shoulder where he hunkered in the dark. "Of course they will. You equipped them. And they're smart, in their own way."

*For giants*, James thought, but didn't say. After all, Hagrid himself was half-giant, and he had conjured one of the best camouflage talismans James had ever seen.

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Hagrid nodded decisively. "Right then," he whispered, and tossed a glance back toward Heddlebun and the coiled shape of Norberta. "Let's be away, then."

Herding James, Rose, Ralph, and Zane ahead of him, the half-giant led Norberta out through the open bay door and down the broken asphalt of the drive. Snow filled the air in a million fluffy flecks, sketching the shape of the wind as it surrounded the warehouse, scoured the pier, and escaped over the wasteland of the frozen Thames.

James glanced back, curious, and saw Heddlebun riding atop Norberta's head, bent low to her ear, whispering incessantly. With one hand, she patted the great dragon on the bunched muscles of her jaw. Norberta followed Hagrid as if in a trance, her head low and sweeping over the pier, her feet lifting and falling like a cat stalking through a garden, making no noise whatsoever.

Silently, the troupe threaded past the ice-locked barges and down to the frozen surface of the Thames. The Gertrude was barely a low, sleek shape amidst a panorama of drifting grey. Beyond this, London itself was merely a dull throb and a watercolor fog of lights.

"Easy now," Hagrid muttered nervously as Norberta settled her weight onto the frozen river. The ice groaned precipitously but held firm, at least for the moment. In a ragged line, with Ralph in the lead and Norberta following behind, the group began to trek toward the black hole in the ice where the Gertrude rocked, waiting.

Shivering but still chipper despite his hushed voice, Zane asked James, "So where'd you guys find the dragon-whisperer?"

"Heddlebun?" James shook his head. "She was a house elf in Millie Vandergriff's house. Got sacked just this past holiday after spending her whole life there. Somehow Hagrid got hold of her when he found out she'd lost her service and knew how to keep beasts calm. Pretty lucky, I guess."

"She got sacked?" Zane frowned, "I thought that hardly ever happened? What for?"

James sighed. Ahead of them, the Gertrude unsheathed slowly from the fog. The folding gangplank stretched out to the ice, tilting and creaking with the movement of the ship. "She was mad and desperate about losing her work to a load of Muggle servants. She tried to

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sabotage them into getting sacked, but got herself caught and sacked instead. It was me that caught her, in fact. I was there for the holidays with Millie."

Zane turned to glance at James, his brow lowering. "And you all *trust* her?" he asked, his voice suddenly incredulous.

James opened his mouth to reply, but a sudden commotion from behind startled both boys.

"Whoa!" Hagrid bellowed suddenly, "Norberta! WHOA!"

With a sound both low and terribly huge, the ice cracked beneath James' feet, as if something very heavy had just pressed hard down on it. He felt the motion as the frozen expanse pitched, throwing him off balance. Zane grabbed his arm, keeping him upright, but just barely. Something buffeted overhead and the sky was momentarily blotted by a huge black silhouette. Dark wings whumped through the air, and suddenly, deafeningly, a roar broke over the ice. It was deep, long, and ululating, seeming to make the very snowflakes shiver in their course. This, James immediately knew, was no restrained bark of nervous energy. This was a full-on roar of hectic release.

Norberta couldn't properly fly, James remembered, only glide short distances due to an old wing injury. She swooped over him and closed on Ralph, her shadow covering him as she lowered, scrabbling at the air, her claws swinging down toward the cracked ice.

"Ralph!" Zane cried, but the boy had already turned around. His eyes bulged in terror as the great beast bore down on him. Instinctively, he threw himself flat just as the dragon crunched down, rebounding from the ice with all four powerful legs, and lunging back into the air again even as the frozen river shattered beneath her weight. Ralph scrambled to hold on, now captive on a heaving chunk of loose ice.

Hagrid ran past on James' right, still bellowing, leaping clumsily over widening cracks. Rose was close behind, running more nimbly, even as her boots slipped and scraped.

Norberta pumped her wings, lofted through the air, and kicked off again, this time from the deck of the Gertude, tearing up planks and rigging with her claws. One wing walloped the air, the other, slightly out of synch, limped faintly, tugging her off course. Her swooping form was wreathed in swirls of snow, and James could just make out the shape

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of Haddlebun as she leapt from the dragon's head, grabbed onto the rear mast of the Getrude, and swung up to perch on the furled sail.

"Elf work is for elves!" she called, her voice suddenly firm, as high and ringing as a trumpet. "Spread the word! This is just the beginning! Elf work is for elves, or the Muggle world will pay!"

James slid and stumbled to a halt as the shattered ice broke up before him. Norberta roared again, and the echo of it pealed over the Thames like thunder. With a wrench and screech of metal, she landed on the unmistakable shape of a Tower Bridge, clawed up to the top of its south stone tower, and coiled there, her tail whipping about her flanks, her wings raised and flexing for balance. She raised her neck, hinged open her jaw, and sent a gout of flame high into the snowy clouds. Yellow light filled the world like a beacon, illuminating every falling snowflake, glinting from bridge's suspended walkways. On the roadway below, cars squealed and tyres screeched. The noise of crashing metal and terrified screams was unmistakable even through the dark distance.

Then, with a sinewy lunge, Norberta launched again. Her wings caught the air, whumped down, and she swooped into a long, low arc, descending into the foggy glow of the city, where she was met with distant blares of horns and crumps of colliding metal.

James could barely believe what he was seeing. Zane scraped to a halt next to him, weighing down the giant chunk of ice they floated on and grabbing James' shoulder for support.

"NORBERTA!!" Hagrid bellowed, standing in silhouette on a heaving floe ahead, his legs splayed. Next to him, Rose clutched onto his coat for dear life. "NORBERTA! COME BACK!"

James turned, realizing that the force of the river had already carried them some distance away from the Gertrude. Frantically, he scanned the rigging and masts, looking, but there was no longer anything to see.

"She's escaped," Zane gasped hopelessly, still clinging to James for support. "We'll never see *that* little traitor again."

A heavy shape slid up against James' legs as the ice bobbed, allowing black water to bubble up over its edge. He buckled and fell backwards onto the object, which let out a hoarse "Oof!"

It was Ralph.

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"I really do get tired," he wheezed, rolling onto his back on the ice and throwing James off of him, "of being right... about these things."



## **18. A BRIEF REPRIEVE**

It was almost dawn by the time James and Rose made their way back to the portrait hole, feeling as if they'd been away for weeks rather than hours.

"My, just *look* at the two of you," the Fat Lady said disapprovingly, raising the topmost of her many chins. "You both look a fright. And what brings you back at such an ungodly hour?"

"Venomous Tentacula," Rose growled the password as if it was a curse.

"Well!" the Fat Lady huffed, gathering her stole tighter about her shoulders indignantly. With a creak, her frame swung open, revealing the deep shadows and cold hearth of the common room.

Without a word, the two separated and climbed their respective dormitory stairs.

James didn't know about Rose, but despite the numbing exhaustion of his body, he felt as wide awake as he'd ever been in his entire life. Creeping up the winding stairs to the somnolent dimness of

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the dormitory, he was relieved to see even Scorpius asleep in his stolen place among the seventh years.

Unable to muster the energy even to peel off his damp clothes, James lowered himself to his bed fully dressed, collapsed upon it, and lay there staring up toward the nearby window. The snow had stopped and the moon was up, glaring back with its own glowing eye, illuminating the window's frosted edges like neon.

James' every thought was consumed with the grave consequences of what they had inadvertently caused that night. The journey home had been difficult and arduous, with hours spent on the broken ice of the Thames shoring up the Gertrude enough to brave the attempt, all while Zane cast *visum-ineptio* charms over the ship to make it look like a mere tugboat to anyone who might come to investigate the fracas nearby.

But now that it was over, the return trip ceased to matter completely.

They had set a dragon loose in Muggle London.

The very thought seemed preposterous. Laughable, even. And yet he could all too easily recall the crash of colliding cars and the screams of witnesses as Norberta clawed to the top of Tower Bridge, coiling atop its famed silhouette like a living gargoyle.

Hundreds of people had to have seen it, despite the hour. And even now, the fully-grown Norwegian Ridgeback was surely rampaging through the city, doing untold damage and spreading a wake of Muggle terror in every direction.

Zane had been right. As they'd departed the hobbled Gertrude upon finally returning to the Moonpool, he had pulled James, Rose, and Ralph aside and gravely said, "This is worse than the Night of the Unveiling. You know that, right?"

Hagrid had been utterly silent throughout the return journey, even as they all bid their solemn goodnights. He was in a sort of shock, James knew, caught between worrying about his poor, lost dragon, the knowledge that he had caused possibly the greatest breach of the Vow of Secrecy in a thousand years, and the reality that, by the following morning, he may well be carted off to Azkaban to await trial for crimes too numerous to easily count.

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And yet James simply couldn't comprehend the terrible scope of it all. Whenever he tried to imagine what was to come, or what he should do about it, his mind fetched up once again on that harrowing image of the dragon atop Tower Bridge, her tail whipping her flanks, her wings spread for balance, roaring a stream of liquid fire into the clouds.

He fell asleep without realizing it and woke up mere minutes later, or so it felt. The daylight outside the window betrayed the truth, however. It was the middle of Saturday afternoon.

James groaned and rolled over, clutching a hand over his eyes.

"Late night, sleepyhead?" A voice greeted him cheerfully. It was Graham. "You'll be in no shape for Quidditch tomorrow if you keep that up. As your team captain, I feel it's my duty to say I'm disappointed in you."

James groaned again, unable to formulate any meaningful response. As he swung his feet to the floor, realizing that he was fully clothed in grimy jeans, sweatshirt, and clammy socks, the memory of the previous night fell back onto him like a millstone.

"Oh, bloody hell," he muttered urgently to himself. "Graham, have you seen a newspaper today?"

Graham had not. "Why? Did you have *another* interview with Rita Skeeter?"

Breathlessly, James leapt out of bed, not even thinking to change out of his grimy day-old clothes, and ran down the spiral stairs.

No one in the common room had seen that morning's *Daily Prophet* either. James pushed through the portrait hole and ran toward the staircase, his feet clad only in socks, now loose and flopping damply from his toes.

He passed Peeves in the hall, and the poltergeist hurried to follow, sensing potential trouble and eager to exploit it however he could.

"Get away!" James called back over his shoulder, panting. "This is none of your business!"

"Things that aren't my business are the best things of all!" the fat little figure trilled, bouncing happily from the walls.

Rose was just coming out of the Great Hall as James blundered to the bottom of the stairs with Peeves tittering close behind.

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"Have you seen it? What's the news?" James gasped, but Rose hurried to him, already shushing him with a finger to her lips.

"Ooo!" Peeves squeaked with high anticipation. "This is going to be good! I can just *smell* the beautiful stink of conspiracy about you both!"

"Away with you, Peeves!" Rose hissed, snapping her glare onto the poltergeist. "This doesn't concern you!"

"All the better!" Peeves squealed, turning loops in the air. "Trouble, trouble for Peeves to double!"

Rose narrowed her eyes. When she spoke again, it was in a musing, sing-song voice. "Did you hear what they're making for dessert tonight, James?"

Peeves halted in mid-air, his face suddenly suspicious.

"Sleeping Toad Tarts," Rose whispered tantalizingly. "Mmmm... miniature enchanted sugar toads twitching in Turkish Delight gelatin drops. Very tricky to prepare. Requires complete silence in the kitchen, lest the trays of sugar toads be woken before they're properly embedded in the gelatin. Can you just imagine? Hundreds of candy toads leaping pell-mell about the kitchen with all the elves scrambling to catch them?"

James glanced up at Peeves and was surprised to see the poltergeist wringing his hands frantically, his piggish face screwed up with strain, like Ralph trying not to belch in class after chugging a licorice soda.

"It would be simply disastrous," Rose went on, speaking in an awed voice, "if anyone, say, invaded the kitchen and started banging pots and pans while singing the Hogwarts Salute at the top of their lungs. It's a good thing I don't know *anyone* who likes to do such things."

"MmmmMMH!" Peeves groaned shrilly, nearly popping with torment. He hovered a moment longer, his eyes going cross-eyed and his cheeks bulging with concentration, and then let out a bawl of helpless glee and swooped away, careening in the unmistakable direction of the kitchens, already breaking into the first verse of the Hogwarts Tribute.

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“Come with me,” Rose said, grabbing James by the elbow and steering him away toward a side corridor. “The library. And not a word before we get there.”

James allowed Rose to drag him onward, once again marveling at her ability to manipulate lesser minds by giving them exactly what they most want.

Five minutes later, at a table in the farthest back corner of the library, with their backs to the wall and no one else in sight, James bent over Rose’s edition of that morning’s *Daily Prophet*.

The news story was surprisingly small, halfway down the second page. Not buried, exactly, but clearly not the screaming headline that they had expected.

### MUGGLE DRAGON SIGHTINGS IN CENTRAL LONDON CAUSE FOR INVESTIGATION

Ministry of Magic officials responded early this morning to persistent reports that a dragon had been sighted atop London’s Tower Bridge and in nearby environs. Initially dismissed as mass hysteria induced by the numerous unrelated breaches of magical unplottability in Muggle spaces, eyewitness testimonies led Ministry investigators to believe that some incursion of a magical beast may indeed have occurred.

“A dragon is exceedingly unlikely,” explains Harry Potter, head Auror and lead responder to the scene. “But Muggle witnesses indicate that some fantastical beast or magical entity may well have temporarily escaped secure wizarding boundaries. Most likely the creature is simply a rogue boggart unwittingly set loose in the Muggle streets. We shall catch up to it forthwith, I am certain.”

According to official reports, the appearance of the creature occurred between 1:25 and 1:40 in the morning, where the beast was first observed over Tower Bridge, then soaring over Potters Field Park and vanishing into

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nearby Shard rail-yard. Ministry oblivitors, now working round the clock, were dispatched to the district to alter the memories of nearly three hundred Muggle witnesses. Damage from multiple vehicle accidents was also magically repaired. Ministry officials caution, however, that with sightings of this magnitude, some residual memory and physical evidence is bound to remain.

Wolfram Tryce, Lead Obliviator, warns, “We are reduced to short-term memory extraction rather than full experiential replacement. All it will take is for two or three of the witnesses to encounter each other in their daily lives for their shared memories to resurface.”

As *Daily Prophet* readers are bound to know, the popular Hokus Brothers Circus, currently performing in wizarding London’s Diagon Alley, feature a Hebridean Black dragon that performs under the stage name of Montague Python. Circus owner and ringmaster Archibald Hokus assured this reporter personally that their dragon was present and accounted for throughout the entire night.

“Montague’s a registered beast, never out of our sight, and tame as a lamb, despite his fearsome size and reputation,” Hokus explained via floo early this morning. “And for good reason! Trained dragons are right dear, in every sense of the word. I don’t expect there’s another like him in the entire world, much as we might wish there was. And Monty’s been with us for so long now that he’s like a member of my own family.”

When pressed for whether the Ministry of Magic has been in contact with Hokus Brothers Circus to confirm the whereabouts of their dragon during last night’s sightings, Mr. Hokus assured that he is “cooperating in every possible way with the authorities.”

Curtailing suspicions in the non-magical community, the official explanation planted in Muggle news outlets for the sightings involves a runaway weather balloon and

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swamp gas build-up under the ice of the frozen Thames.

"Oldies are still goodies," Mr. Tryce explained—somewhat wearily, in this reporter's tenured estimation.

"Well," James sighed, overcome with tentative relief, "that's a stroke of luck, isn't it?" He pushed the newspaper back toward Rose, who collected and folded it again, looking nowhere near as relieved as James himself.

"Something's fishy about the whole story," she said in a harsh whisper, "Norberta is still loose in London, but nobody else has seen her since the middle of last night. How likely is that?"

"Maybe she got scared and found a hiding place," James shrugged uncertainly.

"That's possible, actually," Rose admitted, "Norwegian Ridgebacks, when confronted with the unknown, will usually find a familiar-looking hovel to retreat to, waiting out danger or confusion. The poor thing's probably terrified."

"Now you're sounding like Hagrid," James observed, surprised.

"Just because she may still get us all in the worst trouble of our lives," Rose sniffed, sagging low in her chair, "doesn't mean I'm heartless. Norberta didn't ask for any of this. She's just responding to instinct."

"It's Haddlebun who's to blame," another voice said, strained to a dense whisper. It was Ralph, sliding into a chair across the table, his eyes wide and serious. "I told you this whole affair was a disaster just waiting to happen!"

"I think it was me what told you all that Haddlebun couldn't be trusted," James said, shaking his head. "For whatever good that did."

Rose adopted her most beatific expression and said, "It's no use laying blame now. What's done is done. Now we have to figure out what to do about it."

"Easy for you to say," Ralph said, his voice still strained with anxiety. "You're the one that said nothing would go wrong if we got involved."

"I never said nothing would go wrong," Rose commented primly. "I said we wouldn't get caught."

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"S'not how I remember it," Ralph groused, folding his arms.

"So," James said, trying to bring the topic back on point. "If Norberta's hiding away someplace, like Rose says, what exactly is the problem?" Unwilling to abandon his newfound relief, he tapped the newspaper and added, "Out of sight, out of mind, right?"

Rose turned her impatient glare back on him and rasped, "That was your *dad* they quoted in the article, if you hadn't noticed. He's no Ministry pencil pusher. That would be *my dad*," she admitted with another weak slump in her chair, before rallying slightly, "but even *he* wouldn't buy this line of tripe about a 'rogue Boggart'. That's pure rubbish meant to console stupid people. Nothing more."

James rolled his eyes in exasperation. "We get a huge break on what could be the worst news in centuries, and you're complaining about it! We're off the hook, don't you see? What's the problem, Rose?"

"The problem is this isn't over," Rose insisted in a firm whisper. "It can't be! Norberta is still out there. And no matter what your dad says to the 'tenured reporter' at the *Daily Prophet*, he *knows* something's up."

"I'm with Rose," Ralph nodded. "Only, not. Because I happen to think the best thing for us to do right now is go to Merlin and tell him the whole bleedin' thing."

"It's fine," James soothed, glancing back and forth between Ralph and Rose. He gestured at the newspaper again and asked, "Did either of you show Hagrid?"

Rose shook her head and blew out a sigh. "I expect he knows about it already. The poor old bloke was worried sick last night. He would have gotten a newspaper first thing, just to know the extent of the damage. But mark my words. This isn't over. We set a dragon loose in London! It may be all clear for the moment, what with the Obliviators done with their work and the wrecks all mended. But Norberta's still out there. We're going to have to *do* something about that!"

"And I'm telling *you*, Rose," James said, leaning forward and stabbing a finger down onto the folded newspaper. "It's not our problem anymore! Norberta's in hiding, and the Ministry is explaining it away with Boggarts and weather balloons and swamp gas. We should be counting our lucky stars for the breaks we got here, *not* looking for

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more dark omens to fret about!" he flopped back in his chair again and crossed his arms over his chest before commenting in a different voice, "Zane sure was a dab hand at those *visum-ineptio* charms though last night, wasn't he?"

"Well, it's hard to tell, isn't it," Rose sighed, collecting the newspaper and pushing it back into her bag. "Those only work on people who don't know what they're really looking at."

"But you were impressed," Ralph agreed, tilting his head. "I could tell. Admit it: you're glad he came."

Rose's face flushed. It was a subtle thing, but James had known his cousin since she was a baby, and recognized it. She zipped her bag and avoided looking at him. "He's an irreverent, juvenile, reckless, manically cheerful, dodgy, American rogue."

James nodded. "And you like him for exactly everything that he annoys you for."

He expected her to be angry, but she simply slumped over the table, chin on her crossed arms, and stared out over the bookshelves. "He's no Scorpius, that's for sure."

"Ah," James nodded, feeling rather bold. "Because *he* annoys you for everything you used to like him for."

"Oh, I still like him. I can't help it," Rose shook her head on her arms, keeping her voice low. "But I hate myself for it. He keeps me in a confused tizzy most of the time. Every time I think we're all smoothed out, he does something else infuriating. My school-work is suffering for it."

Ralph glanced at her, frowning. "What are you talking about? You get top marks in every class."

"But I'm not enjoying it. It's all become a... a *drudgery*."

"Wow," James gave a low whistle. "A world where schoolwork is a drudgery. That's more than I can imagine."

"You're some help," Rose muttered disconsolately. "I don't even know why I'm saying this to you two."

James was tempted to tell Rose that Scorpius was simply no good for her, but he knew that it would be pointless. That was something she'd have to learn on her own, when she realized for herself that the

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sum total of their relationship was annoyance, heartbreak, and petty squabbles.

Instead, he mused, “‘Rose Malfoy’ sounds like a shade of sickening pink. Like that terrible stomach potion Grandma Weasley brews up whenever we get the flu.”

“Oh, thanks for that,” Rose sat up again and collected her bag. “That clears up everything.” She made to leave, then turned back to him and Ralph. “But seriously. This Norberta business isn’t over. We’ve made a mess, and something’s going to have to be done about it before it all comes crashing down on our heads.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked away. James watched her go, arms still crossed over his chest, and then blew out a weary sigh.

He firmly wanted to believe that Rose was over-reacting and that Norberta was no longer their problem. He was less convinced it was true, however, than that Rose still harbored a secret, hopeless torch for Zane Walker, even from inside the emotional cage of her relationship with Scorpius.

Ralph was still looking back at Rose as she turned past a bookshelf and out of sight. “I hate to say it, but she’s right about Norberta. And you’re right about her and Scorpius Malfoy. What a right wazzock he is.”

James sighed and stood up, finally deciding, reluctantly, that he should change out of last night’s grubby clothes. “This whole affair’s gone totally quantum. Way over our tiny heads. See you later, Ralph.”

As he made his way back to the Gryffindor tower, he mused that, much like Norberta loose in central London, Rose’s love life was just one more thing that he, James, couldn’t do anything about.



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As the weather is wont to do during those first ambiguous days of early spring, Friday night's snowstorm was followed by a wave of unseasonable warmth on Sunday. The balmy air chased the snow into sullen, crusted dregs in the castle's shadows, revealing the matted yellow grass beneath and summoning cascades of pallid icicles from the eaves and turrets. The ground squelched beneath James' trainers, soaking them through, as he made his way to the Quidditch pitch for the evening's match against Ravenclaw.

He was eager to get back onto a broom again after the long break, and was hoping to finally prove himself worthy of his position as Seeker. Thus far in the season, Gryffindor was in third place, following Ravenclaw and Slytherin. If they could snatch victory in today's match-up, they would climb to second with dreams of a possible tournament win. If they lost, they could most likely kiss the trophy goodbye.

The grandstands were full to overflowing, noisome and drumming with cheers and tramping feet, as James took his place on the field for the pre-game captains' handshake.

The match that followed was hard fought and mostly textbook. The air was clear beneath a bright grey sky, allowing for perfect visibility and offering almost no cross-breeze. James banked and swooped in search of the Snitch, keeping one eye out for rogue Bludgers as well as George Muldoon, who played Seeker for the Ravenclaws. As James swooped low over the Ravenclaw stadium, with the sun setting just beyond the streaming banners overhead, he spotted Edgar Edgecombe and his cronies, Ogden and Heathrow, seated in the front row, calling jeers through cupped hands. Dimly, James realized that he hadn't thought of them in weeks, and was very glad of it. Perhaps, he mused, he had heard the last of their petty, pointless antagonism. Even as he swooped on, however, he expected this was too much to hope for.

Gryffindor maintained a thin but persistent lead over Ravenclaw throughout the match, but nowhere near enough to secure a victory. James knew that the extra few points on the scoreboard would come to

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naught if Muldoon spotted and snagged the Snitch before he did. Suspense tightened in his chest like a noose as the sun dipped low over the grandstands and the match grew tense, feverish with anticipation.

James had not seen the Snitch the entire match, and knew that it simply must make an appearance sometime soon. He scanned the wild fracas of players, watched the wallop of Bludgers and the lob of Quaffles toward glinting rings. He heard Lily grunt with effort, managing to knock back shot after shot. Gritting his teeth, he waited and searched, straining his eyes so hard that they ached behind his glasses.

And then, with a glimmer of sunset gold and a streak of fluttering wings, there it was: the Snitch bobbed behind Ashley Doone as she hovered before the Ravenclaw goal rings. Then, it formed an arc of bronze as it dipped, banked, and zipped across the pitch, heading straight toward him.

James watched it approach, his breath caught in his chest. Surely, it wouldn't be this easy. And of course, it wasn't. The Snitch zigged in the air, angling away into the setting sunlight, and James hunkered over his broom, launching forward in pursuit.

From his peripheral vision, he tried to see if Muldoon was giving chase as well, but the sunset light made it impossible to tell. Eyes locked onto the fluttering golden ball, James twitched and banked through the melee of players, ducking under Bludgers and doing a full barrel-roll beneath Stebbins, Gryffindor's lead Beater.

"Go James!" he heard Graham call, followed by a surprised whoop from Deirdre as he blew past her. The crowd bellowed with a surge of excitement, and James knew that Muldoon must have joined the chase now as well. The match was likely only seconds from being over.

Suddenly, Ashley Doone was in front of James, careening straight into his path as she abandoned her post at the goals, attempting to block his course. He ticked his broom to the right and dipped his head, careening so close beneath her broom that its tail bristles combed his hair. When he glanced up again, Muldoon was swinging up alongside, his brow lowered, his face set in a grim scowl.

But he was too late, and James knew it. He exulted in it. As Muldoon struggled to catch up, James stretched out his hand, saw his shadow flicker over the swooping shape of the Snitch, and caught it.

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It was like catching an apple out of a tree in Grandma Weasley's orchard; just as natural and easy as snatching a dinner roll from a plate. He blinked at his own fist and the golden wings that fluttered against his palm. As he looked, the wings stilled. The match was over.

Amazed and grinning with delight, he glanced aside at Muldoon, who tugged his broom to a disgusted halt and dropped his chin to his chest, his sweaty hair falling over his face.

The grandstands erupted into deafening applause.

"And thanks to some solid flying and the eagle-eye of James Potter," Josephina Bartlett cried from the announcer's booth, "Gryffindor plucks a second-place standing from the grasp of tonight's rival, Ravenclaw!"

Firework charms popped and sizzled all around as the rest of the team piled around James, hooting with delight and boosting him up between them.

Lily threw an arm around James' shoulders in mid-air, and James decided, then and there, that he could forgive her for blaming him for their earlier loss against Slytherin. Apparently, sport could be both the greatest divider and the strongest unifier. None of it may be especially important in the long run, but for the moment it felt like the only thing that mattered in the whole world.

Until, moments later, as James was descending to the pitch, circling like a dandelion seed with the rest of team Gryffindor still hollering and congratulating each other all around him.

Seated in the second row of the Gryffindor grandstand was James' father, the unmistakable and legendary Harry Potter. He was smiling with pride, but not cheering. On his right was James' Uncle, Ron Weasley. And next to him, resplendent in her scarlet and gold scarf and bushy brown hair, was his Aunt Hermione. They were all three watching him, smiling tightly, and yet there was something in their eyes that said that they had not, in fact, come to Hogwarts, strictly speaking, for the evening's Quidditch match.

Rose was waiting next to the grandstand as James touched down and collected his broom.

"You saw?" she said, reading the sudden ashen look on his face.

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He nodded. "Have you talked to them already? What are they here for?"

"Let's just say," Rose said, pitching her voice low and offering him a meaningful look, "that none of them really think it was a boggart that showed up in London the other night."



The plan, according to Rose, was to meet up in Hagrid's hut at nightfall. She hurried back to the castle in order to Duck the message to Ralph while James retreated to the locker area and changed out of his Quidditch gear. He could barely bring himself to wait until that night to know what the meeting with his dad, aunt, and uncle was about. Worry and alarm fanned out in his veins like cold acid, infusing him with low dread, but there was nothing he could do about it. In the wake of the Quidditch match, the three grown-ups were scheduled for a private dinner with Headmaster Merlin and several teachers, ostensibly to discuss the continued disintegration of the Vow of Secrecy and theories about how to shore it up in the short term. James had the distinct idea that this was only a ruse meant to throw off suspicion. The real reason for their visit would be illuminated later that night in Hagrid's hut, for a much more select group.

He showered, hurried to dinner, and couldn't bring himself to eat. His stomach was in knots at the thought of what might be to come. What did his dad know about the Norberta debacle? Was Hagrid going to be sent to Azkaban? Had *the Daily Prophet* been fed a deliberately

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sanitized version of the story? Perhaps Norberta was even now continuing to tear a ravenous swathe of destruction across London! But how could such a thing possibly be kept quiet?

Finally, desperately, he confided his worries to Rose as they left the Great Hall.

“That’s idiotic,” she said with a patronizing sniff. “But I’m glad you’re at least taking the thing seriously now.”

“I’ve always taken it seriously!” James exclaimed, albeit in a low rasp, “I just hoped that the problem had gone away by itself. Can’t blame me for being optimistic, can you?”

“There’s optimistic and there’s irresponsible,” Rose said with a shake of her head.

As they neared the stairs, Ralph huffed toward them, his Head Boy badge glinting in the evening light. “What’s this all about, your parents coming here and arranging some secret meeting at Hagrid’s?” he panted. “Are we doomed? We’re completely doomed, aren’t we?”

“Cool your cauldron,” Rose said, “If it was as bad as that they would have carted us all off the moment they got here, not waited to meet all quiet-like under cover of darkness.”

“I *told* you it was a massive mistake,” Ralph grumped, leaning against the balustrade to catch his breath. “No more of this! We tell them everything. Agreed?”

“Maybe,” Rose hedged, raising a placating hand.

“And Merlin, too,” Ralph insisted. “And not just about this whole dragon affair. About everything. Petra, Odin-Vann, the Crimson Thread, the whole thing.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” James hissed, tugging Ralph, with considerable effort, into a dark corner beneath the stairs. “Not a chance! Are you completely mental?”

“I’m the sanest one of all of us,” Ralph protested, keeping his own voice low but clearly resenting it. “We’ve made the mistake before of not trusting Merlin and our parents! But this is too big for us to make that same mistake again!”

James opened his mouth to object, but Rose spoke before he could. “Merlin and our parents are sworn to capture Petra by any means necessary, not to help her. You know that, Ralph. You *saw* what

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happened when Merlin and Petra clashed in the World Between the Worlds."

Ralph ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "Has it occurred to you two that maybe they're *right* to try to stop her?" He glared at them each in turn, and then shook his head, overruling their objections. "Look, I trust Petra as much as I trust either of you. I believe she *thinks* this is the only plan that will work. But just because Petra has awesome powers doesn't mean she's always right. And don't even get me started about Odin-Vann. He's as dodgy as a rubber galleon. I trust Merlin and our parents ten times more than I trust *that* skinny prat. We need their help, and you know it."

Rose merely gave a hard sigh and turned to look at James. Clearly, she had been struggling with this very dilemma.

And it was only in that moment that James finally understood his biggest reason for keeping Petra's plan a secret. The weight of the realization chilled him all the way to his heels. Rose saw it on his face, as did Ralph, who blanched a little himself.

"What is it?" he asked, dropping his voice to a whisper. "What do you know?"

James shook his head slowly. "It's not what I know," he breathed, leaning against the wall and sliding down into a weak crouch. "It's what I'm afraid could happen. What *will* happen, if we tell Merlin and our parents."

Ralph hunkered down as well. Rose knelt and smoothed her skirt over her knees. "They'll try to reason with her, won't they?" she said reasonably. "If they can get her to listen, they'll try to talk her out of her plan."

James shook his head again. "But they won't succeed. Petra is completely committed. She's made a *Horcrux* just to assure she can carry out her plan. No way that Merlin and our parents will be able to talk her out of it. That means they won't have any choice but to try to stop her however they can."

Rose's face paled now as she nodded, beginning to understand. "And if they oppose her by force..."

Ralph's shoulders slumped. "People will end up getting hurt. Maybe even killed."

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“But not Petra,” James whispered. “That’s the whole point of the Horcrux. They may resort to trying to cut her down, but it won’t work. And then...”

“*She will attack them,*” Rose said in a small voice. “Petra will kill anyone who stands in her way.”

James felt cold to the bone as he nodded. “She’ll do it because she thinks it’s the only way to save the entire world. She’ll hate it. But she *will* do it. Because she believes she is strong enough to make the hardest choice of all.”

Rose added, “And because her soul is already stained with *one* death.”

Ralph stared down at the floor between them, apparently thinking hard, mulling over the cold truth of their words. “So,” he muttered, “if we tell Merlin or our parents, they may end up dead. And it would be partly our fault, because we set them up to oppose someone they can’t possibly defeat.”

None of them responded. After a long moment, Ralph raised his head again.

“Not even Merlin?”

James looked at Rose, then Ralph. “Merlin would be our best hope. But remember what happened when he confronted Petra at the parade in New York, on the Night of the Unveiling. He tried to stop her. He used his staff on her. And it didn’t even stun her. He was nothing to her.”

Ralph frowned, still struggling with the idea. “But the city is her element! It’s the source of her power! Sure, she was more powerful than him there. But maybe next time...”

With a deep sigh, Rose said, “*If* there’s a next time, Petra will make sure the odds are stacked in her favor again, just like they were in New York. She knows Merlin’s weakness. She won’t let him have any advantage over her. She will defeat him. And when she does, he won’t ever come back.”

Ralph simply scowled and stared at the floor again. He didn’t like it. James could see that. But neither could he argue with it.

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Without a word, the three went their separate ways. They didn't see each other again until nearly nine o'clock, as they congregated in the entrance hall and slipped out into the cold of the night.

Hagrid's hut glowed with yellow light. A ribbon of grey smoke issued from its stone chimney, just like always, and yet James had never felt less welcomed by the familiar hut than he did now. He was mad with suspense about what was to come, but also trembling with trepidation that he might be about to get into the worst trouble of his life.

A noise suddenly wafted across the blue evening glow of the lawns, stopping James, Rose, and Ralph in their tracks. It was faint but unmistakable, and it was the last sound they expected to hear coming from the depths of the hut.

It was laughter. Several voices, all different timbres, were laughing in unison, forming a melody like an old song, long forgotten.

James glanced aside in alarm and met Rose's puzzled gaze. Ralph gulped audibly.

"Is that a good sign," he whispered, "or a bad sign?"

Rose shrugged uncertainly, and then, more slowly, resumed her short trek across the lawn. James and Ralph followed tentatively.

The laughter came again, growing louder as the three approached the hut. Rose raised her small fist and knocked once, softly, almost as if she hoped not to be heard. The hut went immediately silent. Several seconds later, the door budged open and the shaggy bulk of Hagrid's head peered out. His dark eyes flicked over the three students, then he nodded and stepped back, tugging the door open with him.

James followed Rose and Ralph inside and glanced around.

Seated around the huge table, their faces illuminated in the glow of a single lantern, with the dishes of a late tea scattered between them, were Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and his wife Hermione. They were dressed in dark jeans and heavy sweaters, their faces merry but quiet as they looked up at the newcomers, as if reluctantly prepared to get down to the business of the night.

Hagrid shut the hut door with a clunk and gestured toward the table. "We was just discussin' old times," he acknowledged. "Lot o'

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memories with these three. Not all of ‘em good, but definitely more of ‘em than not.”

Hermione nodded and pointed to a small chair beneath the window. “I remember you sitting right there, Ron,” she commented, “vomiting slugs for a good quarter hour. Is that one of the good memories or the bad ones?”

James’ father tried not to grin. Ron rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You’re a laugh riot, Mrs. Weasley. If you recall, that was a result of me trying to defend your prodigious honour.”

“And failing admirably,” Harry agreed. “But it’s definitely the thought that counts.”

Hermione put an arm around her husband and dipped her head to his shoulder. “I do remember,” she said warmly, “And I’ll never forget it.”

“Nice catch out there today, James,” Ron nodded, turning to James with a crooked smile.

James moved into the light of the table, looking from face to face for some sign of what was going on. His father saw the question on his face and gave a brief nod.

“We know about Norberta,” he admitted. “And before you give Hagrid any grief, no, it isn’t because he told us.”

Hagrid raised both of his slab-like hands as he settled back into his chair. “Didn’t utter nary a word. Not this time.”

Rose narrowed her eyes, moving to budge onto the chair next to her mother, who shifted to allow room. “So, how *do* you know, then?” she asked, looking cagily around the table. “And, er, *what* do you know?”

Her father spoke up then, raising a hand to tick off points on his fingers. “We know about the plan to steal off to London to facilitate transport of a certain unregistered Norwegian Ridgeback whose living arrangement with the giants had become tenuous, at best. We know that the plan, such as it was, went terribly awry, leading to said dragon’s escape into the city proper, causing hundreds of poor Muggle Londoners to soil their britches in mortal terror.”

“Ronald,” Hermione clucked her tongue in disdain.

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"And," Ron went on, not missing a beat, "we know that, fortunately for everyone involved, said dragon—a certain female named, through no fault of her own, Norberta—quickly went to ground, hiding herself away somewhere within the confines of the city proper, and is apparently still there, scared and waiting until such time as she is discovered, or becomes hungry enough to have to go hunting for food."

James sagged into the last empty seat at the table, weak with a mixture of relief and embarrassment. To his father, he asked, "How did you work all of this out?"

"Simple," Harry said, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sleeve. "It's my *job* to work things out."

"We looked up the records of every registered dragon in a hundred mile radius," Hermione explained. "It's not exactly a long list. We checked out each one and determined they'd all been accounted for on the night in question. And since native Welsh Greens all stay far away from the cities by nature, that left only one option."

Ron nodded. "A certain Norwegian Ridgeback that only a few people know about, and that we three are nominally responsible for."

"*We four*," Harry corrected, tossing a sidelong glance at Hagrid.

"Not to mention," Ron added, "That several of the Muggle witnesses that night reported seeing a ship broken through the ice of the Thames. Some said it was a long old ship with masts and a great paddlewheel. Others said it was a regular old tugboat. Same place, same time."

Hermione went on, "So we made some quick deductions, and then came straight here to ask Hagrid what, precisely, he was up to, and who else had come along for the ride." At this, she turned to her daughter with a pointed look.

"What were we supposed to do?" Rose said shrilly. "Let poor old Hagrid go off and try to rescue Norberta by himself in that floating bucket of his? He would have, you know! We had an obligation to help, all three of us. It wasn't my fault that Zane Walker ended up coming along for the ride! I wanted to send him back to Alma Aleron the moment Ralph Ducked him here!"

James saw what was happening an instant before his Aunt Hermione raised her eyebrows and turned to look back at her husband, a sly, knowing expression on her face.

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“*Nary* a word,” Hagrid repeated emphatically. “It wasn’t me this time.”

Ralph smacked a hand to his forehead.

Rose looked from her mother to her father, then across the table to her uncle, who dipped his eyes to the tabletop and fingered his empty teacup.

Rose said, “You didn’t know any of that... did you?”

“It’s the oldest trick in the Auror book,” James sighed, flopping back in his chair. “Convince them you already know everything, and then just sit back and listen. He’s been doing it to Albus, Lil, and I for years.”

“But...!” Rose fumed, her cheeks going deep crimson. “But you said...!” She glared at her uncle accusingly.

Harry said, “It’s like I told you: it’s my job to work things out. You were very helpful, Rose. Thank you.”

Hermione turned to Hagrid. “How could you let them come?” she asked reproachfully. “That was extremely dangerous.”

“No more than anything we did in our day,” Ron said softly, “and for the exact same dragon.”

“That’s what I *told* them!” Rose spluttered. “We were just finishing what you started!”

Hermione gave her daughter a stern look. “Except that *we* succeeded. *You* lot set a dragon loose in London.”

“Oh, don’t blame them,” Hagrid moaned, shaking his great head mournfully. “It’s all my fault. I never should o’ let ‘em come along. Never should ‘ave involved ‘em at all. I was just so worried about Norberta. I wasn’t thinkin’ straight.”

Harry reached around James’ shoulders and touched Hagrid’s arm. “There’s no blame to be had. I know how persistent these three can be. Mainly because I remember how persistent *us* three used to be. There’s nothing to be gained by pointing fingers now.”

Ralph, still standing behind Hagrid’s chair, piped up, “Especially since I tried to warn them over and over that the whole plan was a nightmare from the start!”

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Hermione nodded with feeling. “Just like I tried to warn *these* two back when we were still students and Norberta was just a hatchling. *Somebody* needs to be the voice of reason.”

“*Thank you!*” Ralph nodded, holding out his hands in a helpless gesture. “It’s a thankless job, innit?”

“Prudence and discretion are rarely popular,” Hermione agreed wisely, now glancing aside at James, who sank lower in his seat.

“The *point* is,” Harry spoke up, “This is a serious dilemma that needs to be resolved. We all have a hand in causing it. So it’s up to us to try to mend it before any more Muggle Londoners are terrorized by a dragon in their streets.”

Hagrid nodded. “Or Norberta has to go one more day starvin’ and terrified in th’ city somewhere.”

Hermione gave him an impatient look. “Or any poor old gamekeeper gets sent away to Azkaban for the rest of his life. Let’s try to keep this in perspective, shall we?”

Harry sat up in his chair and put his spectacles back on. “We’ve been fortunate so far that Norberta went into hiding somehow. But it won’t last forever. The first task is to find her and get her out of the city without anyone else seeing her, Muggle or otherwise. The second task...?” He glanced across the table to Ron, who perked up.

“I spoke to Charlie this afternoon by floo. He says they’re pretty crowded now, what with the Romanian government rounding up and interring all registered dragons in his preserve. But according to him, there’s always a space for Norberta, even if it means letting her bunk with the twins in their apartment in Brașov.”

“But!” Hagrid said, sitting up in his seat and putting both hands flat onto the table. “I already made arrangements here! The barn’s all emptied out an’ a-waitin’!”

Ron suddenly arched his eyebrows and made a point of arranging the cups and saucers on the table before him.

“Hagrid,” Hermione said gently. “You *know* you can’t keep Norberta here on Hogwarts grounds. Headmaster Merlin may have a soft spot for dangerous creatures, just like you, but even he won’t turn a blind eye to a contraband dragon. And you can’t possibly think you can keep it a secret from him...?”

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Hagrid sat rigid for a long moment, chewing his lips and staring hard at Hermione. Then he slumped back again, producing a strained creak from his chair. "I know," he admitted sadly. "I've known all along. It's daft, it is. I guess I was just hopin' that, once th' deed was done an' she was here..."

"It's better this way," Harry nodded. "For everybody involved."

"Not fer Norberta!" Hagrid exclaimed, lifting his shaggy head again. "She'll go crazy, all cooped up with them Romanian Longhorns! They're not compatible with Ridgebacks, an' they're powerful territorial creatures, those Longhorns! Norberta's already half-lame, what with 'er bad wing! They'll sense weakness an' make mincemeat out o' the poor old girl!"

"It's already settled," Ron said, finally looking up from the table. "If we can get Norberta out of the city on your ship, we only have to get her as far as the wizard port in Bruges. We've arranged an airship that can get her the rest of the way to Charlie in Brașov, no questions asked, cash on the barrelhead."

"An' whose payin' fer it?" Hagrid demanded, clearly groping for any excuse to deny the plan.

"We all pitched in," Hermione said, watching Hagrid closely, letting him see her eyes. "And you can, too, if you want. It's less than you might think. And it's the least we can do. After all, we really are partly responsible for this whole thing. Even if some of us *did* try to act as a voice of reason before the fact." Here, she glanced up at Ralph and offered a small, commiserating smile.

Hagrid drew a huge, quaking sigh, and then nodded slowly. "I suppose yer right. But I won't let any o' yeh lot pay a single knut for th' transport. I've plenty o' money put away, an' no other ideas what t' do with it. This is as good a way to spend it as any. The best way of all, prob'ly."

Hermione nodded and relaxed in her seat.

Ralph asked, "So, if the first job is to find Norberta, how exactly do we do that?"

"There's no 'we,'" Harry countered, looking up at the big boy, and then at James and Rose. "You three have done enough already. All

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we need you for now is to help us pinpoint precisely where Norberta was headed. We'll take it from there."

"*Thank* you," Ralph said again, finally collapsing into Hagrid's huge armchair before the fire.

"But Mum—!" Rose protested, but her mother was already shaking her head firmly.

"Not a chance, Rose," she said, brooking no argument. "You have school tomorrow. No way I'm allowing you to stay out to who knows what hour tonight, even if I *can* keep my eyes on you this time."

James blinked in surprise. "We're doing it tonight?"

"*We* are doing it," his father clarified patiently, nodding aside at Ron and Hermione. "We can't afford to wait any longer. Norberta won't stay hidden forever. We need to find her now, and get her out of the city immediately, before this whole mess goes total disaster and we're all on the hook for it."

"Some more than others," Ron pointed out quickly, glancing around the table. "Just so we're clear on that. Yeah?" He turned his gaze apologetically to Hagrid, who nodded sadly.

Rose crossed her arms sullenly. "She was headed southwest," she admitted in a taut voice. "Low, skipping over cars and rooftops. She couldn't have gotten far."

Ron leaned past Hermione and kissed his daughter on the top of her head. "Thanks love. And for what it's worth, I wish you *could* come along. But your mum's right. What kind of dad would I be if I took you out dragon-hunting on a school-night?"

"A bloody brilliant one?" Rose suggested, glancing up at him from beneath her eyebrows.

"Spot on," he nodded gravely. Hermione elbowed him aside with a roll of her eyes.

"So where will she be hidin'?" Ralph asked from the armchair. "The sewers, maybe?"

Hagrid shook his head. "Nah, nah," he sighed, "Norwegian Ridgebacks are powerful good at hidin', but they'll always look fer someplace that feels recognizable to 'em. Someplace that reminds 'em o' their ancestral homeland, all comfortin' and familiar."

"Charlie says the same thing," Ron agreed. "He says they have strong memories burnt into their instincts of the lands and places they

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originally came from. He says all we have to do is find someplace that looks and feels like it might fit right into the Norwegian countryside, a hundred years ago.”

James frowned at his uncle. “In modern London?”

Ron shrugged. “Well... sure. You know. Something that feels Norwegian-like. So...” He looked around at the others, “what do things look like in Norway, then?”

“There’s lots of fjords,” Ralph suggested. “My dad’s always going on about the fjords. Says he means to take us there to see them someday. Says they’re a wonder of the world.”

Rose gave a brisk sigh. “There aren’t any fjords in central London.”

“All right, then,” Harry said with a nod. “So, buildings and things. What would look Norwegian enough to attract a scared and homesick dragon?”

Ron sat up and pointed at Harry in inspiration. “Moss on roofs! With, like, trees growing on top. Right? All fairy-tale and heavy wood and fancy cut-outs on the doors, that sort of thing.” He glanced aside at Hermione. “Er, right?”

“This is definitely a problem,” Harry said, “if none of us has any idea what architectural details might look Norwegian enough to attract a wayward dragon.”

“Um,” James said, his eyes going wide as an idea materialized, fully formed, in his head. “Will you let me come along tonight...?”

“*No*,” Hermione repeated, putting her hand down on the table. “We’ve already been over this—”

“IF,” James interrupted, glancing from his aunt to his father, knowing that he was severely pressing his luck, “*if* I can find us an expert on all sorts of architecture?”

Harry studied his son, his eyes probing, skeptical but reluctantly considering. “And just who,” he asked slowly, “might this architectural expert be?”



## 19. BACK TO LONDON

“You told your *dad!*?” Millie hissed, her eyes bulging in the shadows outside the Hufflepuff common room door.

“I didn’t say any *names*,” James whispered defensively, glancing around to assure they weren’t overheard. The stacks of barrels along the corridor offered a nominal hiding place, and the low ceiling eliminated echoes. Dimly, a little wistfully, James remembered kissing Millie in almost this exact spot only a few weeks earlier. “I just said I knew *somebody* who knows architecture. And I can’t tell you what we need a person like that for. Not until you agree to come. And I really hope you will, because, well, we really do need you and your architectural expertise.”

Millie rolled her eyes impatiently. She was dressed in loose grey sweatpants and a yellow Hufflepuff Quidditch tee shirt. The hand-lettered legend across the front read *WE’LL HUFFlePUFF and BLOW YOUR HOUSE DOWN!*

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“James,” Millie said, covering her eyes with one hand. “I’ve got exactly one book on the subject, and I’ve barely had a chance to crack it so far. What sort of ‘expertise’ do you need, exactly?”

James hedged a little, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Well. We need somebody who can recognize building styles that might look at home in... a different country.”

Millie peeked over her hand at him, and then dropped it, cocking her head. “What country?”

“Norway,” James answered, deciding to go for broke.

“I don’t know anything about Norwegian architecture,” Millie said, bracing her hands on her hips. “Not any more than the average person does.”

“*I’m* the average person,” James said helplessly, “and up until ten minutes ago I didn’t know Norwegian architecture was even a thing!”

“Look, I wouldn’t be any help,” Millie insisted, becoming annoyed. “Whatever you told your dad, I doubt I can live up to it. When it comes to Norway, I can barely tell a redwood stave from a Romanesque.”

“See?” James brightened, boggling at her in the dark. “You *do* know what you’re talking about!”

“Those are just words I picked up while skimming books,” Millie exclaimed in annoyance. “The sentence barely even makes sense. If you really want someone who knows their stuff, why don’t you go talk to Blake? Poor bloke’s probably still groping around for his invisible car.” She turned away, reaching for the door.

“Millie,” James whispered, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. She halted, but didn’t turn back to him. Still whispering, he said, “I’m sorry for the way I acted that night. I’m not sorry for *Blake*—I still think he’s an obnoxious, scheming pikey. But I’m sorry to *you* that I was a jealous, suspicious duffer. And later on the train, it was stupid of me to tell Ralph what I did. I didn’t want you to find out from him. I acted like a coward.”

Millie considered this, one hand still on the latch of the common room door. “I could’ve taken it,” she said quietly. “If you’d just come and told me yourself.”

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"I was on my way to do that," James sighed. "But I kept finding reasons to put it off. I didn't want to hurt you."

"Well," she nodded, still staring back at the closed door, "you did hurt me. But I'm a big girl. I can handle it. And I'm mostly over it. Mostly."

James lowered his hand. "I'm glad. I do really like you, Millie. I just don't..."

He stopped, knowing he couldn't go any further without explaining his connection to Petra, and the hopeless love he felt for her.

Fortunately, he didn't need to say anymore. Millie glanced back at him over her shoulder, and the look on her face told him she was content to leave it at that.

"This doesn't make me know any more about Norwegian architecture," she said, meeting his gaze.

He shrugged and sighed.

Millie turned back to him fully. "But it *does* make me slightly more willing to help you. If not for your sake, then at least for your dad. I've been hearing about *him* since I was in nappies. Let me change and get my coat. It's about time *my* name appeared in one of Revalvier's books."



Merlin came along as well.

James didn't discover this until they were already on the ship, barreling along the subterranean tunnels en route back to London. As he and Millie clambered down the steps into the narrow hold, they

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encountered the headmaster seated on a crate reading a small but immensely thick book, a pair of glinting spectacles perched low on his nose.

James stumbled to a halt so quickly that Millie clambered into him from behind.

The ship rocked precipitously and groaned all around, occasionally juddering as the hull ground against the rushing tunnel beyond. Merlin seemed completely oblivious to these things, but he did clap his book shut and look up at the students, his face merely pleasantly curious.

"I doubt you two have developed your sea legs yet," he announced, and patted a bench bolted to the sloping hull next to him. "Do come sit down before you do yourselves harm."

James hesitated, his mind racing with a mixture of speechless surprise and cold fear. Why was the headmaster here? What did he know? Was he a portent of official trouble to come?

After a moment, Millie pushed James aside and half walked, half stumbled to the bench. Strategically, she sat at the end of the bench furthest from the headmaster, leaving James the space right to him. With a silent sigh and a gulp, he lurched to the bench and fell to a seat upon it.

Merlin opened his tiny book again, adjusted his spectacles, and casually said, "I trust your father, aunt, and uncle are assisting Mr. Hagrid in piloting the ship to our destination?"

James nodded uncertainly. He knew that there wasn't much piloting to be done once the ship was caught in the throat of the rushing tunnels, but felt there was no point in explaining it.

Instead, he asked in a low voice, "I guess we're all going to be in trouble when we get back?"

"Trouble?" the headmaster repeated the word as if he'd never heard it before. "Whatever for?"

James blinked aside at him. "You know why we're going to London, right? You're not just along for the ride?"

Merlin shrugged his huge shoulders. "I know that magical safeguards in the cities have deteriorated to the point that a dragon has penetrated Muggle spaces, causing some distress to hapless witnesses.

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And I know that you and your friends were ultimately responsible for it.” He tilted an eye at James, as if he could see the wave of guilt that washed over him, making him shrink against the hull wall. Lowering his voice to a low rumble, the headmaster said, “Your error was not in attempting to rescue the dragon from her own persistent instincts, Mr. Potter. Until recent years, normal magical protections would have rendered the city impenetrable to creatures such as she. Nor did you err in not telling me of your plans. I am, personally, quite content when citizens willingly delegate these tasks to themselves. It frees those such as myself to their own unique devices.”

“So...” James said, frowning a little. “We’re *not* in trouble?”

“Your error,” Merlin said, raising a finger, “*and* the error of your companions, was to trust an elf whose motives were proven to be suspect.”

James sat up in surprise. “How did you know about her? We didn’t mention her to my dad or anyone else!”

Merlin drew a deep sigh and blew it out thoughtfully. “I’d *prefer* to allow you to believe that I divined this information via my own mysterious and terrible machinations. But I find that trust is a more valuable commodity than awe when it comes to you, Mr. Potter. Therefore I will admit: I spoke to Hagrid, and he wisely regaled me with the whole story. We conversed on the deck of this very ship as we awaited you and your family. He told me of the house elf, and her sabotage of your otherwise courageous, if rather foolhardy, arrangement with his giantish kin.”

James slumped in mingled relief and humiliation. “I *tried* to tell them that Heddlebun couldn’t be trusted. I saw what she did back at the Vandergriff’s house.”

“*You* saw it,” Merlin clarified, “But *Hagrid* did not. Nor your cousin, or Mr. Walker, or Mr. Dolohov.”

James glanced aside at him again. “Exactly. So?”

“So the truth was clear for you to see, but cloudy for them. It was your responsibility to *make* it clear, by whatever means necessary. Thus, the responsibility for the error rests heavier on your shoulders than theirs.”

This wasn’t the first time that James had encountered the headmaster’s strict, unforgiving interpretation of responsibility, but it

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still nettled him to no end. He crossed his arms, clutching his shoulders against the chill of the hold. "So it's all my fault, then. Is that what you want me to hear?"

Merlin shrugged again. "If there is one thing that constantly dismays me about this age, it is the speed and ease with which good people give up. Grant me a stubborn donkey over a weak-willed saint. At least the donkey's kick can be aimed at the proper doors."

"So," James said, rolling his eyes to himself, "just to be clear, *are* we in trouble or not?"

"That is what we are on this journey to discover," Merlin answered, returning his gaze to the small book in his hands. To James' eye, the book looked completely blank, but he knew that this was surely an illusion to prevent its being read by the likes of him. "For you, Mr. Potter, the days of trouble being meted out in house points and lines are over. Make no mistake: from here onward, trouble shall be measured in laws, years, and blood."

James chose to view this as a good thing, in the sense that it didn't seem to indicate that the headmaster intended to give him, Ralph, or Rose any official punishment.

Soon enough, the ship tilted upwards and seemed to accelerate. The momentum pushed James against Millie, almost driving her off her end of the short bench. Merlin, however, remained completely planted, as if his feet were rooted to the floor. He continued to read his tiny, fat book, peering down through his spectacles, even as the ship rocked upright, seemed to hover in suspension for a long, sickening moment, and then keeled slowly forward, falling flat again onto a thudding, sloshing surface.

"Londontown, I presume," Merlin said, finally tucking his book into his robes and standing as much as the low overhead would allow. Footsteps sounded from above, moving quickly. Merlin climbed the stairs to the deck with James and Millie following close behind.

Cold air coursed over the deck above and whistled eerily through the rigging. By the look of the city all around, the Gertrude appeared to have surfaced in exactly the same place as last time. Fortunate, of course, since the ice of the Thames had not frozen over the original hole yet.

The adults congregated on the stern of the ship and, without a word, apparated to the shore, materializing on a long boardwalk in the shadow of a dark wharf, where they were nothing more than shadows on a darker background. Millie side-along apparated with Hermione and Ron, while Harry remained last to take James.

"That was wily of you to arrange to come along the way that you did," he said with a wry smile. "I hope your friend Millie knows enough to make it worth it."

James shrugged a little. "She hopes so, too."

He took his father's hand when he offered it. A moment later, the world vanished into a whip-crack and a whirl of cold darkness. Within a sliver of a second, James' feet smacked down onto the leaning planks of the boardwalk.

When he looked up, Merlin had his staff in his hand, having produced it out of thin air, as he always did when he desired it. He held it aloft over the edge of the boardwalk, pointing it toward the dark ship where it bobbed in its circle of broken ice.

"*Cuddiasid*," he said, reverting to the guttural language of his ancient origins. A wave of purple light swept upwards through the runes of his staff, culminating in the tip with a brief but blinding flash. When James' eyes cleared, the Gertrude was gone. Shards of broken ice choked the hole where it had rocked only a second before. The ship was still there, James knew, but rendered utterly hidden and invisible through whatever prehistoric enchantment the sorcerer had cast over it.

"That's pretty handy," Millie commented, awed. "I see why you came along."

"My usefulness has only begun to reveal itself," Merlin said, clacking his staff to the wooden plank next to his feet. "Assuming that *your* usefulness serves as well as Mr. Potter hopes."

Millie looked uncomfortably from Merlin to James.

Hagrid spoke up, pointing to the brightly glowing shape of Tower Bridge in the near distance. "Norberta went that way. Down into th' city, southwest from th' south tower."

Harry struck out, inviting the others to follow. "Then let us get into the proper vicinity. Perhaps we will get lucky and stumble upon the unmistakable stench of dragon manure."

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Ron shrugged gamely. “That’s the only time *that* smell’s been called ‘lucky’, I wager.”

“Wellnow,” Hagrid suggested, shrugging his coat more tightly about his shoulders, “I’ve always found dragon scat t’ ‘ave a not unpleasant odor, as a matter o’ fact. Now hippogriff guano, *gor...*” He shook his head violently, “noble creatures they may be, but *there’s* a stink to peel the varnish off yer broomstick.”

Following along behind, Hermione sniffed, “I expect there *are* better topics of conversation we might explore.”

From there, the troupe walked in silence as they approached the lights and sounds of the city, climbing a switchback of concrete stairs to a thoroughfare lit with brilliant orange-ish streetlamps on tall, industrial-looking posts. The street was surprisingly busy for the hour, filled with gleaming black taxis, lorries belching smoke, red double-decker buses, and endless automobiles. Dozens of traffic lights hung over cross-roads, blinking their red, amber, and green eyes at the lines of vehicles below. In one direction, Tower Bridge loomed over low rooftops. In the other, a massive roundabout spun with vehicles, lit like a flying saucer, like a larger-than-life version of the Wocket from James’ first year.

Merlin stepped out to cross the crowded thoroughfare, completely ignoring the rushing vehicles that bore down on him, their headlamps glaring and painting his robes with brightness.

“Wait!” James called, alarmed, but it was too late. Vehicles swooped past and around the huge man at full speed, neither swerving nor sounding their horns. Neither did Merlin pay the vehicles any attention. He merely strode across the many lanes, his staff clacking the pavement at his side. Halfway across, he paused to look back at the people watching, dumbfounded, from the curb behind.

“A little trick I learned navigating herds of stampeding Erumpents during my travels in darkest Africa,” he called in his deep, resonating voice. “Follow close behind. We have a schedule to keep.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Ron muttered in a high voice. “He’s not serious, is he?”

Hermione said, “I think *I’ll* take the cross-walk, if you don’t mind.” She struck off at a trot toward the nearest traffic light some fifty yards away.

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"I'm with her," Ron nodded firmly. "We'll catch up to 'Mr. Red Cross-code Man' on the other side, and schedule be damned."

Hagrid wrung his huge hands in miserable indecision, glancing back and forth between the headmaster's retreating back and the hurrying Weasleys. "I'll jus'" He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, beginning to back away, "keep an eye on 'em, then. Erm." Turning, he hastened to join Ron and Hermione, his long coat flapping behind him.

"I'm going to try it," Millie said, watching the headmaster with a twinkle in her eye.

"What!?" James began, "Millie, we can't just—" but she had already stepped off the curb. Walking purposefully, without a glance back, she began to stride across the first lane. Headlamps painted her side with increasing luminance as vehicles bore down on her.

"Millie!" he called, and took one step down from the curb. A bus swept past her, buffeting her hair with the zooming blast of its passage. She didn't even glance at it.

"Dad!" James exclaimed, turning aside to his father, but his father wasn't there anymore, either. The elder Potter was also striding out onto the busy street, neither hurrying nor hesitating, keeping his gaze straight ahead as vehicles blurred past in both directions, whipping at his pant-legs and unruly hair.

James hovered a moment longer, completely stymied with uncertainty. And then, with a gulp and a steeling of his already frayed nerve, he stepped out onto the pavement of the thoroughfare himself.

The key, it appeared, was not to watch, not to pay the slightest attention to the rushing lanes of vehicles on either side. He kept his eyes firmly on his father's back as he trod ahead of him, even as his father seemed to watch Millie ahead of *him*. Merlin had reached the other side now, having crossed no less than six lanes of busy nighttime traffic.

Without warning, a load of vehicles blared past in both directions, flickering between James and his father, momentarily obscuring his view. His eyes strained, reflexively trying to follow the flashing metal and glass of the vehicles, to look both ways to assure that his next step wouldn't place him into the path of a speeding lorry. And yet, just barely, James resisted, keeping his gaze locked dead ahead. And each step, amazingly, carried him forward between roaring cars and taxis, buses and vans, threading through them in a sort of suicidal dance. The

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passing drivers, for their part, seemed completely oblivious to the line of magical pedestrians crossing between them. James could feel the hot blat of exhausts on his face, the sooty grit of road grime peppering his cheeks and hair. And yet, almost before he thought it possible, he found himself stepping up onto the curb of the other side of the boulevard, leaving the deafening drone of traffic behind him.

"That was brilliant!" Millie exclaimed, grabbing James' hands and pulling him forward, into a narrow alley. "Wasn't it a complete blast?"

"How could you *do* that?" James gasped, his heart still slamming in his throat. "Either of you?!"

Harry shrugged with one shoulder, glancing into the mouth of the alley, where Merlin was still striding away, a mere silhouette against the security lights beyond. "If Merlin said it was safe, I've come to trust him," he said. "But don't you dare ever try that on your own. Either of you."

"No worries there!" James said, still struggling to catch his breath over the thunder of his heart. He glanced around the street outside the alley. "Where's Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron?"

"They'll catch up to us," his father answered, "come on. It would seem that the Headmaster is in the teeth of the hunt."

James found himself running along behind his father into the shadows and stink of the alley. Darkness choked the space, interrupted only by glaring security lights that didn't seem to illuminate anything other than slushy puddles and hulking trash bins.

The alley ended in a narrow cobbled road bordered by a long chain-link fence. Beyond the fence was a dark open space, crowded with low weeds and bushes, that James vaguely recognized as a railway switchyard.

Merlin had stopped before the fence, the runes of his staff pulsing a pale blue. "In there," he said, nodding his bearded chin. He stepped forward and the chain-link rattled and rang before him as if buffeted by a sudden, silent gale. The mesh of metal unfurled and unraveled, spiraling out from a centre point and forming a gaping opening just as the headmaster stepped through it, not even bowing his head. James and Millie clambered to follow him through, now with

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James' father in the rear, his wand held at the ready, his eyes alert behind his spectacles.

"What about the others?" Millie said, her voice unconsciously hushed beneath the steady thrum of the city all around.

"Coming," Hermione's voice called, approaching from behind. James turned to see his aunt run lightly out of the darkness, her bushy hair bouncing about her face. "I'm right here. And Ron is..." She turned to look back. "Well. On his way, it would seem."

"Save yourselves!" a man's voice wheezed from the vicinity of the chain-link fence. "I'll just lie down here and die."

"Come on, Ron," Harry called back. "Think of it as exercise."

Ron approached at a shamble, breathing hard. "You mean she's not the only one what does this running thing just for *fun*? That's a masochist streak, you ask me."

Millie asked, "What about Hagrid?"

"I thought it might be a good idea to have him ask around at some of the wizarding establishments near Diagon Alley," Hermione said. "There are loads of pubs and pawn shops and the like, secretly run by witches and wizards for Muggle patronage. Some of them might have seen or heard something about where Norberta has holed up."

"He didn't want to go," Ron said, glancing aside at Harry. "But we thought... er... he might be more *useful* in that capacity."

Harry nodded once, meaningfully. Tonight's plan relied largely on subtlety and finesse, James knew, and neither of those things exactly sprang to mind when one thought of Hagrid.

The troupe began to move into the darkness of the switchyard again. Harry nodded toward Merlin and explained, "The old man seems to have caught a hint of a trail or something."

"Not a trail as such," Merlin said as he walked. "There may not be much wild left in the City, but what there is of it, the weed-grasses and brush, the beetles and rats, they remember the scent of a powerful beast near here, too vague to pinpoint exactly."

Moving swiftly, James followed his dad and the others into the darkness. Soon, they were stepping up over humps of railroad tracks, their footsteps grinding on gravel.

"Miss Vandegriff," Merlin announced from the lead, "what shall we be looking for from this point? I understand that you are our

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resident expert on the sorts of Norwegian structures that might attract a particular dragonish heritage."

"I'm nobody's expert," Millie said, "I told James, I barely know anything—"

Merlin stopped and turned, more suddenly and gracefully than seemed possible for a man of his size. In the darkness, he was like a faceless totem rising out of the rail-beds.

"Miss Vandergriff," he said, his voice soft and deep, yet strangely penetrating. "While humility is widely considered a virtue, it is not one that I myself prize under even normal circumstances. I believe that you do indeed have the requisite knowledge to accomplish our mission this night. Therefore, pray, do not allow your own understandable insecurities to be an impediment. Call upon what your interests have cultivated. What are we seeking? More accurately, what may have attracted a creature of some limited intellect seeking a reminder of her ancestral Norwegian homeland?"

Millie opened her mouth to object, paused, and then, after a thoughtful moment, closed it again. James recognized Merlin's subtle powers at work. The ancient sorcerer did not control people magically, exactly. But he did exert a sort of calming, focusing influence on them at certain important times.

James turned to look more closely at Millie. Her eyes were open wide, not in shock, but in thought. Her pupils flicked rhythmically back and forth, as if she was scanning a file cabinet in her own mind.

"There was no such thing as architecture in Norway for centuries," she said in a musing voice, blinking rapidly. "They built huts and houses out of whatever was at hand, with no thought to design. Except for the churches. Those they built with things called staves, tall posts that allowed them to build very tall and narrow, with sharp, sloping roofs. The magical varieties were built with Redwood staves, allowing them to be massively tall. Most of them were built with a sort of vertical diminishing redundancy."

"Vertical...? Now she's just not making any sense," James muttered aside to his uncle Ron, who shrugged and shook his head.

Millie glanced at James. "I'm standing right here, you know," she said. "I can hear everything you say."

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James gave a shrug, half apologetic, half impatient.

Hermione urged gently, "Go on, Millie, you're doing well."

Millie narrowed her eyes again in thought. "Vertical diminishing redundancy just means that the church structure is repeated atop itself in smaller and smaller versions, up and up, sort of like a Chinese pagoda."

"Oh," James nodded and shrugged. "*Now I understand.*"

Millie ignored him. "Norway is famous for their stave churches. It's their most defining building style. At least, it was for hundreds of years."

"Then that is the sort of structure we shall be searching for," Merlin agreed, turning and stalking onward again.

Glancing around the switchyard, Harry said, "I doubt there are many stave churches in London."

"It doesn't have to be an actual stave church," Hermione suggested. "Norberta's no architectural expert. She'll just look for something that sort of reminds her of such a place."

The four tramped onward, climbing over humps of railroad tracks, moving into a warren of parallel switches dotted with lines of dark passenger carriages and tankers, looming like sleeping dinosaurs in the darkness. Trailing behind Merlin, who seemed to be following a sort of communal instinct all his own, they wended into the lines of railroad cars, cutting across wherever they could, climbing over iron connector knuckles wherever they couldn't. Between the tracks, forests of dark gantries jutted up, each topped with boxes containing colored signal lights, currently all dark. A dizzying array of overhead wires connected the signals, stretching in every direction. James wondered how Norberta could possibly have navigated through those wires and gantries, had she attempted to land in this area.

Finally, the troupe came out beyond the lines of switches to a row of complicated brick buildings lined with ranks of windows, festooned with smokestacks and conveyor ramps covered in corrugated steel, each more industrial and looming than the last.

"Now where?" Ron asked, turning on the spot. "Any of these old places look large enough for Norberta to hide in."

"That one," Harry pointed.

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James turned to look where his father was pointing. Sure enough, rising over the furthest roof, a tall structure hulked upwards against the clouds. It was a sort of silo tower with levels of steeply sloping roofs, all rusted to the color of Redwood. Running along the lowest roof were gigantic faded letters, barely legible: CROSTICK COAL.

Millie shrugged a little uncertainly. “Vertical diminishing redundancy. In a manner of speaking.”

Silently, with Merlin in the lead and Harry bringing up the rear again, the group picked their way along the edge of the dark brick buildings. Dead weeds and brush poked through sullen snowdrifts, diminishing to slushy bogs between the structures. Enormous smokestacks and mountainous piles of coal blotted out the breeze and noise and distant city lights, creating a sort of watchful gloom. Finally, the group picked their way across a pocked gravel parking lot toward the base of the Crostick Coal building. Signs posted to the chain-link fences rattled in the breeze. James turned to read one as they passed: CONDEMNED PROPERTY! KEEP OUT.

He worried briefly that Hagrid was not there with them. Then, he shivered and worried more acutely that he and the rest of them *were*.

The shadows surrounding the ancient coal work were dense and silent, leaving a distinct sense of unseen eyes peering from every broken window. And yet Merlin, for his part, seemed completely unfazed by the eeriness of the scene. Perhaps, James mused, the old sorcerer liked it here. After all, this was a section of the city that was slowly, irrevocably, being reclaimed by nature. The environmental predators of civilization—rust, weeds, and entropy—were hard at work here, reasserting the feral inevitability of nature. And the green wilds of nature, of course, were Merlin’s element.

James couldn’t be certain, but he almost thought the headmaster was humming cheerfully in the deepening gloom.

A not-unpleasant fact occurred to him: it was hard to be especially frightened in the presence of a happily humming Merlin.

The six travelers followed a set of weedy railroad tracks into a sort of courtyard surrounded by huge, empty doorways, each large enough to drive a lorry through and as black as pitch. Hulking over the

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tracks was a monstrosity of metal hoppers and closed hatches, blotting out the clouds above.

And there was a smell. It was not dragon dung, as James' father had hoped. It was a high chemical smell, like the potions closet on a steamy day. James recognized it immediately.

"It's her breath!" he whispered, raising his nose to the still air. "That's what it smells like when she flames! She must be here somewhere!"

Merlin angled toward one of the huge open doors. As he did, a brief gust of warm air blew out of it, rippling his robes. A chuff of yellow firelight illuminated a scaly snout, a curl of tail, and a pair of gold-foil eyes peering out of the darkness.

Merlin didn't hesitate, didn't even slow his step. But he did begin to speak. James recognized the sound of the sorcerer's old Welsh, only low and muttered, like words sung to a half-sleeping baby.

The dragon's huge eyes were only visible where they reflected the distant city lights. They seemed to open wide and elevate, watchful and wary as Merlin approached.

Merlin raised a hand, as if to offer a benediction to the dragon. Then, amazingly, he lowered it to the dragon's hard, scaly snout. Norberta lowered her head again and her eyes seemed to slit shut in the darkness. Low and rumbling, Merlin spoke to her, his tone lilting and hypnotic.

Almost to himself, James said, "Looks like Heddlebun isn't the only beast whisperer in town."

His father looked at him. "Who?"

James glanced up and then shook his head. "This elf that Hagrid brought along when we first came to collect Norberta. She could talk to beasts, soothe them, like. But she used her powers to set Norberta off when we got out onto the river. She wanted to make a point about elf rights or something."

Millie frowned. "By setting a dragon loose in London?"

Hermione gave a brisk little sigh. "People will resort to whatever gets attention when they feel that every other option's been taken away."

The earth thumped faintly as Merlin backed away from the dark doorway, leading Norberta out into the faint nightglow. Her head emerged first on its long, serpentine neck, sweeping low over the

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ground. Then her shoulders hove into view, carrying the muscular bulk of her chest. Finally, her rear legs and tail appeared. Her claws clattered on the frozen gravel and her footsteps made faint tremors, but otherwise she was completely silent, her golden eyes half-lidded, contentedly following Merlin and his gently glowing staff.

A little awed, Ron said, "Back to the ship, then?"

"Indeed," Merlin answered. "But not the way we came. Our dragon friend will never fit through the alleyway. Nor could she cross the thoroughfare that we traversed. We shall have to forge an alternate route through the city proper."

"That's, like, an actual dragon...!" Millie said, her eyes bulging at the enormous creature. "I don't think I've ever seen one this up close and personal!"

"A privilege we would like to reserve for as few people as possible," Hermione commented, a little worriedly.

Merlin nodded. "Which means we shall have to tread very carefully. Our dragon friend is quite docile at the moment, but make no mistake: beneath her current calm lies a hungry and terrified and deeply driven dragon, responding to the most fundamental and undeniable instincts of all creatures. Her male counterpart, the redoubtable Montague, is nearer than ever. We must increase the distance between them while she is still, nominally, under our influence."

Harry gave the old wizard a sidelong grin. "I assume that you have some suitably cunning subterfuge in mind, Headmaster?"

"You speak well, Mr. Potter," Merlin nodded, meeting Harry's smile with a small one of his own. "I sometimes wonder if perhaps there is some trace of sorcerer in your lineage."

Harry bobbed his head and shrugged. "Medieval Muggle royalty, I once was told. But sadly, no sorcery."

Merlin narrowed his eyes at this, unsurprised, and then turned his attention back to the dragon who stood nearby, her head hovering just over his shoulder.

"I beg your pardon, Madame Norberta," he said in a low voice, and patted her again on the snout. "Do try not to be *too* offended..."

Ten minutes later and three blocks away, a huge metal gate shuddered slightly, shaken by a golden flash. The padlock securing the

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gate snicked open, releasing its loops of chain, which unwound and slithered to the ground with a ringing chime of metal. The gates eased inward, opening onto the unmistakable depths of the railroad switchyard beyond.

James stepped out into the buzzing streetlight, his eyes wide, his hair buffeting in a sudden gust of wind. He looked around, up and down the narrow street. Cars lined the far curb, parked bumper to bumper, but no one was currently in sight.

"All clear," he called back, cupping his hands to his mouth.

A moment later, Millie crept out into the light, hurrying to join James, her face a mask of mingled excitement and trepidation. Ron and Hermione came next, followed by Harry Potter and Merlin, the former glancing around alertly, his wand just visible in his sleeve, the latter walking with calm, even strides, moving straight out into the empty street, leaving no footprints on the sheen of melting slush.

Following Merlin at a low, grumbling idle, was what looked like, for all intents and purposes, the largest, dirtiest, most conspicuous refuse truck that James had ever seen. The truck's tyres bumped down over the curb, thumped in icy puddles, and angled out onto the road to join Merlin as he chose a direction, seemingly at random, and began to walk.

The refuse truck followed him, its engine throbbing throatily, rolling along at his very heels. Behind the filthy glass of its windscreen, the steering wheel pivoted by itself, with no driver. This, however, was perhaps less strange than the fact that the truck was driving *backwards*, leading with its open rear compactor, currently empty but looking hungry enough to swallow a small car whole. James wasn't sure if this detail was due to Merlin's unfamiliarity with the operation of municipal fleet vehicles, or if the wily magician simply preferred a challenge.

The drone and honk of far busier streets could be heard from very nearby. The troupe would be avoiding those streets however possible, sticking to less populous, albeit narrower side streets and avenues. This did mean, however, that their route to the river would be much longer and more circuitous than preferred.

"Hermione, Ron," Harry said, turning to his friends, "why don't you two head back to the Gertrude and pilot her to London Bridge City Pier? That will be a more convenient place to embark from our new route."

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Ron nodded his agreement, but Hermione looked concerned.  
“Should we separate, though?”

“It’s probably for the best at this point,” Harry said. “We’ll be less conspicuous this way.”

“And what could possibly go wrong?” Ron grinned, throwing an arm around Hermione’s shoulders.

Hermione grudgingly agreed. “But perhaps we should take Millie and James with us, then. They’ve done their part.”

“No way!” Millie exclaimed, and then composed herself. “I mean, I’d much rather stay and watch. If you don’t mind, Madame.”

“Ugh,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “*Don’t call me Madame.*”

“I’m with Millie,” James said, “And Uncle Ron’s right. What could go wrong? We’ve got the great Merlinus Ambrosius with us!”

Harry nudged his son and muttered, “I think ‘the great Merlinus Ambrosius’ is fairly immune to flattery.”

“You would think wrongly,” Merlin observed idly from some distance away, not turning around.

“So be it,” Hermione said, raising both hands. “But just remember, without me or your friend Ralph here, it’s up to Millie to be the voice of reason.” She glanced at James, then his father and Merlin. “Because I know none of *you* three will be.”

“Come, love,” Ron said, offering Hermione his arm. “Allow me whisk you away on a winter’s moonlit boat ride down the romantic and pristine Thames River.”

Hermione smiled at his roguish grin and took his arm. Together they turned and hurried away, returning the way they had come.

James and Millie watched them go.

“They’re so cute,” she sighed.

James shrugged. “Cute is relative, I suppose.”

“We should keep moving,” Harry said briskly, turning and resuming their walk along the footpath. Merlin strode onward down the centre of the road, and the magically disguised Norberta budged forward to follow, her engine throttling, her air brakes hissing and squeaking their release.

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"Patience will be our ally," Merlin reminded them. "We have nothing to fear so long as we all keep our heads about us and our feet on the ground."

"Or our wheels on the road," Millie added, skipping forward with what James considered far too much glibness.

"As you say, Miss Vandergriff," Merlin answered calmly.

With painstaking deliberation, the group walked along the street, turned left, away from the brighter lights and thrum of nearby traffic, and maintained a steady, sedate pace into an area of multi-level parking structures, closed office buildings, occasional pubs (open and thumping with music), and corner groceries (closed and barricaded for the night).

As they meandered from street to street, Merlin walked down the centre line with Norberta the refuse truck prowling along right behind him, backwards and grumbling deep in her engine, with the remainder of her entourage walking beside her on nearby footpaths. Occasional cars passed them, usually hurrying to get around the slow-moving truck, their drivers barely sparing a second glance at the strange assembly. As they neared crossings or small roundabouts, Merlin would first consult quietly with Harry Potter, who seemed to know these streets extremely well, and then turn to speak calming, indecipherable words to the refuse truck at his heel, which thrummed its engine, shuddered on its dirty tyres, and hissed from its air-brakes.

The truck still smelled of the fiery brimstone guts of Norberta, now exhaling from the huge open rear compactor of the truck.

At one angle in the narrow street, a pair of young men, one skinny and one fat, emerged from the neon glow of a questionable-looking basement pub, each carrying nearly empty bottles of ale and swaying slightly on their feet. They stumbled out into the path of Merlin and the gently throttling truck, both of which came to a halt under the red glare of a traffic light.

"Blimey," the skinny man said, pushing his long ginger hair out of his face. "This bloke is huge." He stopped in the street and pointed up at Merlin with the hand still holding a brown ale bottle. "Are you seeing this bloke? He's bloody hyooge!"

"I don't think *either* of you are seeing anyone," Merlin suggested, arching an eyebrow for subtle emphasis. "Huge or otherwise. Merely a common city vehicle about an honest night's work."

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“Yeah,” the fatter man said, frowning and squinting. “I don’t see nothing but a bleedin’ refuse truck. Come on, yeh piker.” He tugged his ginger mate on the elbow, nearly pulling him off his feet.

The ginger man recovered, shrugged, and then tossed his bottle into the open rear compactor of the refuse truck. With a hiss of hydraulics and a shimmy-clatter that shook the entire truck, the compactor closed on the bottle, chewed it up into tinkling bits, and then let out a strangely brimstone-smelling belch.

The traffic light overhead clicked green. The troupe walked forward again, angling into an alley lined with parked cars glinting under streetlamps.

“Dad,” James said quietly, “I heard something over the holiday that I wanted to ask you about.”

Harry ambled easily, scuffing his boots on the footpath. “What’s that, son?”

James turned and glanced back at Millie who was walking behind them, watching the gently rolling Norberta-truck. “I spoke to Millie’s grandmother. Or, she spoke to me, actually. She told me some stuff about Grimmauld Place.”

“You met the Countess?” Harry smiled aside at his son. “She’s quite an impressive Lady, I’m told.”

James nodded and shrugged. “She says that when you inherited the Black mansion, you inherited a sort of... er... *title* with it.”

“Did she say so,” Harry commented. There was no curiosity in his voice, and James wondered if perhaps his dad *did* know more about the Black estate than he’d ever admitted. “A title. Well, blimey.”

“She said it’s more than just a title, though,” James went on, frowning as he thought back. “She says that it’s a responsibility. A sort of ancient guardianship over some huge, elemental human force. They’re lots of them, she says, and they’re all colours. Red was the Barony of Love, Green was for ambition and greed, that sort of thing. Except that a lot of the titles have died off or something, leaving their forces unguarded, just running all out of control in the world.”

“Sounds serious,” Harry nodded, pursing his lips.

“Grandmother Eunice is a little, er, eccentric,” Millie commented, approaching from behind and falling in beside James. “She

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believes all sorts of crazy old things. She's never read *the Quibbler*, but she's got loads in common with it."

"Sure didn't sound like *the Quibbler* to me," James muttered.

"Grandmother can be very convincing," Millie said, her tone turning lofty. "After all, one doesn't usually expect a Countess to be a bit of a wee barmpot. But there's a reason she no longer brings up such things with my parents, or Bent and Mattie."

From the centre of the narrow street, Merlin said, "I knew the Viscount Blacke in my time. A thoroughly vicious and duplicitous man, capable of deeds legendary in their capriciousness and vanity. We were friends, in a sense."

"Is that so?" Harry asked, still in an oddly banal voice, as if he was only marginally interested. "The Black family is a thousand years old?"

"The line of Blacke is far older than that, I would wager," Merlin said. "And I would not be so quick to dismiss the legends of their charge. The guardianship of the polarities of human nature was once an established magical institution, inviolate and deeply respected, forming the very pillars of humanity, without which civilised culture would be impossible. It is a curiosity of this new age that because one finds an idea intellectually offensive, one assumes it cannot be true."

Millie bristled slightly. "I didn't say I find the idea *offensive*. Just a little barmy."

James moved to the curb, catching up to Merlin. "So, you think there may be something to what Millie's grandmother says? About the Black title being responsible for some huge elemental... something?"

Merlin shrugged. "I merely say that the idea has ancient precedent. One cannot immediately dismiss it."

"Did the Viscount Blacke that you knew have powers like that? Was he in charge of some element of human nature?"

"The Viscount Blacke was famously reticent regarding details about himself or his holdings. Meeting him in an inn, he would lament that he had barely two coppers to rub together. And yet the opulence of his robes and carriage made it clear that his wealth was incalculable. I never wasted the breath to ask him about the rumours of his title."

"But there *were* rumours?" James prodded, looking up at the headmaster.

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“There are *always* rumours.” Merlin nodded.

“So...?” James pressed again, glancing back at his father, annoyed at the lack of interest he saw there. “What do you think the Black title is in charge of?”

“I haven’t the faintest notion,” Merlin replied simply. “And that is the truth. But I expect the name itself provides some minor hint.”

“Black?” James frowned.

“It is as you say, Mr. Potter. All the titles are colours. And yet what do we know of the colour black?”

James shrugged. He didn’t always appreciate the headmaster’s baroque conversational style. “I don’t know. It’s dark?”

Millie suggested, “It’s not truly a colour, is it? It’s the *absence* of all colour.”

Merlin cocked his head slightly. “It depends upon how you look at it. Black may not be a colour unto itself. But it *absorbs* every other hue. It is, in fact, every colour combined.”

James’ eyes widened slightly at the thought. In a quieter voice, he asked, “So... what does that mean for the elemental guardianship of the Black title?”

Merlin turned to look aside at him again as he walked. “Haven’t the foggiest notion, Mr. Potter.”

“It *means*,” Harry said from behind, “That if there *is* some enormous dangerous potential inherent in our title, then like all such things, it is best left buried, untouched, and safely forgotten. After all, we Potters don’t have the greatest record with handling huge, earth-shaking responsibilities.”

“*That* is a topic of possible debate,” Merlin countered with a wry look.

James was about to reply when a sudden noise startled him. Some small but heavy object clanged off the side of Norberta’s truckish shape. It struck the footpath and fumbled to a halt against a fire hydrant. James looked and saw that it was a chunk of old brick.

“What the—” Millie started, when another brick struck Norberta, bouncing off her high bonnet. She groaned and hissed her hydraulics, shuddering on her huge tyres.

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"Over there," Harry said, pointing with his wand to a narrow alley on their left. "Someone in there is having a bit of sport."

Another brick sailed through the air, missed the refuse truck, and broke into pieces on the road at Merlin's feet. He looked up from it calmly, but with a grim twinkle in his eye, following the trajectory back to the dark alley.

"Muggle vandals?" Harry asked, stepping alongside Merlin.

"I think not," Merlin answered quietly. "I smell something else entirely. Guard our charge for a moment."

And with that, he stalked away, his robes swaying in the cold air, his feet silent on the slushy road. James watched as the huge wizard strode into the shadows, putting out his hand as he did so, producing his staff out of thin air. A moment later he was gone, vanished into the depths of the alley.

Harry watched. James stood next to him, eyes wide. Millie peered from just behind his shoulder, silent. The three barely breathed. Behind them, Norberta the refuse truck chugged idly, revving her engine with rhythmic impatience.

No more bricks lobbed out of the alley.

Suddenly, a flash of blue light flickered from the throat of its depths. The glare illuminated trash bins and doorways in a bright stutter, and then darkness fell again, as seamless as a well.

"What's he doing?" Millie whispered.

"Why isn't he coming back?" James added.

Harry merely watched, his wand in his fist, pointed at the pavement next to his feet.

Another flash came, more dimly this time, as if from a distance. Barely heard over the constant drum of nearby traffic, a deep bellow sounded. Merlin's voice, shouting something. Harry tensed but remained in place.

And then, half a minute later, a shadow stumbled out of the alley. It wasn't Merlin. James could see that right away. It was very small, very thin, with huge, limp ears. The shadow stumbled to its knees, caught itself with its arms, and then raised its large head, as if to look up at them.

Harry finally broke away and ran to the figure, wand out, but not pointing at it. James hurried to join him.

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It was a house elf dressed in a knotted tea towel. James recognized the huge head and sad, anxious eyes. It was Piggen, the elf he had last seen stoking the fire in Gryffindor tower weeks earlier.

Harry dropped to crouch next to the elf, concern and wariness etched onto his face.

"Why are you here?" he asked, "Are you all right? Have you been injured?"

Still hunkered on all fours over the curb, the elf peered up at Harry with his huge, glistening eyes. Then, he turned his gaze to James.

"Piggen is sorry, Master Potter," he said with heartbreakingly sincerity. "Piggen is a bad, bad elf."

Behind James and Harry, Millie screamed.

James spun around clumsily, still half-kneeling behind his father. Harry was quicker, however, launching back to his feet and sweeping his wand around in a blurred arc.

"Lumos!" he barked, and his wand flared to blinding light, illuminating the street like daylight, casting leaping black shadows behind every object.

The refuse truck was rearing onto its front wheels, bulging and creaking, tilting its gaping compactor toward the sky. With a convulsive lunge, a ball of orange flame erupted from its metal guts. James realized that Norberta the refuse truck was quickly transforming back into Norberta the dragon. The rubber tyres stretched and burst into sinewy legs. The mouth of the compactor gnashed, grew long fangs and elongated onto an accordion neck, rising up between the buildings. The rumble of the engine grew to a sustained roar, and fire once again burst into the sky, streaming from the dragon's unhinged jaws.

Another elf was riding on the back of Norberta's neck, clinging tight with long, agile fingers, its mouth moving quickly as it spoke to the dragon, provoking it.

It was Heddlebun.

A lance of red light struck Norberta's flank, exploding into sparks. Dimly, James realized that his father was firing at her, trying to Stun her. He fumbled his own wand out and aimed wildly, but before he could utter a single spell, Norberta reared, unfurled her wings, and clapped them down again, sending a wave of gritty wind washing over

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the street, rocking the parked cars on their springs. The dragon leapt upwards, scratched and clawed her way up a nearby parking structure, tearing loose great chunks of concrete as she went, and clambered onto its roof with a flick of her long tail.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” James’ father called, stabbing out his wand again and arresting a huge chunk of concrete an instant before it could bash itself to bits on the street below. Hunched in the hovering concrete’s shadow, Millie lifted her head from beneath her clasped arms. Eyes bulging, she looked up at the slowly revolving hunk of building, and then scrambled sideways, out of its range.

With a grunt of released effort, James’ dad lowered his wand. The concrete completed its fall, shattering like a dropped plate.

James looked up at his dad, shocked and speechless, but his father was already turning back to the alley, dropping his eyes to the small figure of Piggen.

But Piggen wasn’t there.

Footsteps rang from the depths of the alley, not retreating but approaching. Merlin reappeared, his staff held before him, its runes glowing with fierce red light.

Breathing hard, the sorcerer looked from James to Harry. “Which way did she go?”

Harry nodded to the scarred façade of the parking structure. “Diagon Alley. Has to be.”

“Then let us not spare a moment!” Merlin commanded, already moving forward. He broke into a run, reached to grasp Millie’s hand where she stood dumbfounded in the street, and then vanished with her in tow, leaving the crack of their disappearance echoing down the canyon of the street.

“Well, James,” his father announced, reaching out with his left hand, raising his wand in his right. “You said you wanted to be a Junior Auror-in-training, yes? Here’s your chance.”

With a gulp, James raised his own wand and grasped his father’s hand.

The world whip-cracked away, spinning into a blur of oblivion. An instant later, it sprang back into place, leaping up to smack James’ heels as he landed next to his father. He looked around, pointing his wand frantically. They were in another street now, this one wider but

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even less illuminated. Before him was an old pub with mullioned windows and a heavy wooden door beneath a swinging sign: The Leaky Cauldron.

Harry stepped swiftly into the dark street and raised his eyes, looking out over the nearby rooftops.

Merlin burst through the front door of the Leaky Cauldron, his staff leading, still pulsing with red light.

“There!” he announced, pointing to James’ right.

James spun to look, even as he heard the grating roar of the dragon’s approach.

A decrepit apartment building, four floors high, stood on a wedge of footpath between two angled streets. James craned to look up at its roofline. There, an old wooden water tower stood on posts. Startlingly, the water tower exploded, disintegrating into flying planks, flinging metal braces, and a torrent of unleashed water. Norberta’s head plunged through the water and bashed aside the remains of the tower. Her wings pumped and she leapt from the building’s roof, sailed over empty space, kicked off a lamp-post, and grappled up the face of a soot-stained factory, shattering rows of windows as she went.

A blare of horns sounded from the connecting streets. Voices began to shout in alarm.

“Damn and drat!” Harry breathed urgently, lifting his wand to fire Stunning bolts at the scrabbling dragon. It was no use.

Merlin called magical spells in his guttural tongue, and lances of vivid purple light spat over the street. Even these merely bounced off Norberta’s scaly skin. Using her wings for leverage, she clawed and tore her way to the roof of the factory, and then loped along its top. James watched, horrified, as the great dragon lowered her head and plowed between a pair of brick smokestacks, pulverizing their bases. Ponderously, the smokestacks leaned toward each other, kissed their surfaces with a sustained crunch, and then began to collapse, disintegrating into themselves.

“Damn and drat!” Harry said again, this time in a half-shout. He raised his wand nearly straight up, waiting for Norberta to appear between the factory and the block above the Leaky Cauldron.

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A bell clattered nearby and the door of the pub swung open. James glanced aside to see a grizzled old wizard with a nose the size and color of a blood orange peer out at them.

"Whassall this, then?" he said, his black eyes glimmering in the dark. "Whassall the noise?"

Harry fired several shots in quick succession, even as Merlin leapt backwards into the street, pointing his staff at the roof above, unleashing a torrent of crackling energy.

The building shook. Grit and chunks of masonry broke from above, raining down and clattering to the street all around.

The grizzled wizard jerked his head back into the door, which slammed shut.

"She's beyond the roof!" Harry called, lowering his wand and lunging toward the door of the pub.

It was locked tight, rattling with bolts and chains. Without so much as a backward glance, Harry simply stepped aside and gestured briefly with his wand. *After you*, the motion seemed to say.

Merlin dipped his staff. Its runes flashed green and the door of the Leaky Cauldron blew open, taking the remains of an iron deadbolt and chains with it. The bell overhead gave an alarmed clatter and broke loose. Harry led the way with Merlin immediately behind. James scrambled to follow, passing the grizzled wizard with the blood orange nose who stood huddled in the corner, fuming speechlessly at his demolished door.

James had been inside the Leaky Cauldron on many occasions and assumed that it never technically closed. Indeed, even at this late hour, the pub was crowded with patrons of all shapes and sizes, most gathered around a long bar cluttered with glasses, steins, and bottles. Eyes turned to follow Merlin, Harry, and James as they rushed past, pounding toward the rear exit, wands and staff raised. Millie stood away from the bar, her eyes wide and terrified. She moved to follow James, hunching her shoulders and ducking low in his wake.

Darkness filled the pub's back hall and the staircase leading up to rental rooms. A moment later, bluish light bloomed as the rear door blasted open. The four poured out into a tiny courtyard, turning immediately to the enchanted brick wall that separated Muggle London from Diagon Alley.

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But the wall was barely still there. Bricks pattered down from an enormous, ragged, dragon-sized hole. Beyond this, the dragon herself loped and careened down the winding wizarding thoroughfare of Diagon Alley, her wings tearing at eaves, her tail bashing aside signs and awnings. Witches and wizards leapt into doorways as she thundered past.

Merlin disappeared again, vanishing into a pinpoint of light, this time leaving Millie behind.

“The circus!” Harry announced, pointing. Beneath the dark sky, James could just see the peaks of coloured tents and fluttering banners over a line of nearby gabled roofs. “Stay here!” his father commanded, shooting him a steely glance. A moment later, he vanished with a ringing crack.

“Like bloody hell I’m staying here,” James said, turning to Millie. He reached for her hand.

She recoiled from it in surprise, her eyes glassy in the dimness. “What are you doing!?”

“I’m apparating to the circus!” he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Come on!”

“But I don’t *want* to go to the circus!” she cried, nearly hysterical with fear and confusion. “And you don’t know how to apperate yet! I’m... I’m being the voice of reason!”

“I’ve apparated once before!” he insisted, pushing his hand toward her again. “Er, sort of.”

“I’m not going!” she said firmly, and stamped her foot. “You’re all crazy! Do you know that!? Crossing streets is one thing! But this is just... just...!”

James slumped helplessly, and then gave up on her. He glanced up again to the fluttering banners and illuminated peaks of the circus tents. They were barely a quarter mile away. He tried to pinpoint where exactly they were, calling up a mental map of Wizarding London. He decided, somewhat haphazardly, that the circus was erected in the square where Diagon Alley and Sartori Alley intersected. With this picture firmly established in his mind, he stepped away from Millie, fisted his hands, squeezed his eyes shut, and flexed the mental muscle that he had last used when trying to cross a Hogwarts classroom.

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There was no Edgar Edgecomb to toss a firecracker at him this time. He felt the world twang away, unreeling in a blur. Then, just as it had with his father a minute before, it reasserted itself around him. His feet struck down on hard stone and he swayed only slightly, sticking out his arms for balance.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was standing in the dead center of the square formed by the intersection of Sartori and Diagon Alleys. He'd apparated into a fountain, in fact, though one fortunately drained for the winter. On both sides, enormous tents, striped orange, blue, and white, stretched up into darkness, their canvas sides fluttering in the cold wind.

The noise of Norberta's approach was behind him. The ground trembled with her pounding footsteps. The air rang with her feverish roar.

James turned on the spot and clambered over the ledge of the empty fountain, running out of the space between the tents, his wand in his outstretched hand. At the nearest corner, Gringotts bank loomed, its pillars reaching high to the marble cornices of its roof. As James looked, a corner gargoyle broke loose, tumbled end over end, and smashed to bits on the cobbles below. Norberta barreled around the corner, stepped and slid on the remains of the gargoyle, then dug in her claws and thundered straight toward James, her eyes blazing, her jaws open to show her rows of dagger teeth.

Heddlebun was still clinging to her neck, speaking to her, exploiting her dragonish nature and driving her to frenzy.

James skidded to a halt as the dragon's shadow loomed over him. Scrambling, nearly falling backwards, he began to retreat.

Bolts of red and purple light erupted from the alley behind Norberta. Merlin and James' dad, it seemed, were still giving chase, aiming to stop Norberta's rampage. Soon, they would have to resort to killing curses. *Avada Kedavra* might not be enough to destroy a dragon, James thought hectically, but Merlin surely knew a spell that would.

Remembering his own wand, James struggled to aim it. He tripped, fell to the cold cobbles, and felt the stampede of Norberta's claws closing in on him. He threw himself onto his back, aimed his wand into the air, and shouted, "Expeliarmus!"

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It was a purely instinctive reaction, culled from his many dueling sessions in Professor Debellows' classroom. Norberta had no weapon to be expelled, of course. And yet, suddenly, her feet dug into the pavement, grinding over the cobbles as she skidded and slewed to a halt, plowing a cloud of dust before her.

The great dragon came to rest a dozen feet from James, and something fell to the square between them. It was small and bony, with flapping ears and large hands.

It was Haddlebun the elf. She lay where she had fallen, unmoving.

And suddenly James understood: the elf herself had been the weapon. James' dueling shot had expelled her from the hapless dragon, who now hunkered in distressed confusion, huffing the air, looking around to see where she was.

Merlin and James's father appeared from the mouth of the alley, rounding Gringotts bank at a run, wand and staff raised. They paused when they saw the halted dragon, with James climbing to his feet before it.

"Beware, James!" his father called, wasting no time on chastising him for his disobedience. "If Norberta smells the male dragon before Merlin can mesmerize her again...!"

James glanced up. Norberta's nostrils flared before him. Her gold-foil eyes widened. Her head began to rise on the serpentine length of her neck, into the light of the circus tents beyond.

Merlin approached from behind the dragon, his staff held high, its runes glowing with soft golden light. He began to speak to her, his voice low, the syllables indecipherable yet strangely haunting.

Norberta blinked. Slowly, her head swept to the side, arcing back to peer at the headmaster in the darkness. The glow of his staff pulsed hypnotically.

It was working. Norberta was very nearly under Merlin's prodigious spell again, undoing the maddening trance that Haddlebun had spun in her mind.

But then, much to James' surprise, the ground shook again. He glanced down, alarmed and confused: Norberta's claws were still firmly planted on the cobbles. And yet the ground shook once more, forming

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an undeniable, low beat. Something else was moving in the square, something large enough to make the ground shudder and the marble fountain behind James rattle like a cupboard of crockery.

A chuff of hot air, redolent of brimstone, blew over James from behind, fluttering his hair.

He turned slowly, eyes wide.

A second dragon hove out of the shadows between the circus tents, swaying back and forth like a cobra, its eyes glowing amethyst purple.

James stumbled backward in fear, and then clambered aside, hurrying to get out from between the two dragons.

Norberta swung her head back, now forgetting Merlin and his glowing staff. Her eyes locked onto the second dragon and her nostrils flared. Slowly, she arose from her hunkered crouch. Her tail swayed back and forth, sweeping low over the cobbles.

The second dragon, clearly the very circus dragon, Montague Python, that Norberta had been sensing for months, approached her cautiously, flicking a snakelike tongue from its long, black snout. His body was rather smaller than hers, sleek and long, but with much larger diaphanous wings that glinted with oily pearlescence. A sinuous black tail curled up and then stamped down on the ground, clapping its steely barbed tip to the cobbles with a ringing clang.

A commotion of movement came from the circus tent as its entrance flaps were wrestled from inside. A figure clambered out, stumbling nearly between Montague's fore legs. It was a large man with an impressively round belly, clad in an ivory vest and huge shirtsleeves gathered in tight cuffs with gold buttons. He wore black riding trousers with suspenders hanging and flopping about his knees.

"Oh bloody Nora," he said in a high, breathless voice, looking up at the two dragons as they sniffed each other cautiously, drawing nearer and nearer, beginning to twine their long necks. "It's love at first sight, it is!"

Montague raised his tail and clapped it down again, ringing its barbed tip to the cobbles in what was clearly a sort of mating dance.

James felt his father and Merlin join him at his side. Merlin lowered his staff to the pavement with a resigned clack. Harry put a

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hand on his son's shoulder, heavily. James sensed in the gesture both cautious pride and weary rebuke.

The ringmaster—for that's clearly what he was, Mr. Archibald Hokus himself—lowered his gaze from the twining dragons and looked over at James, Harry, and Merlin, his cheeks red and his eyes glistening. “It's just a beautiful thing, isn't it?” he sniffed.

A pound of footsteps and distant voices approached from the mouth of the nearby alley. James glanced back to see Hagrid loping heavily into the shadow of the circus camp, where he slowed to a stunned, clumsy halt, his hands falling limp to his sides, dropping his pink umbrella. His black eyes stared up at the two dragons and his mouth opened in a gape of perfect, speechless delight.

“Oh, Norberta!” he said, his voice suddenly choked with happy tears.

James drew a helpless, exhausted sigh and turned his attention back to the dragons. They circled each other slowly, sniffing each other, Montague flicking his purple tongue, Norberta flaring her scaly nostrils. They growled to each other, making low, purring gurgles deep in their throats.

James glanced down. Haddlebun still lay where she had fallen, one limp ear flattened over her face. Cautiously, he approached her, pocketing his wand as he went. He wondered if she was dead, but then he saw the hitching rise and fall of her chest.

He felt his father coming alongside as he lowered to one knee over the elf.

She was sobbing. James sensed that she was lying there not because she was injured, but because her plan—a last resort borne of abject desperation—had come to ruin and failure. Hopeless to begin with, now she was hopeless *and* without any recourse.

Quietly but firmly, Harry asked, “There were others of your kind in the alley. How many are in your little elven uprising?”

Haddlebun's sobbing paused. She lifted one large hand weakly and pushed her ear away from her face. James expected her to look up with remorse and defeat, or even fear. Instead, when she lifted her huge eyes to them, though still thick with tears, her gaze was hard. Her mouth turned down in a trembling scowl of bitter resentment.

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"All of us," she said in a low, emphatic voice. "The Elven Uprising is every... single... *one*."





## **20. WORLD IN COLLAPSE**

The ship ride back to Hogwarts was a long and solemn affair, despite the happiness borne of Norberta's unscheduled union with Montague Python. Archibald Hokus had insisted that Norberta, being lamed already with her wounded wing and long accustomed to the ministrations of humans, join their traveling circus as an accompaniment to Montague's act.

"She will revitalize our entire program!" he had proclaimed after corralling both dragons in the safety of Montague's paddock. "We've wanted a second dragon for years! Montague's our star performer, of course. Now, with Norberta his grand love added to the show, we shall truly be a wonder of the wizarding world! I can see it now!" He raised his arms and framed his hands, as if envisioning a tent-sized placard, "Montague & Norberta! The Beast-Wedding of the Century! Of the *Millennium!*"

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At Harry's insistence, Hokus had vowed to have Norberta officially registered the very following day, as "a rescued orphan beast of origins unknown" as per Ministry regulations.

In response to this, Hagrid had offered his tearful goodbyes, blowing his nose prodigiously on a hankie provided by Ron from one of his coat pockets.

"Keep it, Hagrid," Ron had said as the half giant offered it limply back to him. "Think of it as a, er, memento of the night."

Harry took Heddlebun into custody, magically shackling her with a lanyard charm as they returned to the Gertrude, much more quickly and stealthily now that Norberta was no longer part of their entourage. Thus, less than twenty minutes later, back on board and standing on the gently rocking bow, James' dad had quietly consulted with Ron and Hermione, explaining why he'd returned with a captive house elf in tow rather than a lovesick dragon, and debating what they should do with her.

"Officially speaking, we're all home snug in our beds right now," Ron reminded them. "We can't just pop over to the Ministry with a magical prisoner all of a sudden. Things like that require explanations."

"Titus is on duty tonight," Hermione suggested. "He could bring her in. But can you trust him, Harry?" Things had been better lately between James' father and his partner, Titus Hardcastle, but everyone still remembered that, for a brief time during James' fourth year, Titus had sided with his superiors at the Ministry against his boss and friend.

"I can," Harry answered, "But I won't. Even if Titus was willing to guard our secrets, this little elf has no such obligation or concern. More importantly, I don't think the Wizengamot would have the slightest clue what to do with her. There are no laws on the books regarding rogue house elves, simply because there has never been any need. What she represents is an all new dilemma for the wizarding world, and one that no one is prepared to confront. Not with so many other, larger cauldrons to boil at the moment."

"Well, we can't just set her free," Ron said, frowning.

"Allow me to be her charge," Merlin suggested from the nearby shadows, an ominous note in his voice. "After all, she has apparently corrupted at least one of the elves in the employ of Hogwarts School. I

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should very much like to interrogate her about who else might be a part of her secret cabal.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve considered that, Headmaster. And it’s a tempting idea. But our prisoner has already answered that question, at least as much as I am certain she ever intends to. According to her, *all* house elves are part of her cabal. And I have a sinking suspicion that she is telling the truth. At least, as far as she knows. No, I have another warden in mind for Miss Heddlebun.”

With that, Harry drew his wand from his pocket and flicked it lightly toward the sky. “Curatio,” he said quietly, firing a narrow pencil-beam of deep purple sparks high into the sky. The spell emitted an almost sub-audible chime, like anchor chains clattering in bottomless depths.

“You rang, sir,” a gratingly deep voice suddenly said from directly behind James. He knew the voice instantly, but couldn’t help jumping on the spot, startled by the ancient elf’s sudden, noiseless appearance.

“Kreacher,” Hermione said, understanding dawning on her.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Kreacher,” Harry said, “I have a task for you, but it’s up to you whether you want to accept it or not.”

James turned to the tiny old elf and watched as a dozen extremely subtle expressions flitted, almost imperceptibly, across his stony, curmudgeon face. The elf was no more accustomed to the egalitarian attitudes of his master now than he was over two decades ago, when he had first come into Harry Potter’s employ. But he had at least learned that it was pointless to say so.

“Master’s wish is Kreacher’s command,” he said for possibly the millionth time, drawing upon a well of stubborn patience that James thought was likely as inexhaustible, and cold, as space itself.

Harry nodded, “And yet, according to this particular member of your kind,” he gestured toward the shape of Heddlebun, who sat hunched in the shadows, her knees clutched to her chest and her head lowered atop them. “You are part of a secret universal coalition of elven resistance, led, in part, by she herself.”

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Kreacher's head swiveled so slowly and ponderously that James thought he could hear the tendons of the elf's neck creak. "Does she say so, Master," he asked in his deep, monotone voice, although it wasn't really a question.

"Indeed," Harry replied, "She says that all members of your kind are part of a new elven uprising. Thus, my request—which is for you to take her back to Marble Arch, guard her, and provide her with some suitable service until a better plan presents itself—may place you in the uncomfortable position of having to decide between loyalties."

James knew that Kreacher couldn't possibly be a part of Heddlebun's Elven Uprising. And yet, as the old house elf regarded his younger, female counterpart, his pinched, inscrutable face as stoic as an anvil, James had to wonder. Perhaps Kreacher *had* heard of the Uprising. Perhaps his loyalties were, if not in question, then at least sympathetic.

Instead of answering directly, Kreacher said, "Master is certain that Mistress will welcome this new development?"

"I am certain of no such thing," Harry sighed. "But 'Mistress' has learned to be extremely resilient over the years. I will speak to her myself. But do, perhaps, try to keep our new guest a secret until morning? Let me break it to Ginny over tea."

"So to be clear," Hermione said carefully, turning from Heddlebun back to Kreacher. "Is there any truth to what she says?"

Kreacher arched one heavy brow at Hermione, apparently weighing whether he was required to answer her or not. Then, as if submitting to Harry's unspoken urging, he raised his chin stiffly and said, "Kreacher's allegiance is always and forever to Harry Potter and the house of Black."

"Blimey, Harry," Ron muttered, shaking his head, "you collect stray house elves the way Rose used to collect dogerpillars in the back garden."

Without a word, Kreacher took custody of Heddlebun and vanished away with her, their departure marked only by a faint, airy pop.

Quietly, Hermione asked, "What will you do with her?"

Harry shrugged. "Keep her busy, if nothing else. Especially for elves, it would seem that idle hands really are the devil's playthings."

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Hagrid tugged up the Gertrude's anchor and shortly they were back underway, returning via the mysterious subterranean rivers that had brought them there.

Millie fell asleep on the bench next to James as the ship swooped and rocked its way back. He realized that part of the magic of the journey lie in the fact that whatever time you conserved on the way there, you earned back on the return trip, making the final trek seem tiresomely long and exhausting. He looked aside at Millie where she lay curled on the bench, rocking obliviously with the motion of the hull, her blonde hair partially obscuring her face. He was jealous of her fitful sleep, even if it was rooted in a sort of numb shock. Even now, her brow was creased faintly, her lips downturned in a worried frown.

"I was wrong," she'd said to him after boarding the Gertrude again. "Wrong about all your adventures. They're only fun in books. Rose can have them from now on."

James didn't argue with her. He'd known she was wrong from the beginning. And yet the bland finality of her words still gave him a faint pang. He wanted to say he never asked for deadly and scary adventures, they just seemed to seek him out. But he knew there was no point. There was nothing to salvage with Millie. And she was better off away from him. Whatever it took.

Back at the moonpool, James said goodnight to Hagrid, his dad, aunt, and uncle, and then walked Millie through the eerily dark and silent corridors of the school until their paths parted.

She turned to him but didn't look up at him. "Well. Goodnight, James."

"Goodbye, Millie," he sighed.

She gave a sigh of her own and nodded.

A moment later, she was merely a shadow trudging tiredly away from him. A moment after that, she was gone around a corner.

James stood and stared at the empty corner for a minute. He had kissed Millie, and made her giggle, and held her hand, and shared long, intense gazes with her across classrooms and the library. But in the end, she couldn't look him in the eye as they said goodbye. And that, James thought, too exhausted to feel particularly sad, was probably the story of most of life's loves: brief moments of blazing romance, followed

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by two people standing over the spitting, cooling coals of their spent passion until one of them got uncomfortable enough to walk away.

Until the love that mattered. The one to end them all, the one whose coals would never cool or lose their spark.

This thought offered James no consolation, however. He had found his one perfect love, the one whose fire would forever burn. And further, he now knew that she loved him back. Yet even that golden, pristine love would end with one of them walking away forever, never looking back.

He sighed, long and hard, and the sigh was half shudder.

He didn't remember walking back to the Gryffindor tower and falling into his bed. He barely even remembered saying goodbye to Millie. All he remembered was the feeling of emptiness, of having been, if not loved, then really, really liked, and then losing that affection forever, with nothing to replace it with.

It wasn't a nice feeling. But, as James went into the last, breathless, portentous weeks of his Hogwarts career, he had an idea that it was possibly the most grown-up feeling he had ever yet known.

\* \* \*

Spring settled over Hogwarts with languid extravagance, freshening the air, melting the snow, unlocking the lake from its pall of ice, and breathing green buds throughout the Forest and grounds. This was greeted with renewed excitement and energy by most students, though not by James himself, who felt the mingled weight of Petra's impending departure, and the uncertainty of her dark plan, along with the more general worries about the continued erosion of the Vow of Secrecy and the magical world in general.

Part of the reason that Norberta's appearance in London hadn't made greater news, James now knew, was that stories of the breakdown of wizarding boundaries were becoming increasingly commonplace. Thousand-year-old safeguards and protections were gradually discovered to be weakening or broken entirely. This was met with dismay by the Ministry, with increasingly feverish articles by the wizarding press, and

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with secret, dark glee by certain unsavoury denizens of the magical world.

Every morning's post brought more worrying news:

Werewolves were prowling small Muggle communities with growing boldness, testing ancient boundary hexes and finding them threadbare or entirely gone. Mainstream Muggle news outlets mostly ignored such fantastical stories (for the time being), but tabloid papers and local news programs picked up the slack, giving breathless, incredulous reports of attacks by "unusually large and vicious wolves". Some eyewitnesses swore that the beasts walked on hind legs like men, and even used fragments of human speech. Other eyewitnesses, horribly, never lived to tell their tale. Murders were few and scattered, but horribly violent, striking terror in rural communities unlike anything they'd known in modern times.

The news from Romania was possibly even more unsettling. After hundreds of years of quiet reformation, small communities of vampires were reportedly renouncing their Pact of Blood Temperance, refusing long-established voluntary blood depositories and returning instead to ancient midnight hunting practices. A team of Harriers had been assembled to confront the leader of one such community, a certain Count Domn Orpheus, only to be ambushed themselves by the Count and his guard. Three harriers had been bitten, bled, and then carried by their retreating mates to the nearest hospital some seventy miles away. There, the three died, only to reawaken the next morning under the veil of the undead, hissing, befanged, and starved for blood.

Via the Shard, Zane informed James that his old mate from Bigfoot House, Wentworth Paddington, who was part vampire himself (though none would ever guess it), had been taken out of school by his parents in preparation for moving back to Romania. This was not because they intended to abandon their own Blood Temperance, but to get out of America before the rumours of "extranatural interment camps" came true.

The news from within the Giant communities was spotty, but equally worrisome. Many tribes had retreated from their ancestral communities, but clumsily, leaving behind copious evidence of their habitation. Muggle explorers were discovering giant footprints, tribal

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cave drawings, and even burial mounds. International magical response teams were dispatched to the sites to scrub as much evidence as possible, and obliviators did what they could to erase memories and alter reports. Still, some leaks of giant-related material had proved impossible to contain. One Muggle explorer had actually dug up a giant skull from its burial mound and was displaying the ghastly object (purported to be five feet in diameter with a weight of nearly five stone) to any and all photographers and television news cameras. For now, as with the werewolf sightings, these reports were mainly met with skepticism from major media. But those in the magical world knew that such fortune couldn't possibly last forever.

Perhaps most disheartening of all, wizarding thieves had begun targeting Muggle homes and institutions. Where magical safeguards had once made it impossible for adult witches and wizards to deliberately use their powers against Muggle establishments, now petty magical criminals easily thieved banks, vaults, and wealthy manors, all with increasing confidence, knowing that the magical community was too occupied to stop them, and Muggle locks and alarms were no match for their wands.

One particularly audacious heist of the United States gold reserve at Fort Knox was only thwarted because the American Magical Integration Bureau had shown the foresight to erect foe-glasses in their secret offices in that and similarly sensitive locations. The organized gang of witches and wizards, led, sadly enough, by a certain Luckinbill Fletcher of Herbertshire, was only temporarily captured. They eluded authorities en route to Fort Bedlam prison, vowing that next time no "hand-me-down magical trinkets" would stop them.

As a result, the Ministry of Magic had determined that the Magical Integration Bureau's use of physical guards was worthy of consideration. Thus, as a "temporary safety measure" (or "desperate last resort" according to Scorpius), thirty particularly essential magical locations around Europe had been deemed Code Red High-Risk and fortified with twenty-four hour watchmen.

Hogwarts was one of those thirty.

"We have been kindly asked," Merlin stated at the official announcement one Thursday evening at dinner, "that we not refer to our new watch as 'guards', since that term is feared to imply a certain," he peered down his nose at a parchment in his hand, "antagonistic

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and/or fear-based response, rather than a mere benevolent vigilance for the welfare of all, both magical and otherwise.”

Next to Merlin, albeit a step back, a blocky man in dark brown coat and beret nodded approvingly. He was the captain of the watch, apparently, a Mr. Hawtrey. James guessed that he, like many of the watch themselves, were retired wizards who had volunteered for this service, and showed, more than anything, the sort of dutiful zealotry that comes mostly from age and boredom.

A watchtower was quickly and economically erected along the shore of the lake and rounds were established throughout every hour of the day. The men of the watch were mostly amiable duffers often distracted from their duties by the temptation to tell tales, to anyone who would listen, of their own long-ago days at Hogwarts.

“Back in my time,” one of them regaled James one day between classes, tapping him in the chest, “If we spoke out of turn, it was the tongue-screw we got!” He chuffed wheezing laughter at this. “We had real discipline back then! Not this namby-pamby drivel they coddle you lot with now.”

The man’s partner, much taller than him, with thin hair slicked black with pomade, nodded and narrowed one eye. “Argus Filch was a resident apprentice here in those days. Head-in-the-clouds Filch we called him. Always writing poetry and painting pictures, he was.”

“All he *could* do, since a wand was no good in the poor sod’s hand.”

“Hush! I don’t think we’re s’posed to talk about that,” the taller man chastised. “Filch may be a hopeless dreamer, but he’s got to command respect *someday...!*”

James tried to back away without the men noticing. Ralph tugged his elbow as the two seemed to fall into a small squabble.

A few of the watchmen, however, were unrelenting in their grim dedication. They stalked the corridors and grounds with eyes of flint, apparently feeling empowered to enforce student rules, and even invent new ones in the name of security. One of these men, a gangly Welshman of about forty with the constipated face and rigid posture of a born rule-follower, ordered students back from a late spring wade in the lake, chastising them for crossing the boundary of the school. The same

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man, whose name James learned was Royston Brimble, insisted loudly that Hogsmeade weekends should be curtailed until further notice (a suggestion that Merlin, fortunately, did not so much as honour with a reply). Later, he called for the abandonment and “removal or demolition” of Hagrid’s hut on the grounds that it was “an eyesore and a superfluous extra domicile, needlessly complicating the scope of watch duties.”

At this recommendation, Hagrid simply smiled with all of his teeth, clapped the man on the shoulder hard enough to buckle his knees, and said, “Good luck with that, Mr. Brimble.”

A short time later, fortunately, Brimble was seen beneath the watchtower being spoken to very carefully by Mr. Hawtrey in his natty brown beret. Brimble abandoned the matters of Hogsmeade weekends and Hagrid’s hut, but continued to order and reprimand students at every possible opportunity, always with blazing eyes and specks of white spittle in the corners of his mouth.

A sign-up sheet for student volunteers to the watch was posted in the entrance hall. *STAY UP LATE FOR A GOOD CAUSE!* the heading ran. After a week, there were only three names on the parchment. James was annoyed yet unsurprised to see that the names were Edgar Edgecombe, Polly Heathrow, and Quincy Ogden.

When he saw the three again, they sported small silver badges on their robes, carefully polished and prominently displayed. The badges were tiny shields with the letters J.W. stamped onto them.

“Junior Watch,” Edgecombe said, tapping his badge importantly as he waited outside a classroom watching others walk past, his eyes narrowed. “Counts as credit for Muggle studies, it does. Gets me out of Grenadine’s stupid class.”

“Curious, that,” Sanjay Yadav commented from nearby, “I’ve found Miss Grenadine’s class to be a lot less stupid without you three in it.”

Several others laughed (including James, passing on his way to Transfiguration) but Polly Heathrow glared at Sanjay, pushing up to her full height.

“We’ve been instructed to report any of a whole list of suspicious behaviours,” she said in her high, nasal voice. “Disrespecting authority

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is number twelve. You just might want to tread careful before you end up on any ‘official watch lists’.”

James turned when he heard this, but Rose caught his elbow even as he did. “Leave her be,” she muttered. “You don’t have time to start anything. And besides, Sanjay is quick enough to fight his own battles.”

Indeed, behind them, Sanjay spoke up, “Does the list include being three proper little gits? If so, I may need to do some reporting of my own.”

Ogden moved to confront Sanjay, but at that moment James’ line of sight was obscured by passing students. Somewhat regrettably, he turned back and hurried on to his own class. Rose was right that Sanjay was clearly capable of handling himself. And at least the trio of little bullies had turned their attention to someone other than him.

As classes progressed, James confronted for the first time, and with great unwillingness, the reality that final N.E.W.T. examinations were, in fact, going to happen, no matter how hard he pretended otherwise. With the enthusiasm of a man going to the gallows, he began to devote himself to studying and preparation, thankful for the spontaneous study groups that began to gather in the library most evenings. Graham, Deirdre, Ralph, Fiera Hutchins, Fiona Fourcompass, and Trenton Bloch were almost always there. Often, they would be joined by other seventh years, including Nolan Beetlebrick, Julian Jackson, Ashley Doone, Patrick McCoy, Millie, and George Muldoon, creating a large and occasionally boisterous gathering that often, James noticed with some degree of relief, bordered on the edge of becoming a football scrum (when they argued vigourously about a debatable technique) or a kitchen raiding party (when the argument was over and everyone was feeling restless and peckish). The evening librarian eventually gave up trying to contain and quiet the group. Long-accustomed to the ebbs and flows of school life, she simply herded the students into a large bay-window area far from the main floor. Here, window seats were covered in cushions and pillows, high curtains and shelves baffled extra noise, and the rugs probably still bore the biscuit crumbs and soda stains of decades-past study sessions.

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One Monday morning, with the late spring sun blazing down from the rafters of the Great Hall, James finally found the time and determination to confront Albus about his interactions with Petra, if for no other reason than to prove to his brother that he now knew about her plans, too. His intention was sidetracked, however, when he arrived in the Great Hall and learned that Albus' relationship with Chance Jackson had been ended that weekend, by her choice.

Chance sat in her normal place at the end of the Gryffindor table, solemn but surrounded by her doting entourage of friends. They cooed over her and leaned in to offer commiserating touches, clearly enjoying the delicious pathos of her drama. Albus, on the other hand, sat alone in the darkest corner of the Slytherin table, on the opposite side of the Hall, not eating breakfast, nor talking, not doing anything much besides glowering at everything and nothing, his head low between his hunched shoulders.

James decided to approach him anyway, but Albus saw him coming and hurled himself to his feet, dragging his knapsack with him and slinging it angrily over one shoulder, stalking toward the door.

"He's really upset," Fiera Hutchins observed to Nolan Beetlebrick, who leaned back to watch as Albus shoved through the double doors.

"That's what comes of dating outside one's house," Beetlebrick agreed sagely, cocking one eye aside at James. "Nothing but betrayal and heartbreak."

James pretended not to hear. Clearly, for reasons that were entirely his own, Albus had allowed himself to become hopelessly enmeshed with Chance Jackson, and was sincerely, if angrily, bereft about the ending of their relationship. James couldn't bring himself to understand it in the least. Chance was cute and all, he supposed, but she was hardly worth jumping off a cliff over. Come to think of it, though, neither was Albus.

Returning to his seat at the Gryffindor table, James decided that he could wait just a little longer to learn what Albus knew about Petra's plan, and whatever part he, Albus, was meant to play in it.

It was fully three weeks after their midnight trip to London on Hagrid's blockade runner that James was summoned to Merlin's office on what appeared to be disciplinary charges. He got the message from a

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smugly gleeful Filch during breakfast on a Thursday morning, just as he was taking his first bite of sausage.

“The headmaster requires your presence at half-past six this evening in his office,” the old caretaker growled from behind him, leaning close in a parody of confidentiality. “Half past six, sharp. And I must say, he didn’t seem especially pleased about it. Dear me, no.” He sucked his teeth thoughtfully and shook his head.

Coldness fell over James as he glanced back at Filch, absorbing this sudden news. Then he turned toward the head table, looking for Merlin himself. Only he wasn’t there. His high chair in the centre of the table was empty, his place cleared.

“What’ll *that* be about, eh?” Ralph asked quietly as they made their way out of the castle toward Care of Magical Creatures. “Have you been up to something I don’t know about?”

“Haven’t the faintest idea,” James answered worriedly.

“It’s probably that stupid Night Quidditch,” Ralph nodded soberly to himself. “You know he’s bound to put a stop to it. He has to, sooner or later. All the prefects are on the lookout for you lot. Me, too, come to think of it. I don’t want to do it, but responsibilities is responsibilities.”

“It’s not about Night Quidditch,” James snapped irritably. “And I really wish you’d lay off about it. It’s just a game. It doesn’t hurt anybody.”

“It’s breaking curfew, for starters,” Ralph replied. “And it’s threatening our security nowadays, it is. All of you out there with your glowing Bludgers and Quaffles and such. And now I’m told you’re using loads of those ridiculous sport magic spells you picked up last year at Clutchcudgel. Gravity wells and knucklers and other dotty stuff that’s in no self-respecting spellbook. What if some Muggle campers happen to see all that magic and those flying glowing balls from across the lake?”

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard,” James hissed, rolling his eyes. He was quite proud of the addition of sport magic to Night Quidditch, and still considered himself one of its best practitioners, though Julian Jackson would be a close second. “Nobody’s going to see us, no matter what spells we use. Would you come off it, already?”

“I’m Head Boy, James—”

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"As if you'd let me forget *that* for more than thirty seconds."

"And I've got a future to think about. As a Dolohov, I could have a solid career at the Ministry, or even in the States. But I've got to start living up to it now. And sometimes that means putting duty before friendship."

"Look, Ralph," James declared, stopping on the grass and turning on his friend. "If this is more of this 'finding the true Ralph' stuff, I get it. I really do. But you are dangerously close to crossing a line I don't think you really mean to cross. It was one thing when Zane was here to help reign you in—"

*"Reign me in!?"*

"But I'm just one person and you're full steam ahead into... *whatever* it is you're on about. I don't even know. I want to support you, Ralph. We've been mates since forever. But if you think your duty to that stupid badge is more important than your friends, well, all I can say is I guess you've finally proved yourself a Slytherin."

"*Whoa,*" Graham Warton said, impressed, as he passed the two of them. "The fangs are out now, aren't they?"

"Give 'em hell, James!" Ashley Doone called from some distance away, walking backwards to watch. Next to her, Patrick McCoy sniggered.

James rolled his eyes and took a step back.

Ralph stood like a statue for a long moment, his cheeks brick red, his eyes both hurt and defiant. He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could a girl stepped between them, placing a hand on each one's chest.

"Shake hands and say sorry," she said quietly. It was Rose. She glanced aside at James, and then at Ralph. Neither boy moved.

"Do it," she said in the same tone of voice. "You both know you want to. Tensions are high right now and everybody's at their frayed edge. But you need each other. And I can't muster the energy to get between you both if you go to war. So shake hands and say sorry."

James drew a long breath through his nose. Rose was right. And yet a fiercely stubborn urge held him back.

"Sorry," Ralph said, his eyes lowered but his hand held out. "Really. You're right. I'm sorry."

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James blew out the breath he'd been holding and reached to shake Ralph's hand, briefly but firmly.

"I'm sorry, too, Ralph. I'm just... you know."

"You're worried about Merlin's summons," Ralph nodded.

"And... everything else. I know."

To Rose, James muttered, "Since when did you turn into our mum?"

Rose rolled her eyes, bemused and relieved. "Since you both proved you need one."

The rest of the day went by in a fugue of slowly increasing tension. James had no idea what the summons from Merlin was about. What he did know was that it was just like the headmaster to make the request first thing in the morning so James had ten long hours to stew over it. His final class of the day, Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall, seemed to stretch into nearly infinite lethargy, each minute taking approximately a year as he struggled, halfheartedly, to change a China teapot into a half dozen teacups. McGonagall herself showed off the technique with frustrating ease, tipping her steaming pot and transforming the spout into a line of six dainty cups, catching each one deftly as it appeared and setting them on the desk, even as the teapot emptied both its water and itself into the final receptacle.

James hissed and yanked his hand away, burning his fingers with hot tea for what felt like the thousandth time, but producing no teacups from the pot in his hand.

"It's a matter of confidence, students," McGonagall instructed grimly, scrutinizing them over her spectacles. "Pour as if you fully expect the cup to appear. Any hesitation at all will spoil the magic."

James shook his head and lifted the teapot again, even as it bubbled and steamed, magically refilling itself. He sucked his red fingers, then held out his hand once more, preparing to catch the teacup as it formed from the tilting spout, and knowing that it would never happen. This, he mused, was the tricky thing about confidence: the more you tried to force it to happen, the more elusive it was.

Finally, dinnertime came and went. James barely noticed it, being far too focused on the appointment afterward. But then, somehow, time seemed to catch up to him, snapping forward with cruel

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elasticity, and he found himself walking toward the rising spiral stairs of the headmaster's office, caught once again on the miserable knife edge between wanting to get it over with as soon as possible and wanting to run away as fast as he could.

"Potter," the Gargoyle guard said in its gravel voice, nodding him onward toward the stairs.

James paused. "Aren't you going to ask me for the password?"

"Do you *know* the password?" the gargoyle asked, raising a suspicious marble eyebrow.

"Um," James admitted reluctantly, "No, I don't."

The gargoyle nodded again, as if satisfied. "But *I* know *you*, and that's what counts. Passwords can be forgotten or stolen. New times call for new measures. Now, go on up. He's expecting you."

James swallowed hard and turned to the gently rising steps. Effortlessly, they lifted him and carried him up, around, into darkness, and then into the mellower, golden light of the headmaster's antechamber. The large office door stood open, casting a bar of firelight out onto the waiting bench and the wall of miscellaneous portraits, paintings, and plaques.

James approached the door, feeling twice as heavy as normal.

*It's just Merlin, he told himself. I'm most of the reason he even exists in this time and place and isn't still floating around in the Void of Disappearance. I'm part of the reason he was given the post of headmaster. He helped me rid the school of that loony Muggle reporter, and I helped him rid the world of the Gatekeeper. We go back together. We're friends...*

And yet James knew that what Merlin called friendship and what *he* called friendship were likely two extremely different things. As different as the two worlds, a thousand years apart, that formed them both.

As always, the headmaster's office was crowded to the point of claustrophobia, filled with trunks and crates, bookshelves and tables, tools, talismans, and enormous oddities of every imagining, including (but hardly limited to) the gigantic stuffed alligator that hung from the ceiling, its glassy black eyes staring down and its hundreds of teeth bared in an uncomfortably jolly grin.

"Come in, James, and do close the door," Merlin said easily, not looking up from his desk, where he seemed to be writing something with

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one hand, consulting a large book with the other. “It seems to be a customary expectation of the age that I offer you a seat. But frankly *I* prefer for you to remain standing. Thus, I shall leave the option to your good judgment.”

James moved cautiously to a space equidistant from the hearth on his left and the desk in front. The stone floor was warm. The air of the office was heavy with the sleepy scent of candle wax, old leather, and, unexpectedly, cocoa. James glanced down. A silver tray sat perched on the edge of Merlin’s desk, nearly pushed off by a haphazard pile of books. On the tray, a large stoneware mug of hot chocolate steamed gently. As James watched, Merlin reached without looking, scooped the mug into his hand, and sipped a deep draught, finally leaning back in his chair as he did so.

“Ahh,” he said, half-closing his eyes. “You know, James, I’ve gone in and out, to and fro in this new world. I’ve seen, smelled, and tasted its million strange discoveries. And I don’t care what the politicians, priests, and poets say: hot chocolate is the pinnacle of your era. Perhaps any era.” He breathed the mug’s rich steam, sipped again at its contents, and then, reluctantly, set the cocoa aside on its tray.

Returning his gaze to James, a speculative look in his eyes, he said, “You’re probably wondering why I’ve summoned you here.”

“Well,” James said, his voice dry, “Yeah. I mean, yes sir. I assumed...” He stopped and cleared his throat nervously. “I assumed that I was in trouble, like.”

“Oh, but you are, Mr. Potter,” the headmaster nodded somberly, and drew a little sigh. “As headmaster of this school, I would be bereft in my duties if I did not correct aberrant behaviour by the accepted means. I know it’s been a month, but do forgive me. I’m a busy man.”

“But,” James blinked, sincerely baffled, “but you said on the boat that there wouldn’t *be* any punishment for the whole dragon-in-London thing!”

“Oh, I truly doubt I said anything that direct. I prize nuance, Mr. Potter. But you are, in essence, correct. There is no discipline to be meted out for your failure to control the events of that night. Your lesson, one might hope, has been learned.”

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Behind James, somebody gave a light, peremptory cough. He turned quickly, in time to see the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, unusually awake and alert. Dumbledore folded his hands on his lap and looked past James, staring politely into the middle distance.

"Yes," Merlin said, drawing attention back to himself. "And yet there is the small matter of your being out of bed past the accepted time. For that, I'm afraid I must deduct, let me think... perhaps five house points."

At the headmaster's words, James fancied he could hear the tiny clink and clatter of rubies emptying from the Gryffindor vial, far below. He knew he was imagining it.

"Um," he said after a long, hopeful pause, "is that all, sir?"

"No, James," Merlin said, and his façade of unassailable authority seemed to evaporate, as if it was a robe the huge man put on and took off whenever it suited him. "It is not. And yet, for the life of me, I find myself so often at a very unaccustomed loss for how to proceed with you." He picked up his cocoa again but did not drink it, merely regarded James through ribbons of rising steam.

James' previous nervousness rushed back, and doubled. He gulped. "Should I be, er, sorry, sir?"

"Where do you think she keeps it?" the huge man asked, his voice so calm and quiet that it was almost a lion's purr. "Has she told you? Has she, perhaps, shown you?"

A thrill of exquisite fear coursed from the crown of James' head to the soles of his feet, shaking him where he stood. And he knew: Merlin was reading him like a book. Merlin knew everything. Merlin couldn't be fooled.

He heard his own voice ask, almost automatically, "Where she keeps what, sir?"

"Her Horcrux," Merlin answered, and then shrugged vaguely. "Or the thread itself. Both are equally important to her. Though not quite as important, I am willing to wager, as this."

He took one hand away from his mug and held it up. Sparkling between his thumb and forefinger was Petra's brooch, the one she had lost from the stern of the Gwyndemere, and the one that she had refound in the World Between the Worlds, brought over by her alternate

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self from another, darker dimension. James' eyes widened at the sight of it.

Merlin turned his gaze from James to the brooch in his hand, tilting his head back to examine its silver and moonstone through his spectacles. "It was a gift from her father, while she was yet in her mother's womb. He was never able to give it to her, sadly. He died in prison."

"He didn't die there," James said before he could stop himself, his own voice an octave lower than normal. "He was *killed* there. Murdered by his guards for secrets they believed he was keeping."

Merlin nodded, still examining the brooch, turning it this way and that by the firelight. "The gears of justice are too large not to occasionally grind up the innocent. Or at least, in this case, the only slightly guilty."

James opened his mouth to retort, but stopped himself. He narrowed his eyes as an idea—a near certainty—came into his mind. He remembered something that Merlin had said to him back during his first year: *nine-tenths of magic happens in the mind. The last tenth is pure and unadulterated bluster.*

Merlin was pulling the same trick that his father had so often used on him. The same trick that had only recently worked so well on Rose, getting her to confess nearly everything about their first disastrous trip to London. The headmaster was pretending to know far more than he did, in order to lure James into telling him all the rest. Only Merlin, being Merlin, was infinitely better at it.

"I don't know where she keeps anything," James said, reverting to the headmaster's initial question. It wasn't a lie, exactly. It just wasn't all of the truth.

"You are very nearly of age now, James," Merlin said, lowering his hand and gazing at him again. "Indeed, in the world I once knew, you would be considered old enough to go off to war, to marry, to own and tend your own holdings. You are no longer a child, but a man. And this is not flattery, for it is a terrible responsibility to be a man or a woman, grown and thrust out from beneath the wing of your parents and teachers. Thus, be sure that when I ask you about Petra Morganstern—or Morgan, as she now reluctantly prefers to be called—I

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do not ask as a guardian to a charge, but as one responsible citizen to another, with nothing less in the balance than the fate of worlds."

His eyes were stern as he spoke, but his voice remained calm, low. "I believe that you are keeping your own secret council for noble reasons. Perhaps you mean to assist Morgan or dissuade her using your own unique influence over her. Perhaps you fear for the lives of those you love if you draw them into a potentially hopeless confrontation with her. In short, I trust your motives, James, if not always your judgment."

Here, Merlin stood behind his desk, leaving the mug steaming on its corner. James watched him, resisting the urge to speak up, to answer Merlin's comments. He desperately wanted to explain everything. There was nothing more tempting in the moment than to share the burden of responsibility with Merlin, to be welcomed into his powerful camaraderie and confidence.

But Merlin couldn't dissuade or stop Petra. He would die trying. As much as it pained and saddened James, he remained stubbornly silent, afraid almost to look the huge sorcerer in the eye, lest he reveal the truth with his mere gaze.

"I shall do you the service of telling you everything I know, James," Merlin said, slowly rounding his desk and approaching the fire. "For via my diverse arts I have learned much, however frustratingly incomplete. Petra has identified herself with her dark mirror, the other version of herself, now murdered and bound to this earth. She believes that only by assuming Morgan's place in her original dimension can she reset the crumbling destinies of our twin worlds. In this, James," Merlin reached the fire and turned his gaze sidelong to face him, "Petra is both absolutely correct, and terribly, fatally mistaken. For there are other forces in play, powerful forces both terrible and corrupt. They assist Petra, drive her, and yet they do not share her benevolent motives. I see them not, but I sense their movement, like shapes underwater, tracing deep ripples on the surface of causality, undermining all that is true and good."

"Judith," James said involuntarily. A chill traced down his spine, shaking him where he stood.

"And another," Merlin nodded slowly. They both knew who he meant, but neither would say it. And this sent another, harder shiver all the way to James' heels. For many long years—over two decades—no

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one had been afraid to say the name of Voldemort. Why should they? The Dark Lord had been beaten and killed by his young nemesis, Harry Potter.

But now, the greatest wizard alive, Merlinus Ambrosius himself, stood with his back to the fire in his own office leaving that old name unspoken in the air between them. Voldemort was once again He Who Must Not Be Named. He lived again, if only as a fractured shred in Petra's mind, but stronger today than yesterday, and growing ever stronger by the minute.

Because Petra no longer resisted the perverse whisper of Voldemort's influence. She was cultivating it. She was using it, drawing conviction, and power, and direction from it.

Every child knew the stories of how the Dark Lord's black magic worked, back when he was fully alive in power and malevolence: speaking the villain's name summoned him.

Now, it was true once again. If either James or Merlin spoke the name, she would know.

And perhaps she would come.

"There is only one thing that matters in all of this, James," Merlin said, turning to face him fully now, regarding him levelly. "Petra's—Morgan's—mission cannot be what it appears as long as the worst villains in this, or any, earth are driving her to accomplish it. She may believe that she can harness the power of the bloodline within her while not succumbing to it. But she grows blinded in exactly the same measure as she grows powerful. And soon, James, she will not care if she is blinded or not. He whose soul curses her will turn her completely."

James shook his head slowly, thoughtfully, now looking up at Merlin. "No, she won't. She can't be. Petra is good. She can resist."

"She *has* resisted," Merlin agreed carefully. "But she stopped doing so the moment that she made her Horcrux. Now, she has partnered with her curse. Soon, inevitably, it will consume her."

James shook his head again and dropped his gaze. He backed up a step and sank into a nearby chair. "I think... she believes that she'll be gone before the voice in her mind can get that sort of control over her. She'll be vanished away into Morgan's original dimension. It won't matter anymore."

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"You miss the point, James," Merlin stated, a note of impatience, even frustration, edging into his voice. "This is no longer a decision that can be left up to her. She is deluded beyond reason. The Petra you once knew is gone already. In her place is the Bloodline. The Crimson Thread. Morgan. She is corrupted. And as such, she is unable to see that her plan is rooted in lies. There is no other interpretation. If the Lady of the Lake and He Who Must Not Be Named are scheming for the success of her plan, then only terror and misery can come of it. Never hope. Never salvation."

James was becoming agitated with frustration. "But it makes *sense*, though!" He glared down at his open hands, and then snapped them into fists. "As much as I hate what it means—that she will leave us forever—it makes *sense!* The world is falling apart more every day, all because of the imbalance caused by the stolen Crimson Thread. Morgan was her twin, so that means Petra is the only one who can replace her and set things back to rights again."

"The world is not so simple," Merlin stated firmly. "I wish that it were, but it is not, and you are grown enough to know that. The young lady who was once your friend has embraced an illusion. Her guilt has partnered with her power to make her vulnerable to the worst of lies, and thus she is made a pawn for powers that would seek not just our slow degradation, but our outright destruction."

James realized, with some dismay, that his frustration was edging into anger now. He looked up at the headmaster again, boldly. "Everyone thinks Petra is evil. That she's the worst witch that ever lived. The world's first female Undesirable Number One. And now you think that, too."

"Evil, no," Merlin countered, lifting his chin. "But *deluded* by evil, yes."

"You're all wrong," James said, firming his jaw. "I know her better than any of you. I know she's stronger than you know. Not just in her powers, but in her heart."

"Are you willing to stake the balance of the world, and all worlds, on that confidence?"

James faltered. He glared up at the headmaster still. But he had no more strong words.

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When Merlin spoke again, his voice was very low, deadly serious. "She makes her attempt soon, James. She and those who have chosen to assist her. But she will not leave without this." He held up the moonstone brooch again. "You were there when I captured it. You already suspect what I know: that the brooch is her heart and soul, because it means everything that she has lost. Before she leaves this realm, if indeed that is possible, she will come for it. I will confront her. And then, what will happen, will happen. Unless you, James, decide to assist me."

James was still gazing up into the headmaster's probing eyes. He felt wary, and torn, and deeply worried. His voice a near whisper, he asked, "How could I help you?"

"By telling me who it is that she has called to her side. There are two that I can sense via my arts, the Ransom and the Architect, but I cannot name them. Besides the villains who drive and protect her, who are these two who mean to assist Petra in her misguided, disastrous plan? Tell me so that I may reason with them. For the time is coming, and it may indeed be here, when there will be nothing left but fight, blood, and death. Tell me before it must come to that, James. Only you can do so."

James' thoughts reeled. Could Merlin be referring to Odin-Vann and Albus? Or were there possibly others? What did the mysterious roles mean, the Ransom and the Architect? And if it was Odin-Vann and Albus, which one was which?

He drew a deep breath, balanced perfectly on the razor's edge of indecision. And then, with a sort of internal collapse of relief, he knew what he had to do.

It was Merlin, after all.

He met the headmaster's gaze and said, "It's—"

Several things happened at once, interrupting him. A voice, harsh and startling, spoke up from the hearth. A fist pounded on the door, urgently. And most disconcerting of all, a horn sounded outside the headmaster's open window. The noise was low and throbbing, like a note blown on a ram's horn, only one of massive size, giving it a deep, bass resonance.

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"Headmaster Merlinus," the woman's voice from the floo declared. "This is Deputy Partridge from the Department of Magical Integrity and Security calling. Are you there?" Her face, thin and stern with hair pulled into a merciless bun, shifted in the coals, looking for him.

"I am here, Madame," Merlin answered quickly, even as he moved to the door and swept it open. Mr. Brimble, the evening watchman, stood outside, his eyes wide, his face the colour of putty. He stepped into the doorframe and glanced around hectically. His eyes alit on James and then dismissed him, flicking back to the headmaster.

From the floo, the woman from the Ministry said, "There have been several breaches in temporary magical boundaries this night. We have incoming reports of unnamed magical species venturing into protected areas. Hogwarts School is one of them. Initiate Ministry regulation lockdown protocols until further notice."

"I shall take whatever precaution the situation dictates, Madame Partridge," Merlin replied smoothly. "Just as soon as we ascertain which magical species has decided to visit us."

Brimble bounced on his toes, nearly bursting with impatience. Merlin turned to him, his brow raised inquisitively.

"They pulled down the watchtower, sir!" he said breathlessly. "Hawtrey and Rheem barely got out before they toppled the whole thing over into the lake using their ropes and hooks! They're right furious, although none of us can understand a word they say! Seems like they think we were using the tower to spy on them or something!"

"Who, pray tell?" Merlin asked.

"Merpeople, sir!" Brimble said, his eyes bulging further. "They're gathered all along the shore, shouting nonsense and brandishing those mad, three-pronged spear-things at us!"

"I believe the word you are groping for is 'trident', Mr. Brimble." Merlin suggested.

The horn sounded from beyond the window again, closer now, low and throaty. The noise chilled James and prickled his hair.

"That is not the horn of merpeople," the headmaster said, turning back to Brimble. "That is blown from a golden Graphorn, the traditional rallying call of—"

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“Centaurs, Headmaster,” Partridge concurred from the floo. “We’ve just received word from remote viewers. The entire eastern congress of centaurs is on the move. Hogwarts School is either their destination, or in their path. Evacuation may be imminent.”

“Perhaps let us not leap to extremes,” Merlin suggested with almost impish calm. As a man accustomed to action, even war, it appeared that these were precisely the moments he lived for. “Have we any idea what our guests are seeking?”

“They’re threatening the lot of us with their pointy, er, tridents, sir!” Brimble exclaimed, his voice climbing into near falsetto range. “I think it’s bloody well obvious what they want!”

“The centaurs, I mean,” Merlin said, holding up a hand to Brimble. “The merpeople are waterbound, thus of some lesser concern at the moment. Yet, the centaurs are not a people to attack without warrant and reason. Has anyone inquired what they are seeking?”

“This is not the time for diplomacy, Mr. Ambrosius,” Partridge commanded from the floo. “Initiate lockdown, as protocol demands. Hundreds of students are in danger.”

“Not unless any of them attack our guests,” Merlin countered smoothly. “And even then, I expect the centaur sword would be used to spank rather than gut. These are a patient people. We shall meet with them as comrades.”

More footsteps echoed heavily up the spiral stairs beyond the door. A figure plowed into the office, pushing Brimble aside unceremoniously. It was Hawtrey this time, his face red and clammy with sweat, his chest heaving from the exertion of having run some distance. His brown beret was pushed back, revealing his high, balding brow.

“Centaurs, sir,” he wheezed between gasps. “In the courtyard... Demand palaver with the Pendragon, whatever that is...” He swallowed and fell against the doorframe, raising one hand to cover his heart. “And two counselors... of his choosing.”

“Please sit and recover yourself, Mr. Hawtrey,” Merlin instructed, and then turned to Brimble. “Go and summon Professor McGonagall. She will surely be found in her quarters at this hour. Have her meet me in the courtyard within five minutes. We should not

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keep our guests waiting. James?" He turned and looked down at James where he still sat, now perched forward on the edge of his chair.

"Yes sir?"

"You will accompany me as my second counselor." This did not seem to be a suggestion.

"*Me, sir?*"

"I can think of no one else I would prefer. You may consider it credit toward your, ahem, Junior Auror-in-Training elective. I shall inform Professor Debellows."

"Headmaster," Partridge interrupted sternly, "we have instituted official protocols for a reason. I insist that—"

"Rest assured, Madame," Merlin said, turning back to the face in the coals. "If the outcome of this evening's palaver requires it, I shall follow Department regulations to the very jot and tittle."

"Mr. Ambrosius!" Partridge called stridently, but Merlin was already stepping toward his open door, passing Hawtrey where he sat gasping and wheezing on the antechamber bench.

James jumped up from his chair and ran to catch up, leaving the face in the hearth fuming, both literally and figuratively.

As he passed the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, the old headmaster offered him a solemn nod. "Courage and prudence, Mr. Potter."

Next to him, the portrait of Snape rolled its eyes hopelessly.

James ran on, clumping down the spiral steps in pursuit of the headmaster. He had a sinking sensation that somewhere, somehow, a final corner had been turned. There was a sense of destinies shifting on the huge, crushing axes of fate, like a minute hand on a galactic clock ticking one notch closer to absolute midnight.

It was a deeply unsettling feeling, and yet he was barely aware of it. He was too caught up in the inertia of things to come; a momentum that he feared would not let up from that day forward, until the final, ultimate end.



## **21. DISINTEGRATING PLANS**

“Shouldn’t we be meeting atop the Sylvven Tower, sir?” James suggested as he followed Merlin through the entrance hall. Students milled in urgently whispering knots, collecting around the main doors and peering out, some with trepidation, others with nervous excitement. Bright, wide eyes turned to follow the headmaster as he parted the crowd, walking straight toward the open doors and the twilight courtyard beyond.

“As I am quite certain that it would be pointless to send you all to your common rooms,” he declared without breaking his stride, “At least do respect the confidence and gravity of our guests by staying inside and quiet. I need not remind you that centaurs are solemn creatures

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who do not bear offense lightly." In a quieter voice, he said to James, "The Sylvven Tower is indeed the traditional place for meetings such as these, but it was not built with centaurs in mind. The many stairs would be an injustice and an insult."

The air beyond the open doors was still warm with the dying sunlight, but swirled with capricious night breezes. James stopped on the top step as Merlin progressed down, slowly, moving to greet his guests with stately grace.

The courtyard was filled, nearly wall to wall, with centaurs.

James had never seen so many at once, had never imagined there could be this many gathered in one place. He knew that the eastern congress of the Forest centaurs had to include more than Firenze, Bane, Ronan, and the few others he'd met or glimpsed on rare occasions. And yet the sight before him boggled the mind. Part of his awe was in the sheer weight of the hundreds of stony gazes, all facing toward the doors in ranks and rows, corresponding to some secret hierarchy that James couldn't fathom. Part of it was the array of weaponry on display—massive bows and staffs, ornately crafted broadswords and daggers—none wielded, but held at the ready or worn in creaking belts and leather scabbards. And part of it was that, for the first time, he was seeing female centaurs. They were clad just as the men, but with slighter bodies and, if anything, even more regal bearings, with tapered up-thrust chins and large, grave eyes.

But most of the fearful reverence the colony inspired, however, was in the rarity of their marching in numbers such as this. The centaurs were elusive and secret creatures, vastly preferring their own society to that of man or wizard, and therefore fiercely defending their lands and culture from curious eyes. Yet here they all were, exuding a sense of aloof, cautious superiority so thick that it seemed to darken the very air.

James looked for Magorian, their aged leader, but couldn't find him in their ranks.

Someone hurried alongside James, and then past him, clacking down the steps to join Merlin as he neared the leading row of centaurs. It was professor McGonagall, of course, dressed in a surprising quilted housecoat with a tartan shawl tight around her shoulders, her peaked hat wobbling crookedly. She glanced back at him briefly, her eyes sharp,

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and nodded him curtly forward. James hurried to join them, coming along on Merlin's left side, while McGonagall stood straight on his right.

In unison, she and the headmaster bowed. It was a stiff movement, bending at the waist, but slow and deliberate. James rushed to mimic their movement, feeling awkward and woefully conspicuous.

"Hail, noble denizens of the Forest, your domain," Merlin announced, straightening. "Is Magorian among you? Or to whom shall I address tribute?"

"Magorian is no more," one of the near centaurs answered stiffly. He was tall even by centaur standards, with grey dappled horse flanks and deep brown man's skin from the waist up. His grey hair was loose and long, hanging about his shoulders in ragged ropes and ribbons. "I am Jakhar, his successor, and leader of this colony. Pay tribute to me, Pendragon Merlinus, and bid us welcome, for we come with a warning, and a promise."

"Master Jakhar, venerable leader of a noble people," Merlin acknowledged with a dip of his chin.

Jakhar's face grew harder and his eyes narrowed. "Noble we may be, but people we are not, insofar as your own leaders are concerned. Call us beasts, for that is the title we prefer, lest we fall under the same category as the other odious creatures upon whom you've bestowed the title of 'beings'."

McGonagall replied, "A history lesson we are all quite familiar with. Clearly you remind us of this distinction for a reason?"

"I do," Jakhar concurred. "The news in your world surely confirms what we have divined from the Dance of the Elders. Your mistake in absorbing the lesser creatures into your society has come to its inevitable consequence. Hags, vampires, Goblins, and other such vermin have rotted your culture to its very foundation. And now they threaten to incur and topple unmagicked human civilization as well."

"An overstatement, perhaps," Merlin hedged mildly. "But a concern that we are striving to address. The Centauri objection notwithstanding, there are yet many individuals of those species who not only uphold our laws and society, but who repudiate the actions of their wayward brethren. The revered Magorian and myself debated this topic

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at length, and yet even he, late in his life, understood the error of condemning an entire population for its worst members."

"An opinion that he recanted in his final day," Jakhar bristled, stamping his forehoof. "The clarity of death brightened his inner eye, and he saw the truth: a spring that is only half poison will yet kill those who drink of it. An apple that is only half-rotten will still spoil the lot. Humanity has failed to guard itself from the poison and rot of lesser creatures. And now human civilization is as a golden statue with clay feet, cracked and ready to collapse."

"This is an ancient debate," McGonagall declared smoothly, if a bit wearily, "and one that we shall not satisfy this day. What is your warning, Master Jakhar? And what is your promise?"

Jakhar regarded McGonagall carefully, and then switched his gaze to Merlin, and then James. "Our warning is simple and irrevocable, and it is this: the age of Man is over. Wizardkind may be blind to this truth, but we Centaurs have observed the spiral of mankind for decades. Your unmagicked brothers wage war upon each other with ever more terrible weapons. They grow arrogant on power, drunken on technology, and lazy on diversion. The circle of their age closes more with every cycle, devouring itself with increasing speed. We have observed this and shown forbearance, knowing that such monumental portents require absolute surety before action. But the signs have culminated. The point of certainty is past and the time to act has come. Man can no longer be granted the freedom of self-governance. Thus we, the Centaurs and our allies, will mount a revolution into the citadels of human rule. We will save them from themselves. We will eradicate the rot that has beset them in their ignorance, and grant them the security of wise rule, once and for all, under true and prudent dominion."

"You're going to take over human governments?" James blurted, unwilling to believe that he'd heard properly.

"It is the only way to balance the collision of destinies," Jakhar nodded, peering down at James gravely. "The influence of humanity has grown too powerful not to drag the rest of us into its own destruction."

McGonagall's voice was shrill with restrained anger, "Unstable humanity may be, but on the verge of destruction they simply are not. We witches and wizards learned long ago that power does not give one

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the right to make decisions on behalf of an independent culture and people.”

“In fact, Madame Professor,” another centaur spoke up, this one the female who stood to Jakhar’s left, “It is wizardkind’s *failure* to make decisions on behalf of lesser peoples that has led to this impending catastrophe. We Centaurs will not repeat that mistake.”

“How soon?” It was Merlin who asked, his voice as unfailingly calm and measured as always. “We know that the Centauri do not act without much planning, proper preparation, and fair warning. We recognize your warning and ask: how soon do you intend to move upon the Muggle world and their governments? Let us prepare them for your strength and manner, that fewer of both sides might be harmed.”

The female centaur blinked at Merlin, and then glanced aside at Jakhar, who shifted on his hooves, his tail flicking restlessly against his flanks.

“You misunderstand, Merlinus,” he said, dropping his voice to a confidential tone. “It is not the Muggle world that we intend to move upon. The warning is not for you to pass onto them, but for wizardkind itself.”

James felt a wave of coldness fall over him as he looked up at the solemn centaur, standing at the head of his ranks and rows of grim warriors.

After a long, breathless pause, Merlin’s voice was somber. “I see. You intend to move upon the bastions of wizard rule. Because you believe that we have failed in our duties to humanity as a whole.”

The female centaur raised her chin. “Those whom you call Muggles are as your charges. It has always been your duty to shield them from themselves, and from the worst of your own kind. You have done neither. Your mission cannot be said to have failed, for you never took it up. And now, the Centauri have no choice but to accept the mantle of responsibility. We shall establish the rule that you have ignored, and we shall do so first with you and your people. Your Ministry will submit to us. Your leaders will be subject to us. And this school,” her eyes sharpened as she challenged Merlin’s gaze, “shall be our first stronghold.”

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Merlin merely nodded, slowly and consideringly. "Your warning is received with respect," he said. "And your promise?"

"That not one hair on a single head shall be harmed so long as we are met with the respect and obeisance that we require."

Merlin nodded again, even more slowly.

"That is *quite* a stringent requirement," McGonagall said, her voice hushed. "Submission to occupying forces is not something that comes naturally to most of us."

"And that is why we offer our warning," Jakhar replied. "For the day of our coming is not today. But it is soon. We abhor violence. We abhor it so strongly that when forced to fight, we do so with the ferocity and viciousness of conviction, that it may be ended as soon as possible. Those who stand up to Centaurs do not stand up again. This is the only way to shorten the time of violence. Do what you must to assure that it does not come to that."

Without waiting for a response, Jakhar and his escorts turned, their hooves clopping on the flagstones, and paced regally back toward the open courtyard gates. The ranks behind them parted smoothly, forming a silent thoroughfare for them to pass through.

McGonagall turned to Merlin, her eyes sharp, but said nothing. Merlin merely stood and watched the departing Centaurs. They filed out row by row, front to back, funneling through the gate and into the deepening dusk. When the last of them exited, four abreast, their tails flicking restlessly and their heads raised, Merlin finally spoke.

"We should have a word with our Mermish friends. I will explain to them that our watchtower was not intended for them, but that we shall relocate it out of respect for their concerns."

"Headmaster," McGonagall whispered harshly, her gaze still sharp. "What are we to do? The Centaurs mean to take the school! Is it possible that they could indeed breach our boundaries if they came in force?"

"Centaurs do not threaten, Professor," Merlin answered. "If they state an intention, it behooves us to trust that they have the means to accomplish it." He stepped down onto the cobbles and strode for the gate, apparently heading toward the lake to converse with the Merpeople. James and McGonagall followed.

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“Surely, we must inform the Ministry immediately,” McGonagall said, her voice low and serious. “This is a terrible matter indeed.”

“As a matter of fact, Professor,” Merlin said as he passed through the gate and turned toward the lake below, where it glimmered with coppery sunset light, “I believe we may count our lucky stars.”

James glanced up at the big man, frowning. “*Lucky?* How in the world is being invaded by Centaurs lucky?”

“Two reasons. First, because Centaurs measure time in years, not minutes. It may be that they will attack tomorrow, or in a decades’ time. Likely, there is ample time to prepare. And second, because they might indeed have chosen to invade Muggle governments first. With the earth balanced as precariously as it is, that surely would have tipped the scales of fate into irreversible collapse. As it is, there is a shred of hope.”

“I daresay I fail to see it,” McGonagall breathed, and shook her head.

Merlin glanced aside at her, and then at James. Something glinted in his eye, a grim, puckish twinkle, cracking his façade of stony calm. Quietly, he said, “That is because you fail to remember the single most important difference between the non-magical world and our own. Unlike our Muggle friends, when faced with a magical enemy, *we* are able to fight *back*.”



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There was no point in James telling Rose, Ralph, Scorpius, or anyone else about the Centaur summit, since the entire school had been watching breathlessly from the open front doors and every surrounding window. Merlin made an announcement within mere minutes of his meeting with the Merpeople, broadcasting his voice throughout the school as everyone trickled to their common rooms, hushed and abuzz with worrisome chatter.

“Attention students and faculty of Hogwarts,” his voice echoed from every wall, resonated from each flat surface, as if the entire school had been converted into a magical sounding board, which it probably had. “As you are now aware, the Merpeople have been mollified, while our Centaur friends of the Forbidden Forest have expressed their deep concern about the welfare of the human world, both its magical and Muggle counterparts. You may have heard that they believe it will soon be their responsibility to govern us all, and that they will come in force to impose that governing, starting here, with this school. You did not misunderstand. But I assure you: diplomacy will rule the day first. Centaurs are eminently thoughtful creatures, unruly by emotion. Ministry ambassadors will surely be dispatched this very night to negotiate with the Centaurs, and those negotiations shall surely, partly by design, and partly by their very nature, take a very long time. The day may indeed come when diplomacy fails and the centaurs invade Hogwarts. But I expect two things when and if that day comes: you will no longer be here, and we will be equipped to resist them. Fear not, students. Attend to your studies. The fate of the world may not rest on you completing your homework, but the fate of your future does. Let that be your primary focus.”

His voice died away as the students, frozen in place with wide eyes and alert, listening expressions, all began to move again, turning to each other, resuming their whispered, nervous conversations, albeit with a new note of relief in the air. Merlin was the most powerful wizard (and the only living sorcerer) in the entire magical world. If he was not concerned, then perhaps the world was not, in fact, about to fall apart around everyone’s ears.

But as James made his own way up the crowded stairs to the Gryffindor common room, shouldering past slower moving knots of urgently chattering students, watched by the unsettled gazes of dozens of

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paintings, he thought of Merlin's comment back during James' first year. The last tenth of magic, he had said, was pure and unadulterated bluster.

Merlin couldn't know how long the centaurs might take to mount their forces against the school. He couldn't know if they would even engage in diplomacy with any Ministry ambassadors. Based on what James had just heard in the courtyard, he thought it extremely unlikely, in fact. Diplomacy had stopped the moment that Jakhar and his advisors had turned tail and stalked away, leading their troops back to the Forest, leaving their warning and promise ringing in the air behind them.

And of course, James was one of the few people to know that while Merlin may indeed be the only living *sorcerer* in the world, there was a living *sorceress* out there as well. And who knew what she might do in the wake of this news. Or even if it was somehow a part of her plan.

The next day was Tuesday, and both of James' first two classes, Potions and Muggle Studies, were canceled, replaced with study periods in the suddenly very crowded library. The rasp of whispers and shuffle of gossiping students from table to table was nominally overseen by the librarian and, inexplicably, Professor Revalvier.

"The rest of the teachers are in a sort of war-room meeting, I hear," Rose whispered to James, peering low over an open textbook. "The Ministry is in a complete uproar ever since the news last night. They're sending new watchmen, including a few retired Harriers and Aurors. The teachers hate it, but they're worried, too. All of them are in a mandatory emergency response training class with Headmaster Merlinus today."

Ralph glanced back over his shoulder toward the reference desk. "So if it's mandatory, why's Professor Revalvier sitting it out?"

Rose lowered her voice further. "She's a pacifist, they say. Won't raise a wand against another person or creature if it's in the name of war. She may lose her post over it, but she says it's worth it to set an example to the students."

James shook his head in dismay, and then turned back to Rose. "How do you know all of this stuff?"

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"I ask the right people," Rose shrugged. "It pays off being teacher's pet to half a dozen professors. I magic the blackboards clean and shelve their books and they talk to me. It's like being a barkeeper."

By the end of the week, with the Centaurs still biding their time mysteriously in the Forest, life had returned to what currently passed for normal. The watchtower had been rebuilt a safe distance from the lake and the expanded watch now patrolled two at a time throughout all hours of the day and night. The final Hogsmeade weekend came and went as spring finally broke its clammy hold over the grounds, granting the first truly sunny days and leaving flowers and lush grass across the grounds. Study sessions in the library resumed as N.E.W.T. examinations grew imminent. The first occurred early, as Mr. Twycross, the Ministry disappearance expert, concluded his class and prepared to disembark. When James' examination time came, he successfully apparated across the classroom, leaving not even the faintest trace of magical exhaust.

"Excellent form, Mr. Potter," Twycross nodded curtly, clearly impressed. "One might well think you had been apparating for years."

James grinned a little guiltily, thinking of his midnight experience in Diagon Alley weeks earlier. That night, necessity had been a very good teacher. By comparison, zapping across the classroom felt about as difficult as hovering on a broom.

Night Quidditch picked up as the weather improved, with Gryffindor just barely leading in the standings against team Hufflepuff, led by the irrepressible Julien Jackson. Jackson, who had initially been reluctant to allow game magic into the matches, was now equal to James in her ability to cast gravity wells and bonefuse hexes. Further, she had taken to studying obscure Clutchcudgel magazines from the United States in order to learn all new spells, including a nasty version of the Knuckler that caused a person's fingers to flex backwards (making it impossible to hold the clutch or a beater bat) and a ghosting hex that created random duplicates of the player who cast it, with no way to tell which was the original. She taught the spells to her teammates, but guarded them vigilantly from being discovered by any other teams. James was annoyed at her devotion, mostly because he felt too distracted to make such efforts himself.

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For his own part, Ralph continued to chafe at the existence of Night Quidditch, vowing that if he ever found out when a match was going to occur, it would be his duty "as Head Boy and a magical citizen" to shut it down. James rolled his eyes at these proclamations, choosing to believe that Ralph made them mostly out of duty, not determination. Indeed, with the watch patrolling the premises twenty-four hours a day, the night Quidditch teams had been forced to resort to their own guards, warning of incoming patrols so that the teams could rush away to hiding places in the grandstands every half hour or so, peering over railings as the watchmen passed obliviously below.

James thought often of his recent meeting with Merlin, during which he had almost told the headmaster everything he knew—had only been prevented from telling, in fact, by the incredible intrusion of both the Merpeople and the Centaurs. The timing of those events, James mused, seemed simply too coincidental to be random. And yet he couldn't imagine how they could be anything else. No one else knew what he and the headmaster had been discussing, and even if they had, who could have orchestrated such a conspiracy with two societies as independent and irascible as the Merpeople and the Centaurs?

Still, he wondered if it had been a blessing or a curse that he had been interrupted before telling Merlin the secret of Albus' and Odin-Vann's involvement with Petra—the Ransom and the Architect, according to him. Sometimes he considered seeking the headmaster out and telling him after all. Other times, he tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible, hoping that Merlin would forget about the whole thing.

For his own part, Merlin seemed busier than he ever had been before. He was constantly in meetings, or bustling from place to place with members of the watch in tow, or traveling far and wide consulting with magical administrations and security forces all over Europe. And yet, somehow, the old sorcerer seemed more engaged and animated than James had ever known him. It had been a thousand years since Merlin had been part of a magical war. Perhaps, as dismaying as it might seem, he had sort of missed it. He was a tactician at heart, after all, a man of action with deep battle instincts. He may not welcome the coming confrontations, whenever or however they happened, but he would

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know how to handle them. Until then, content with his duties and the competence of his skills, he was preparing.

Odin-Vann went missing for a solid week. James didn't know about it until the young professor's classes were cancelled one day, and then led the following few days by Professor Votary as substitute.

"Sick, I am told," Votary sniffed with a note of disapproval. "And contagious as well, quarantined in his quarters with no visitors allowed. Myself, I expect the young man suffers from mere seasonal scumblewort allergies. Tis the season. But far be it from me to judge another professor's ability to function while impaired." He plunked his carpetbag onto the desk for emphasis.

Graham leaned aside and whispered, "I hear he's got dragon pox. Sneezing his guts out through his ears and every other orifice."

"You're disgusting," Kendra Corner rolled her eyes.

Later that evening, James and Rose stole through the corridors to Odin-Vann's door. Sure enough, they could hear the unmistakable sound of gut-wrenching sneezes from within, the force of them visibly shaking the old door. Tentatively, Rose knocked.

"Can we get you anything, Professor?"

They waited, but Odin-Vann didn't respond. A few moments later, another gusting sneeze rocked the door in its frame. Rose looked up at James, her face etched with suspicion.

James understood, and a feeling of deep dismay chilled him. Something was indeed sneezing in Odin-Vann's quarters, but it wasn't the professor. Perhaps it was a recording of some kind, or even an Augurey trained to repeat the same violent noise randomly. Either way, the professor was not there. And James had a terrible feeling that he knew where he was.

Odin-Vann was in America, with Petra. They were finally completing her task, breaking into the Alma Aleron Hall of Archives and descending to the Vault of Destinies, where the halted Loom waited for them. They would restore the symbolic crimson thread, using whatever complicated magic was necessary for the task, and reset the Loom. Then Petra, the living, breathing Crimson Thread, would be torn from the world and sent to whatever darker dimension Morgan, the other Petra, had come from.

"Perhaps it's already happened?" Rose asked in a whisper.

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James shook his head. "We would have sensed it. Wouldn't we? The whole point is for this ruddy destiny to be undone and replaced with our original history. But nothing's changed. Or, would we even know if it had?"

Rose merely shrugged. Like him, she was worried. But James was also conflicted. *He* wanted to be the one helping Petra during her final moments in this world, not Odin-Vann. *He* wanted to look her in the eyes when she departed her home dimension, and him, forever. He wanted, more than anything, simply to say goodbye.

But that was not meant to happen, it seemed. When Odin-Vann returned, one way or another, the deed would be done.

As they hurried back through the darkening corridors, Rose asked, "But what about Albus? He's supposed to have some task to perform as well, isn't he? Only he's still here. We saw him an hour ago at dinner, moping at the end of the Slytherin table, just as tragic and morose as ever."

James shook his head and shrugged. "Maybe he was just a failsafe. Maybe she didn't really need him. Or maybe he can play his part from here. Who knows?"

James wanted desperately to ask his brother directly, but Albus' mood had indeed spiraled darker and more reclusive since his breakup with Chance Jackson. When he did show up at mealtimes, he sat alone, his brow lowered, his eyes staring sullenly into space. When James approached him, Albus stalked away, either angry or elusive. Perhaps he knew what James meant to ask, and had no intention of answering. James could have pursued his brother, of course, demanding to speak to him. And yet some buried part of him, quiet but persistent, held him back, whispering that the longer he didn't know, the longer the inevitable could be delayed.

The truth came home to James on a Friday, as he hurried along the corridor toward Divination, his final class of the day. Something small and hard bounced off the back of his head, startling him so that he nearly dropped the crystal ball in his hand. He stopped and turned, clapping his free hand to the back of his head.

On the floor behind him, a small badge lay glinting in the sun. It was shaped like a shield and engraved with the letters J.W. As he

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watched, the badge skittered on the floor, spun around, then shot backwards into the air. It socked into the waiting hand of Edgar Edgecombe, who stood along the far wall, his wand in his hand. The boy grinned at James, his eyes squinting meanly. To his right, Polly Heathrow sniggered into the back of her hand. Quincy Ogden scowled at James from Edgecombe's left, his chin raised challengingly.

"You little—" James began, his face heating with rage. "What is your problem!?" The words came out much more loudly and forcefully than he intended, causing students nearby to stop in their tracks, eyes suddenly keen.

"We didn't do a thing," Heathrow said, her nasal voice high and smug. "You've got nargles in the brain, that's all. They was knocking to get out."

Laughing, Edgecombe pinned his badge back onto his robes. "Walk on, Potter. Before we get annoyed and report the whole lot of your stupid night Quidditch league to the authorities. See if we don't."

James knew the boy was trying to pique him, and knew equally well that he shouldn't let him. But he was angry, and fed up, and already feeling helpless about so many other things. He felt the weight of his wand in his robes and longed to pull it out, to brandish it at the horrible little git and his two bratty friends.

"What's night Quidditch mean to *him*?" Ogden sneered. "He's used to making other people pay for his stupid ideas. Sometimes he even lets other people *die* for them."

James felt a rod of ice jam down his spine at Ogden's words. He stood stock still for a moment as every watching eye turned to him. He opened his mouth to respond, but Heathrow spoke first, raising her shrill voice in a parody of woe.

"Oh, boo-hoo, my cousin's dead," she cried nastily, cocking her head and drawing a hand up to her thin chest. "Everybody feel sorry for me because I got my cousin killed off meddling in stuff I had no right to! I'm a tragic hero, don't you know! Who else wants to die to prove it?"

James' hands moved of their own accord. He heard the brittle crack of the crystal ball as it dropped to the floor and shattered, saw the lunge of his own wand as he pointed it at Heathrow, then Edgecombe as the boy burst into braying laughter, blind to James' furious approach.

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Only Ogden saw and responded, whipping his own wand forward and pointing it at James' face.

They both fired at the same time—James, a blasting curse; Ogden, a total body bind—and both spells spat across the space between them, lighting the walls and faces of the surprised observers with brilliant red and electric purple.

And at that exact moment, a quake shook the floor, sharp and sudden. The windows rattled in their frames. The grasses beyond shuddered, undulating across the grounds. Leaves shivered from the trees in the Forbidden Forest and birds startled in clouds from their nests.

And neither boy's spells struck their marks.

As James watched, the curses ground to a halt in mid-air, hovering and crackling with energy, as if suddenly suspended in jelly.

There was perfect silence apart from the throbbing hum of the frozen spells. No one had ever seen or felt such a thing before. James had a moment to wonder if Merlin was involved. He even glanced around, looking to see if the sorcerer was standing nearby, his staff in his hand, exerting some sort of deadening force over the boys' rash curses, causing the dreadful tremor that had just shaken the world.

The headmaster was nowhere in sight.

Cautiously, gingerly, Sanjay Yadav shouldered through the crowd of stunned observers, approaching the crackling spells where they hung in space. He raised his wand to them, less like a magical instrument, and more like a tree branch with which to poke a spider to see if it's dead. As the tip of his wand neared James' thrumming *Confringo* spell, it collapsed upon itself, disintegrating into glowing dust and falling uselessly away.

A split second later, Ogden's spell did the same.

The silence that followed was breathless with confusion.

And then, distantly, the silence was interrupted by a chorus of distant yells and howls of surprise.

As a single mass, the crowd of students hurried to the windows along the corridor wall, peering out into the sunlight. James saw nothing at first. Then, with a jolt, he spied something falling toward the Quidditch pitch. It was a person on a broom, tumbling end over end,

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followed by two more and a couple of Bludgers, dropping like stones. They dropped past a fringe of trees, sparing everyone the sight of them crashing to the pitch below.

"Their brooms gave out," Graham Warton said in a high, disbelieving voice. "They were practicing for tomorrow's match, the Slytherins were! And their brooms gave out! Did you see it?"

James still had his wand in his hand. He held it up suddenly.

"Lumos," he commanded in a dry voice.

Nothing happened. His wand protruded pointlessly from his hand, as dead as a stick.

He looked up from it, dread suddenly filling his chest, and his gaze met Rose's as she pushed through the crowd, coming alongside him.

"Look!" Nolan Beetlebrick said suddenly, pointing to the window again. "Do you see it?"

James pressed his face to the glass again as Rose crowded in next to him.

It was the greenhouses this time. They were shaking as if in the teeth of a windstorm, throttling so that their glass panes vibrated and cracked. Some began to shatter in places, their shards bashed aside by unfurling leafy tentacles and thorny vines. Whatever plants were capable of locomotion, they were beating at the glass, straining for release, breaking through and boiling upward in writhing, twining masses.

Professor Longbottom burst through the door of the centre greenhouse, his robes torn, green vines twisted about his arms and legs. He swatted at them, pulled them off and threw them to the ground, stamping on the writhing bits and producing his wand. He pointed it back at the greenhouse, seemed to call a spell, and then raised his wand, examining it in silent surprise as nothing happened.

Little did James know, at that moment, the extent of the event as its various effects befell the entire world.

In nearby Hogsmeade, a group of three Muggle hikers stumbled into the High Street, having suddenly encountered an entire mysterious village where only dense trees and brush had been moments before. They wandered into the unlocked door of The Three Broomsticks, wide-eyed and gape-jawed, as Madame Rosemerta called helplessly, "Who are you? You shouldn't be here, now! You shouldn't *be* here!"

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In London, the recently repaired brick wall separating Diagon Alley from the Muggle city proper cracked, bowed, and then collapsed in a rain of dust, dry bricks, and fresh mortar. The proprietor of the Leaky Cauldron, an old wizard with a nose the size and texture of a blood orange, peered out the rear of his establishment, took one look at the demolished wall, and then hurried out the front, jamming an old fisherman's cap onto his head and leaving a sign swinging on the locked front door: CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, OR THE END OF THE UNIVERSE, WHICHEVER COMES FIRST.

In recently reopened and repopulated New York City, thousands of Muggle denizens looked up from the brief earthquake that had only just subsided, blinking at the sight of innumerable strange signs and establishments as they materialized all over and atop the Muggle city, along with suspended thoroughfares of flying buses and broom-riders, many now struggling to stay aloft as the world's magical field flickered disastrously. One such Muggle, an old cabbie of Pakistani descent with a tweed cap pressed down over his thick greying hair, sighed and shook his head wearily. "Not again," he muttered to himself, as screams of awe and terror began to rise from the streets all around.

In Philadelphia, where the quake had been worst of all, streets bulged and windows shattered for blocks in every direction as a tiny, empty lot surrounded by an old stone wall suddenly expanded, blasting outward to a size of several square blocks, shoving space and time aside like an erumpent crowding onto a bus. Vehicles screeched to a halt or rammed into each other as streets rearranged themselves, entire blocks resituated, street signs spun, reoriented, and grew entirely new names.

And centred above it all, a sudden storm threw waves of boiling clouds out over the city, swirling and spiraling down over a single dark point, forming a sort of metaphysical compass pointing not at true north, but at the hub upon which the wheel of time and destiny turned—a strange and ancient device buried deep beneath the stone dome of the Alma Aleron Hall of Archives.

In the darkness beneath that dome, two hundred feet down, surrounded by raining grit and groaning stone as terraces and iron stairways tilted, crumbled, and began to crash in on themselves, two voices called to each other in shocked alarm.

*"Destroyed!?"* Petra Morganstern shrieked, her hair grey with dust, her eyes wild with horror and surprise. "How can the Loom be destroyed!?"

"Sabotage," Donofrio Odin-Vann gasped, his face bleeding from a wide cut across his forehead. He limped to her from the ruin of the Vault where its brass and crystal leaves lay warped in on themselves, or broken, or melted to glowing sludge by the force of the magical blast which had just shaken the entire earth. "Someone, somehow... they knew we were coming. They set up a technomancic chain reaction. It was triggered the moment that we approached with the thread and began the spell of replacing it..."

Behind him, and all around, the walls shook violently. A dull roar echoed from high above as levels began to collapse down onto each other like dominoes, disintegrating and crushing thousands of ancient, priceless relics and their stored memories.

Petra's eyes sparked with furious, desperate light. "But how is that even possible! Who could have known! *Why* would they have risked the balance of the *entire world* just to *stop me!*?"

Odin-Vann grabbed her arm, began to pull her away from the destroyed Loom. A snarl of frayed threads and torn tapestry smoked from the ruin. The Loom itself was nothing more than a smouldering frame of char. "It doesn't matter! Not now! We must go before the entire place comes down on our heads!"

"No!" Petra cried in fury, immobile as stone, her eyes steaming like dry ice. "It *can't* be finished! *I cannot be stopped!*"

"There is *another way!*" Odin-Vann shouted, shaking her and making her look at his face. "It will cost much, but there is one final option that I never told you about! A last, ultimate resort! But only if we leave now!"

Petra glared at him, seemed to tower over him, her eyes glowing orbs of rage. And then, with a shaking exhale, the blinding glare fell away and she was just a young woman again, shaking and dirty and bleeding from a half dozen ragged scratches. Trembling, she asked, "There's still one other way?"

"A terrible way," Odin-Vann admitted reluctantly, palming blood from his face. "An *unspeakable* way. A path to ripping open dimensions that no one has ever attempted before because it is only one

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way, and the cost will be great. But if we leave this plane now, Petra... perhaps we can perform it."

In a smaller, eerily girlish voice, she asked, "Can we capture back my father's brooch before we do?"

Odin-Vann cringed as more of the edifice began to cave in behind him. "We will do what must," he rasped urgently. "But we have to leave this very second. Your Horcrux may save you. But this place is about to kill me permanently."

The Archive began to sink all around them. Every surface blurred and tilted, shattered and screeched out of true. The death throes of the subterranean edifice was a sustained roar, growing, shaking the very air.

Petra took Odin-Vann's hand. Behind her, space tore open in a blinding fracture, forming a rough doorway into a calmer place, a sunny gazebo with the flicker of water behind it. She turned to the rift, knowing it would be there, and stepped through, taking the young man with her.

Far above, the Archive's dome gave way. Its surrounding pillars tilted inward, falling ponderously into the massive pit below even as a volcano of dust and grit exploded up out of it, reaching to the boil of bruised clouds high above.

And with that, the deed that had begun four years earlier finally completed itself: the wheel of destiny finally, ultimately, ground to a complete and fatal halt.

In the Alma Aleron medical college, an old Cajun woman sat up in the chair next to her bed. For the first time in years, Madame Delacroix's mind came back into malignant focus, as sharp and wicked as ever. She turned her blind gaze toward the tiny, barred window and the boil of clouds above, and a slow, helpless grin spread over her face, showing all of her crooked yellow teeth.

In the room directly above hers, Nastasia Hendricks—or what remained of her, still wasting away in the years since her lighter half was killed—bolted upright in her bed, her mad eyes blazing with alertness. She unhinged her jaw and belted a scream of laughter, clawed at her face, even as her eyes filled with tears and rolled, both gleeful and horrified in equal measures.

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As the destruction of the Archive subsided, Alma Aleron's timelock tremored back into being and reasserted itself. The lot and its stone wall sprang back to its original tiny shape, sucking the city of Philadelphia in around it, shattering more windows, unbuckling the unruly streets, and leaving stunned Philadelphians dizzy, blinking, and dumbfounded.

The magical city of New Amsterdam vanished away again, swallowed back up by its reinforced new secrecy field. The old Pakistani cabbie stood inside the open door of his yellow taxi, looking around as stunned observers frowned, speechlessly asking each other if all those strange sights had really been there, or if they had been merely another mass delusion.

The cab rocked as a man dropped into the back seat, slamming the door behind him. The Pakistani cabbie leaned and glanced into the rear of his car. There, a thin man in a trench coat and an old fedora hat met his gaze, his face tense but composed.

"I'll pay you a hundred simoleans to get us out of the city as fast as this boat can roll," he said, holding up a thin sheaf of bills.

"Which direction?" the cabbie asked, a little breathlessly.

"*Any* direction," Marshall Parris answered. "And if you're smart, my friend, you won't come back afterward."

An ocean away, behind the Leaky Cauldron, the pile of broken bricks shuddered, vibrated, and with some difficulty, began to reassemble itself into a wall, once again, for the last time, closing off Diagon Alley from prying Muggle eyes.

Hogsmeade shimmered and vanished away into unplottability again, leaving the three hikers dazzled and confused, having only moments before been arguing loudly with Madame Rosemerta about the use of her apparently nonexistent telephone. Now, they stood cramped in a thicket so dense that it seemed to physically force them back, stumbling, scratched with nasty thorns and briars.

And in the Hogwarts greenhouses, the maddened plants began to settle, withdrawing slowly, retracting their vines in sheepish curls.

Dangling in James' stunned hand, his wand suddenly and silently burst alight, shining with the Lumos spell he had called only moments before. Stunned and deeply worried, he raised his wand and looked at it.

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Rose raised her eyes from the wand in his hands to his face. “*What... was that?*” she asked in a bare whisper, nearly mouthing the words.

James weakly shook his head. He had no idea, although he would know the truth soon enough. For now, he simply had a deeply sinking sense that, whatever it was that had just happened, it was the beginning of the ultimate end.

And in that, of course, he was sadly correct.



## 22. THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Professor Odin-Vann didn't return that night, or at all on Saturday.

James, Rose, and Ralph finally grew impatient on Sunday afternoon and knocked on his door, but to no avail. The sound of sneezing had stopped from within—either the recording had worn out or the trained mimicking beast had finally grown bored and either given up or escaped.

"Maybe he's asleep," Ralph whispered, listening close to the door, but Rose shook her head.

"There's nobody in there. You can tell by the silence of it. He's not returned yet."

As they wended their way disconsolately back through the weekend silent corridors, passing through sunbeams dense with floating motes of dust, James asked, "It *couldn't* have worked. Whatever he and Petra tried, it must have failed. Right?"

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Rose shrugged and sighed. Uncharacteristically, she had no hypothesis or comment whatsoever.

*The Daily Prophet* weekend edition called the earthquake a “temporary shift in magical polarities”, quoting a technomancy professor from the wizarding university in Warsaw. “These things happen with cosmic regularity, though in cycles of decades or centuries, thus few alive experience more than one such event. There is nothing to be concerned about now that the moment has passed.”

The rest of the newspaper had been filled with stories of the effects of the quake, most fairly minor, but a few with serious consequences. A few houses and buildings had collapsed, not from the tremor itself, but from the brief interruption of magical force, breaking the spells that had kept the ramshackle old structures intact and upright. James mused that the Burrow probably would have been one such casualty if Merlin had not shored it up himself, being part owner and occasional resident. Other stories were variously bizarre or inexplicable. A wizarding zoo in Russia was suddenly overrun by freed beasts when its magical locks failed. Similarly, the American wizarding prison, Fort Bedlam, saw the escape of several inmates when their unplottable exercise yard suddenly burst out into the Muggle city of Phoenix, Arizona, appearing right in the centre of a busy Muggle park. Elsewhere, a wizarding warehouse full of crated vials of Floo powder mysteriously exploded, igniting the thousands of vials and thus sending bits of burning crate shooting like fireworks out of hundreds of random hearths all around Wales. One such Floo misfire lit a cottage on fire, burning it and a nearby barn to the ground. Thousands of injuries were reported worldwide, and, tragically, more than a dozen deaths, most from failed brooms during high altitude flights.

“Professor Jackson says it was no normal event, no matter what the papers say,” Zane proclaimed seriously from the Shard later that afternoon. “There was an assembly in the theater about it and he told us everything. Basically, all the magic in the world is tied together in a huge invisible field, kind of like the magnetic poles of the earth. Something broke the field for a few seconds, completely disrupted it, like a huge hand flipping a switch, turning off magic for a few seconds. It

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came back on, but just barely. And nobody knows how long it's going to last now, or how strong it will continue to be."

"But what caused it?" James asked, keeping his voice low and leaning close to the Shard. "Was it Petra and Odin-Vann? Did they succeed in their plan?"

"I don't know if it was them," Zane admitted with a shake of his head. "I haven't heard a peep from either of them. But if it *was* them, it didn't work, and that's the understatement of the century. The Archive's been completely destroyed. The Loom is gone, no more than a pile of ash buried under a hundred tons of dirt and stone. Nobody knows for sure what caused it. But there's *no* repairing it."

Rose crowded over James' shoulder where they huddled in a corner of the common room. Awed and frightened, she asked, "What does it mean? The Loom was the destiny of the whole world! How can it be destroyed?"

"Well, technically, the tapestry in the Loom was our destiny," Zane shrugged vaguely in the mirror glass, "The Loom was just the machine recording it. And the Vault was protecting the whole kit and caboodle. For all the good it did. Point is, the Loom had been shut down ever since Judith broke into the Vault back in our third year and stole the crimson thread, bringing Morgan here. But at least there was always the possibility that it *could* be started up again if the thread was somehow put back, and some version of Morgan sent back to her own destiny. That's what's been keeping things together in our world, although less and less every day. Now..." He raised both hands, palms up, in a helpless gesture.

"But..." Ralph said slowly, "We're all still here. I mean, right? So the world's destiny can't be really *ended*. Can it?"

Zane looked grave. "Professor Jackson says that the Loom was like the load-bearing wall in a house. Cut it down and the house may still stand for awhile out of sheer habit, but slam the wrong door or step on the wrong creaky floorboard, and *boom*. The whole place comes down forever. And he means *forever* forever."

James shook his head fretfully. "But Petra was so *certain* it would work. What could have happened?"

Zane didn't know, and no one else had the slightest guess.

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As the evening wore on and the sun set on Sunday night, James found himself nearly mad with worry and confusion. In a moment of desperate inspiration, he leapt from his seat in the common room and tramped up the steps to his dormitory, Ralph and Scorpius following curiously behind.

"What are you about?" Ralph asked, frowning as James bent and heaved open his trunk.

Scorpius sat heavily on his own bed. "I think the stress has finally cracked him. I knew it was bound to eventually."

James ignored them. Leaning over his trunk, he rooted inside, raking his hand through piles of laundry, wrinkled parchments, musty books, his new dress robes still wrapped in paper, some ratty and bent quills, his old trainers, his spare spectacles, and a surprising array of miscellany. Hectically, he tossed handfuls of random contents behind him, digging deeper into the recesses of the trunk.

"Where is it," he groused urgently to himself, his voice muffled in the depths. "I almost always carry it with me. The *one* time it might be *really* useful..."

Ralph approached tentatively and knelt down next to the trunk. A little worriedly, he asked, "What? What are you looking for?"

"Ah-ha!" James suddenly cried, leaning back and brandishing something in his upraised hand.

Ralph peered at it, still frowning. "What is it? Looks like an old Winkle."

James didn't answer. Scooting back and pushing aside a pile of miss-matched socks and old arithmancy notes, he put the tiny parcel of paper down onto the floor. Sitting back up, he scrambled to produce his wand, then pointed it at the parchment and uttered a short, breathless spell.

With a brief flash, the parcel of paper sprang open like an origami flower, blossoming into a sheaf of creased old parchments, covered in masses of scrawled handwriting.

Scorpius slid from his bed and moved to join Ralph and James, who leaned over the parchment, frowning with concentration.

James shook his head and squinted at the parchments. Wand still in hand, he raised it and said, "Lumos!" The wand lit, illuminating

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the old parchment with unearthly clarity. As always, Petra's handwriting covered the pages, but now it was so hectic and dense, so scratched out and scribbled over, that it was a virtual ink-blot of chaos.

In a low, awed voice, Ralph asked again, "What *is* it?"

"It's Petra's dream story," James answered, distracted. He reached and flipped over the top parchment. The backside was also covered with scrawled words and sentences, built up to a nonsensical strew, as was the page beneath. Almost nothing was legible.

"Her... what?" Ralph quavered.

James blinked and remembered that he had never shown anyone Petra's dream story before. He had told them about it, but for some reason he'd never shown them. It had been his and Petra's shared secret. Through it, she had sent him private messages on occasion, usually when he most needed to hear from her. At other times, the pages had offered a glimpse into the sometimes complicated and feverish world of her thoughts.

But it had never looked like this before. This was like a love letter to insanity. The scribbled words seemed to crawl over each other, pulsing with their own insectile life.

Without answering Ralph, James reached and scooped the parchments together again, shuffling them back into a stack and folding them over, quickly hiding their scribbled contents. The parchment crackled like dry leaves, suddenly icy cold. James could feel it on the pages themselves, turning the edges brittle and chilling his fingers.

"Potter," Scorpius said, raising his chin.

"I don't want to hear it," James said quickly, folding the dream story again, roughly, so that the old pages crinkled and tore. "It's nothing. There's nothing to see. I thought... maybe..."

"Potter," Scorpius said again, and then pointed to the floor where the dream story had rested moments earlier. "Is that also yours?"

James looked aside at Scorpius, blinking rapidly and hugging the sheaf of Petra's old parchments to his chest, feeling the cold of them seeping through his shirt. For a moment he didn't register what the boy had asked him, but then he followed the direction of Scorpius' pointing finger.

On the floor before James' knees, between an old puking pastille and a dried out inkpot, was another piece of parchment. This one was

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even older than the dream story, torn from a larger sheet, frayed and creased from its long sojourn in the bowels of James' trunk. Three words were written on the parchment, scrawled in James' own hand.

He didn't remember the note at first. And then, in a blink of memory, it flooded back to him. It had been during his second year that he had had the dream—a nightmare, in fact. Shreds of it flickered before his mind's eye: Albus with a young woman, standing in a graveyard, his grandparents' graves leaning nearby; the Dark Mark exploding into the sky overhead, shot from Albus' wand in the young woman's hand, lighting the cemetery with its eerie green glow; James himself appearing out of thin air, apparating with alarm in his suddenly older voice, warning Albus and his companion that it didn't have to be like this, that others were coming, and that they wouldn't waste time with words...

Only now, thinking back on the dream five years later, James fully understood: the young woman in the graveyard was Petra. Of course she was. He just hadn't known it then, because he hadn't yet discovered that Petra was the Bloodline. *Or the Crimson Thread.*

He looked down at the old note.

When he had awoken from the dream, he had gotten up from his bed and, compelled by a sense of phantom, inexplicable resolve, penned those three words on a scrap of spare parchment. He didn't know why, not then and not now. He had only known that the dream had demanded it somehow. He had only believed that someday, somehow, the words would mean something.

He looked up at Scorpius again. Scorpius wasn't looking at the note, but at James, his eyes narrowed.

"I've always wondered," the blond boy said, as if musing aloud. "Were you sleepwalking when you wrote that? Or would you remember it again when you came across it?"

James felt suddenly exhausted, almost as if he had been hollowed out of all emotion. He merely shook his head at Scorpius, who had clearly observed him writing the note years earlier. "Both, maybe. I didn't remember writing it until now. I don't even know why I did. It doesn't mean anything. It's just a line from the play."

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Ralph leaned over the note and read it. "The play? You mean *The Triumvirate?*"

James shrugged. "We were putting it on that year. For Muggle Studies. I was playing Treus, remember? It's just one of my lines."

Ralph picked up the old note and examined it critically. On it, the ink had dried to a brackish brown, the color of congealed blood. James looked at it in Ralph's hand and then read the words again, this time aloud.

"Beware... foul Donovan."

Ralph looked up at him, his brow knitted. He balled the note in his hands and shrugged impatiently. "It's nothing. Just an old script cheat-sheet, right? What was that *other* thing?" He nodded meaningfully at the dream story where James still held it folded against his chest.

James shook himself, then reached and stuffed the scribbled parchments back into his trunk. "Also nothing," he sighed harshly. "I thought it might give us some news, but it doesn't. It's useless, just like everything else."

Ralph pushed himself up from his knees, clearly preparing to protest, but at that moment a sound of running feet echoed up the nearby stairwell. Graham Warton appeared there, leaning in through the door and looking slightly put-out.

"Rose Weasley says you lot need to come right now," he announced. "She says he's come back, and he needs your help. Whatever the bloody hell that means."

James jumped anxiously to his feet, slamming his trunk as he went, and joined Scorpius and Ralph as they clambered past Graham, leaving him staring after them in annoyed confusion.

"And you can tell Weasley that I'm not your bleedin' secretary!" he called after them.

A moment later, shaking his head, Graham tromped back down after them.

Unseen in the now empty dormitory, a ribbon of white vapor snaked from beneath the lid of James' trunk. Inside, the dream story steamed with cold, sizzling faintly as it chilled to absolute zero, freezing the socks and jeans all around it, cracking the glass in James' spare

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spectacles. Then, with a final, brittle hiss, the pages disintegrated into films of icy ash and fell apart, sifting into bone-white dust.

And far, far away, under the darkness of a cloudy night sky, a cold wind at her back, buffeting her dark hair, Petra relaxed her fists and opened her eyes. She sighed in mingled resolve and worry.

“James,” she whispered. “Please, James... *stay away.*”



Odin-Vann, Rose informed them as they hurried through the corridors, was in the subterranean moonpool, watching the door and waiting for them. He had somehow managed to send word to her via her Protean duck, even though he didn't have a duck of his own. James, Scorpius, Rose, and Ralph slowed to a breathless stop as they joined the young professor, clambering through the door into the cool darkness of the underground lake. He closed the door immediately behind them, and then stood back and pointed at it with his wand. Without speaking a word, his wand spat an arc of electric pink at the lock, which clacked and latched firmly, presumably until he cast the unlocking charm. James had a moment to muse once again about the professor's sudden prodigious skill with his wand, after his earlier (and apparently infamous) magical impotence under stress. Now, he handled his wand with utmost confidence, and, perhaps even more impressively, with mostly non-verbal spells.

When Odin-Vann turned back from the door, however, James' eyes widened. Dirt and blood stained the professor's face like a mask.

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His eyes were haunted, sunken and wild in their sockets. His clothing was torn, partially burned, and grey with gritty dust. He paused, noting the students' shocked expressions, then made a conscious effort to calm his features. He raised his left hand, took a step toward them, and nearly collapsed before Rose and James caught him, one under each arm.

"Professor!" Rose cried, "What happened!? Are you OK? Should we go for Madame Curio?"

"No!" Odin-Vann barked, gasping in pain as his knees buckled. "No, I'm all right. It looks worse than it is, I promise. And there are far more important matters at hand than my wellbeing. I need your help. Or, rather, Petra does. Now more than ever."

Ralph's voice was stoic, almost cold, as he crossed his arms and cocked his head. "What happened?" he demanded firmly. "What did you do? Tell us before we agree to any more help."

"Ralph!" Rose scolded him loudly. "What's wrong with you!? He's hurt, can't you see?"

"He's bleeding and dirty, I'll give you that," Ralph countered. "But he somehow survived the destruction of Alma Aleron's Archive, *and* the Loom in the Vault of Destinies. He's *responsible* for what happened. I, for one, am feeling far more inclined to turn him over to Merlin and the Watch than to help him. What's he going to destroy next, eh? What's his newest brilliant idea?"

"Ralph!" James said, sudden anger burning his cheeks, but Scorpius overrode him, his drawling voice sounding almost bored.

"Deedle is right," he commented, and then caught himself and turned to Ralph. "Sorry. *Dolohov*, is right."

"Thank you," Ralph sighed. He hadn't drawn his wand, but James could see that his hands were itching to do so.

Odin-Vann seemed to regain his footing and his strength. He straightened his robes and nodded at Ralph. "You're right. I'm sorry for rushing you. It's been..." He laughed drily. It was a short, somewhat mad sound. "It's been a strange few days for me. But I can't blame you for being extremely suspicious. I would be as well. I shall tell you everything you wish to know, if I can. And yet I cannot emphasize enough, I fear, that time is very much now our enemy."

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Ralph nodded to himself and firmed his jaw. "Fine," he said, exhaling harshly. "Start by telling us exactly what happened on Friday afternoon."

Odin-Vann looked up at Ralph, meeting his eyes with impatience and desperation etched onto his face, but then, with a force of apparently Herculean effort, he calmed himself again. "Very well. But let us go to the ship. It is our destination, at any rate. If you hear my short tale and decide to help, then we shall embark immediately. If not..." He shrugged and shook his head, "Then you are free to return to whatever remains of our lives."

"Hey guys!" a voice called from the vicinity of Hagrid's ship where it bobbed on the dark waves. James turned to look back, surprised. He recognized the voice and, even in his distress, couldn't help smiling. The figure of Zane Walker stood on the deck of the Gertrude, his hands cupped to his mouth as he called, "You all gonna stand there kibitzing all night? I'm starting to feel a little left out."

"Petra asked for him as well," Odin-Vann sighed, turning back from the ship. "And she brought him here. The same way that she brought me back. By opening space like a door. She can do that now. She can do... well, just about anything."

"Except return the crimson thread," James commented pointedly as the crew began to hurry down to the waiting gangplank.

"No," Odin-Vann agreed, limping as he walked. "Opening a path to the right dimension is beyond even her powers. For that... she will need all of us."

The group's footsteps clumped and clanked up the gangplank to the deck of the Gertrude, where Zane greeted everyone with his irrepressible grin and a hearty handshake, as if he was a cruise director welcoming a gaggle of tourists. Above them all, the inverted mirror of the Black Lake hung precipitously, clapping its own waves and dropping cool mist.

"Let us sit," Odin-Vann said, and James could hear the exhaustion in his voice. "Just here, on the deck. I don't have it in me to go below. This won't take long, I hope."

James hunkered down along the outside railing and felt the gentle roll and dip of the ship beneath him. Odin-Vann sank to an

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awkward sitting position against the wheelhouse, while the others formed a rough circle.

"Petra found me in my dormitory," Zane admitted quietly to James. "Didn't knock or anything. Just stepped right out of a black hole and onto my fake yeti-skin rug. I about peed my pants, and that's saying something. We Zombies pride ourselves in expecting the unexpected."

"What did she say?" James asked.

"She said that time was short and you lot would need me to do what needed to be done," he answered with a shrug. "And that's pretty much word-for-word. She was in a major hurry."

"So what needs to be done?" Ralph asked, turning back to Odin-Vann.

The young professor shook his head wearily. "With the Loom destroyed, there's only one more chance to set everything right," he answered. "One last way to replace Morgan with Petra and reset the balance. But it will take all of us. Petra plays the most important part, and it will cost her everything, a higher price than I am willing to admit, in fact. But without us—without *you* lot—there's no hope whatsoever."

Ralph asked again, his eyes narrowed, "*What did you do?*"

"Someone sabotaged us," Odin-Vann answered flatly, meeting Ralph's accusing stare. "I had prepared so carefully, so thoroughly. I was ready for anything that might go wrong with actually restarting the Loom and replacing the thread. The spellwork was *perfect*. But we never even got a chance to try it. The moment we approached, we triggered something. A boundary hex of some kind, attuned either to Petra, or the thread itself, or both. The Vault contracted like a fist. It didn't crush the Loom—that device was far too magical to be destroyed by brute strength. But it compressed its power, condensed it with titanic force, until it simply combusted. The Loom consumed itself with the blinding singularity of its own compressed energy, and the Vault exploded. The repercussions demolished the Archive and ruptured the magical fabric of the entire world. But worst of all, it halted the inertia of our dying destiny entirely. There is nothing supporting us anymore. No fate. No purpose. No providence, or luck, or fortune. We are untethered from any intelligible directing force whatsoever. If we don't

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succeed with this last, final chance... there may be no world for us to come back to."

"But..." Rose said, her voice low with awed worry, "What can Petra *do*? Where can she go now to accomplish her task?"

"There is only one place," Odin-Vann acknowledged, dropping his eyes to the deck between them. "One place where decisions still matter, where destiny can play its part."

Scorpius seemed dubious. "And where is that?"

"The past," Odin-Vann said firmly, and looked up at Scorpius without raising his head.

Ralph frowned. "The *past*? What do you mean? Are you talking about... Time Turners?"

Rose shook her head. "Time Turners can't change history," she said tiredly, glancing from Ralph to Odin-Vann. "At least, not *major* history. That's their fatal flaw. The past has a sort of inertia. The bigger the event, and the longer ago it happened, the more it will find a way to *keep* happening, no matter what you do in the past to try to change it. Besides, a Time Turner is a personal device. Go back in time and walk a mile in any direction, you'll stumble right out of its influence and back into the present. Right, Professor?"

"Time Turners are for reliving short moments in the recent past, by one or two people, in a small vicinity," Odin-Vann agreed unhappily. "Changes *can* be made in that past, but only if their effects haven't yet had major repercussions in the present. Rose is right. Once history has been made, trying to change it in the past is like trying to steer this ship with a teaspoon. It would have to be something that almost happened right anyway, but didn't for some reason. And it would take monumental, immeasurable power."

Scorpius said, "So if history can't be changed, how can going back to the past help us?"

Odin-Vann shook his head, growing animated, "I don't mean traveling back in *time*," he said, lowering his voice with urgency. "I mean going someplace that Petra has already been before, someplace with deep, elemental meaning to her, someplace that defines her. We need an object, a talisman that will connect Petra with Morgan on a quantum level. That way, when we open the rift between dimensions, it

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will connect with the proper place and time, taking Petra back to Morgan's original world!"

"But," James said, "I thought there was no way to open a rift directly into another dimension? You have to go through the World Between the Worlds, and there's no way to find one specific dimension from inside there. It would be like finding a single star in a billion galaxies."

Odin-Vann was shaking his head again, his eyes bright with fervor. "No. It *is* possible to go straight into another dimension. But no one has ever tried it because it's only a one-way trip. And the cost is... terrible. But it is only possible if we can find the right talisman, the right key to Morgan's original world!"

"So, what's the key?" Rose asked.

Odin-Vann looked at James. And suddenly James knew the answer.

"Her father's brooch," he said in an awed voice, and shuddered.

Zane nodded, even as his mouth dropped open in revelation. "It's exactly like the brooch Petra lost on the back of the Gwyndemere when she fell overboard! You saved *her*, but *it* sank forever! The one Merlin captured was *Morgan's*! She never went on the ship with you, because in her world Izzy died and she went mad with loss! The brooch is from that other dimension!"

Odin-Vann said, "It's our only hope. It connects Petra to Morgan in the most fundamental way—through a love they both shared. And it's from Morgan's original world, making it the perfect key. If we can get it, then it is just possible that Petra can accomplish her mission after all."

James looked at the professor. "But, why do we need to go anywhere for it? Merlin has the brooch, doesn't he?"

Odin-Vann's face hardened. "Merlin is a wilier and more cunning character than any man who ever lived. It was he who somehow divined that Petra had traveled to the World Between the Worlds in search of the thread, and who confronted her there. It was he, I am willing to wager, who sabotaged the Loom to prevent us from utilizing the thread and completing our mission. He is not a man who would keep the brooch here at the school, where Petra might come and

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win it back from him. He has hidden it." Here, his hard eyes glimmered with a mad light. "And I know *where*."

"And how, pray tell," Scorpius asked, arching one eyebrow, "could you possibly know that?"

Odin-Vann smiled grimly. "Merlin is powerful," he admitted. "But he relies far too much on that power. I, on the other hand, am *not* powerful. I spent my life being *mocked* and *ridiculed* for my weakness. Which means that I came to rely most heavily on my *intellect*." He tapped his bloody temple grimly, meaningfully. "The headmaster's reliance on raw power is his greatest weakness, and with your help, we shall exploit it."

"Well," Ralph said with a resolute sigh, climbing back to his feet. "I'm out."

"What?!" James asked, surprised. "Are you serious? What do you mean, you're out?"

"I *mean* I'm going back to my common room and finishing my Ancient Runes homework and going to bed," Ralph replied, glancing around the gathering. "And the rest of you should best do the same. This bloke is right *mental*. He's opposing Merlin. You heard him say that, yeah? Merlinus Ambrosius!"

"He's not *opposing* him," James rasped, pitching his voice low. "He's just... Merlin doesn't know what he's *doing* this time. He doesn't understand Petra's mission. That she's the world's only hope! He would confront her instead of help her, and he would probably end up dead!"

"You think so?" Ralph said, raising his eyebrows. "Merlin's no fool, no matter what this nutter says. We should have gone to Merlin months ago with this whole mess. He could fix it. He *would* have worked with Petra. And she would have been a damn sight better off partnering with the headmaster than with this... this..." He gestured at Odin-Vann where he still sat, leaning against the wheelhouse.

"Ralph," Zane said, climbing to his feet as well. "Are you going to go tell the old man? I mean, you have every right to your opinion and all. But it's a little late in the game to be switching coaches now, isn't it? If you tell on us," he shrugged helplessly, "then it's all over."

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Ralph heaved a huge sigh as he glared at Zane, and then James, and then Rose.

"Don't look at *me*," Scorpius said, raising a hand, palm out. "I'm just here because it's better than watching Warton and Finnegan snog in the common room."

Ralph finally shook his head weakly, hopelessly. "What good would it do me to tell *now*? It's too late, like you say. But I won't be a part of this anymore. It's not right. I should have done something about it months ago. I should have stood up to *him* when there was still a chance to make it right." He turned to Odin-Vann again, his face going stony with angry disgust. Then, without looking back, he turned and stumped down the gangplank.

From his seat on the deck, Odin-Vann raised his wand, aimed it at the far off door, and tapped it. A spit of pink light flashed and, distantly, the door latches unlocked.

"Mr. Malfoy," Odin-Vann said a little coolly. "You can leave now as well. Petra only asked for James, Rose, Zane, and Ralph."

Scorpius shrugged. "I think I'll stay, actually," he said. "I can't fill Dolohov's shoes, of course. Mainly because they're ten sizes bigger than mine. But I'm a curious sort. I'd like to see how this plays out. Assuming nobody else minds."

He glanced aside at James, Zane, and Rose. Zane nodded.

"Fine," Odin-Vann sighed, finally pushing to his feet. "Then we leave tonight. Right now, in fact. Petra awaits our return, and we don't have a second to spare."

Rose glanced at James, her eyes worried. James understood. It was all happening so fast, without any chance to think about what they were about to do. And yet, really, did they have any choice? He hesitated for only a moment, and then, to Odin-Vann, asked, "Where are we heading to?"

Odin-Vann's eyes narrowed and sparkled again with that keen, slightly hectic gleam. "Morganstern Farm," he answered. "To the lake, and its dead, sunken gazebo."

Zane cocked his head. "Why there?"

Odin-Vann turned to the wheelhouse and wrenched open the door. "Because it's the very last place in the world that Merlin would expect us to look."

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Odin-Vann piloted the ship himself. The ship's wheel was nearly as tall as he, but he held onto it with determination, turning the Gertrude toward a different tunnel entrance than they had traversed before. This one had no destination inscribed across its arch, but the professor—or the ship itself—seemed to know where to go.

"It's not the same without Ralph," Zane said quietly. On James' other side, Rose nodded.

James looked at Scorpius, expecting a snide comment, but the blond boy said nothing, merely looked ahead, toward the approaching darkness as the tunnel sucked the Gertrude in, drawing her inexorably into its rushing current.

The masts folded with a heavy thump. Darkness swallowed the ship and dizzying speed replaced the gentle rocking of the moonpool.

James barely noticed it. He held onto the brass railing bolted to the back wall of the wheelhouse, watching the repaired lantern as it swung over the bow, providing the only light in the rushing maw of the tunnel.

"We must be quick," Odin-Vann called without looking back. "Each of you will have a role to play."

"And what will those roles be, exactly?" Scorpius called back.

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James looked at Odin-Vann, who didn't seem prepared to answer that question just yet. Then, seeming to consider his words carefully, he said, "We shall come up in the centre of the farm lake, but it will be difficult to keep the ship from beaching on the shallow shores. Mr. Malfoy, you will stay in the wheelhouse and keep us steady, hands on the wheel." He glanced aside quickly, his eyes bright with the reflection of the swaying lantern ahead. It cast wild, swooping shadows in the darkness. "Rose, you and Mr. Walker will raise the gazebo from its sunken state. It will be very heavy and waterlogged, but I know that you can manage it together, as well as keep it upright while I collect the hidden brooch. And James..." He glanced back again, fleetingly meeting James' eyes while struggling with the ship's wheel and the rushing dark beyond. Grey water exploded around the speeding bow, throwing rafters of mist back against the windows, blattering them noisily and blurring the view beyond. "James, you shall assist me in retrieving the brooch."

"That hardly seems like a two person job," Scorpius observed.

"After what happened at the Archive," Odin-Vann replied darkly, "I won't be taking the slightest chance."

The journey took longer than James expected. The Gertrude rocked up one side of the tunnel, then another, barreling through seemingly endless dark. After a while, Rose covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she warned with a deep, gulping breath.

"Nearly there," Odin-Vann said, steeling himself as the tunnel angled upward beneath them. James tightened his grip on the railing and planted his footing. Water welled up over the bow in waves, and then washed over it in a flood, submerging the lantern and rushing over the windows. The roar of air was swallowed up in a deep, gurgling boom as cold darkness engulfed the Gertrude. The ship angled steeply upward, still blasting forward, but now through seamless, rushing depth. The lantern continued to glow, forming a bottle-green halo through streaming bubbles.

And then, much smoother than before, the ship burst out onto wide open surface, keeled ponderously forward, and, with a shuddering smack, buried its hull in white-capped waves.

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Anxiously, James stepped toward the windows and peered out through streaming droplets. The waves were choppy and fast, dully illuminated by moon glow through rushing, scrubby clouds. No land was visible in any direction, only a dark horizon, unbroken and flat.

Zane pressed in alongside James. "This... is a pretty big woodland lake, isn't it?"

"We're not to Morganstern farm yet," Odin-Vann explained, releasing the wheel and exhaling harshly. "Going to Oswestry isn't like going to London—it's not a straight shot. This will take some good old-fashioned sailing, I'm afraid. We're just past the Isle of Man. When we see the lights of Liverpool we'll submerge again and come up through the lake on Morganstern farm."

Scorpius glanced aside at the professor. "It's a good thing you know how to operate a ship like this, isn't it?"

Odin-Vann shrugged wearily, and then reached to pull a brass latch. With a click, a ratchet, and a whip-crack of rigging, the masts creaked upright again, shuddering into place. "The ship's been charmed to take us where we want to go. All we have to do is wait and watch."

"How convenient," Scorpius nodded, turning back to the dark view beyond the window. "Morganstern did the hexing herself, did she?"

James glanced at Scorpius.

Odin-Vann frowned and blinked, then shook his head faintly. "Petra? Oh. Yes, of course. She charmed it. I wouldn't have any idea how to do such a thing."

"How humble of you," Scorpius mused, seeming to merely think aloud, "Thus, I assume that we are committed to our destination no matter what?"

Odin-Vann didn't answer. To the assembly, he said, "I'm going to go below to wash up and try to sleep for an hour. Wake me when the coast comes into sight, eh?"

"Aye-aye, Cap'n," Zane said, standing rigid and giving a stiff salute.

"I really am going to be sick," Rose moaned, and pushed toward the door. Cool night air and mist rushed in as she heaved it open and

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fled out onto the wet deck, angling toward the railing. Odin-Vann followed her and turned toward the stairs into the ship's hold.

"*He* certainly seems to have relaxed now that we're underway," Scorpius commented, gazing after the departed professor.

James tilted his head at Scorpius. "What are you getting at?"

"I don't know what *he's* getting at," Zane said, rubbing his stomach, "but Petra nabbed me just as I was heading down for dinner, and I'm starved. Does this tub have a galley, you think? A snack bar? A vending machine, maybe?"

James glanced back at him. "Seriously? How can you eat at a time like this?"

Zane shrugged, unperturbed. "Saving the world makes me hungry."

James determined that accompanying Zane was marginally better than simply waiting in the wheelhouse. Leaving Scorpius, they slipped out onto the dark decks and explored around. There was very little to see. Above decks, the wheelhouse, paddlewheels, and masts were the only structures. Below decks, most of the space was separated into cargo holds, divided down the centre by a narrow hall. Close to the bow was a small common area for the crew, where James had sat with Merlin and Millie on their return trip to London. Here, Professor Odin-Vann lay sprawled on the bench, one arm over his eyes, one leg kicked out onto the deck, feet akimbo. He snored fitfully.

"Here we go," Zane whispered, wrenching open a series of small cupboards. He rummaged and withdrew a cellophane-wrapped package. Squinting in the low light, he read the label. "'Halberd's Humble Hardtack'. Ever heard of it?"

James shook his head, distracted.

Zane used his teeth to strip off the wrapping, revealing a stack of biscuits that looked, both in size and color, like roofing shingles. He shrugged and bit one. Then, he bit it harder. Unable to crack a corner off the allegedly edible biscuit, he lowered it and struck it against the edge of a counter. It knocked like stone. He sighed mournfully and tossed it away.

Rose joined them a few minutes later and the threesome sat in the hold, not talking, leaning in time to the rocking rhythm of the hull. Nearby, Odin-Vann continued to snore haltingly.

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Growing stiff and frustratingly bored, James stood and headed back along the hall that divided the cargo areas. No one joined him.

Scorpius was seated against the wall at the end, his knees up and his hands dangling over them.

James plopped down next to him.

"Why did you really come along?" he asked. "It sure wasn't out of the overflowing goodness of your heart."

Blandly, Scorpius said, "You wound me, sir."

"I'm serious."

Scorpius gave a weak shrug. "You don't really believe that cock-and-bull story Odin-Vann told about finding Morganstern's talisman on her grandfather's farm, do you?"

James sat up and turned to Scorpius. "The brooch? What do you mean?"

"I mean, the likelihood of *him* outsmarting the headmaster is about as high as you beating Dolohov at Wizard chess. In short, not at all. He's either deluded—which is entirely possible—or he's lying."

"But..." James shook his head, caught between alarm and annoyance, "why would he lie? He's helping Petra, isn't he? Just like we all are."

"Just like *you* all are," Scorpius corrected. "I just came along to keep an eye on Rose and Walker. He's got a *thing* for her. And I'm the jealous type."

"Don't change the subject," James said, watching the blond boy closely. "You think Odin-Vann is lying to us? Do you agree with Ralph about him? That he's not to be trusted?"

"Don't tell me you haven't figured it out yet," Scorpius sighed. "It was you that wrote the note to yourself after all. Surely you don't need me to spell it out for you."

"You know what I'm sick of?" James suddenly declared, gesturing angrily with both hands. "People hinting at big, important revelations without ever just giving me a direct answer! Millie's grandmother, Headmaster Merlin, and now you! Out with it, or learn to keep your dodgy suspicions to yourself!"

Scorpius allowed a small smile, clearly enjoying James' discomfiture. Then, he nodded and grew serious again. "It's all in your

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note. You remember the play, just like I do. The roles are all in place, now just as they were then.”

James slumped. “Yeah, yeah. Petra is Princess Astra,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “And I’m Treus, blind with love and all that. What’s the point?”

“Like I said, *you* wrote the note,” Scorpius answered loftily. “All I’m saying is that here we are, in the final act. The two of you are on centre stage once again. And *I* think you wrote *yourself* that note for a reason.”

“I dreamed a crazy dream,” James shook his head dismissively. “About Petra in a graveyard with Albus. I woke up with an idea in my head. It made no sense, but apparently I wrote it down. I barely remember doing it. I was probably still dreaming.”

“It’s called ‘automatic writing’,” Scorpius said, sliding a disdainful eye toward James. “We learned it in Trelawney’s first class. Just because she’s a daft old nutter doesn’t mean there’s no such thing as prophecy.”

James frowned. “I pay as little attention in her class as I can,” he admitted.

Scorpius rolled his eyes, and then said, “Automatic writing is what happens when your subconscious knows something that your waking mind doesn’t. It’s when the buried part of your brain takes over your body for a moment to send your waking mind a message.”

James considered this, and then shook his head again. “I don’t see what the message could be. It’s just a line from the play. Beware foul Donovan.”

“Not *actually*,” Scorpius said. “Nowhere in the play are those three words spoken. Treus comes close during his rallying speech. But the word ‘beware’ isn’t anywhere in the script.”

James blinked as he thought back to the play. He tried to recall his own lines. Reluctantly, he realized that Scorpius was right. Still, it was just as likely that his second-year self had gotten the line wrong in the note as it was that the three words had any prophetic significance.

He mused on it, strained and concentrated, trying to determine what the words could possibly mean in their current situation. But nothing came to him. Finally, mentally exhausted, he gave up.

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A minute passed, and then he said to Scorpius, "You really should just break up with Rose."

Scorpius glanced aside at him, his brow darkening. "I don't know if I'm more impressed that *that's* what you're over there mooning about, or annoyed that you would actually say it."

"Neither," James said, staring darkly down the length of the hall. "I just realized I don't care what you think anymore."

Scorpius relaxed a little. "Facing the possibility of the end of the world does that, I suppose."

"I'm serious," James said dully. "You don't even know what to do with her. I swear, you deliberately lash her emotions back and forth just because you wouldn't know how to have a normal human conversation with her."

"This from the person who can't choose between an entitled, bossy aristocrat and a neurotic criminal sorceress."

James drew an annoyed sigh and blew it out. He wanted to argue with Scorpius. He wanted to tell him that he, Scorpius, wasn't a bad *person*, exactly, he was just bad for Rose. But there didn't seem to be any point. He realized, almost clinically, how late the hour probably was. Midnight? Even later?

His jaw cracked as a monumental yawn overtook him.

Next to him, Scorpius kicked out one leg and leaned aside, turning away from James.

James no longer cared. Weariness stole over him, weighing his eyelids down, turning his muscles into sandbags.

He gave in to it, and time began to stretch out, first dulling every sensation, and then turning minutes into hours.

He did not dream.

A sudden hard shudder wracked the ship, and James felt himself falling forward. He flailed in confusion, not sure which way was up, his head still reeling, thick with sleep. A wall of cold, worn wood slammed against him, and he realized, very dimly, that it was the floor of the hall.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows and pried his eyes open. The light was different. Thin pencil-beams of grey daylight lanced down from above, shining through cracks in the upper deck.

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Scorpius groaned in bleary irritation, struggling up from his own prone position on the floor.

"We fell asleep," James rasped, his voice hoarse. He scrubbed his face with his hands, raked them through his hair. "We slept through the night. Had to have. Are we there?"

"I need a loo and a cup of black tea," Scorpius answered grumpily, pushing himself to his feet and then slumping back against the wall. The ship rocked gently beneath them, accompanied by the distant slap of waves.

James turned and stumbled back along the hall, still bleary with sleep, but forcing himself to alertness.

Rose and Zane met them at the stairs, Rose with her hair bushed out in sleepy tangles, Zane blinking and squinting up into the gloomy dawn above. Together, without a word, they tramped up the steps into cool air and drab, stormy daylight.

Odin-Vann stood on the bow, in front of the wheelhouse. He looked back when he heard them coming, his eyes bright and wary.

"We're here," he announced in a hushed voice, and pointed ahead.

James moved to join the professor, blinking against the pall of white fog that surrounded the ship.

"I don't see anything," Scorpius said flatly, passing James and peering all around.

"It's there," Odin-Vann nodded. "Just visible through the fog. Trees on all sides and there, just ahead, the old dock and the sunken gazebo. James, you've seen this place, yes? At least, the decades' past version of it that Petra can conjure? You recognize it, don't you?"

James inched toward the bow railing and peered critically out over the leaden waves. Now that Odin-Vann mentioned it, he could see the shadows of trees, an encircling wood, all shrouded and ghostly beyond the lurking fog. He turned his gaze to the front. The bow did indeed seem to be pointed at a skeletal dock. It swam in and out of drifting grey mist.

"This is it," he nodded. "In Petra's version, the gazebo is still there, at the end of the dock. But the version in our time is broken away and sunken. I don't know how deep." He glanced down at the water, but nothing was visible through it. The waves slapped at the hull,

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reflecting the clot of the sky, turning the lake into a shifting, broken mirror.

“We’re drifting,” Odin-Vann said, his eyes still on the dock in its mantle of fog. “Scorpius, take the wheel and keep us in the centre of the lake.”

“I didn’t want to say so last night,” Scorpius replied, tired and terse, “But I don’t think that’s how boats work.”

“Go!” Odin-Vann said with sudden strength, turning back to Scorpius. His eyes were wide and sharp, either on the edge of panic, or triumph. “Rose, Walker, raise the gazebo. Aim for the water just in front of the broken dock!”

Scorpius, James noticed, backed up to the wheelhouse but didn’t enter it. From the shadows, his narrowed eyes watched Odin-Vann keenly.

Rose and Zane approached the rocking prow and drew their wands. Sharing a quick glance, they aimed for the dock, and then dipped their arms slightly, toward the restless waves beneath.

“Wingardium leviosa!” they both called in unison.

James sensed more than heard the surge of magic which fired into the depths. Nothing happened at first. Then, subtly, a deep groan arose from the deep. Odin-Vann moved slowly alongside Zane, his gaze rapt. James sidled in next to him, thinking hard, a sense of cold trepidation settling over him like a shroud. It was all happening so suddenly, too quickly for anyone to think about.

And then, a thought that had haunted the back of his mind since the previous night finally pushed to the fore, bringing with it a deepening suspicion.

“Professor,” he whispered, even as he watched the water at the base of the dock. A surge of dense bubbles pushed the surface into a low swell. “How did you find out that Merlin had hidden Petra’s brooch here? Did she tell you?”

Odin-Vann’s gaze didn’t flicker from the bubbling disturbance. More deep groans and creaks emanated from the cold depths. Zane and Rose frowned in tense concentration.

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"Come, James," Odin-Vann said, holding out his hand and swinging one leg over the railing. James glanced up at him in surprise. "Come!" the Professor said in a commanding rasp. "And look!"

He nodded toward the waves below the bobbing bow. There, a haze of white solidified a wave, freezing it into a sudden ice floe, which arose silently, like a surfacing submarine. The floe pressed up against Odin-Vann's boot, supporting his weight. "See? Petra's power accompanies us. Come. I will need your eyes and courage to accomplish our task."

With that, he swung his other leg over the railing and stood atop the frozen, elevated wave. Another crackled into being before him, rising to meet his next step down, forming enchanted, icy stairs. A wintry chill wafted up from them, making James' breath suddenly puff a visible cloud. He shivered violently.

"Go, James," Zane said in a strained voice. "Once this thing's out of the water we won't be able to hold it up for long."

James nodded worriedly and climbed awkwardly over the bow railing. His foot skidded on the ice step below, and then found purchase. Carefully, nervously, he began to follow Odin-Vann down, moving from frozen step to frozen step. Once James and the professor reached the level of the water, the stairs sank away with a deep gurgle, replaced by a bridge of ice, as thin as paper and brittle as glass, yet somehow strong enough to support their weight as they walked slowly, approaching the rising swell before the dock.

As James watched, peering around Odin-Vann's shoulder, he saw the spire of the old gazebo spear out of the gurgling boil. It was made of wood, but rotted and misshapen, barely sheathed in slimy white paint. It pushed upward, and a conical roof began to follow, its old shakes warped, as unruly as a hag's teeth. Water began to pour down the roof as it widened, unleashing the weight of the depths.

"Only," James whispered, more urgently now. "I had a meeting with the headmaster. He told me how he was keeping the brooch because he was hoping Petra would come to him. He had it with him, right there in his office. Did he... maybe... hide it here later?"

Odin-Vann didn't answer. He inched closer to the rising gazebo.

"Ungh!" Rose grunted from behind. "This... is *heavy!*"

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"Just a little more," Odin-Vann called back, holding out one hand in a calming gesture. The ice bridge had narrowed as it stretched out, as if its power was weakening. Waves swamped serenely over it, wetting James' shoes as he turned sideways, edging along in the professor's wake.

*Beware, foul Donovan,* he thought. The words teased him, seemed to nag at him.

*Surely you don't need me to spell it out for you,* Scorpius had said the night before.

"Almost there," Odin-Vann said, almost to himself.

A long, creaking moan emanated from the gazebo as it rose further into the grey air, casting off its freight of water. It was crooked, turning as it rose, wallowing like a bloated corpse. Slick drapes of seaweed hung from its edges and coated its upright supports.

James stopped as an awful idea began to form in his mind. The cold of the ice bridge welled up over him.

*Beware, foul...*

The roar of water was too loud to speak over as the gazebo disgorged from the lake, finally bobbing fully to the surface. Its interior was obscured by curtains of limp, slimy seaweed. As it settled, it rocked and turned slightly, groaning against the old pilings.

"Donofrio Odin-Vann," James whispered urgently, his eyes widening in horrible, stunned revelation. "*Don... O... Vann?*"

The gazebo shuddered against the dock, and as it did so the seaweed tore loose from its roofline, falling away like a sodden veil.

Someone was standing inside the gazebo. The shape was barely a silhouette, wasted and skeletal, and yet still, somehow, recognizable by her long, sopping red hair.

"James," she said in a chiding, rasping, ancient voice. "I warned you, did I not? On the lake just this past winter, I told you to abandon your Petra. And yet here you are. Predictable... to the last."

Ahead of James, Odin-Vann's arm jerked spasmodically, whipping his wand up and back. James flinched in terror as it seemed to point at him and fire a bolt of blinding blue. The spell sizzled over his shoulder, however, striking a mark further away, back on the boat.

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Scorpius grunted in surprise. James turned in time to see the boy flung back against the wheelhouse, his wand falling from his hand. A moment later, he collapsed heavily to the deck.

James drew breath to yell, but a sudden horrible pressure squeezed the air right out of him. The world spun upside down as he was lifted from the ice bridge and heaved away from the ship, pressed in the grip of a monstrous watery tentacle. A second later, he struck the cold, rotten floor of the gazebo, rolling hard enough to bash against the rear railing, smashing a leg through it.

"I would not!" Judith called toward the ship, her voice a hoarse shriek but still with the same imperious tone of command. "Drop this structure back into the depths and poor James goes down with it!"

James tried to struggle up, but his leg was tangled in the broken railing. Judith was standing directly before him. Her once glorious robes were now matted and sodden, rotted threadbare. Beneath them, her body seemed to be all angles, mere bones and tendon. She stank abominably.

Thirty yards away, Zane and Rose still leaned over the bow of the Gertrude, wands outstretched, straining, eyes wide with shock and fear.

Between them and the gazebo, Odin-Vann stood on the ice bridge with his wand still raised, pointing back at the boat, but his face looking forward, eyes locked upon Judith. His expression was misty with something very near adoration.

"Professor!" James called, half attempting to snap the man out of the trance that Judith had cast over him. Odin-Vann dipped his gaze for a moment, blinking at James, and his face hardened. James understood the terrible truth: Judith had not cast any entrancement over the man at all. He was doing this entirely of his own free will.

"It was *you*," James exclaimed with sudden, sinking surety. "*You* sabotaged the Loom! But why?"

Judith answered, "The good professor and I have certain mutual interests, James." As she spoke, she turned to look down at him. Her face, James now saw, was a shrivel of filmy white skin over bone. Her lips were gone, revealing the ivory grin of her teeth. Her eyes were like peeled grapes in the hollows of their sockets. But her hair was still long and red, draping her skull in wet ribbons. "As you can see, I need a new

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host. Petra has broken from me. Without her, my time in this sphere is nearly over. But Mr. Odin-Vann is more than willing to take her place. He is *eager*."

James recoiled from the horror of Judith's dead stare. Trembling, he tore his gaze away from her and focused again on the professor. "But what could *you* possibly get out of it?"

Odin-Vann frowned and shook his head, slowly but firmly, as if James had finally confirmed something that he had been suspecting all along.

"You *really* don't know, do you?" he seemed to wonder aloud. "Early on, I thought perhaps you would prove different. When you were attacked and humiliated by the little bullies, Edgecombe and his friends. I hoped you might grasp the truth. But now I see that you really are just like all the rest. Too arrogant in your own perceived superiority to understand *what it's like...*" He edged toward James, his face contorting into a mask of furious, age-old misery, "to be *mocked*. To be *belittled* at every turn. To be coddled like a *child* by those who believe they are good, and beaten down like a *dog* by those who know they are bad." He moved forward more resolutely now, homing in on James, raising his chin and speaking with the fervor of long-suppressed rage. "Both of those acts arise from the same, pathetic delusion. That they are *better* than me. That they are more *powerful* than me. That I will always be what they *believe* me to be. A weak, slow, bookish, clumsy little *embarrassment!* But *now* the world will see. I used my *brain* to defeat them *first*. I made my *WAND!*"

He brandished it in his fist, which vibrated with manic tension. His eyes blazed.

"*Slow*, was I in the past? Now, I am the fastest wizard alive! Weak? Now I have the power of instantaneous strength. I have finally programmed my wand with every counter-jinx, every protective charm, every repulsion hex in the Caster's Lexicon! Thus primed, it can sense and deflect any spell that *anyone* dares attack me with!" He drew a huge, firming breath and held it. "With this tool finally perfected, I *knew* I was unstoppable. But I also knew that it was not *enough*. I needed not only to silence those who had tormented me, but to stand up against *all* who cling to the *pathetic illusion* of their own superiority. *All* of those

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who bumble through this life so *convinced* of their own goodness, their own virtue, their own idiotic *delusion of right!* And then... Judith found me.”

He looked aside at her, finally stepping up onto the warped floor of the gazebo and joining her.

“She found me,” he said with sudden, soft rapture. “And she helped me to understand. Petra, my old school friend, would come to me. Judith divined this directly from Petra’s thoughts, for as yet they are still, if barely, connected. And when Petra did come to me, I would assist her. Judith helped me to see that it was my duty. I must help Petra to rid herself of her curse once and for all. I must do this, with Judith’s help... by ending her.”

“No!” James exclaimed, straining to extricate his leg from the broken railing.

“It’s the merciful thing,” Judith agreed in her cracked, swampy voice. “Secretly, even Petra herself desires her death. And then, with her out of the way, Donofrio will become my new host. Thus fully restored and once again rooted to this realm, we can finally rejoice that power will be in the hands of those who truly deserve it, and who are unafraid to use it.”

“Because, James,” Odin-Vann said, looking down at him now with a sort of benevolent sadness. “Judith really is right. It isn’t just *some* people who stumble through this life under the delusion of their own rightness. It’s *all* of them. And they are all... every one... fatally, insultingly, *wrong*.”

His voice grew leaden as he spoke the final words, and raised his wand, pointing it at James.

“Oh, bugger this!” a voice said from some distance away. James glanced up and saw that it was Rose. She jerked her wand upright, releasing the levitation spell.

“*Swim, James!*” she shouted desperately. Next to her, Zane staggered, suddenly supporting the gazebo entirely with his own wand. He grunted, gasped, and broke his spell as well.

The gazebo dropped precipitously, struck the water, and began to roll over, immediately capsizing.

Odin-Vann stumbled, fell past Judith, and struck a side railing, smashing it and following it into the water.

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A bolt of brilliant red struck the waves where he had fallen, exploding in a burst of steam. Rose was firing attacks from the ship, aiming for both Odin-Vann and Judith. Zane gripped his wand to join her.

Judith whirled. In a blink, she transformed into a cyclone of stinking black water, her force tearing the gazebo apart all around. Writhing tentacles uncoiled and scooped Odin-Vann from the water. His body was borne up into the throat of the waterspout, which roared, circled James with fury as he thrashed amidst the ruin, and then fled away out over the lake, bypassing the Gertrude and vanishing into the dense pall of fog all around.

“James!” Zane called, stabbing out his wand again. Breathlessly, he repeated the levitation spell. James, along with a messy assortment of broken railing, floor planks, and destroyed roofing, rocketed up out of the waves with breathtaking speed, streaming water in a corona.

“Yikes!” Zane gasped, grabbing onto his wand now with both hands. “You’re a lot lighter than that crazy gazebo. Hold on while I rein it in a little!”

Clumsily, trembling with exhaustion, he bobbed James, along with his entourage of sodden debris, over the deck and set him down. James stumbled as his feet met the planks.

“We have to go after them!” he gasped, grabbing onto a railing for support.

“None of us even knows how!” Rose cried helplessly, dragging a still-woozy Scorpius to his feet. “We don’t know how to sail this ship!”

“How hard can it be?” Zane said, stuffing his wand back into his pocket. “We watched Hagrid do it, didn’t we? All we have to do is set the destination lever back to Hogwarts. Down we go and we’ll be on our way back!”

“I don’t think it’s going to be quite that straightforward,” Scorpius said, pushing fully to his feet and nodding toward the deck near James’ feet.

James glanced down. A chunk of rotten railing lay on the deck, transported aboard along with himself by Zane’s levitation spell. But as James watched, the broken wooden chunk melted away like an ice sculpture, losing all colour and draining into a loose puddle.

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Behind him, a hunk of roof did the same. In a moment, all the gazebo debris had vanished into nothing but melted seawater.

"Oh no," Rose said, her voice high and faint. She ran to the railing and peered out over the waves.

Beyond her, the fog was drifting away, fading from view. Revealing...

Nothing. There was no encircling shoreline or fringe of woodland. Only dark waves marching off into further and further leagues, eventually stretching all the way to the horizon.

James reached the railing alongside Rose and looked out, speechless.

Faintly, Zane asked, "We're not in any country lake... are we?"

"They got rid of us," Scorpius mused aloud, almost as if he was impressed. "Odin-Vann and The Lady of the Lake. They got rid of us because we were the only ones who know enough to stop them."

"But, where are we?" James asked, banging his fist down onto the railing.

"I think *where* we are matters less," Zane said, nudging James and pointing upward, "than *that* does."

James looked up. Revealed by the retreating fog, a low, hulking boil of clouds bore down on the Gertrude, driven before a rising, whipping wind. It was a storm front, dark as a bruise and flickering with gouts of lightning, rumbling with distant thunder.

"Am I crazy," Rose breathed, eyes wide, "or does that storm seem to be aiming directly for us?"

"Into the wheelhouse," James cried, finally engaging to action. He turned, grabbing Zane and pulling him along. "We need to get back into the tunnels below, and as soon as possible! The storm won't be able to reach us there, and we can get back."

Fat drops of rain began to pepper the ship, striking with stinging force, pinging off the metal wheelhouse and patterning in the sails. Together, the foursome poured through the door of the wheelhouse. Scorpius tugged it shut with a heavy clang.

James moved behind the wheel, which was turning loosely back and forth with the increasing rock of the ship.

Wind suddenly tore over the deck outside, whumping in the sails and singing a high, whipping note in the rigging.

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Scorpius scanned the instruments ranged below the window. Spying a large brass dial with an attached lever, he gripped it and tugged. The lever ratcheted, turning the dial past several notches. When it stopped, the readout showed a single word, white letters printed on black: HOGWARTS.

The wheel began to turn in James' hand, spinning ponderously and bringing the Gertrude about. With a lurch, it rocked forward. A spray of mist began to plow up beneath the bow. Then, heavily, the bow began to rise and fall on the waves, striking with sickening force and sending up gouts of spray.

The Gertrude drove onward, faster, but it did not submerge.

This was all part of Judith's design, James realized. To maroon them far from any hope of escape, to set a murderous storm upon them, preventing their return, and hopefully killing them all. It was just as Scorpius had said: this was the final act, and the stage was set. It was *the Triumvirate* brought to horrifying life: a ruse of an ocean journey, a magical storm racing them back, and the villain Donovan, along with his ally, the Lady of the Lake this time instead of the Marsh Hag, forging ahead, ready and prepared to freely execute their final, fatal plan.

And yet their intent was no mere wedding conspiracy in pursuit of a seat of power. Their plan was to somehow kill Petra, leaving Odin-Vann to take over as Judith's host, harnessing her chaotic power instead of thwarting it.

As James finally grasped this horrible change of events, a surge of undiluted anger welled up in his chest. Odin-Vann had lied to Petra all along about helping her to fulfill her destiny as the Crimson Thread. He had never intended to help her save the world. He had tricked her, sabotaged her, fed her guilt and the madness of her scheme, only to betray her in the end in the worst way possible.

"But," Rose asked James, not taking her eyes from the rushing waves and the advancing, terrible storm, "How can Odin-Vann and Judith kill Petra? They know she made a Horcrux."

"Potter here knows better than anyone else," Scorpius answered darkly. "Horcruxes can be created, and they can also be destroyed. They needed Petra alive for some reason, until this moment. Where there's a will, there's a way."

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James knew that Scorpius was right. But he had a deep suspicion that Judith's answer would be a lot simpler, and more final, than even Scorpius suggested.



## **23. CHAOS DESCENDS**

The Gertrude could not outpace the storm. Even as it plowed forward through the rising waves, the arms of the tempest encroached on both sides, surrounding the blockade runner in a smothering embrace. Wind tore across the deck in capricious gusts, shrieking in the rigging and whumping the furled sails hard enough to shudder the entire boat. In the wheelhouse, the windows rattled in their frames. Raindrops fell hard enough to ring on the roof like coins.

“It’s slowing us down,” Zane observed, raising his voice over the gale. “The storm is coming around against it, forcing us backwards!”

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Scorpius leaned toward the window and peered up. "It's the sails and masts," he said. "Too much wind resistance."

James understood. "We need to lighten our load and get more streamlined. Come on!" He reached for the door.

"What are you going to do?" Rose asked, her eyes wide. And yet James saw that she already had an inkling of his plan. She drew out her wand in preparation.

He nodded, one hand on the door. "We need to strip away the masts, the sails, the rigging, everything that's slowing us down."

He shoved open the door against a sudden, shocking force of wind. Rain sprayed in, immediately spattering his face and hair. He squinted against it and pressed out into the gale. Rose followed, with Scorpius and Zane right behind.

The driving rain was like icy pebbles pelting their heads and shoulders. Indeed, the deck was scattered with tiny knots of hail. They rolled with the increasing sway of the ship, pushed by ever harder gusts of wind.

"Hagrid will likely kill us!" Rose cried over the storm as James raised his wand, aiming at the foremast.

James hoped they lived long enough to find out. He sighted down his wand, squinting one eye shut, and shouted, "Convulsis!"

The bolt struck the mast just below a junction of pulleys and netting. With a deafening crack and flash of purple, the base exploded, spraying splinters in every direction. The mast crunched down, still momentarily suspended in its web of rigging, but then the force of the storm caught it, pushed it, and the mast keeled over ponderously, dragging whips of rope and torn netting with it. The boat rolled and the mast fell into the waves, where it was tugged away from the ship completely.

From the rear of the ship, another flash and crack marked the aft mast. Zane and Scorpius backed away quickly, peering up as the mast creaked, snapped, and tottered backwards, spearing into the waves beyond the stern.

Suddenly, sickeningly, time seemed to double back on itself in James' mind. As he watched the aft mast break and tear away, the Gertrude became the Gwyndemere. He heard Petra's surprised scream as the falling boom swept her overboard, felt the weight of her hanging

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from the back of the ship over hungry, mountainous waves. He brooch fell away, and her eyes pleaded with him. *Let me go, James*, she said with terrible calm...

He was shaken back to the present as Rose tugged him by the arm. "The lifeboats," she cried, pointing. There were only two, one on either side of the bow, lying upside down and battened down with canvas straps.

Together, they broke the straps with their wands and blasted the boats over the side, taking some of the railing with them.

James paused and looked back over the ship, shielding his eyes with one hand. The Gertrude was no longer a high, noble craft but a streamlined, if ragged, bullet shape, stripped down to a low profile that noticeably cut the waves much faster, driven by its magic-powered paddle wheels.

"That's the best we can do," Zane called, returning from the stern, his hair plastered to his forehead by rain. "We blasted away everything that wasn't bolted down, and plenty that was!"

"Let's go back inside," James shouted and pointed to the wheelhouse, which was now the highest point on the ship.

The storm boomed thunder and spat lightning, illuminating miles of waves like a flashbulb image. The four students clambered back into the relative warmth of the wheelhouse and James resumed the wheel, catching it as it spun sluggishly.

"What now?" Rose asked, wiping her wet hair out of her face.

James considered this, and shrugged a little helplessly. "We see if we can outrun it."

Amazingly, this did now seem possible. Relieved of its excess weight and drag, the Gertrude plowed ahead like a torpedo. The storm still strained on both sides, trying to close in on the little ship, but it could only keep pace. Slowly, it began to fall behind.

Within a few minutes, the waves ahead shrank from sharp-peaked hills for the Gertrude to climb to streaming whitecaps for the ship to cut through. The blasting wind gradually diminished, replaced by warmer currents. Thunder still boomed, sounding like an enraged beast cheated of its prey, but from greater distance.

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And then, so suddenly that James gasped and flailed with one hand, grabbing for the steadyng bar behind him, the Gertrude angled down like a whale. Its bow plunged into the ocean, buried itself in the waves, and the entire ship followed. Water rushed up over the diminished shape of the boat, overtook the windows, and swallowed the Gertrude with a deep, gurgling roar. Dimness filled the wheelhouse as the bow dropped first into rushing green pressure, and then into swift and total darkness. The lantern was gone, of course, having been blasted away along with the foremast.

James could see nothing. The ship creaked ominously all around, adjusting to the pressures of the deep.

"I hate this part," Rose said in a strained voice.

The external pressure changed somehow. James felt it in his stomach and the very sockets of his eyes. With a shudder and a blast of bubbles, the Gertrude sucked into some smaller, tighter space, accelerating at an even more alarming rate than before. Stripped of its external structures, the ship was an underwater arrow, careening into blind darkness.

The ship suddenly dropped, fell through a burst of loose water, and landed with a shuddering thud in the sluice of the returning tunnel. Freed of the surrounding depths, it sped onward, rocking with the angle of the walls.

The storm was behind them now, and they were utterly beyond its angry reach. It may be a magical storm, as James suspected, but they would outpace it easily, at least until they reached their destination.

All that was left was to return to Hogwarts and hope that they weren't too late to stop whatever Judith and Odin-Vann intended to do. With this in mind, James leaned forward into the rushing dark, peering uselessly through the black window. He groped and put his hands on the wheel again, doing whatever he could to keep the ship pointing straight ahead, willing the boat to go even faster.

"We can't confront them, you know," Scorpius said, sensing James' thoughts. "Judith and Odin-Vann. She's too powerful. And he countered my stunning spell before it so much as left my wand. He can deflect any spell we might cast. There's no way to battle either of them."

"I don't care about battling them," James said grimly. "We just need to get to Petra. We have to tell her what we know."

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After a worried moment, Zane asked, “And then what?”

James narrowed his eyes in the blind dark. With conviction, he answered, “Then *she* can battle them.”



The return journey seemed to take far longer than James thought possible. The Gertrude barreled onward through endless curves and pitches. Rose and Scorpius braved the rushing wind and sloping decks to leave the wheelhouse and climb down to the hold, hoping that the motion would somehow be less pronounced below. Only Zane stayed with James. Neither spoke, but James was glad of his old friend’s presence. After what felt like hours, James loosened his grip on the wheel. His fingers ached from strain, and his eyes bulged for light.

Zane sensed James’ respite. “This isn’t the same without the Ralphinator, is it?” he said for the second time.

James sighed deeply and nodded in the dark. He knew Zane couldn’t see him, but didn’t think it mattered.

Zane spoke again. “I wonder what our parents are up to right now?” He seemed to consider this in the rushing darkness, and then said, “Actually, I know what my parents are probably doing. They’re home in St. Louis starting to think about dinner. Greer is probably at the table doing her homework and being really grumpy about it, while my dad teases her, thinking it will put her in a better mood, although it never does. They’re Muggles, so they don’t know anything about halted destinies, and rogue sorceresses, and magical snafus threatening to end

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the whole universe. I think, for the first time in my life... I'm a little jealous of them."

"My dad is probably home in his office," James mused quietly. "Probably looking over the latest reports and emergency procedures, but not really reading any of it. Just moving pages around while his brain spins on like a machine, trying out ideas, testing plans, figuring out what he's going to do next. I've seen him like that a thousand times."

"We should call him somehow when we get to Hoggies," Zane said with resolve. "He's Harry Potter. He'll know what to do."

James shook his head slowly. "Do you remember what the dryad said, back during our first year?"

Zane blew out a breath, as if he'd been secretly thinking the same thing. "Yeah. She said your father's battle was over. She said this one would be all yours."

"Well, fortunately, it's not *all* mine. I've got you, and Rose, and Scorpius."

Zane seemed to accept this. Then, uncomfortably, he added, "But no Ralph."

"Ralph is his own problem now," James said, half angry, half sad.

Gradually, light began to blossom far ahead. James at first wondered if his senses were teasing him, but the glow quickly resolved into a solid blur, deep blue, reflecting on the rushing river and the walls of its tunnel, growing with increasing speed.

James tensed to alertness and gripped the ship's wheel again.

"Looks like we're almost back," Zane said, approaching the windows and peering out.

James suddenly didn't feel ready. He realized now that he had drifted into a sort of stunned stupor, lulled by the motion of the ship and the timelessness of the dark. Now, adrenaline surged through his body like electricity, bringing with it a sick dread. He felt the weight of his wand in his pocket, and wondered how soon he might need to draw it, to use it to defend either his own life or someone else's.

The blue light grew to fill the tunnel, but remained dim and murky, rushing forward to illuminate the ship.

"Something's wrong," James said, almost to himself.

Instead of angling out into the open air of the moonpool, the tunnel river rose suddenly, washing up the tunnel walls and closing over

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the bow of the Gertrude. The ship bobbed upward with it, rising on the sudden tide until the wheelhouse roof crunched against the ceiling, screeching and scraping with deafening force until the roof began to cave in over James' and Zane's heads. They ducked instinctively, eyes wide with fear.

Then, with a rushing whump, the river blasted over the ship completely, submerging it in dim blue depth. The Gertrude sank away from the tunnel ceiling, fortunately, but began to turn, rolling into a sluggish corkscrew. James held onto the ship's wheel while Zane grappled with the railing behind, struggling to stay on his feet as the wall and floor began to switch places.

The view ahead changed. The ship shot out of the confines of the tunnel into some larger space full of murky, shifting depths. James couldn't recognize it at first, if only because he was looking at it sideways, from the odd capsizing perspective of the ship. Then, with a cold shock, he recognized the huge circular space, the row of tunnel mouths, the terraces leading up to the closed and locked door. It was the cavern beneath the lake, only completely submerged now, dense with shifting beams of what could only be moon glow sifting down from the lake far above.

Something disastrous had happened, flooding the erstwhile moonpool.

Shapes swam through the dimness, darting between shadows, glinting like metal in the dim moonlight. James couldn't tell for certain, but he had a cold suspicion that the shapes were not fish.

The Gertrude slowed as it propelled out into the airless abyss, still turning, turning upside down. James and Zane clambered over each other, banging from the wheelhouse's walls and tumbling to its ceiling. Noises boomed up from the ship as its contents shifted, rolled, crashed through corners and angles. James hoped, fleetingly, that Rose and Scorpius were hanging on tight somewhere, safe from the loose cargo.

The Gertrude was angling upwards now, even as it continued to corkscrew, tumbling slowly upright again. Through the windows, the beams of moonlight broke into tatters, resolved into rolling facets—waves seen eerily from below. They rushed closer, grew larger, and James tightened his grip on the wheel.

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With a thunderous roar, the ship exploded to the surface, crashing down and bobbing crookedly on oily waves, where it listed precipitously, streaming water from its decks.

James was bruised and sore from his tumble around the interior of the wheelhouse, but he forgot his own pains entirely as water ran from the windows, revealing the view beyond.

Hogwarts castle was lit against the blue night sky by a seething yellow glare from below. James could not see its source beyond the trees, but the flicker of fire was unmistakable. Shadows moved past the trees, forming a mass of silhouettes, some flitting in furtive groups, others worryingly large and lumbering. And then, as the crash and trickle of water fell away, James heard voices as well. Echoing over the lake came shouting and bellows of rage or pain, the distinct roar of a large and angry crowd.

"What's happening?" Zane asked, his eyes wide, lit by the yellow glow beyond.

James shook his head weakly, stunned and deeply afraid. He broke his paralysis and bolted to the door, wrenching it open with a screech of bent metal.

Something clanged against the wheelhouse just to the right of his head. He barely registered it before the object clattered to the deck. He glanced down at it. It was a spear with a rough-hewn stone point, green as jade. Further down the ship, more clangs and thunks indicated an ongoing attack.

All around, the lake was suddenly full of splashing figures. They were unrecognizable in the dark, mere muscular shapes surfacing with arms raised, hurling their weapons with frightening accuracy at the already wounded Gertrude. Their war cries were piercingly shrill, screeching like rusty gears.

"The Merpeople!" Rose cried, stumbling as she ran from the hold. "They've gone totally berserk!"

"Not that they're ever exactly friendly," Scorpius added crossly from behind, ducking as a spear spangled off the wheelhouse, leaving a deep dent.

James stumbled into Rose, nearly knocking her back into Scorpius, as the Gertrude suddenly surged forward, its bow rising against the waves.

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"Hold on!" Zane called from inside the wheelhouse. "I don't know much about driving boats, but I'm pretty sure red means fast!"

James clambered to hold onto the open door, even as Rose grabbed his arm for support. Inside the wheelhouse, Zane had one hand on a large brass throttle, ramming it to its maximum. His face was wide-eyed and hectic as he steered with his other hand, aiming for the fiery glow of the castle. The ship listed harder as it steamed ahead, pitching James, Rose, and Scorpius toward the outer railing and the rushing waves below. Cold mist began to spray into their faces as the barrage of spears fell behind.

Struggling to hold on, Rose called, "Where you taking us!?"

"Um," Zane shrugged a little manically. "Away!?"

The castle hove nearer with unlikely speed as the Gertrude accelerated, rising onto the waves.

"Getting close to the docks, Walker," Scorpius warned loudly.

"Yeah," Zane nodded, scanning the console before him helplessly. "Only boats don't come with brakes, as far as I can tell. You all might want to, you know, hold onto something."

The bow of the Gertrude hove over the dock. James heard the crash and splinter as the wooden structure crumpled beneath the hull. The ship obliterated it without slowing. The shore was barely twenty yards away, approaching with inevitable speed. Trees lined the rocky beach, dark against the starry sky—and yet even now, James saw that the sky wasn't entirely clear. Just past the canopy of the Forest, low storm clouds boiled, flashing silent bursts of lightning. The Gertrude had beaten the storm to their destination, but it was raging relentlessly onward anyway, seeking its target.

The Gertrude struck the rising beach with a screech and grind of rocks under wood. The ship juddered upward, buckling James' knees, while momentum continued to carry it forward, even as the bow thrust into the fringe of Forest, bashing between tree trunks and tearing away limbs. The ship's sideways list grew precipitous as it began to keel over, causing James, Rose, and Scorpius to hang on desperately, lest they fall and be crushed under the rolling hull. Finally, with a devastating crunch, the Gertrude beached itself completely, crashing to rest against some unseen impediment in the trees.

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Zane half climbed, half fell out of the wheelhouse, clambering to the railing where it now leaned low over the rocky shore. "Home sweet home," he announced breathlessly.

Much closer now, the noise of shouting voices and angry grunts seemed to fill the forest.

"What's happening here?" Rose nearly demanded, fear making her voice strident. James couldn't help thinking that she suddenly sounded a lot like her mother.

"If I had to guess," Scorpius said, climbing over the broken railing and dropping to the beach below. "I'd say that the Centaurs have made good on their promise. Friday's magical quake was likely the last straw, and now they are invading. Only things aren't going as planned. They haven't breached the castle yet."

"What about the Merpeople?" James asked, clambering after Scorpius and helping Rose down behind him. "They aren't partnering with the Centaurs. Why are *they* attacking?"

Zane stumbled as he jumped to the beach. "Everything's happening at once. It's not coincidence. It's just the end."

James shuddered at the idea, but it felt eerily apt. It did indeed feel like the end.

"What now?" Scorpius said, turning back from the fiery glow beyond the woods. "If the centaurs are being held back somehow, that means we are as well."

"Ah," Zane said, brightening. "But the centaurs aren't gremlins, like us." He glanced aside at Rose, who nodded fearfully.

"We know all the secret passages in," she agreed. "The Quidditch shed is probably the closest. Come on!"

Without looking back, she turned and dashed up the beach, skirting the broken hull of the Gertrude, and into the trees.

As he ran to follow, James called, "But I thought the equipment shed passage only worked if that was how you came out of the school to begin with?"

"We fixed that in my third year," Rose answered back, ducking through bushes and leaping over knotted roots. "Scorpius and I spent a whole Saturday leaving the school through the shed passage about a hundred times in a row, coming back in through the main entrance

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every time. We built up a cache of returns for whenever we needed them."

James frowned at this as he ran. "How come I didn't know about this?"

"You were at Alma Aleron that year," Zane called from behind.

"Not that we would have invited you anyway," Scorpius suggested, crashing along in the rear.

Twin spears of light suddenly intersected the students' path, bobbing wildly and accompanied by a throttling roar. Rose skidded to a halt, braking herself against a tree, just as a large vehicle bounded over the path, its headlamps glaring through the trees. It was some sort of off-road vehicle with huge knobby tyres and gunmetal-grey sides. Voices called from within, and James had a sense of pointing hands and excited direction.

"There, see?" a man's voice could be heard from an open rear window. "There's not supposed to be anything here but miles of Forest! But look yourself! It's a huge bleedin' castle! Just like the village that popped up when we was hiking last week!"

The engine whined and strained over the uneven Forest floor. The vehicle surged forward, crashing over brush, squirreling through the huge, ancient trees.

Two more followed in its wake, moving faster and more confidently. From his place behind a nearby tree, James thought he recognized weapons in the passengers' hands. Then, with sinking dismay, he recognized the objects they were brandishing. They weren't weapons, but cameras.

"Not this again," Zane said, rolling his eyes.

"Come on," Rose called again, leaping ahead as the vehicles crashed onward through the wood, crawling in the general direction of the castle and the flicker of fire.

As the four neared the castle themselves and began to bypass it, running along the edge of the Forest, they caught glimpses of a huge rabble gathered against the seamless wall of fire. Centaurs moved in galloping groups, orderly and ranked, their weapons raised.

"Merlin's erected a defence," James realized aloud. "That's no normal fire. It's a fiendfyre boundary!"

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"It won't last," Scorpius said, and then pointed as he ran. "And what's *that*?"

James saw it as well. "That's no centaur," he agreed with sinking realization.

Gathered in their own knot, facing the centaurs against the wall of magical flames, was a gaggle of the huge lumbering shapes that James had glimpsed from the ship. They advanced haltingly toward the ranks of centaurs, hunkering their massive shoulders around their tiny heads. They were giants, dozens of them, in all different monstrous sizes.

"Grawp and Prechka!" Rose cried shrilly. "They came here on their own, even though Hagrid warned them to stay away! And they brought their whole tribe!"

Even in silhouette, James recognized the hulking figure of Prechka. She shied away from the centaurs as they galloped toward her, then around her feet, their weapons raised threateningly. Her potato-like head bobbed and swiveled as she tried to see them all, tried to avoid their stamping, teeming hooves. And then, horribly, she attacked. She was compelled more by terror than anger. James could see it in the clumsy way that she moved, the panicked lurch of her shoulders. She kicked, and one centaur flew through the air, flailing all six of its appendages. Then, spastically, Prechka hunkered, grabbed two more centaurs, one in each hand, and jerked them up to shoulder height. With a massive lunge, she bashed them together like a pair of meaty cymbals. Even over the roar of the fire and the bellowing voices, James heard the horrible crunch of bones.

"No!" Rose called, stumbling to a halt and raising her hands to her face, unable to tear her eyes away. "No, Prechka!"

"Leave her be!" Scorpius called, his voice suddenly commanding. "The time for civility is past! It's her skin or theirs! And soon it might be ours! Keep running!"

"Holy hinkypunks," Zane breathed in a high, scared voice. "That was... brutal!"

Lights sprayed over the increasing melee and the vehicle from the Forest burst into view, bouncing over the hillocks. It ground to a halt, its brakes screeching, its body leaning on its springs. The passenger door burst open and a man scrambled out in sudden panic, his eyes bulging up at the giants. He scrambled backwards in terror, tripped and fell at

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the feet of a stamping centaur. He glanced up at it and screamed, covering his head with his arms.

The other two vehicles bounded forward in pursuit. The middle vehicle crashed into the suddenly halted lead vehicle, nearly running down the panicked passenger. Glass tinkled and voices shouted.

"This is beyond us!" Scorpius called urgently. "Go!"

Distracted and numb with terror, the group ran on again, even as the giants fell fully to battle against the centaurs and the vehicle doors sprang open, disgorging terrified Muggles and their clattering, forgotten cameras.

The fiendfyre raged along the Quidditch pitch, barely missing it but engulfing the Slytherin grandstand, which was already reduced to a mere blackened skeleton, roaring with flame. Running hard beneath the seething light, Rose led the troupe toward the equipment shed, which sizzled and smoked from its own proximity to the fire. Furnace heat swarmed across the pitch, turning the air into writhing shimmers and baking the sweat on James' brow.

In the near distance, James noticed a flailing, writhing mass, boiling with fiendfyre. His stomach fell as he realized that it was the Whomping Willow. Sparks arose in swirling rafters as it heaved its flaming limbs, its leaves glowing like coals as they burned away, transformed to swarming cinders.

He tore his eyes away, grimly deciding not to point out the terrible sight to the others.

Rose reached for the equipment shed's door handle, and then jerked her hand back in pain.

"Hot!" she gasped, cradling her burnt fingers.

Scorpius raised his arm, his wand already jutting from his fist.

"*Convulsis!*" he shouted, and the blast of light struck the door, bashing it open. The inside was dark, much deeper than the tiny shed itself. Cool air wafted blissfully out of it, rising from a rank of stone steps.

Scorpius led the way, running down into the subterranean corridor below.

James gulped as he followed. Everything felt out of control. He didn't know what he intended to do. He didn't know where Petra was,

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or even if she was still alive. Chaos seemed to have fallen over the entire world, throwing every imaginable obstacle and distraction in his way to stop him.

His side ached as he ran into the cool, eerily quiet darkness. And then light bloomed ahead as Scorpius reached the passage exit. The four clambered out, pushing around the statue of Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive, and into the glow of torchlight and a perfectly prosaic Hogwarts corridor. No one was in sight, and yet voices could be heard echoing distantly, shouting with alarm and urgency.

The school had not been vacated, it seemed. That's why Merlin was protecting it. But even he could not hold off the centaurs much longer.

As if on command, a huge boom shook the castle, raining grit from the ceiling and shattering a nearby window. The centaurs were attacking through the fiendfyre, though James couldn't guess how.

"It's all a distraction," he said, turning to Zane, Rose, and Scorpius. "I don't know how or why, but we still have just one job, and that's to find Petra and warn her! If Odin-Vann and Judith get to her first...!"

"But how!?" Rose cried, stamping her foot in frustration. "We don't even know where she is!"

James drew a resolute breath and glanced at Scorpius. "We have to find Merlin," he said firmly. "He has Petra's father's brooch. Petra still thinks she's leaving our world forever, and she won't go anywhere without it. If we find Merlin, we'll find Petra."

"If we're not too late already," Zane shrugged and nodded. "And all of this is just the opening act for the apocalypse."

Drawing his wand and holding it at the ready, James turned and ran down the corridor, heading in the direction of the main stairs and the headmaster's office. As he turned at the nearest junction, he nearly bowled into George Muldoon, the Ravenclaw prefect. The tall boy caught James by the shoulder, a look of terror and alarm bulging in his eyes before he recognized him.

"Potter!" he exclaimed in consternation, "what are you doing down here! We're in lockdown state! Everyone to their common rooms! And you, Weasley and Malfoy! And...!" he boggled at Zane. "And just who the ruddy hell are you?"

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“Zane Walker,” Zane said agreeably. “Normally I shake hands, but we’re in a pretty big hurry. Next time, maybe? If there *is* a next time?”

With that, the troupe ran on again, leaving Muldoon to turn and boggle after them, frantically calling their names.

They reached the stairs and turned to pelt up them, swinging around the ballustrade for support. Another boom shook the castle and the Heracles window cracked, disintegrated, and fell away in a rain of colorful shards.

“That’s not magic,” Scorpius gasped, boggling at the broken window. “Something is hitting us!”

“The giants,” Zane nodded. “They’re trying to get in any way they can. Not to attack, but to get away from the centaurs.”

“Go!” James pressed, turning past the landing and continuing up the stairs. “No time for anything else!”

They reached the third floor, James in the lead. He turned down Gargoyle corridor, aiming for the spiral staircase at the end.

Another boom sounded, this one from directly next to James, and a pillar keeled toward him, breaking into heavy chunks. James ducked and stumbled, barely avoiding the collapsing stonework. Dust blew past him as part of the ceiling came down with the pillar, choking the air and snuffing the nearest lantern.

James scrambled to his feet and looked back, squinting into the gritty dark. He was cut off from Scorpius, Rose, and Zane by the caved-in ceiling.

“She knew that you would come,” a man’s voice said from behind him. “I doubted her. But she knew.”

James wheeled back, so fast that he nearly lost his footing, and jerked his wand wildly upright.

“Expeliarmus!” he gasped, and a bolt of light shot from his wand. It was snuffed immediately, reduced to a swarm of dying sparks.

“Judith predicted that you would race the storm back. I was to wait for you here, and be ready when you came. I shouldn’t have doubted her. She’s rarely wrong.”

A dark figure stepped forward out of the shadows, coming between James and the spiral stairs of the headmaster’s office. Even

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before his face was visible, James recognized the gaunt shape of Donofrio Odin-Vann, his wand held almost lazily, half-raised.

"Stupefy!" James cried, raising his wand up in his hand again.

The red spell flashed and snuffed itself barely a foot from his wand. Odin-Vann was laughing to himself, his upturned wand streaming a faint haze of purple.

"You know you cannot defeat me," he chided. "Best not even to try."

"Where's Petra?" James demanded, staring down the length of his trembling wand. He gulped. "Is she still alive?"

"Petra isn't your concern, James," Odin-Vann answered, stepping forward slowly. "She never was. You like to think she feels something for you, don't you? And yet it's her that intended to leave you forever. That must gall you. Does it gall you, James?"

James lowered his wand slowly in defeat. And then jerked it up again and cried, "Expulso!"

The spell leapt across the distance between them, and exploded against the shimmering shield charm that sprang, unbidden, from Odin-Vann's raised wand. He stepped forward again, closing the distance between them.

James backed up a step. His heel crunched on broken grit. "Are you planning to kill me?"

"I don't need to kill you," Odin-Vann answered with a light shrug. "The storm will kill you. It will follow you wherever you go. And if somehow you manage to stay ahead of it, well..." he sighed and shook his head. "This world only has a few hours left anyway."

"Why are you doing this?" James demanded, lowering his wand again, this time all the way. "I mean, I understand being bullied around and all. Revenge makes sense, even if you seem to have gone pretty mental with it. But why destroy the whole world?"

"Ah, but this is no longer my world, James," the young man replied breezily. "With Judith's help, we can create an all new world. One crafted in our own image. We have the key. And the key is our very own Petra Morganstern. She will open the way for us. And then we will throw away the key forever. No backsies." He tittered.

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James retreated another step. He chilled under the force of Odin-Vann's madness, and yet a tiny surge of hope fanned out in his veins. Petra was still alive. If only he could find her...

"Relashiol!" he shouted, stabbing his wand up again and firing with lightning speed.

Odin-Vann's arm jerked up from the shoulder, following the force of his wand, and a bolt of green flashed, snuffing James' spell in mid-air. He was laughing again, moving steadily closer.

"Petrificus Totalis!" James cried, putting all of the force he could muster into the spell. "Levicorpus! Incarcerous! *Convulsis!*"

Each spell exploded and obliterated bare inches from his wand as Odin-Vann's jerked in his upraised hand, firing the prescribed counter-jinxes of its own accord.

"You really don't know when to quit, do you?" the young professor laughed delightedly. "There's that arrogance that I've come to so loathe in people like you. The assurance that somehow, some way, you must win. That *you* are the good one. That *you* are *right*. It's truly unbearable, you know. But it's entertaining, at least."

James strained forward with his wand, now only ten feet from the approaching professor. He drew breath to call his next spell, resolving to resort to unforgivable curses out of pure desperation, when a series of footsteps suddenly sounded from behind Odin-Vann, clambering down the spiral stairs of the headmaster's office. They were heavy, and yet James instinctively knew by the sound that they were not Merlin's.

"James!" the figure's voice called in surprise, clambering to a stop at the base of the steps.

It was Ralph.

Odin-Vann's left hand shot up and back, fisted on a second wand. "Stay, Mr. Dolohov," he ordered, his eyes not flinching from James. "There is no need for you to share Mr. Potter's fate."

"That's a laugh," Ralph scoffed in a brittle voice. "Like any of us are going to survive this night! I've been waiting for the headmaster for almost an hour, but it doesn't look like he's coming back at all. Without him, we're pretty much done for."

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As he spoke, Ralph raised his wand and fired a nonverbal spell at Odin-Vann. It was deep blue, arcing like electricity.

Odin-Vann's left hand twitched, pulled his arm up, and fired the counter-spell, obliterating Ralph's attack.

The professor smiled at James, one wand pointed back at Ralph, the other leveled at James' chest. "Crucio," he said, almost conversationally.

James flinched, but the spell wasn't aimed at him. From Odin-Vann's second wand, a belt of searing green struck Ralph and drove him back against the stairs, where he crashed heavily, half across the steps, jerking in agony. He gasped and tried to scream, but his chest locked and his teeth clenched, reducing his cry to a strained, desperate groan.

"I meant to thank you, Mr. Dolohov," Odin-Vann said over the crackle of his spell. "You found the one potential flaw in my wand. Nonverbal spells. Thanks to you, I have been able to calibrate and overcome even that."

"Stop it!" James shouted, raising his own wand again. And then, before he could reconsider it, he repeated Odin-Vann's spell: "*Crucio!*"

He had never attempted an unforgiveable curse, even on a practice dummy. The green bolt that fired from his wand was weak, frayed, without focus. Odin-Vann's right arm flicked up with the force of his wand and the counter-spell fired, easily extinguishing James' curse between them.

Ralph rolled and tumbled off the steps to the floor, still smothered in the grip of Odin-Vann's *Cruciatis* spell. He gasped and groaned, and James thought he was trying to form words, even through the blinding haze of pain.

"NNNnn-nuh... nnnNIGHT!" He forced the word through helplessly gritted teeth.

Odin-Vann bared his own teeth at James and intensified his spell. It pulsed lime green and Ralph screamed.

"Stop!" James shouted, his own wand still pointed at Odin-Vann helplessly. It was no use. "You'll kill him!"

"*Everybody* dies," Odin-Vann said with sudden, grinning ferocity. "Let's just hope that they *lived* while they had the chance! I admit, I have my doubts!"

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Ralph writhed and arched his back on the floor. He gasped a whistling breath and strained again, struggling to speak.

“Nuh... nnnNIGHT... Quh-QUIDDITCH!”

James frowned in terrified confusion, his fist aching on his useless, outstretched wand. What could Ralph possibly mean? Was he going mad with pain? Why in the world would he spend his last, desperate words talking about something as inane and stupid as Night Quidditch?

The Cruciatus curse lanced into him, boiled over him, enveloped the big boy in unspeakable, maddening pain.

And then, somehow, James understood. His mouth dropped open as the realization washed over him. His mind raced, searched for exactly the right option, the one final gambit that would either turn the tables or doom them all. Resolved, he stabbed forward with his wand one last time.

“Osclauditis!” he shouted.

The spell was a lance of white. It struck Odin-Vann’s right shoulder, and his arm snapped rigid, the elbow locking straight.

His eyes shot wide with shock. Jerkily, he looked down at his right arm, and the wand in his hand, now pointed firmly and helplessly at the floor. It hadn’t fired the counter jinx.

There *was* no counter jinx. Not for game magic. The bonefuse hex could only be dodged, never countered.

The Cruciatus curse extinguished from Odin-Vann’s left-hand wand as the professor’s concentration broke.

“How—!” he began, raising his eyes back to James, but James fired again.

“Novistenaci!”

The fingers of Odin-Vann’s left hand spasmed with the blast of the Knuckler hex. The secondary wand they had been holding clattered to the floor.

“How are you *doing* this!?” Odin-Vann demanded, his face turning furious.

“Game magic,” James answered, narrowing his eyes, “doesn’t appear in the Caster’s Lexicon.”

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Odin-Vann roared with rage. He lowered his head and charged, aiming to ram James physically, to tackle him back onto the ruined wall behind him.

*"Expeliarmus!"*

This spell did not come from James, but from Ralph. James saw his friend still sprawled on the floor before the headmaster's stairs, but with his head now raised, his wand outstretched and shaking weakly.

The wand in Odin-Vann's right hand jerked up to deflect Ralph's spell. The professor's shoulder and elbow, however, were still locked rigid by the bonefuse hex. With a terrible, grating snap the bones broke, wrenched upwards by the force of the enchanted wand as it performed its duty.

The professor screamed and collapsed, even as his wand fired the counter jinx, snuffing Ralph's disarming spell. His broken arm went limp again and he forced his fingers loose, dropping the wand before Ralph could coax it into action again. He cradled his broken arm against his body and faltered to the floor, moaning pathetically.

Ralph staggered to his feet and braced himself against the headmaster's stairs.

James lunged forward and grabbed both of the professor's dropped wands. With a decisive twist, he broke both wands at once and threw down the pieces. They clattered senselessly.

"That was dead brilliant thinking, Ralph!" James exclaimed as he ran to help his friend. "Are you all right?"

"Ungh," Ralph moaned and clutched his head. "I don't think I'll ever be all right again. Sincerely."

"Everything's gone completely upside down," James declared, "I'm sorry, Ralph. You were right all along about Odin-Vann."

"You think?" Ralph wheezed, and laughed feebly.

"Have you seen Petra?" James asked earnestly. "Finding her is our only chance. Odin-Vann and Judith mean to kill her and end everything. He has some sort of delusion about becoming Judith's new host and starting an all new version of our destiny."

"He *can't* kill Petra," Ralph shook his head, finally standing up straight. "She has a Horcrux. He knows that better than anyone. And how can he start any new destinies? The Loom is destroyed."

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"He's the one that destroyed it," James nodded darkly. "But no matter what, Petra is the key to everything. I thought she might have come here, to Merlin, looking for her father's brooch."

"Merlin's been a little busy," Ralph shrugged and nodded toward a nearby window. "What with the whole world coming down on the castle like a plague. Centaurs, Merpeople, Muggle explorers and news people. I was looking for him myself, to finally tell him everything we know. He's here *somewhere*. Just not in his office."

James' face hardened and he raised his wand again. He turned back to the decimated corridor and trotted to where Odin-Vann lay, his arm broken and his wands destroyed.

Only the professor was no longer there.

"He disapparated or something," Ralph said angrily, coming alongside and glancing around. "Had to have."

"Or *she* took him," James muttered. "Judith. She needs him. He's to be her new host. Or her pet human. Either way, he's essential to whatever her plan is."

The castle shook again, quaked violently with a sustained shock, but this time the violence was accompanied by a gust of wintry, ice-flecked air. It whistled through the broken wall and streamed through James' and Ralph's hair.

James' eyes widened. He glanced at Ralph.

"Petra?" they both said in unison.

"We have to apparate!" James added breathlessly. "The entrance hall!"

Ralph nodded and swallowed hard. James could see that his friend was nervous about testing his apparating skills under such conditions.

James gave him a bracing grip on the shoulder. "You know the entrance hall as well as you know your own house. You've been there a thousand times. You can do this, Ralph. On three!"

Ralph nodded, firming his jaw. "On three."

"One..." James said.

"Two..." they both said together, gripping their wands in preparation for whatever they would find waiting for them.

"*Three!*"



The world snapped away, whirled wildly, and reasserted itself with a shock of speed and noise. James' feet struck the stone floor of the entrance hall and something immediately bounced off his head. He blinked, stumbled backwards, and raised a hand to his brow, probing to see if he was injured.

A muffin rolled at his feet. It appeared to be blueberry.

“Elf work is for elves!” a chorus of tiny, angry voices cried, and more muffins sailed through the air. They pelted the walls, bounced from portraits, pattered and rolled down the staircase steps.

“We have *quite* enough to handle at the moment without your little elven uprising!” a shrill voice exclaimed. James turned to see Professor McGonagall near the stairs, her wand raised warningly. A line of other teachers stood with her, looking variously confused and impatiently harried. “I will say this only once more!” McGonagall shouted. “*All* of you, back to the kitchens for your own safety!”

“Safety is not our concern!” a tiny voice called back. James turned to see Piggen, his face pained but resolved. “Without service for all of our kind worldwide, death is a preferred option!” Turning to the line of elves behind him, he yelled, “Muffins away!”

Another barrage of baked goods streamed through the air.

Dimly, James sensed Ralph pulling on his elbow, dragging him out of the space between the professors and the elves. Zane, Rose, and Scorpius huddled in the shadow of the stairs, their eyes wild.

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“James!” Rose gasped, grabbing his other arm and pulling him into the nominal protection of the balustrade. “What happened?”

“I saw Odin-Vann,” James answered as briefly as he could. “But not Petra. She’s got to be nearby. We felt her magic at work.”

“We felt it, too,” Zane said, and pointed to the closed doors of the great hall. “From in there. Sounds like a war-zone!”

James made to break away from the group, to run across the muffin-littered floor toward the great hall, when the main entrance doors blasted inward next to him, breaking from their hinges, swinging and falling away before a concussive shock. One of the falling doors barely missed James as it slammed down, throwing up a cloud of stinging grit. Light glared and the throttle of an engine roared. The gunmetal-grey off-road vehicle plowed into the entrance hall, bouncing over the broken doors. Its windscreen was smashed to a cloud of cracks and its front end was mangled almost unrecognizable, singed black and smoking. Only one of the headlamps still worked, stabbing its glare up at the staircase.

“Attack!” Piggen cried shrilly, and a barrage of biscuits, rolls, scones, and even pots and pans arced toward the vehicle, bouncing and clanging from its blackened and steaming bonnet.

“They drove their blasted vehicle through the fiendfyre boundary,” McGonagall announced. “We’re breached! Hogwarts is breached!”

The vehicle’s doors sprang open and people began to tumble out, running in all directions, their faces wild with terror.

From the darkness beyond the smashed-in entrance, shadows moved. The clatter of hooves approached. Voices bellowed and shouted.

One of the Muggles did not run away. He stumbled into the centre of the entrance hall, his figure illuminated brilliantly by the vehicle’s headlamp. He was thin and tall, with angular features and sleek dark hair, now mussed and wild. James recognized him immediately. It was the rogue Muggle reporter from his first year, Martin Prescott.

“I knew it!” Prescott shouted hoarsely, triumphantly. He balled his fists, raising them into the air. “*I knew* it wasn’t a dream! I was here! *I was here!*”

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McGonagall rolled her eyes impatiently and stunned him with her wand. Prescott tumbled to the floor still grinning, his hands still fisted in victory.

"Protego Maxima!" McGonagall called next, striding past the smoking vehicle and aiming for the door. A burst of blue light formed a shield. Behind her, Professors Shert, Votary, and Heretofore surged forward and added their strength to the charm, defending against the approaching centaurs.

The castle boomed again. The ceiling of the entrance hall cracked along its entire length. Broken plaster and chunks of masonry rained down. Portraits tilted and fell from the walls. Windows broke and shattered all around.

"Potter!" One of the portraits commanded in a steely voice.

James turned to see a painting of a very ugly farmer standing in a field of blooming Spynuswort. The farmer's face was vaguely recognizable beneath his wide-brimmed hat.

"Your brother is not in the castle," the painted figure said quickly. "Every other student is accounted for except him."

"Albus?" James asked, his mind spinning.

"Albus Severus, my namesake," the disguised portrait of Snape said. "And our names are not all that we have in common. His loyalties are divided. You must find him."

James shook his head. "No, it's Petra I have to find! She's here, in the Great Hall! I have to warn her!"

"*No!*" Snape insisted, his eyes blazing from the painting. "For once in your insipid, reckless little lives would one of you Potters *listen* to me!? The headmaster has divined the truth! Odin-Vann, whom you were lucky enough to best, was the Architect. But your brother is the *Ransom!* Without him, their plan fails! Find him right now, Potter! This is not about his safety, but the balance of worlds!"

James was shaking his head, barely listening now. Another deep shudder shook the floor and broke chunks from the ceiling. The Great Hall doors wrenched open as a blast of icy wind and furious light exploded through them.

James forgot about the portrait of Snape. He broke away from the wall, angled around the smoking vehicle, ducked behind the

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defending teachers, leapt the unconscious figure of Martin Prescott, and pushed through the crack of the huge wooden doors.

The Great Hall beyond was dark, creaking, full of motion, a wrecked shamble of shocking destruction.

Every window was broken, jagged with shards of glass and bent metalwork. The ceiling was laced with cracks and missing huge chunks, its enchantment flickering and fading, showing mere fractures of marching storm clouds and approaching lightning. The floating candles spun and bounced from the walls, many broken, most with their flames extinguished, streaming ribbons of grey smoke.

The tables were forced against the walls, wrecked and smashed together.

The rose window was intact, but flickering with fire and laced with cracks.

In the centre of the floor, Merlin and Petra faced each other, each breathing hard, each staring at the other with furious intensity. Merlin's staff was raised in his right hand, its runes pulsing with green light. Petra's hair was wild around her face, her left hand raised palm out, fingers splayed. It was clear that the duel between them had descended to brute attack, a stalemate between equal powers and level cunning.

"Go to your common room, James!" Merlin ordered, his voice cracked, strained.

"Obey the headmaster," Petra seethed, not taking her eyes from the sorcerer before her.

James clambered forward instead, getting between the two, raising both of his hands.

"Petra...!" he began.

The rose window exploded in a cloud of glass as something huge bashed through it, taking its pillars and supports with it. The head table broke under the weight of the object as it slammed down, and James dimly saw that it was a tree trunk, freshly torn from the ground, its roots still clotted with earth. A monstrous shape wielded the trunk, following it through the raining debris, head down and shoulders hunched. It was a giant, its eyes wild with fear, its hairy free hand fisted into a knuckly boulder, ready to fight.

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James suddenly wavered on his feet as a bolt of blinding blue shot over his shoulder, emanating from Petra's raised right hand. She had launched an attack, but not at the giant. Taking advantage of the distraction, she had aimed at the headmaster. The assault drove him backwards with violent force. He struck the dais hard enough to break it, cratering the ruin of the head table, right in the very shadow of the giant. The giant, panicked, reached for the prone human figure at its feet. Its massive hand closed over Merlin and pulled him from the destruction, along with a fistful of broken table.

Merlin's staff flashed and the giant recoiled, snapping its fingers open again. Merlin tumbled, fell, and arrested his momentum in mid-air, floating, his arms wide, his eyes glowing with fierce golden light.

But Petra was already advancing, redoubling her attack with merciless intensity. She launched another barrage even as the headmaster arrested his fall. The blast struck him in the chest and bashed him backwards, past the invading giant, through the ruin of the rose window, and into the flaming night beyond.

James' knees trembled as inexplicable weakness overtook him, making the world fade to grey. He remembered the same feeling when Petra and Merlin had battled in the World Between the Worlds. Somehow, James was like a battery in Petra's presence, holding a reserve of her power. She siphoned it from him through the invisible cord that connected them, just as he had siphoned it from her during the debacle of the Morrigan Web, right in this hall, and years before that, when he had first conjured the cord of her power to save her very life.

He staggered in the smoky dark, his head spinning.

Petra strode forward purposefully, climbing the dais and raising one hand to the giant without even looking. The giant blinked, tottered, and crunched to its gigantic rump on the ruin of the table. Its head dipped to its chest and the huge creature snorted a massive, grating snore, even as its bare feet, as large and hard as crypt doors, slid forward, grating on broken glass.

"Petra!" James shouted, clambering forward in her wake. "Petra, wait!"

"I *can't* wait, James!" she exclaimed back at him, halting and glancing over her shoulder. "My time here is done! This world is in chaos, and it's *all my fault!* You can't stop me, James! No one can be

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allowed to stop me!" Her face was terrible in the darkness, illuminated only by the writhing fiendfyre beyond the destroyed window. But her eyes shimmered, and James saw that there were tears in them. She was afraid, and she was driven by guilt, and she didn't want to leave, and she knew that she had no other choice.

"Don't follow me, James!" she demanded, firming her gaze, her voice hoarse and desperate. "I can't be responsible for what happens to you if you do!"

With that, she turned swiftly, leaving him behind and striding out through the broken window, where she was obscured by a pall of smoke.

James struggled over the broken table, his feet slipping on broken glass and destroyed stonework. When he finally climbed over the giant's feet and the ledge of the decimated window, he could see nothing but smoking lawn and roaring flames beyond. He jumped to the bushes, tumbled to the dry grass, and cast about in all directions, looking for any sign of Petra, squinting against the blinding fire.

A figure appeared in the wall of flames, striding forward through them, untouched. James stumbled toward the shape, shielding his own face from the heat. When the figure resolved, stepping out onto the lawn and marching back toward the broken window, James saw that it was Merlin.

The headmaster was bleeding and disheveled, his robes smoking, but his face was stony with resolve.

"All able-bodied warriors," he said as he walked, and his voice suddenly boomed, shaking the air and waking echoes all around. "Seal the students in their dormitories where they will be unharmed by those invading. Then, come to me in the entrance hall. The end of our world is upon us if we are not swift and committed to our duty. The villainess has escaped, but we shall track her. I shall summon those who can best assist us, Aurors and harriers alike. Come now and be ready to kill or be killed, for this is our final moment."

He made to pass James, not even looking down at him.

"Headmaster," James gasped, turning to catch up to him.  
*"Merlin!"*

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"She has captured the brooch," Merlin said in a low, grave voice. He stopped but did not turn back. "Nothing stands in her way now. The Architect has done his work. And the Ransom shall soon do his. You should have told me what you knew while it yet mattered."

James had no answer for that. He looked up at the headmaster's broad back, speechless, wounded, and afraid.

Merlin still did not look back at him. Instead, he tapped his staff to the ground and vanished in a crack of disappearance, leaving only stormy wind, lightning, and roaring fiendfyre in his wake.

A sense of deep, stunning loss filled James like lead. He stared at the space where Merlin had stood only moments before. His mind reeled, stymied with uncertainty.

Merlin would track Petra, he and any others prepared to accompany him. McGonagall would be among them, as would Debellow and Heretofore and any number of other teachers. Perhaps even his father and Viktor Krum and the rest of the Aurors and harriers, if they could be roused in time. James thought it very likely. They would leave the students locked and shielded in their dormitories, trusting that the centaurs would honour their word and not attack unless attacked first.

Merlin and those with him would abandon Hogwarts in pursuit of Petra, since she, they believed, was the cause and source of the chaos that had befallen the world. They would find her and go to war with her. She would kill them all, or they would succeed in cutting her down.

If Judith and Odin-Vann didn't succeed in that endeavor first.

It was just like James' dream, years earlier. They were coming to destroy Petra, and they wouldn't waste time on words.

And with that, a sense of preternatural calm settled over James. Because he knew exactly what he had to do. After all, he had already done it, in a manner of speaking. He had lived it once already, five years earlier, in that strange and prophetic vision.

He closed his eyes and imagined it, summoned every recollection of that long-ago dream. He remembered a freshly dug grave. He remembered Albus offering the young woman, Petra, his wand. It was necessary, James now understood. For Petra no longer had a wand of her own, having broken and abandoned hers years earlier. Sorceresses

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used their bare hands to perform magic. Unless, that was, they needed to cast a particularly unique spell that relied on a wand.

A spell like the Dark Mark.

Because Petra had stopped resisting the evil of the Bloodline. She was channeling it, using it, tapping into the conviction and resolve that only the last shred of Voldemort could provide. And now, tonight, she would finally embrace it. She would fire the Dark Mark into the sky over the cemetery—was probably doing so at this very moment, announcing her final, damning choice.

Whatever terrible evil that such a choice entailed.

James squeezed his eyes shut tighter. He envisioned the cemetery; his grandparents' leaning headstones; the freshly dug grave like a blot of ink under the stormy dark. He focused, firmed his grip on his wand, drew a deep breath, held it...

And flexed the mental muscle of disapparation.

With a hard crack, he vanished, just as Merlin had done moments before.

Neither would return to the same Hogwarts ever again.



## 24. THE BLOOD OF DEAREST LOVE

Somehow, amazingly, James sensed the presence of the Dark Mark in the split-instant even before he reapparated. The spell was an emerald chill in the void, like the depths of a moss-choked well. He passed through it somehow as the world resolved around him, depositing him onto a wind-scoured hilltop, beneath the hulking sprawl of a dead tree. He faltered and fell, never yet having apparated such a distance, and unaccustomed to the strange inertia of it. Dry grass collected him, blew and whipped about his face, but he scrambled to his hands and knees immediately, disoriented yet breathless with panic. There was no time left. It was probably too late already. He looked around wildly, trying to make sense of his surroundings.

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The moon still glowed here, pale yellow on the horizon, unobstructed by the imminent storm. Next to James, the dead tree reached out of the earth, gnarled and twisted, like a giant arthritic hand with a hundred fingers.

Beyond this, just visible in the pale moonlight, sprawled a very old cemetery. Its headstones leaned like rotten teeth, embraced within the confines of a weed-choked iron fence. A decorative arch marked the entrance. Above this, still rising against the approaching storm clouds, was the ghastly huge skull, phantasmic and terrible, of the Dark Mark. Its jaw was unhinged, open in a silent scream. From the gaping mouth, a spectral snake poured out, uncoiling, opening its own fanged jaws in a vicious hiss.

“No!” James barked, but his voice came as barely a dry husk, lost in the buffet of the wind. Using the ancient dead tree for support, he blundered to his feet and pelted down the hill, under the crooked arch of the gate, and into the ranks and rows of old headstones.

He heard voices, indistinct on the wind. And then he saw them.

Albus and Petra stood on a low rise, in the corner of the marching fence, their shoulders and heads illuminated from above by the eerie green light of the Dark Mark. Near their feet was an open grave, next to a neat pile of fresh earth.

“Stop!” James shouted desperately, flinging out a hand to them, forgetting that his wand was still gripped in it. It would look like a pose of attack. “Both of you! I know what you think you have to do, but it doesn’t have to be this way! Albus, don’t let it end like this!”

Albus saw him, heard him, but ignored his brother. Even from this distance, James could see the expression of scowling resolve on his brother’s face—the expression that he’d worn almost exclusively over the past few weeks, silent and sullen as he haunted the Slytherin table in the Great Hall and the edges of the corridors, lost in his own dark musings. It wasn’t simply that he was brokenhearted about his break up with Chance Jackson. James saw it now for what it was. His brother had been steeling himself up for something, preparing for some horrible duty that he believed was his alone to bear. Had Odin-Vann told him even before he’d told Petra? Had he exploited Albus’ natural inner darkness, preyed on his teenage melodrama?

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Either way, Albus was the Ransom, ready to give up everything for the sake of the whole world.

Across the shadowy, wind-blown distance, Albus turned aside to Petra. She had his wand in her hand. Slowly, reluctantly, she leveled it at him.

"Do it," Albus insisted calmly, his voice thin and small, carried on the wind.

"No!" James exclaimed, as loudly as he could. He ran forward, but stopped again as Petra looked at him, her eyes bright and intent, but clouded with blind determination. She would indeed do it, James saw. He halted again, holding both hands up now, raised in a warning gesture. "The rest are coming!" he heard himself cry out, "and they won't waste time on words! We only have a few seconds!" He switched his gaze to his brother. "Albus, don't be a fool!"

"I'm sorry," Albus muttered. He wasn't speaking to James, or even to Petra. He almost seemed to be speaking to the nearby graves, as if he was disappointing them somehow. He turned and nodded his assent to Petra.

"*Petra!*" James yelled frantically, and started forward again, coming with thirty feet of the pair. The storm was blowing in with eerie speed, reaching to blot the moon behind a great, creeping wing of clouds. Wind whipped the grass and rattled the tree branches. "*Please don't! This isn't who you really are!*"

"You're right, James," Petra said, her eyes going cold, dead with resolve as she turned to him. Along with her gaze, the wand in her hand swiveled as well, swinging away from Albus, coming around to point at him instead, moving with slow, unmistakable purpose. "As of tonight, I will be known by an entirely different name. I am Morgan now. And since you came after all, despite all of my warnings, I'm afraid it must be you who will die for my cause. Brave Albus was your willing substitute, your surrogate. For his blood is your blood, and therefore able to satisfy the dark magic of the dimensional portal. But now... *you* are here. And I can't deny what fate demands." Tears fell down her cheeks, but her gaze didn't waver, nor did the wand in her hand. "I'm so, so sorry, my love."

"*No!*" Albus cried, and lunged with both hands, even as Petra's face crumpled and the wand in her hand exploded with vivid green light.

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James felt the power of the spell as it blasted toward him, illuminating the graveyard, spraying inky shadows in a radius behind each and every headstone, every individual blade of grass. The killing curse arced across the distance between them and James watched it come, as if time had become plastic, allowing him to stretch his final instant into patient infinity. He saw Albus' hands on Petra's wrist, saw the tears wet on her cheeks, her mouth pulled into a frown of wretchedness, her eyes squeezed shut, unable to watch.

*And James thought, it's OK. I'm glad to be the one to serve Petra. Even if it means my death. Even if she's wrong, and killing me won't make a dimensional portal, as Odin-Vann surely told her. At least it means that Albus doesn't have to be the Ransom. She tried to save me. She loved me by sending me away. But it was always supposed to be me here in the graveyard with her, not Albus. If dying is serving her, even if it's based on a lie and a mistake... then I'm glad to do it.*

The killing spell struck and exploded. James felt a spray of grit pepper his face and hair, faltered backward a step with the force of the blast, and then felt himself fall backwards, almost gently, landing in a drift of heather and weeds. And yet, even as he stared up at the terrible glow of the Dark Mark, he sensed that he was not dead, or even particularly hurt. Dazed, he pushed up onto his elbows and raised his head. Directly ahead of him, a headstone tottered, crumbled, and fell apart, still fuming with green sparks. Albus' intervention had been just enough to spoil Petra's aim, sending the killing curse into the gravestone instead of James' chest.

And then, in the breathless silence that followed, chaos broke out all around the cemetery.

A sequence of piercing cracks echoed from every direction and figures apparated into place, surrounding the cemetery and moving immediately into defensive positions. They hunkered behind trees, crouched behind tombstones and mausoleums. There were six of them, and then ten, and then more than a dozen.

“Ware!” a deep voice, Merlin, exclaimed from the darkness near the dead tree. “A killing curse has been fired!”

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"Waste no time on Stunning," another voice commanded. James had a terrible intuition that this was his father. "But be sure at whom you aim! Innocent people may be present!"

A woman's voice cried, "I see her! Northeast corner!"

Spells exploded across the graveyard, illuminating it in deadly firework colours.

Albus reached for Petra, but she darted away from him, approaching James at a frantic run. He cringed away from her in sudden fear, but she dropped the wand as she came, running between sizzling bolts of light. As she reached him, she tumbled to her knees and fell upon him.

"You're alive!" she gasped, and moaned with fear, and hugged him to her.

"Yeah," he said weakly against her shoulder. "Sorry about that."

"No!" she said, and squeezed him harder. "I let Albus ruin my aim. I didn't have the strength to do what I must! I've failed everything! It's all my fault!"

He hugged her back, and she seemed to go limp in his arms, either with relief or hopelessness. He supposed, under the circumstances, that they might both be the same thing.

"Odin-Vann lied to you," he said—or at least began to. Halfway through the sentence, a streak of orange light struck a nearby obelisk, destroying its base. It crumbled, broke away, and began to topple. James saw its looming shadow in the instant before it struck. With every ounce of his strength, he pushed Petra, throwing her away from him and out of the obelisk's path. It struck him on the shoulder, crushed him down beneath it so hard and fast that he barely even felt it. Darkness plummeted over him, but not the darkness of unconsciousness. He was mashed into the weeds and heather, face down, his upper body suddenly pinned beneath a monstrous, cold weight, as if a giant was standing on his shoulders.

"James!" Petra screamed, her voice brittle with horror and fear, but the sound was distant, strangely unimportant, like a thing heard on a wireless in someone else's house. Still, some deep, buried part of James' mind hated to hear Petra upset. He tried to call out to her, to tell her it was all right. But no breath came to his crushed lungs. When he

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opened his mouth, only blood came out, hot and sticky, tasting like copper.

He knew, with only vague interest, that he was probably dying, crushed under the fallen monument.

But then, blissfully and suddenly, the weight was gone. His chest spasmed, gasped for air, and pain came instead. He felt the splintering grind of his ribs, sensed tearing as the broken bones punctured things deep inside his body.

“*No!*” Petra screamed, this time with low, furious emphasis.

There was a rush of terrible wind. A sound like shattering crockery. And then, a series of whumps, thumps, crashes, and distant cries.

“Minerva!” a voice bellowed.

“Hardcastle is down!” a woman called breathlessly.

“Fall back!” His father’s voice, panicked and desperate.

James felt himself lifted from the ground, gently, and yet another pall of pain wracked his body.

Blearily, he sensed movement all around. Large, heavy objects whirled around the cemetery like a cyclone, bashing through trees, clanging from the broken fence. They were tombstones, monuments, mausoleum doors, iron gates, all wrenched loose and powered by Petra’s vengeful will, forming an impassable maelstrom.

And yet her eyes were soft, pained with regret as she looked up at him. James realized that he, like the tombstones and monuments, was also being held aloft in Petra’s sorceress grip, but tenderly, as if gravity had simply forgotten about him for a moment. Dimly, he realized that blood was wetting his shirt, cooling fast in the stormy wind.

Petra studied him, seemed to look into him. And then, using the powers that were unique to her, she began to mend him. He felt a tingle and then gasped, more in surprise than pain, as his ribs shifted back into place, releasing his lungs from their broken death-clench. The ruptures deep inside his body first went numb, and then warmed as the pain faded away. Tentatively, he took a breath. His chest expanded, drew air, and his head swam.

“That was stupid of you, James,” Petra said quietly, affectionately, as she settled him back to the grass, coming to meet him.

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The cyclone of headstones still swam all around, rushing and surreal. "I could have withstood the falling stone, and protected you from it."

"I didn't think about it," James whispered, buckling slightly as gravity collected him again. "I just acted."

"That's you in a nutshell," she said, and smiled wanly.

She reached out to him, placed a hand on his chest. His shirt was still soaked with blood. It stuck to her palm greased it with red.

James looked down at her. Her own face was bloody. It was a shocking sight to see. Something, probably a hunk of the falling obelisk, had struck her temple and cut it. Blood trickled from beneath her hair, down the line of her cheek, and dripped from her chin. Falling stone might not be capable of killing her, but she could still be cut.

She was still just human enough to bleed.

He cupped her cheek, felt the warm wetness of her blood against his fingers, tried to wipe it away from her skin.

She took her hand from his chest and looked down at it. Her palm was slick and tacky with his blood. With her head still lowered, she looked up at him with her eyes. There was a disconcerting, calculating look in her gaze, as if she wanted to say something, but didn't quite dare.

An object glimmered mildly on the lapel of her jumper. James glanced down at it, saw that it was her father's brooch, the identical twin of the one that had fallen into the ocean four years earlier.

Without a word, Petra raised her head. Keeping her bloody right hand raised, she turned, as if facing the incoming storm.

*"Claudicatis in aeternum mortiferum!"* Her voice was terrible, deafening as thunder, yet clear as birdsong.

Lightning cleaved the sky. It lanced through the skull of the Dark Mark, brightening it, and struck the earth immediately before Petra. The blast propelled James backward, toppling him again into the mass of heather and weeds. The lightning did not strike and vanish, however, but remained locked in place, caged between earth and sky, rioting within itself, crackling with a voice of doom.

"Petra!" James shouted, but his voice was virtually inaudible beneath the noise.

She didn't hear him, or chose to ignore him if she did. But she did look back. Against the blinding, boiling glare, her face was a mere

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silhouette. Storm wind tore at her hair, flailed it about her face as she turned back to him one last time. She tried to smile. It was a sad, pathetic attempt. Her eyes sparkled with regret.

And then, with a shuddering breath and squared shoulders, she faced the magical portal that she had conjured, stepped forward, and walked into its violent glare. It swallowed her up with an explosion of blinding light and hurricane-force icy wind.

The blast flattened James, bowled away in every direction.

All around, the maelstrom of stone and iron fell away, crashing to the ground, bereft of its mistress.

"No," James said again, no longer shouting, barely whispering. He stared at the crackling, captured bolt of lightning, the magical portal, now empty. It hadn't vanished with Petra, but the Dark Mark above it had.

James scrambled to his feet, made to move forward into the bolt, to follow Petra, but a hand grabbed his shoulder. He didn't see whose it was and didn't care. He twisted to throw it off, his eyes still locked on the writhing fork of light.

"James!" a voice shouted, and the hand yanked him harder, jerking him backwards. Still James fought it, lashing out, struggling to bat the grasping hand away.

More hands gripped him, tugged him, wrestled him back.

"If you go into the portal without the sigils," the voice exclaimed breathlessly, "you'll be killed instantly! Stop fighting us, you great idiot!"

James finally blinked and turned, as if snapping out of a trance. He found himself looking into the face of his brother, Albus.

"She's gone," another voice said, this one female. James glanced aside, still stunned, and saw Rose holding onto his shoulder. Beside her was Ralph. Scorpius and Zane stood on Albus' other side, their eyes wide and haunted.

"What happened?" James asked in a dazed voice, sensing that somehow things were worse than even he knew.

Ralph swallowed hard. "Once we heard where everyone had gone, we followed. Rose side-along apparated with Zane. We ran into the graveyard and hit the ground when the spells started. The others

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retreated..." he said, and then shook his head. "And then, all of them..."

"They're gone," Zane said, his eyes bald with shock, as if he didn't quite believe it himself. "The flying stones took out some of them. Maybe they were just knocked out... maybe..."

"Dad!?" James asked, turning to Albus.

Albus shook his head. "I don't know. When you got hurt, Petra *snapped*. The whole place went berserk. And then, when she conjured the portal, she sent some sort of... *force* rushing out over the whole countryside in every direction. We were just inside the fence, hunkered down and hiding. But everybody outside the graveyard, they just... vanished!"

"Puff of smoke," Rose said, her voice small and terrified.

"It was a defensive thing," James said, looking from face to face. "She didn't know what she was doing!"

Scorpius met James' eyes, his face stolid. "I don't think Morganstern did it at all," he said with low emphasis. "And I *don't* think it stopped when it vanished her attackers."

James felt slowly chilled to the bone as the reality of Scorpius' words settled into place.

"It wasn't Petra's power that caused it," he whispered, turning back to the flashing, crackling lightning bolt. "It was... a sort of shockwave of finality. It started right here, the moment that she opened her portal. It was the last crashing footstep that brought the whole house of reality down."

"But that means," Rose said in a quavering voice, "the shockwave is still spreading, still swallowing up everything as it goes, extending over the whole earth!"

"Over the whole *universe*," Zane exhaled bleakly, looking up at the falling dark.

The storm still boiled above, thickening and groaning with thunder. But everything else beyond the graveyard was descending slowly into black, slipping away like things behind a velvet veil.

"Petra's plan didn't work," Rose slumped, horrorstruck.

"It was never *meant* to work," Ralph countered, anger tightening his voice.

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Albus shook his head. “But it *had* to!” he exclaimed, fear and frustration raising his voice. “She had all the elements! I didn’t think it would work without killing me or James, but his blood alone must have been enough!”

“*What elements?*” Scorpius asked, his eyes sharpening.

Rain began to fall all around, speckling the graves with fat, heavy drops. Wind scoured the weeds and grass, growing restless even as everything beyond the fence drifted into seamless dark. The lightning portal offered the only illumination, dimming by degrees with each passing second.

“The three sigils!” Albus cried over the growing wind, throwing up his hands. “Odin-Vann made Petra and I both memorize them so we wouldn’t forget! There was the token of generation, the key of an alternate world, and the blood of dearest love! We came here, dug up Petra’s grandmother’s grave and took a lock of her hair. *That* was the token of a previous generation. She had the brooch from Morgan’s original universe. That was the key from an alternate world. And then, well, she was *supposed* to kill me.”

Rose looked appalled. “You were willing to *die* for her portal?”

Zane boggled. “*You* were her dearest love?”

Albus flopped helplessly to a seat on a broken gravestone. “*James* is the one she loves, although I never could imagine why. She couldn’t bring herself to kill him, though, so I volunteered. She asked me to help, after all. A few weeks ago, Odin-Vann told me what that might mean. I wouldn’t do it for him. But for Petra....”

“Odin-Vann knew it was his plan all along,” Zane nodded dourly. “Even before the Archive was destroyed and he told Petra about this one last option.”

“I was close enough to be the final of the three sigils,” Albus shrugged, “being of the same blood as James. So yeah, I was willing to die in this world, for Petra, but not in any *forever* sort of way. I’m no martyr. Petra said that if she did her part right, we would get a sort of alternate destiny instead of this one. None of this bad stuff would have happened. I’d be alive in that other destiny, and we’d probably never even remember this version of events.”

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"So, when she got my blood on her hand," James wondered aloud, "she knew that it might be enough to open the dimensional portal. After all, if she hadn't healed me, I probably *would* be dead right now. She called the incantation, and it worked."

Zane gave a low whistle. "A one-way ride to the other side..."

"But why did this part need to happen at *all!*?" Rose moaned, her eyes wide and her mouth turned down in misery. "Our parents! The whole world! All breaking away into nothing! Whatever portal Petra opened and went into, it sure didn't change anything! Why even make her do it!"

"*Everything* Odin-Vann said was a lie!" James exclaimed, suddenly filled with a sort of bereft rage. "He just wanted her busy so he and Judith could work their plan behind her back! He probably forced her to conjure a portal into nothing just to end her!"

"No," Ralph suddenly said, his voice low. His eyes bulged in thought, and he reached out in the lowering dark, groping, grabbing onto James' arm. "No! He didn't lie about everything! At least... not about *one* thing!"

"But..." James blinked, turning aside to his friend. "You said... nothing Odin-Vann said could be trusted. And you were right. He was a liar and a traitor from the start."

Ralph was shaking his head in wonder, still staring at nothing, deep in thought. "There was one thing he *didn't* lie about. Because he didn't really mean to say it! He let it out without even thinking. And then, just as quickly, he covered it up. Don't you remember?" His eyes finally focused and he turned to James.

Urgently, Albus demanded, "Out with it, Dolohov."

"Rose," Ralph said, turning aside to her. "Yesterday when we all met up on the Gertrude, you asked Odin-Vann where Petra could go to accomplish her task, where destiny was still intact and her choices would still matter. Do you remember what he said?"

Rose frowned at him in the dark, her eyes wide and stricken.

"The past," James answered softly, realization dawning on him. "I remember. He let it slip, and then glossed over it, saying that he meant some place that Petra had once been to, someplace important to her. But that was just a cover up. Because the past is where he and Judith planned to go all along...!"

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Ralph nodded slowly, somberly. "He never *intended* for Petra to conjure a portal to Morgan's dimension. He meant to use her to conjure a portal through *time*. As a sorceress, she's the only one powerful enough to do it! Whatever he and Judith mean to do, whatever new destiny they intend to create, it has to be done back before destiny was shut down. When choices still mattered!"

"Before all of this happened," Rose said faintly.

"We have to follow her!" James cried, rousing and stepping toward the lightning portal again, even as it thinned, still fading.

"We *can't*!" Albus said, grabbing his brother's shirtsleeve again. "I already *told* you! Anyone who enters the portal without the three sigils is killed instantly! It's *dark magic!* It requires payment!"

"Here you go," Scorpius said, approaching and taking James' hand, dropping something onto his open palm.

James glanced down, his mind spinning, and saw a pair of old black spectacles resting on his hand. They were heavy, the lenses fogged with dust. He looked up at Scorpius again. The blonde boy shrugged and twirled his wand.

"Accio casket," he said simply. "I saw where this was headed and ran back to visit your grandparents' graves. They're right over there in the corner where these two started out." He tilted his head toward Albus. "Those are your dead grandfather's spectacles. I doubt they're your prescription, though."

Ralph glanced quickly from Scorpius, to Rose. "What about the other two sigils? A relic from some other dimension? Where we going to find something like that?"

"Holy hinkypunks...!" Zane suddenly announced, raising his eyebrows in an epiphany of inspiration. He glanced around at Ralph, then Zane, his eyes wild with wonder. "I never really got around to returning it to the museum in the Tower of Art after we used it last fall! I've just been carrying it around, too wary to leave it home alone, but too lazy to take care of it!" He dug in the pocket of his jeans and produced a largish, silvery object. James' mouth dropped open at the sight of it.

"The unicorn's horseshoe!" he gasped. "You've just been carrying it around in your *pocket* all this time?"

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"Horseshoes are good luck where I come from!" Zane shrugged and bulged his eyes, and spread his palms, one of which still held the miraculous horseshoe. "And for once procrastination is a good thing, right?!"

James stuffed his grandfather's spectacles into his pocket as Zane handed him the ancient silver shape. It was cold and very heavy in his left hand.

"But," he asked, still looking down at the gently glowing object, "what about the blood of dearest love?"

Rose reached and grabbed James' right hand where it hung at his side. She raised it, showing the drying smear of red that still pasted his fingers.

"Petra's blood!" she rasped, her eyes wild with amazement. "You touched her bleeding face! I saw you do it from my hiding place, right before she went through the portal!"

James looked at Petra's blood on his hand. It still glistened red wherever it hadn't already dried to a sticky maroon. Freshening drops of rain pattered down, wetting it again.

"You have the three sigils!" Albus called over the increasing roar of the storm, forcing James to look up into his face. "Only *you* can follow Petra through!"

"Go, James!" Zane said, pushing his friend forward. "Go stop them! Don't let them win!"

"Save Petra," Rose added breathlessly.

"Save bloody *everybody*," Scorpius countered.

Ralph gripped James by the shoulder. "You can do it, mate. This battle is all yours."

James nodded helplessly. "Just like the dryad said."

He turned to the lightning portal. It still crackled and writhed, captive between heaven and what remained of earth. But it was dimming, fading even as he watched, dying away with the rest of the world—with the rest of the known universe. The only thing that remained was the storm overhead. It condensed, descending into a roar that thickened the very air, lowering over James, seeking him relentlessly.

James drew a deep, shaking breath. With his dead grandfather's glasses in his pocket, the silver horseshoe in his left hand, and Petra's blood painting his right, he stepped forward.

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The lightning portal was thinning, yet somehow still blindingly bright. It's cursed light filled his eyes, blotted out the endless, hungry dark beyond.

He stepped forward, felt power prickle through his hair, caress his cheeks and shoulders like electric tentacles. He closed his eyes.

And then, suddenly, the portal enveloped him.

His next step took him out of the world, out of time, and into forever.



## 25. THE TIME BETWEEN THE TIMES

“Hurry it up, Petra, and don’t let Noah’s brother see you.”

It was Ted Lupin’s voice, young and blithe, untainted by worry.

The girl nodded, brushing past James as the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open to reveal the fire-lit glow of the common room. James began to follow her in when Ted threw an arm around his shoulder, turning him around and bringing him back out onto the landing.

“My dear James, you can’t imagine we’re going to let you toddle off to bed at such an early hour, do you? There are Gryffindor traditions to think about, for Merlin’s sake.”

“What?” James stammered. “It’s midnight. You know that, do you?”

“Commonly known in the Muggle world as ‘The Witching Hour,’” Ted said instructively. “A misnomer, of course, but ‘The Witching and Wizarding Pulling Tricks on Unsuspecting Muggle

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Country Folk Hour' is just a bit too long for anyone to remember. We like to call it, simply, 'Raising the Wocket'."

Ted was leading James back toward the stairs, along with three other Gryffindors. "The what?" James asked, trying to keep up.

"Boy doesn't know what the Wocket is," Ted said mournfully to the rest of the group. "And his dad's the owner of the famous Marauder's Map. Just think how much easier this would be if we could get our hands on *that* bit of skullduggery." Turning back to James, he said, "Let me introduce you to the rest of the Gremlins, a group you may indeed hope to join, depending on how things go tonight, of course." Ted stopped, turned and threw his arm wide, indicating the three others skulking along with them. "My number one, Noah Metzker, whose only flaw is his unwitting relationship to his fifth-year prefect brother."

Noah bowed curtly at the waist, grinning.

"Our treasurer," Ted continued, "if we ever manage to come across any coin, Sabrina Hildegard."

A pleasant faced girl with a spray of freckles and a quill stuck in her thick reddish hair nodded to James.

"Our scapegoat, should such services ever be required, young Damien Damascus."

Ted gripped the shoulder of a stout boy with heavy glasses and a pumpkin-like face who grimaced at him and growled.

"And finally, my alibi, my perfect foil, everyone's favorite teacher's favorite, Ms. Petra Morganstern."

Ted gestured affectionately to the girl who was just returning from the portrait hole, her long dark hair framing a face that James immediately memorized, recognizing straight away that she was soon to become the solar centre of his universe, although he barely knew how or why. She met his gaze and smiled, her eyes twinkling but deep with hidden secrets.

She was so young, so seemingly carefree. James had no idea what lay beneath that easy, pretty smile.

Except that he did.

Both of her parents were dead, her father at the hands of vengeful Azkaban guards, killed for dark secrets they insisted that he was

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keeping, her mother in childbirth, dying even as Petra's first cries met the world. Now, Petra lived with her grandfather and his hateful, vicious, Muggle wife, Phyllis, whose bullying even extended to her own mentally handicapped daughter, young Izzy Morganstern, whom Petra loved like a sister and protected as best she could.

"How is this happening?" James asked Petra as she moved to join the rest of the Gremlins.

Only they were alone now. The other Gremlins walked on into the past, their voices fading. The portrait of the Fat Lady drifted into shadow and the corridor vanished away into darkness, becoming a damp cavern, hot with pressure. A pool flickered nearby, illuminated from within by eerie green light. Petra was wearing a yellow dress now, almost impossibly frilly and stiff with layers. Her makeup was streaked and running with tears, although her eyes were clear, unhaunted.

"You followed me," she stated with a sort of weary, disapproving affection. "James, I really just don't know what to do with you."

He shrugged and moved next to her, looking around. "Where are we? Do you know?"

She glanced about, used the back of her hand to wipe a streak of mascara from her cheek. Only, as she did so, the Chamber of Secrets blurred, dimmed, and grew huge. The floor became the wooden planks of a dock. A woodland lake spread away toward a misty forested shore. The gazebo wasn't there. Or, it was, only long since fallen away, sunken to the dark depths.

"It's not a where," Petra said, turning alongside James and taking his hand, walking to the end of the dock with him. Together, they looked down toward the hidden, phantom shape below the waves. Petra wore a plain calico dress now, warmed by a pale blue hooded jumper. "I thought I was opening a portal to another dimension. But I see now that I was lied to. I understood it in the space between entering the portal and your joining me here. People say that hindsight is always clearer. Here, hindsight and foresight are the whole fabric of reality. It's pretty much impossible to be deceived here."

He sensed that she was right, and began to understand.

"We've both been to the World Between the Worlds," he said, squeezing her hand and looking aside at her. "This is like that, isn't it? It's the Time Between the Times."

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She nodded. The wound on her forehead was healed now, James saw, or perhaps had never yet happened. She looked both younger and older than he knew her. Probably, he appeared the same to her.

The lake faded away. In its place was a vast open space. There were neat benches arranged at intervals, and the suggestion of platforms, a sense of patient waiting, even though the space stood entirely empty. It was, James realized, a train station.

“King’s Cross,” Petra smiled, and stepped away from him. She was dressed differently again, but not in any way that James had ever seen her before. She wore a simple dress, form-fitting on top, loose and flowing at the bottom, the same powder blue as her former hooded jumper, but made of some soft, dully shimmering fabric, at once dense and light as it swished about her legs. Ivory pearls hung in a single strand around her neck. To James’ surprise, she had a diamond ring on her left hand. It was not huge or ostentatious, but neither was it cheap. It was inscribed on the inside with a phrase: *Amis et amoureux pour toujours*. James knew this as if he himself had caused the inscription—and the ring itself—to be there.

Petra had learned French at Alma Aleron, after all, and continued to love the language, even if she was not precisely fluent at it...

James looked down at himself. He was dressed differently as well—a white button-down shirt and a dark blazer, navy blue, Bigfoot house colour, yet somehow matching Petra’s dress, tone for tone. He was a little taller, a little older, as was she.

He moved to her with confidence, took her into his arms, and she came to him easily, laid her head on his shoulder. They stood that way for some time, resting together, holding each other as if it was the most natural thing in the world, saying nothing.

Finally, Petra drew a long sigh against him, stirred, and shuddered as she exhaled.

“We can’t stay here forever,” she said regretfully.

“I know,” James replied quietly, not yet letting her go. That moment would come soon enough.

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She raised her head and looked up at him, reading his eyes.  
“What is this, do you think?”

He shrugged a little. “A glimpse of what might have been...”

She nodded and looked around, then rested her cheek against his chest. He touched the top of her head with his chin, breathed in the scent of her hair. Muffled faintly, she said, “There’s not much sadder in the world than ‘what might have been’.”

It was James’ turn to sigh then.

The strangely empty world of King’s Cross Station was darker now. It had the effect of theatre lights dimming, quieting the crowd, subtly hinting that the final act was about to begin.

Still James did not let Petra go. She lowered her arms, found his hands, and laced her fingers into his. When she took a small step back and looked up at him, he wondered if they would kiss again. It was purely a wistful thought, however. They had already had their first and last kiss, the one to stand for all. He knew this. She, he could tell, was thinking the same thing. Her eyes dipped.

She let go of his hands and moved back another step.

The Station darkened from twilight to grey dusk, then dipped into patient midnight, drifting away all around them.

“It’s happening,” Petra said, still nearby but fading into shadow.

James nodded. There was a sound, dull and boundless, deep and low. It grew, rose up around them, bringing with it a sense of cold anticipation, of mist, and wind.

With quiet conviction, Petra said, “You won’t like how this ends.”

James shook his head in the lowering dark. “Nobody knows the end yet.”

“Perhaps not. But promise me one thing.”

“I will if I can,” he said, straining to see her one last time in this place that only they would remember. She was there, but just barely, merely a dark Petra-shape against a darker infinity.

“Accept the ending, James. Even if the play is a tragedy.”

Neither spoke again. Time was reasserting itself. They were coming out of the other side of the Time Between the Times. Voices blended with the rising drone now, indistinct, some shouting busily, others speaking with low, animated worry. They echoed dully, strangely

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familiar, like people heard from the other side of a wall. He strained his ears, tensed his body, as the gears of time caught up to him again, meshed minute to minute, and began to carry them forward again.

Petra was no longer in front of him, although he still sensed her nearby, herself realigning with wherever and whenever they were coming to rest.

He sensed that he might forget the future they had just come from, might slip seamlessly back into whatever former version of himself that he was returning to. For he instinctively understood that this was not like using a Time Turner—this was not his future self doubling back to revisit a previous memory, while still essentially tethered to the future. This kind of time travel unwound along his own lifeline, de-aging him, returning him to the very person that he had been then, younger, and ultimately oblivious to whatever future he had just come from. He would only remember that future if he forced himself to concentrate on it, to cling to it like a dream upon waking.

There was motion around him, as if the whole world was rolling, rocking, creaking faintly, banging with footsteps and distant, urgent voices. The drone of noise finally resolved itself, and James recognized it.

He knew where he was.

He knew *when* he was.

There was a bliss of relief, even in the midst of the worrying motion, the creaking and rocking, the ominous groan of approaching thunder and howling wind.

Because none of it had happened yet. Somewhere, far away, the Vault of Destinies was still intact. The Loom was still spinning its mysterious, unbroken tale of earthly destiny. The Vow of Secrecy was yet intact, absolutely inviolate.

And amazingly, wonderfully nearby—James sensed this almost as if he could hear and feel her very beating heart—was his cousin Lucy.

She was still alive.



*This won't be any magical storm, Barstow, the first mate of the Gwyndemere, had said to James. Not like what nearly overtook the fabled Treus and his crew...*

How wrong he had been about that.

As James clambered up the stairs to the swaying, rocking midship deck, he recognized the storm that bore down on the ship, chilling the wind, whistling through the rigging and sails, growling with deliberate intent. It was Judith's cursed tempest, unrelenting, still seeking payment in death. It had pursued James first to Hogwarts, and then to the cemetery, and now, incredibly, it had followed him back through the years, into his own past, to the ocean voyage of the Gwyndemere, during James' third school year.

He remembered the smell of it, the sudden roaring violence of it, only unlike the first time he had encountered it, now he understood it. It had *always* been Judith's cursed storm, seeking payment in blood. It had been cheated once, but only for a time. The clock had turned back. James had a sinking certainty that, this time, there would be no escaping payment.

The sky moved overhead with sickening speed, as dark and heavy as a tombstone. The ocean all around was a mountainscape of leaden waves, carrying the ship over looming peaks and down into guttural valleys.

Ensconced in the elevated pilot's chair atop the bow, Barstow himself clapped his hat tight to his head with one hand, hung on to the guiding pole with the other. James marveled at it all, remembering every

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detail in a giddy rush—the sea monster, Henrietta, that powered the ship, corkscrewing the waves with her lithe, scaly body; his parents and relatives in the captain’s quarters beneath the stern, waiting out the storm while Merlin observed keenly, knowing that something portentous was afoot; and Petra standing on the deck above them, her dress and hair whipping in the gale winds, her eyes calm but eerily haunted, tormented by dreams of her stepsister, Izzy, drowning to death, murdered for a bargain of lost love and hopelessness.

The Petra of that time did not understand that she was, in fact, infected by the dreams of her dimensional twin, Morgan, soon to be unleashed onto a world that was not her own.

But this version of Petra *did* understand.

James turned and tried to run up the mid-ship steps to the stern. The rocking ship pitched him, made him stumble. He flailed for the bannister and groped his way to the top.

Petra was there, just as before, her back to him, her hands resting calmly on the railing that arced around the stern. Her hair whipped and flicked in loose ribbons. Her drab dress fluttered about her legs like a flag.

“Petra,” James called, raising his voice over the storm.

She turned to look back at him, and he stopped in place, his heart thudding up into his throat. She was so much younger than he remembered. And yet her blank face, her haunted eyes, made her seem much older than even the Petra in the Time Between the Times. She looked at him only briefly, a mere sidelong glance over her shoulder, and then, without a word, turned back to the raging storm and the mountainous waves. The ship rocked in slow, precipitous rhythm, like an enormous pendulum dividing time into dwindling moments.

James braved the canting deck and joined her at the stern, grabbing onto the railing himself. It was cold and wet. In mere moments, if things weren’t changed, Petra would be thrown over it, swept by the falling mast and its swinging booms.

“We should go below decks,” he said, raising his voice over the wind and looking aside at her. She was the same height as him in this timeframe. Her hair flitted and swirled around her face, hiding her eyes. Just like last time, she made no sign of consent or agreement. But she

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did place her hand on his, covering it. Whether giving or taking comfort, there was no way to tell.

"Petra..." he called again, trying to get her to look at him.

"She's out there," Petra replied, not taking her gaze from the marching waves. Each was of nearly alpine height, dwarfing the ship, topped with white crests that tattered in the gale winds.

James looked out and up at the constantly shifting ocean topography. He nodded. "She always was, wasn't she? Water is her medium, after all. She was the waves and the rain. She followed us the whole way, biding her time, watching, waiting for her moment. We can't give it to her. We need to go below, Petra. Right now."

"Lucy is still alive here," Petra nodded to herself, ignoring him. "If we do it right, she won't have to die again. None of it will have to happen."

A shiver coursed down James' back, chilling him. He reached to touch her elbow. "Odin-Vann let slip with his plan," he said. The wind batted his words, tried to steal them away. "He said that the only way to change the past was to find something that almost happened differently, and to make sure that it does. I think... they mean to see you fall from the back of the ship, to die, like you almost did the first time. Then, Odin-Vann will take over as Judith's host in this world."

Petra nodded again, slowly, her eyes still hauntingly clear as she looked out over the tempest, measuring it. "She will be weaker with him as her host than she was when Izzy and I were her sister fates. She knows this. She is a creature from outside of time. Her future, dying self has informed her past, vibrant self. Donofrio won't multiply her power as we did. But neither will he oppose her. Where Izzy and I defied and broke her, *he* will submit and bow to her. That's all that matters to Judith now."

"Petra," James said, using her name as a talisman, trying to rouse her to action. "Don't you understand? We can't let them *win*. They will stop me from saving you somehow."

Petra shook her head. "I don't think they will. I don't think they will have to." Finally, she turned to him. Her eyes were eerily dead. "You were so wonderful, James. So sweet and gallant. You fused your love to my power, connected us. We're still connected even now. I

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can feel it. The thread between us has been there ever since. You saved me that time."

"*That time...?*" James asked, although he had a sinking feeling that he knew exactly what she meant.

"She will be less powerful with Donofrio as her host," Petra nodded, her eyes unfocussing, drifting back out over the waves. "Merlin will be able to defeat her. Or your father. Or even you, perhaps. None of it will need to happen as it did. The broken Loom. Lucy's death. The Night of the Unveiling. The Morrigan web..."

James was shaking his head firmly, growing deeply alarmed. "But Odin-Vann didn't even follow you back in time!" he insisted, reaching to take Petra's hand, to shake her out of her fatalistic fugue. "Nor did Judith! You and I were the only ones that went through the portal!"

She blinked aside at him, as if surprised that he didn't yet get it. "I was the only one that *needed* to come back, James. Don't you see? Judith's origins are outside of time. In some vague way, she is always in both the past and the present. It's her unfair advantage. And Donofrio already exists here. She has surely already found him in this timeline, prepared him, poisoned his already broken mind with delusions of power and revenge. The version of him that you knew will never be. A new Donofrio Odin-Vann will spawn from this changed moment."

She looked at James once more, assuring that he saw the conviction in her eyes, albeit tainted with regret. "They only needed *me* to come back in time, James, because *I* am the one who will make the change. I should have gone over to my death the first time we went through this cursed storm. You saved me. But you should have let me go. You *have* to let me go. I can't let you interfere this time."

"That's crazy!" James exclaimed, nearly shouting in the face of the blaring, rainy wind. "You can't give them what they want! You can't just give up!"

"I'm *not* giving up," Petra said, her voice going firm, her eyes hardening. "This is the cruellest thing of all for me, don't you see? I don't *want* to die. I don't want to leave Izzy! It's even worse than when I thought I was just returning to Morgan's dimension! But this is what *should* have happened. Just look at the terrible things that occurred as a

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result! This time, without me to amplify her power, Judith will be defeated! Merlin will destroy her, assisted by you and all the others who will join him. You know the truth of all this, James. You must tell them. You must make them believe, and act! This is your duty.”

“No!” James cried firmly, taking Petra by the shoulders, turning her to him. “Come down below decks with me! It can’t be like this!”

“You’ve always wondered,” Petra mused thoughtfully, studying his face, “when you invoked the same Deep Magic that your grandmother did to save your father, how it was that you didn’t have to die, like she did. The love covenant is a force of sacrifice, after all. But now we know the answer, don’t we? The bargain wasn’t over. The Deep Magic didn’t require your death because it knew we would be back here again. The bargain was only a reprieve. And now, the circle will complete itself.”

She raised her hands and took his, removing them from her shoulders. She turned away from him then, looked back out over the raging tempest. He reached for her again, and found that he couldn’t touch her. She held him back with her mind, erecting a subtle force around herself.

“It’s all a lie, Petra!” he said desperately. She didn’t look back. Lightning flashed brilliantly over the waves, stabbing down, seeking its mark. Thunder filled the world.

James tried to focus on Petra through the ribbon that connected them. He sensed the power between them, could virtually see the silvery thread pulse in the air between their hands. But she was shutting him out.

She was committed.

“Every bargain they’ve ever made with you was based on paying an impossible, unfair price, Petra!” he shouted, straining to be heard over the thunder and wind. “The Gatekeeper tried to make you kill Lily. The Bloodline of Voldemort wanted you to kill Izzy. Odin-Vann said you had to kill *me*. It’s always the same deal, the same terrible cost. And what do you get for it? Nothing but a tainted soul and teasing shadows! The cost outweighs the benefits! It’s just leprechaun gold, gone by morning! The death bargain is *always* a lie! And this time it’s the biggest lie of all! Judith has finally convinced you that the person you have to kill... is yourself!”

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She refused to look at him. Her back was straight, her arms locked at the elbow, spread to grip the railing, squeezing it, waiting for the inevitable. Her hair flailed in the wind like a black corona. Lightning was nearly constant now, accompanied by a seamless cannonade of thunder.

Seeing the inevitable now, James firmed his voice, raised his chin, and stated, "Judith will kill Izzy first."

Petra's shoulders tensed as if he had struck her.

He went on, bitterly. "When you're dead, the connection will be broken. Judith won't need Izzy anymore, and you won't be there to protect her. Maybe you're right, and in the end Merlin *will* defeat Judith. But she'll kill whoever she can before that happens. Izzy will be the first, because she knows the truth. I'll be next on her list. I'll fight, but who am I compared to her? She'll kill me with barely a second thought. All because you gave up."

"Don't!" Petra shouted, her voice carrying over her shoulder, shrill on the wind. "James, *don't!* I *have* to do this! Don't make it any harder!"

"Do you remember how Lucy died?" James asked, undeterred, taking a step closer, still speaking to her tensed back. "She died protecting Izzy. She'll do the same thing again this time. You know she will. When Judith comes for Izzy, Lucy will get in her way, try to stop her. She'll fail, and Judith will kill her again. History finds a way to *keep happening*. You may change the bigger story, if we're very lucky. But the little things will still find a way to happen just like they did last time!"

"STOP!" Petra shouted, and whirled to face him, her eyes more alive and sharp than he had seen them during the entire exchange.

Lightning illuminated the world, spearing down and arcing onto the Gwyndemere's stern, where it struck the aft mast, immediately behind James. The base of the mast exploded into splinters. James felt them pelt against his back, stick in his damp shirt. The shudder of the force shook the deck. A juddering, groaning creak filled the air and ropes twanged, popped, tore loose as the mast began to topple. James didn't turn to watch, even as he felt the weight collect over him, throwing the stern into deeper darkness beneath its shadow.

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Petra's eyes flashed upward. "*James!*" she shouted, alarmed, and acted apparently without even thinking. She rammed both of her arms into the air, palms flat, and a palpable wave of power shot up from them, arresting the motion of the collapsing mast. The deck split beneath Petra's feet, crushing inward as she supported the weight of the mast, cushioning it with pure invisible force.

James could feel the power throttling between himself and Petra, warming his hand, making his knees tremble as if he had just run a mile.

Gently, concentrating furiously, Petra redirected the falling mast, angled it alongside the stern, and then let it drop again, this time safely off the side. The ship shuddered as the broken weight crashed down, rolled over the railing, plunged its tip into the waves, where it ripped, snapped, and drug away into the surging current.

James turned back to Petra, eyes wide with surprise, his mind reeling at this sudden, unexpected change of events.

"You ducked last time," Petra explained weakly, slumping back against the railing, dipping and shaking her head. Her shoulders hitched as if she was beginning to sob. "You ducked out of the way, leaving the mast to hit me alone."

James ran to her, grabbed her shoulder, fearing that she might still tilt back over the side, fall to the heaving waves below.

She wasn't sobbing. She was *laughing*. It was a weak, helpless sound, but genuine. "You insufferable, noble, stubborn, gallant *git*," she said, and leaned against him, still shaking with helpless amusement. "You were so intent on saving me that you didn't even move to save yourself."

James smiled, nervously relishing the sound of Petra's fragile laughter. "So you saved me instead. Does that mean... we're even?"

Petra raised her head to answer, looking James in the eyes even as rain began to fall in earnest.

A clatter sounded from nearby. James remembered. When the mast had fallen last time, some of the deck hands had run up from below to investigate. He didn't remember them coming this quickly, though.

"It's not over," Petra said, tensing and growing serious again. "She won't give up this easily."

The door on the side of the galley wrenched open, accompanied by the sound of panicked, stumbling footsteps. It wasn't a deck hand

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that emerged. Instead, a lanky young man half-ran, half-fell out of the galley entrance, catching himself on a nearby railing. He pushed rapidly upright, brandishing a wand in one hand, pushing his hair out of his face with the other, looking around frantically.

It was Donofrio Odin-Vann, only not as James knew him. This version of the future professor appeared barely out of his teens, smaller and more gangly, the thick sheaf of his hair longer, greasy and lank on his forehead.

"He stowed away," James said in dark wonder, his voice nearly lost in the stormy wind. "He was on the ship the whole time!"

"He wasn't, actually," Petra said, her brow lowering at the newcomer. "At least, not the first time through. This is a changed event."

"Petra!" Odin-Vann stammered, clearly surprised to find her there. His voice was higher than James remembered, cracked from disuse during his days of hiding. He shot his gaze around at the wet deck littered with splinters, the missing aft mast. "You're... still here! Only, she said..."

"Who said, Don?" Petra asked coyly, cocking her head, her eyes narrowing.

He tried to straighten his matted robes, to recover and mask his surprise. "Your, um, friend. You know. The Lady. She said... she said that you and she were very close. But she said that you would *want* it this way. I hope you haven't had any sort of..." he gulped, and glanced around, "of falling out?"

Petra shook her head slowly. She seemed caught between rising anger and sad pity. Resignedly, she asked, "What did she tell you, Don?"

He gulped again and looked around, his eyes bulging at the raging mountains of water, the seething magical storm. "She said... she said that you called her into the world, but that I could take the burden from you," he called readily over the rushing wind. "I would host her, and get her power in return. All the power I ever wanted, because she's some sort of... of *goddess*. I would be her new sponsor in the earth. And then she would grant me the strength to... to..."

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He forced his eyes back to Petra, blinking rapidly, apparently reluctant to go on.

Petra said, "The power to have revenge on all those who mocked you and bullied you. More, the power to never be mocked or bullied ever again."

"You don't hate me, do you, Petra?" the young man said earnestly. "You always understood me. We always supported each other..."

She shook her head again, with sadness and betrayal. "I never really knew you at all. Did I?"

Odin-Vann gave a grimace. "Does anyone *ever* really know anyone else?"

James saw, with frustrating dismay, that this young man was not yet the manipulative mastermind that he would grow to become. And yet he was clearly toxic with power delusions and fantasies of revenge, dangerous more for his desperation than his power or intellect. James only hoped that Petra understood the same.

"You made yourself a fool, Don," Petra sighed, confirming this. "The Lady of the Lake won't help you. She will only use you. That's what she does. She uses, and manipulates, and lies. And then, when she is done, she kills."

Young Odin-Vann nodded a little, and a tentative smile curled his lips. "She said that's what some people would say. But she also said that you would be happy to be relieved of the burden of being her host. I don't know how you summoned her into the world, but I do know that you don't want that responsibility anymore. We're going to help you let go of it."

Here, young Odin-Vann's eyes switched to James, squinted with an insincere smile. "And this is young Mr. Potter, then, is it? The Lady told me about *you* as well."

James felt anger well up in him. He drew his wand without even thinking. "I beat you once," he said with iron conviction. "And I can do it again."

"You beat me, you say?" Odin-Vann replied quickly, as if moderately impressed. "I don't recall that. But I've been beaten by so very many. Beaten, *and* laughed at. But soon, the laughing will stop.

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Even yours, Mr. James Potter. I hope you enjoyed your one victory. I think it will be your last."

The confidence in his voice was puzzling. A split second too late did James realize what was happening. The stowaway young man was distracting him and Petra, keeping them talking, goading and occupying them for his own nefarious reason.

James turned back to the raging ocean behind them.

A tentacle of icy water blasted him backwards, knocked him to the deck so violently that he lost all sense of direction, knew only vicious motion, and the sound sudden screaming laughter, and a jolt of wracking pain as he struck some hard surface, smashed through it, and crashed into darkness.

"You didn't play your role, dear sister!" Judith's voice screamed, bright with good humour, horribly vibrant. "But no matter. *I* remember how the story is *supposed* to go!"

James tried to find his footing. He slipped and tripped over broken pieces of something, a table and chairs, smashed by his passage through the galley wall. Cold wind and mists of ice battered through the dark, pushing him back down, forcing him to strain against the force.

Petra didn't respond to Judith's taunt. Instead, shudders of violence shook the ship, battered it as it rocked atop the heaving waves. James crawled forward, cutting his hands on broken glass, not feeling it. The broken galley wall loomed before him, revealing a barrage of magic and flailing, watery motion. Odin-Vann was there, but cringing in terror, backing away, his hands raised.

James realized, on some dim, faraway level, that it was not only the blasting force of Petra's and Judith's confrontation that was pushing him back. His arms and legs trembled with weakness. His vision pulsed with waves of grey. He could feel the drain as Petra drew from him, drawing strength like water from a deep well. The cord between them thrummed like a pulse.

He was her battery. Somehow, he stored and held her banked power.

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He forced himself to his knees and clambered through the shattered wall. The storm raged harder than ever, forming a torrential backdrop to the battle.

Judith was in her prime again, James saw. Beautiful and terrible, her red hair loose and flying in waves, her eyes blazing with strength, her teeth bared in a fierce grin. She lunged at Petra, launching a cloud of icy arrows. Petra hunkered and dug in, extending both arms and erecting a shimmering shield, obliterating Judith's attack.

Footsteps clanked and pounded up the mid-ship stairs. Two deck hands appeared on the port side; Merlin and James' father on the starboard.

Odin-Vann glanced back at the newcomers, his eyes wild and terrified. His wand was in his fist, but he did not fire. Instead, he dropped to a crouch and covered his head with his skinny arms, whimpering.

"Halt!" Merlin shouted, his voice booming through the storm.

Judith flung a hand at him, turning it to a bludgeon of ice. It struck the headmaster, bowling him backwards into Harry, knocking both back down the stairs.

"The harder you resist me, sister," Judith cried, renewing her attack on Petra, "The more of your friends will die. Poor Merlinus is no match for me here on the ocean. His strength is the green of the wild. **I** am the blue of the depths! I will crush him like a dung beetle!"

"*No!*" Petra shouted, lowering her voice to a furious command. She planted her feet, knees bent, and shot out both of her fists, left and right. As she did, a shockwave of force blasted away from her in all directions.

James' mind went grey. He began to crumple to the deck, completely sapped of strength.

But the deck suddenly bucked beneath him, threw him aside, and wrenched hard toward the bow. A massive, splintering crunch rocked the ship as it seemed to ram to a halt in the water. James rolled and slid on the varnished planks, fetching up hard against the broken galley wall again, his head spinning.

"Neptune's Trident!" a voice—one of the deck hands—called out, breathless with shock.

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Dizzily, James scrabbled to his hands and knees, pushed up against the leaning galley bulkhead, and blundered back toward the starboard railing.

He was utterly unprepared for the sight that met him.

The waves beyond looked like a Muggle photograph, suddenly and utterly frozen in place, shocked white as if by a flash of lightning. Their peaks glinted like glass daggers, their troughs sloped with deep bottle-blue, perfectly still, like a split-second in time.

With a shock of surprise and awe, James saw that the Gwyndemere lay tilted hard to port, locked in an expanding island of flash-frozen ocean. Even as he watched, further ocean peaks crunched to stillness, overcome by Petra's expanding, icy spell.

Petra's eyes flared like twin suns.

"You shall not touch anyone on this ship again," she declared in a voice of cold thunder. Punctuating this command, she struck out with both hands.

Her attack was a wave of force that visibly bent space around it. The bolt connected with Judith in an instant, blasting her backwards, exploding her through the deck and railing behind.

"Petra!" James' father called, clambering up the tilting stairs again, Merlin struggling upright behind. But Petra was already leaping to follow her nemesis over the lowered port side, landing on a slope of ice.

"Stay on the ship!" she called back. "I will keep her away and busy! When you can navigate the ship again, *fly! Don't look back!*"

The storm still raged, now howling and whistling over the frozen mountains of ice, tattering their crests into sparkling streams of snow. Rain blatted down, slicking the icy canyons, freezing into icicles from the peaks.

Judith laughed shrilly from the echoing chasms.

"Come and find me, Sister!"

The ice rumbled. Cracks appeared around the Gwyndemere, unsettling it. Black water bubbled and spurted up around it. Petra's spell was already weakening.

James drew his wand, helplessly watching as Petra reached the bottom of the frozen wave and broke into a run, seeking the laughing

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monster beyond. He considered joining her, but knew it was no use. He could no sooner assist her than he could lift the ship with his own two hands.

And then someone pushed him from behind, two hands planted in the middle of his back, hard enough to propel him straight forward over the railing.

“James!” his father shouted in alarm, but the sound was already diminishing, muffled with distance as he flipped over in air, landed hard on his back and tumble-slid down the rocklike slope of a frozen swell. Spells lit the driving rain in flashing hues. Voices shouted.

James gasped to recover his breath. His entire body ached and shivered, both with cold and wet and weakness. He lay in the shadow of the ice-locked hull of the Gwyndemere, staring aside at the half-buried rudder, now encased in a thick sheath of ice.

Another figure slipped and clambered down the icy wave, nearly falling atop him.

“She will want you for this,” the figure gasped through gritted teeth. It was young Odin-Vann. He reached, clambered over James, and wrenched the wand from his hand.

“Come!” he commanded, grabbing James by the fabric of his shirt and dragging him roughly to his feet.

Spells spat down from the ship, competing with the flash of angry lightning.

“Stop!” a voice called from above, barely heard over the ripping wind and teeming rain. “You’ll hit my son! We must go after them!”

James clambered along after Odin-Vann, off balance, tugged in the young man’s merciless grip. They clambered through a rippled gully of ice, sheened darkest blue with depth. Before them, James sensed Judith and Petra still battling, just around the nearest mountainous peak. He felt the drain of power as Petra struggled frantically to match Judith’s prime force. It wasn’t working. He sensed her desperation, the faltering quaver of her strength.

Petra’s element was the city, after all. She could not match Judith here any more than Merlin could.

Behind James and Odin-Vann, the canyon of ice wrenched, heaved, and gave a huge, splintering crack. Water boiled up, surged into

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the troughs of the frozen waves. James turned to look back, still stumbling in Odin-Vann's wiry grip.

The Gwyndemere was breaking free into a field of shattered ice, even as figures on the deck attempted to climb down, to chase James and Odin-Vann. As he watched, the ship sloshed to starboard, cracking away from its icy bed, cutting off any pursuit.

Petra couldn't maintain the ice spell. She had used the last reserve of her strength to force Judith away from the ship, to save those aboard. That, at least, seemed to have worked, if only for the time being.

The ice rumbled beneath James' stumbling feet. Odin-Vann nearly fell, but maintained his fistful of James' shirt, jerking him forward, into the howl of a dark ice valley.

Petra was there, facing Judith across the gully. Their magic lit the shimmering walls, reflected deep in the ice like prisms. Petra was backing away clumsily, shielding herself but no longer launching any attacks of her own.

Judith was like a dynamo. She flung jets of blinding light first from one hand, then the other, striding forward, still grinning, propelling Petra ever back, back, until there was nowhere left to go.

James cried out to her, but Odin-Vann yanked him forward, threw him down onto the wet ice, and kicked him in the side.

"How does it feel?" the young man seethed. "Being the *weak* one? Being the one about to be *beaten*!?"

"Stop!" Petra screamed, turning from Judith to Odin-Vann. The moment her attention failed, however, Judith lashed out with her ice-tentacle arms. She slammed Petra backwards violently, bashing her against the slope of a massive, frozen wave. The water wraith raised her club-like arms and beat Petra again, and again, until she no longer attempted to rise. Petra fell back, her hair plastered to her forehead, dangling in wet ribbons. Her pale face and arms were the only things visible in the gloom.

"Use the boy's wand," Judith said, speaking to Odin-Vann but not taking her eyes from the prone form of Petra. "Let it be his last thought before the water swallows them both."

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"Nuh—!" James began, but Odin-Vann kicked him again, hard enough to drive the breath from his lungs. The young man was like a person possessed, maddened and blinded with poison avarice. He strode forward, raising James' wand in his hand, sighting down it.

James tried to get up, to lunge forward and throw himself upon the crazed man. But his arms shivered with frailty. He could scarcely push himself up onto his elbows, barely lift his head to watch. He was feeling Petra's deathly exhaustion, sharing it with her. And yet, even now, the cord between them thrummed, invisible but potent, making them one.

"It may be difficult for you," Judith said, her own voice rasping with greed. She raised her chin and took a step back. "But Petra has nothing left to live for anyway. Regardless of what she says, she *desires* this. She wishes to die here, to sink to the depths, to be claimed by defeat. It's what fate demands. Do it. Save her from herself."

Rain poured into the frozen ocean wasteland. The storm raged, still strengthening. Thunder shook the ice beneath James. Water bubbled up through spreading cracks.

Odin-Vann's fist trembled as he stretched James' wand out toward Petra, sighted carefully down it. But even from his position on the ice, watching helpless from ten paces away, James saw that it wasn't regret that made the young man's arm quiver. It was *anticipation*. He was finally living the fantasy that he had harbored for so many years, to overpower and destroy those who opposed him. Petra had been his confidante, his one solace. But in the end she was merely an obstacle to true power. He would kill her and marvel at the feeling of it—of taking the life of a young woman that he had once called a friend—simply as payment to become Judith's new host, for the immense power that his petty, broken mind had craved for so long.

Petra began to get up. It was a struggle. James could feel it, broadcast to him through the invisible cord.

"Don," she said, and raised a hand to him, as if asking for his help.

"Avada Kedavra," he barked, hoarsely, seeming almost to relish each syllable.

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James' wand burst green. The bolt spat, sharp as a needle, flashed the canyons of ice and curtains of rain into unearthly emerald daylight.

The spell struck Petra just below her throat. It blasted her back down again, slamming her against the ice hard enough to make her head jolt, her damp hair to flail and fall over her open, knowing eyes. The hand she had raised recoiled across her chest, and then flopped down to her side, where it lay suddenly still, horribly still.

She was dead.

James could feel it. The cord was still there between them, connecting them hand to hand, soul to soul, but in that instant her length had gone completely, finally dark.

James screamed. The sound was bestial, utterly bereft, empty of words. He drained his lungs completely and then seemed unable to draw another breath. His chest was locked tight, clenched with shock, and loss, and horror. He no longer noticed Odin-Vann as he took James' wand in both hands, broke it, and tossed it away. He barely even noticed as Judith approached Petra's dead body, reached down, and plucked the moonstone brooch from her jumper, smiling at it in her hand before pinning it to her own robe, claiming it as a trophy of smug triumph.

*How is this possible, James' mind raged. Petra had a Horcrux!*

Only she didn't, of course. Not in *this* timeline. She had travelled back to her previous self, but the dark magic of the Horcrux had not accompanied her. Here, she hadn't yet created it.

And now she never would.

Together, the two murderers strode away into the darkness, the goddess of chaos with her new human host, leaving Petra's last sorceress spell to crack and heave apart behind them, melting away, soon to drop her corpse to the depths, claimed by the very waves that she and James had once cheated.

And James would soon follow. Just one more casualty at sea, lost forever to the deep.

But he no longer felt weak. With Petra no longer summoning from the power that he had collected for her, his own strength returned.

In the wake of everything, this felt like a mockery. A dark insult.

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He sat up in the lowering gloom, even as the ice cracked all around and water sloshed past him. He raised his hand, looked at it. The ribbon was visible as a moon-colored glow, no longer tainted with any trace of crimson. The thread wafted back toward Petra's body.

Her power, her very essence, was still in him, banked away, albeit useless.

But... how was that possible?

Somehow, through some enchantment that he barely understood, he had served as a battery for her. He had used her stored power himself on occasion. And she had drawn it from him, right up until the very end, via the cord that bound them.

After all, Petra's power was the city. There were no cities here, in the middle of the ocean. Here, she had been at her weakest.

But James had been to many, many cities since he and Petra had become bound together. He had been to New York and New Amsterdam. London and Philadelphia. He had spent weeks with Charlie in Brasov, and nearly a month's holiday in Cairo with his parents. As he thought back, even now, he could count them, city after city. Dozens of them. Their power had stored up inside him, growing greater by the hour, nearly limitless, all banked away...

And all ultimately unused.

Because there was only so much power that Petra could siphon off through the invisible thread between them. He had hoarded it, unwittingly, unable to plumb its depths himself, but neither releasing it to Petra.

Because, simply put, he had refused to let her go.

*Let me go, James,* she had asked him, begged him, four years earlier.

But he couldn't. He'd held onto her instead, divided her power between them, because he couldn't bear to give her up.

He pushed to his feet, steadied himself on the shifting icy surface. The storm raged all around, battered him with blasts of wind and pelting rain, dragged hungrily at him. He didn't feel any of it.

He moved to Petra's body, sat down next to her, and took her hand. It was cold. He wanted to cry over her, to pay with tears for the loss, but somehow he couldn't. His grief felt beyond even tears.

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The frozen ocean cracked and broke around him. He felt the remaining floe lower and heave over the waves.

"I'm sorry, Petra," he said, holding onto her cold hand. "It's probably too late now. But I'm finally doing it. I'm doing what you asked. I'm letting you go."

He closed his eyes and focused his inward senses on the clasp of their hands. He located the point where his palm stemmed power into hers, binding them together, connecting them ever since that fateful moment on the back of the Gwyndemere.

*Let me go James...*

He did. He let her go.

The release of her power was a palpable sensation. It streamed out of him first like a ribbon of soft wind, and then like a stream of water, and then increasing to something like a rushing river.

It began to hurt, to strain like muscles flexed past their limit. But there was also a dizzyingly sense of release, like putting down a massive burden that one had forgotten they were even carrying. And still the power flowed out of him, faster and harder, growing to titanic force, like every waterfall in the world forced through a James-sized hose.

His body trembled. He shivered from head to toe, so hard that his eyes seemed to vibrate in their sockets. He tried to breath, but his throat was locked tight. His fingers curled into helpless fists. His right squeezed Petra's cold hand, his left dug fingernails into the flesh of his palm.

Days and weeks and months of stored energy roared out of him, every moment that he had spent in the many metropolises, soaking in their webs of light and noise, their hives of human interconnectedness. The surge grew to a blur of colour, of honking horns, and roaring crowds, and steaming vents, and rushing traffic...

And then, with a spasm like a breath gasped only a split second before drowning, James recoiled backwards, limp and exhausted, his heart broken with loss, but his mind and body blissful with relief.

And in the darkness, wet and slick with rain, Petra's hand warmed. He assumed it was only the heat of their clasped fingers, and the surge of her released power.

But then he gasped.

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As her fingers *squeezed his.*



## **26. THE SHACKLE OF THE BROOCH**

James jerked his head to look down at her. Her eyes opened, but they were changed. They were pure white, glimmering and flashing like diamonds before a winter sun. She did not look at him, but her hand continued to grip his, to squeeze avidly, as if trying to communicate through touch alone.

A warm wind rose up around her, spinning into a soft cyclone, drying her wet hair and clothes, lifting her up to her feet, and then raising her into the air.

James let go of her hand as she arose, straightening, her features firming into a taut expression of severe calm. She raised her hands, held them out at her sides, palms open, fingers spread. She was summoning and controlling the hot wind, using it to repel the viciousness of the

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storm. Light accompanied her, pale as moonbeams, coalescing in waves around her form and building like a halo.

With a subtle sweep of her hand, she extended the force to James. He leaned, swayed as the air rushed around him, cocooned him in a tempest of warmth, and lifted him away from the sinking ice.

Petra's power was surging still, increasing, building like a whine in the air, a thrum underfoot, a pulse that seemed to penetrate into the very ocean depths below.

And yet James felt no siphoning of strength from his own inner core. The cord no longer connected them. He had let go of Petra, given it all to her, poured into her the entirety of all that he had stored for her.

And now she was using every last ounce of it.

He arose alongside her, bathed in her power. He found that he was afraid to speak to her, worried that he might somehow break whatever strange enchantment had brought her back. It was Petra, and yet, in some indefinable way, even beyond the unearthly glitter of her eyes, she was changed.

Together they scanned the dark, storm-swept ocean all around.

The spell of ice was shattering into choked shards now. Floating ice fields rode the waves once again. Lightning stabbed down in staccato strobes. In the middle distance, the Gwyndemere floundered before the gale.

And approaching it, walking atop the water alongside her human host, herself transformed into a giantess of ice and water, swollen with purpose and drunken with triumph, the Lady of the Lake stalked, reaching forward, ready to crush the ship and all aboard it like a broken toy.

Petra saw her, narrowed her flashing diamond eyes, and *surged* forward through the air, supported on her cyclone of warmth, taking James alongside her.

The ocean sped away beneath them. The peaks of the waves reached for them, but never touched them, or even so much as cooled them with mist at their passage.

Odin-Vann was like a child next to Judith's bloated form, stumbling uncertainly atop the waves, his robes and hair battered by wind and rain. Ignoring him, Judith stalked forward, made of the ocean

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and drawing it up into herself, feeding from its power to grow to behemoth proportions, intending not only to kill, but to terrify first.

Petra did not slow to confront Judith. Instead, she raised her fists and blasted through the hulking figure at shoulder level, plunging into her back and bursting from her engorged sternum, emerging fully dry on the other side even as the water demoness half-collapsed, cascading over Odin-Vann, who fell into the waves, spluttering.

Judith roared and rebuilt her form, sucking dense green ocean back into herself and bulging even larger and more terrible.

“How are you *here?*” she bellowed in rage and surprise.

She reached with tentacles like freight trains, groping for Petra and James where they floated in their personal typhoon of light and warmth.

Petra’s voice boomed over the thunder. “Be still and resume the form that granted you entry into this world!”

The tentacle arms fell away, breaking into rushing torrents of loose water and crashing to the waves below. The behemoth herself shrank and writhed, mounting an agony of resistance, but seemingly unable to disobey. She screamed and twisted in on herself, constricting into a shape like a hundred tentacles, bound into a thrashing, tightening knot. And then, the tentacles obliterated into spray and Judith herself emerged from their centre, soaked and streaming, her robes dense with icy water, her hair hanging in soppy, coppery streamers around her face.

She dragged up into the air, captured in the iron grip of Petra’s implacable power, thrashing and screaming, her face contorted into a rictus of affronted hate, apparently robbed of words.

Petra lifted the Lady of the Lake before her, suspended her with a barely raised right hand and a calm glare, until they were eye to hateful eye, ten feet apart. Judith spat and hissed, twisting like a snake, snapping her body in enraged convulsions.

“Come, Donofrio,” Petra said, and lowered her left hand. With a slow flick of her wrist, he lofted up from the waves to join them, gasping and cascading torrents of water. He arose alongside Judith, and James saw that his eyes were utterly terrified. His throat constricted

rhythmically, as if he was trying to scream but couldn't summon the breath.

James did not pity him. The horrible, deluded little man deserved no remorse. And still James found himself turning aside to Petra.

"Don't kill him, Petra," he said, and found that his own voice resonated like thunder over the storm and waves. "He may deserve to die. But you don't deserve to kill."

Petra looked askance at him, blinked at him with her inscrutable shining eyes. Judith and Odin-Vann twisted and writhed in the force of her effortless power. And still James saw the intent on her face, even as she seemed to reconsider, if only for a moment.

Judith screamed, roared, clawed with her hands. Her hair whipped and flailed about her head, stuck to her face in clumps.

And James saw Petra's face harden again. Slowly, she turned back to the pair suspended before them.

Her gaze swept from Odin-Vann to Judith, then focused on Judith's wet robes. They were dark, as always. But something glimmered softly beneath her left shoulder. It was the brooch. Its pearlescent moonstone flickered with the lightning, shimmered in the reflected glow of Petra's swirling power.

With a flick of one finger, Petra caused the brooch to pluck from Judith's robes. The demoness shrieked and swiped at it, clumsily, unable to reach. Behind the brooch, a ribbon of pale light streamed, connecting back to its origin on Judith's breast, a tentacle of intent.

Deftly, Petra maneuvered the brooch between them. It turned gently in the air like a ballerina, its moonstone shining, its silver scrollwork flashing with lightning.

But Petra did not take it back.

Instead, she returned her gaze to Odin-Vann. The brooch lofted toward him at her direction, still trailing its streamer of strength.

His eyes bulged. He gawped with his mouth, but managed only choked gasps. His Adam's apple jerked up and down in the stubbly stalk of his neck.

His robes stretched across his shoulders, and then tore open, revealing his heaving, skinny chest. James watched, equally curious and horrified, as Petra used her powers, her innate understanding of the

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human body, to open his skin like that of an orange, to peel back the muscle, and lay bare the white cage of living ribs beneath. Odin-Vann looked down at himself and screamed. It was not a scream of pain, James understood, but of abject terror. His own body was flaying open before him. His breath came in hyperventilating gusts, each plainly visible as a spastic expand and contract of his ribs, a shuddering bulge of the pulpy lungs beneath.

James glanced at Petra, afraid but speechless. Was she slowly killing the awful little man? Torturing him as she did so? She seemed to be studying Odin-Vann's open chest, squinting with clinical intent. She manipulated the fingers of her left hand.

With a crackle of cartilage and marrow, Odin-Vann's ribs opened like laced fingers, splaying wide, revealing the naked muscle of his heart. It clenched like a fist, red and thumping with terror, hung between the lobes of his gasping lungs.

Petra nodded to herself. Deftly, she manipulated the brooch directly in front of Odin-Vann's palpitating heart. It revolved softly, casting prisms of light over the hollow of gore beyond.

And then, with an apparently reluctant flick, Petra plunged the brooch directly into Odin-Vann's heart, sinking it deep into the muscle, burying it completely. In response, a wave of stunning heat and light exploded from the point of entry, blasting out in a shockwave, encompassing Judith and blowing past James and Petra.

Odin-Vann shrieked and jerked backwards in his cocoon of force, and this time James sensed that it was indeed an exclamation of monumental pain. But there was surprise in it as well, for Odin-Vann's heart did not stop beating. Despite being impaled with the brooch, the organ continued to clench rhythmically between his lungs, pumping desperate blood, so fast and hard that it appeared to convulse. Only now, the silvery thread extended from his heart, spread through the air like a ribbon of smoke, and stabbed into Judith's breast, where the brooch had been pinned only moments before.

With a cold flick, Petra closed Odin-Vann's ribs again, and then sealed the meager muscle and pale skin back into place, leaving not so much as a scar.

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"You chose your new host," Petra said, turning to face Judith, damning finality in her voice. "And thus I cannot kill you. Nor could I do so even if I wished, for history will find its way to keep happening. All I can do is nudge it in a new direction, hope for a new ripple of events that will lead to your eventual and total defeat. You have chosen this man to be your host instead of me. His lifeblood is your root to this world. Thus, he shall also be your tether and prison. If you venture further than the sound of his heartbeat," here, Petra reached out, twined her fist around the pale ribbon that connected them, and gave it a hard, merciless tug. Odin-Vann wrenched and screamed, clutching a hand over his heart. Petra nodded with satisfaction. "The thread will go *taut*, and he will *die*. Your key to this realm is now your ball and chain. He will be your undoing, at the hands of those who are now more powerful than you. Begone, petty creature of the abyss. Your time here is soon ended."

And with that, Petra swept her left hand back from the shoulder, flinging Odin-Vann away like a comet. He vanished into stormy distance, leaving only the echo of his shocked scream.

Judith spared only a split second to bare her teeth before rocketing off in pursuit of him, following the thread that now bound them.

James turned to watch, but they were already vanished, lost in the heaving pall of the storm.

"Where did you send him?" he asked, still searching the clouds.

"The first of the six lost cities of Atlantis," Petra answered, sighing with weariness. "There are air pockets there that are a thousand years old, and nothing else alive for a hundred leagues in any direction. That will keep them busy for a little while, at least."

He turned back to her. They still floated high over the waves, protected from the raging storm by the subtle cushion of her swirling powers. "You didn't kill him," he said with some wonder. "He killed you. But you let him live..."

"You asked me to," she replied, and shrugged. "And it wouldn't have worked if I had. Odin-Vann really was right. History can't be changed by major alterations. We have to steer things only slightly differently, and hope for the best."

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James shook his head in happy disbelief. He reached for her, touched her hand through the swirling glow of power. "I can't believe this is happening. It feels too good to be true."

"It is," she said, and her diamond eyes clouded, her knees suddenly buckled. James reached to catch her, to support her as she went momentarily limp. The cocoon of warmth and light all around them contracted. They dipped suddenly, dropping fifty feet in a second before bobbing uncertainly up again, this time barely above the hungry, mountainous waves.

"I think I used up most of what you gave me," she gasped, clutching onto him for support. "I'm fearful that it wasn't life force. Only power."

He held her up, supported her in his arms, concern darkening his thoughts. "What do you mean?"

She shook her head. Her eyes had returned to their normal blue. James couldn't tell if this was an encouraging or worrying sign. She said, "We're on borrowed time. We need to get back to the ship."

Firming her grip on his elbow, she concentrated, directing the dwindling bubble of her force through the storm, aiming for the Gwyndemere where it foundered, listing over the waves, still crusted with ice.

"Someone comes!" a voice bellowed.

"Wands up!" another commanded.

"Wait!" a third voice cried. It was James' father, thankfully. "That is my son and his friend, Petra Morganstern! Make room! They approach quickly!"

Petra lowered them to the ship's stern, which heaved and rolled beneath them, shifting dozens of feet every few seconds, making landing especially difficult.

"James!" his father cried, reaching to catch him by the arm and shoulder as he stumbled to the deck. Next to him, much to James' surprise, Persephone Remora collected Petra as she lowered, her protective bubble blowing away into the storm, her legs giving out as the deck swelled beneath her.

"What has become of the Lady?" a deep voice asked, stiff with urgency. Merlin shouldered near, his beard streaming in the gale.

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"Not defeated, Headmaster," Petra answered, recovering slightly, though still supported by Remora. "But her power is lessened. And she can now be tracked, for she is hobbled to her human host, a young man named Donofrio Odin-Vann. Find him, and she will be nearby."

Remora nodded, although the look in her eyes betrayed her confusion. "Who was she? An ocean sprite? A siren? I have heard of such beings, though never encountered one of such malignant force."

"She is neither," Merlin replied gravely, though James thought he detected a certain cautious eagerness in the headmaster's stern gaze. He had only just learned of Judith's existence, and yet he had leapt immediately to certain deductions about her origins, as well as a plan for how to confront her, next time in his own element, and with much different results.

"We have to get below decks," Harry called over the roaring storm, dismissing these mysteries for the moment. "It appears that everyone is once again present and accounted for. Let us keep it that way. Headmaster, lead on..."

"No," James said, tugging his father's arm. "You don't understand! This is no regular storm. It's one of her curses—the Lady that Petra and Merlin are talking about! I don't have time to explain it now, but it's not going to just blow over! She unleashed the storm on us to stop us! To kill us and anyone we're with!"

One of the sailors nodded meaningfully, clapping a hand to his head to secure his hat. "I don't know about any lethal Ladies, but the boy's right," he shouted, struggling to be heard over the thunder. James was gratified to see that it was Barstow, the first mate. "I've seen gales all across the seven seas, and this tempest beats them all! It has *intent*, I tell you. It won't let loose without sending us to the depths, this one!"

As if in response, the Gwyndemere tilted before a blast of wind, nearly capsizing to starboard, forcing those on deck to grasp onto railings and rigging and each other. Precipitously, the ship swung back again, groaning in its wallowing guts.

"James is right," Petra shouted, standing straighter and pushing away from Remora. "This storm was summoned by the Lady before her powers were diminished. If we were nearer civilization or land, the headmaster and I might be able to dispel it. But here, on the ocean..." She glanced aside at Merlin, who nodded, reluctantly.

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“The ship already lists and founders,” Barstow bellowed, clinging to the shattered base of the aft mast with one huge hand. “If any of you has any magical idears, I’d say put ‘em to use now or prepare to meet your makers!”

Petra nodded at Barstow, and then took a step back toward the stern, somehow remaining upright on the heaving, dipping deck. Splinters of broken mast streamed back and forth around her feet, carried on rivulets of storm water. Lightning lit her in constant strobes.

“Go below,” she declared firmly. “All of you.”

James saw her intent, even if he didn’t yet understand it. He pushed away from his dad and reached for her, nearly stumbling to the deck himself. “No, Petra,” he said, reaching for her hand, trying to pull her along. She closed her hand within his, but refused to move.

“Petra,” Harry Potter said, raising his voice over the gale, managing to sound perfectly calm. “Whatever you have in mind, there are surely better options—”

“There are not.”

These words were spoken not by Petra, but Merlinus. He was still standing next to Harry, his beard streaming, his heavy robes heavier with rain. His eyes were on Petra, piercing, calculating, measuring. He shook his head, as if reading the answer on her face, in her very posture. “There are no other options. We cannot best the storm by power. And it will indeed take us into the depths before its hunger is sated. We have bare minutes left. If Miss Morganstern has a plan—”

“NO,” James bellowed, his voice rough with shock and betrayal, his hand still clinging to Petra’s. “How can you let her do this?”

“James,” Merlin said, lowering his voice and yet somehow making himself heard over the roar of wind and lash of rain. When James glared back at him, finally looked into his eyes, the headmaster said his name again. “James... this is Petra’s hard choice. You already made yours. You let her go. Her destiny is her own now.”

“NO!” James cried again, firming his grip on Petra’s hand. There was no connection between them anymore. He could not sense her plan, or feel her intent. And still he understood what she meant to do. He understood simply because he knew her, and loved her. “This isn’t what I meant! I won’t let her do it!”

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"James," his father said, moving closer, struggling to steady himself on the reeling deck, his glasses streaked with rain. He reached out his hand to James, to both of them. "Come below. Let us discuss this..."

Petra shook her head sadly. "You were so good to me, Mr. Potter. I'll never forget. Please watch over Izzy."

"Come below and watch over her yourself, Petra," he smiled. It was a stubborn smile, but even James saw the hopelessness of the gesture.

Remora spoke up in a shrill voice, her eyes blinking owlishly. "What am I to understand is going on here? Does this young lady have some task to perform? Is she to be...?" She glanced back and forth between Merlin and Harry.

Barstow crooked his arm into Remora's as the wind suddenly pushed her, nearly bowling her over the side. "*Whatever* she intends to do," he called, "I say we let her get to it! We're like to break up at any moment now!"

"Go below," Merlin said, nodding to Remora and Harry. "I shall vouch for James' safety, and escort him down presently. There are goodbyes to be had, I fear, and we should respect them."

Barstow nodded robustly and led Remora to the mid-ship stairs and the door below decks.

Harry was obviously unwilling to leave his son and Petra. "James!" he yelled, squinting through his spattered glasses, "you obey the headmaster! When he says come, you come! Understand?"

James gulped hard, reluctant to promise anything, but equally understanding that his father was one blink away from physically carrying him below decks. Haltingly, he nodded.

"This is madness," Harry called to Merlin. "Do you know what you're doing?"

"No indeed," the headmaster declared, still observing Petra. "But Miss Morganstern does. And we shall not underestimate her, methinks."

Clearly warring with himself, Harry glanced back at James, frowning with consternation. "Your mother will kill me if anything happens to you!" he said, raising a stern finger in his direction. "Bear that in mind, son!"

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With that, he turned, groped to the stairs through the driving rain, and worked his way down, clinging tight to the bannister.

The ship turned sluggishly, trapped in a raging, circling cyclone. Rain beat the waves into froth all around, even as the wind drove them into ragged peaks, seemingly as tall as the clouds.

"James," Petra yelled to him, still holding his hand, her hair now plastered to her head in shining ribbons. "I told you about this. In the Time Between the Times. Do you remember?"

He shook his head firmly. Refused to look into her eyes. He grabbed her other hand and looked down at them, at their clasped hands between them.

He did remember, but refused to admit it.

Petra went on. "I told you that you wouldn't like the end. But I asked you to accept it. I hope you do, James. Because I have to do this now, no matter what. Only, it will be easier knowing that you don't hate me for it."

He wrestled with his emotions, squeezed his eyes shut, tried not to burst out in rage, or pleading, or tears. He couldn't look at her.

"We've been through this!" he cried, his voice strained. "Judith wanted you to die. But you don't have to!"

"It's one thing to die for weakness," she said, grasping his hands tighter, begging him to meet her eyes. "It's another thing to die for love. And payment. It's why we were sent back to this time. Not for Judith's and Donofrio's plan. I know that now. I've *killed*, James. Long before you or Lucy asked me not to, I gave in. I murdered. Blood calls for payment. If I don't make up for that now, even if I live another thousand years, I'll *never* repay the debt of guilt. This is my one chance."

"We can outrun the storm!" he demanded, panic straining his voice. "We did last time!"

"*You* stopped the storm last time with *this!*" she yelled, raising his right hand in hers. "*Your* love, *my* power! You paid the price that I was meant to, but only for a time! That's why we're right back where we started. Because fate has a bigger story to tell! This isn't losing to Judith. It's my chance to balance the scales!"

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James refused even to consider Petra's words. He shook his head, cascading rainwater from his blowing hair.

The storm surged lower. Waves pushed the ship into a disastrous list, washed over the bow and battered the galley walls. The hull twisted and splintered, groaned deep in its very bones as the tempest condensed around it.

James had no words. Still he could not look up at her. He sensed Merlin standing back, observing, but not interfering. He would neither stop Petra, nor compel her. She would make her own choice, and he would respect it. No matter what.

The storm would claim its own.

Petra let go of James' hands. She stood back from him, lowered her arms weakly to her sides, waited just a moment longer.

James finally raised his eyes to her face. She was watching him, risking everything for one final moment.

He said the only words that came into his mind. "I wish it didn't have to be this way."

She seemed to accept this, and to nod agreement. Raising her voice, she asked, "You don't hate me?"

He slumped a little, even smiled a little with the absurdity of it. "Petra..." he said, and then could say no more. His throat tightened with sadness. His eyes blurred, but he refused to look away again, refused even to blink.

She understood. She gave a wan, relieved smile of her own. She nodded, and then raised her pale hand in a last gesture. It was halfway between a benediction and a goodbye. And then, with her hand still raised, she turned around, looked out over the stern railing, faced the tempest as it collapsed all around, turning the sky black with heaving, boiling clouds.

It seemed to sense her. It condensed further, contracted, like a beast preparing to pounce.

Petra raised her other hand now, and spread her arms, both palms up. She tilted back her head and closed her eyes up at the storm.

The wind and rain lashed down at her as if she was a magnet. She welcomed it, drew its attention to herself with the last of her prodigious, sorceress powers.

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Gently, she pushed up to her tiptoes on the wet deck. And then, silently and slowly, she drifted up into the heavy air, leaving the struggling Gwyndemere to drift on without her.

Immediately, the ship pulled away, and she arose, separating from it. Her hair flew in loose waves, her toes pointed down at the crashing waves below. Lightning struck her, and she absorbed it, channeled it, willed it into a frenzy around her arms and legs. Thunder filled the sky like a living thing, roaring, booming, making physical tremors in the wind.

The Gwyndemere pushed away, running into gradually calmer waters. A hint of evening light washed over the deck. The rain slackened.

Petra was now barely a silhouette rising into a whirlwind of lightning, of swirling purple-black clouds. She was the pole upon which the tempest turned. It cast out tendrils, corkscrews of mist, surrounding her like cosmic clutches, preparing to grasp. It revolved, tightened, and Petra continued to rise into it, to tease it, to sing her own siren song of sacrifice.

James watched. He felt Merlin next to him, and drew a tiny shred of cold comfort from the sorcerer's presence.

The storm withdrew from the Gwyndemere completely. The waves fell away. The wind faded to a bare breeze, sifted with mist, smelling of salt and seaweed and falling night. The clouds streamed back from the ship, surrounding a locus of tightening energy, brightening to a distinct core, barraged with lightning and roaring with constant thunder. It intensified, became a nearly physical presence, hulking in the sky as a demonic maelstrom, keening and howling with hungry rage.

And then, with an eerily subtle yet pervasively deep concussion, the storm detonated in a nearly silent shockwave of warmth and light, blasting outward and obliterating into a million dusky tatters.

The shockwave spread in every direction, like a ripple in a farm pond, silent and crystalline, distorting and magnifying the sky beyond as it passed. It approached the Gwyndemere, pushing a gentle swell before it, and sighed as it swept overhead, rippling the torn sails, trailing a single, soft gust of wind. James felt the breeze comb through his hair

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like fingers, caress his cheeks, buffet his clothes. He scented the faintest breath of floral soap and sun-warmed skin.

And then it was gone. The Gwyndemere bobbed slightly on the wake of the shockwave, and then settled. The ocean lay silent and still, as if exhausted.

James lowered his eyes. He was afraid to look back at the tatters of the storm, afraid that Petra's silent body might come falling out of it, empty of all that had defined her, dropping through the air to splash faintly into the weary sea, and sink down through the cold forgetfulness beneath.

That probably wouldn't happen. Petra had given all of herself to save him and everyone aboard the Gwyndemere. But believing that she had simply vanished was too tempting a thought. Like Merlin on the Night of the Unveiling, a vanished sorcerer or sorceress might not be completely dead. They might still come back.

Petra was never, ever coming back. Petra was, utterly and finally, no more.

James' feet moved of their own accord, carrying him to the deck railing. He saw his hands reach out, grasp the railing in the middle of the stern, exactly where she had stood.

Merlin made no move to stop him, or to interrupt his moment of woe.

Voices and footsteps carried up from below. They were happy, even joyful, bursting with relief at the sudden end of the storm. James heard Ralph and Albus, Lily and his mother. He heard his Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey and the ship's captain, Farragut. He heard Lucy.

And he heard Izzy. She was laughing with the others, gladdened with relief, ready to rejoice on the wet bow and watch as the deck hands attempted to reparo the ship, to mend it for the remainder of their journey.

James couldn't look back. He couldn't bear to think of Izzy's imminent, inconsolable grief. He couldn't approach even his own less tangible loss.

A hand covered his shoulder, large and warm. He assumed it was Merlin.

It was his father.

Quietly, he said, "I'm sorry, son."

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And that was all he said.

The two of them stood that way for some time, until the moon arose over the silent ocean and the storm was nothing more than a fading memory. They stood there until everyone else had gone back down below decks again, much more somberly than they had appeared.

Harry Potter stood with his son, held his arm around him in the dark. Harry knew all about loss, about wounds of the heart that would never truly heal. He was acquainted with grief.

Harry stood with his son.

He was patient.



## 27. THE TRIPLE-SIX ENIGMA

James woke up with a start, and nearly fell out of the Gwyndemere's bunk. His heart was pounding and his mind reeled with confusion. He groped blearily, tried to scramble to his feet, still half-captured in the grip of urgent, feverish dreams.

A hand pushed his shoulder gently, pressing him back onto the bed.

"There we are," a woman's voice said, calm but insistent, as if she had been watching him, waiting for him to awaken. "Finally coming around, then. And what a horrible dream you must be leaving behind. It's all right. You're safe."

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The hand left his shoulder, reversed, and lay briefly against his forehead.

"Fever's nearly past," the woman sighed with relief. "You'll be back on your feet in no time. And not a moment too soon. The headmaster has asked to speak to you the instant you're awake and about."

"Are we arrived yet?" James croaked. His mouth was as dry as cotton. His throat felt like it had been scrubbed with steel wool. He opened his eyes, focused on a high ceiling and a row of bright, sunny windows, tall as pillars.

This was *not* the Gwyndemere.

"You're back home, James," the woman said, turning away and bustling over a tray, clinking vials and wiping her hands on a towel. "Back home safe and sound at Hogwarts."

James startled again and pushed himself up onto his elbows, glancing around in profound confusion. The woman turned quickly at the sound of his movements, a vial in each hand. It was Madame Curio.

He was in the hospital wing, lying in the middle of the ward on the only unmade bed. Morning sunbeams lay across the sleepy room, lit with dozing dust motes.

"How did we...?" he asked, snapping his gaze back to Madame Curio. "But I thought...!?"

"You apparated right out of the school!" the healer said shrilly, half chiding, half amazed. She put down the vials and returned to the bed. "The ban was lifted during testing, of course, like usual, although only from the inside out, just to be safe. Nobody expected anyone from *inside* the school to apparate *out* of it. But off you went! Popped away to the cemetery in Godric's Hollow of all places! It's just a good thing that the headmaster was able to track you and bring you back. Why, you've been unconscious and raving all night long! What in the wide world were you thinking?"

James struggled up to a sitting position on the bed and frowned at his spinning thoughts. He could tell by the feel of his own body that he was back to his older, taller self, once again a seventh year. "But... reality was vanished away when Petra went through the portal! The whole world was disappearing! How...?" He looked around again,

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amazed at the perfectly normal room, the distant rabble and rumble of students moving between classes, the waft of summer breeze pushing in through the open windows, lifting the sheer drapes into billows.

Madame Curio clucked her tongue and touched his forehead again, cursorily. "Triple-six fever," she said with a shake of her head, making James blink at her in confusion. She saw his look and clucked her tongue again. "Don't worry, dear. It will all come back to you. The headmaster said you might be a touch befuddled when you came around."

As she said this, she glanced away over her shoulder, raising her eyebrows.

James followed her glance, craning to look behind him, toward the pebbled glass ward doors.

Merlin was just standing up from the bench along the rear wall, tucking his tiny book into his robes as he did so.

"I presume our charge is back to his usual self?" he asked mildly.

"For better or worse," Madame Curio answered, suppressing a small smile. "Presuming he doesn't attempt any more addled cross-country apparitions."

"I think it safe to assume that such episodes are well behind us," the headmaster nodded with confidence. "Come, Mr. Potter. A brief discussion in my office should prove illuminating."



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“They called it ‘the triple-six enigma,’ ” he said as he settled himself into the chair behind his huge desk. “It first began appearing as vague portents and prophecies almost five years ago. Just the three numbers, six-six-six. They showed up in old women’s tea leaves, and old men’s octocards, and even the crystal balls of students here in Madame Trelawney’s classes. People began dreaming of the strange symbol: three sixes, always arranged in a rough circle, two small ones on top, a larger one on the bottom. It wasn’t until winter of this year, however, that the prophecies became more urgent, and even Muggles became haunted by the symbol. Finally, the significance of the triple sixes revealed itself. It wasn’t a random equation, or the sign of the devil, as many understandably assumed.” He looked at James and raised his eyebrows. “It was simply a date. The sixth day, of the sixth month, of a year equating to six. This year, as you may remember, is the twenty-third year of the second millennium. Two multiplied by three.”

“Equals six,” James answered faintly, settling slowly onto one of the small visitor’s chairs before the desk. Voices could be heard wafting in through the open window, carried on a warm breeze from the Quidditch pitch. The Ravenclaw team was getting in a last minute practice before the tournament tomorrow.

“Elementary arithmancy,” Merlin nodded. “And yet none knew why that date—June the sixth, two thousand and twenty three—had such significance. Many seers consulted their preferred divinations. Even the centaurs measured the portents and formulated their own dire predictions, with much drama as a result. Only recently, they came to our very courtyard in numbers, warning that if the omen came to pass, they would arise in force to wrest control of the magical world, for the good of all humanity. We were able to mollify them by diplomacy, but only just.

“Thus, as the months passed and the date approached, what began as a mysterious diversion grew into a sustained obsession, even a mania.

“People began to experience terrible, vivid nightmares. Signs were observed in the skies, the clouds and stars, even in the patterns of nature. Many of the trees awakened from their ancient slumber, and spoke to terrified witnesses. Across the world, thousands of people, both

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magical and Muggle, experienced apocalyptic visions. The details of every prophecy were always nebulous, but certain patterns emerged. A world slowly grinding to a fatal stop. The breaking down of natural laws and ancient rules. The darkening of the eyes of destiny until the world itself was swept away into oblivion. The power of the portent grew daily, exponentially. But alas, no one fully divined what fate was about to happen, or what could be done to prevent it, or even if it was anything more than mass hysteria, a mere corporate delusion unleashed upon the world like a virus of the mind."

James was beginning to grasp a strange sense of the headmaster's tale. Memories were resurfacing, though very hazily: increasingly shrill articles in *the Daily Prophet* about people building magical shelters in their basements and yards, or about Muggles selling everything they owned to buy stores of food, and medical supplies, and weapons, hastily preparing to stave off the mysterious end.

James looked up from this reverie. Narrowing his eyes suspiciously, he asked, "What day is it today?"

"Today, Mr. Potter," Merlin answered with a small smile, "is June the seventh."

James felt a release of long-sustained tension. It leaked out of his shoulders and neck, slowly, sifting away like sand. He drifted back into the chair, allowed its cool leather upholstery to collect him. "It didn't happen," he said, almost to himself.

"Indeed," the headmaster nodded. "It did not happen. After a night of much fretting, of midnight vigils and frantic crowds, of millions watching the skies and oceans, of families huddled in terror, and entire villages marching en masse to confront imagined harbingers of doom... the darkness faded, and the sun came up, and the birds sang their happy songs. Life, with the perfect blitheness of ancient habit, simply went on. As of this morning, the population of the world has metaphorically blinked with surprise, shuffled its feet in mingled embarrassment and relief, laughed a little at itself, and with a bemused shrug, gone back about its normal business."

James didn't have any response to this. His mind was a pleasant buzz of shock, and relief, and wonderment. More memories were slowly coming back to him: his previous few years, generally uneventful but packed with regular, everyday concerns. The months of his last year of

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school, spooling along only loosely tainted by worries of the triple-six enigma. Up until the past week or so, that was, when the dreams had begun: dreams of a different but all-too-familiar version of reality, of an ocean journey to betrayal, and the Dark Mark hovering over a country cemetery, and Petra Morganstern leveling a wand at Albus' chest...

The dreams and visions had mixed with reality until he couldn't separate one from the other. And then, completely saturated with the nightmare portents of Petra and Judith, Odin-Vann and Albus and the disintegrating vow of secrecy, he had broken away, apparated out to the cemetery in Godric's Hollow, convinced that he had the world to save, desperately and hopelessly. The world... and Petra Morganstern.

Although even in the dream, he had only succeeded at the former.

"You and I," Merlin said in a low, secretive voice, lowering his chin and studying James closely, "are two of the only three living people who know the truth. The triple-six enigma was not, in fact, a dream. It was not a delusion, or mass hysteria. To the contrary, it was simply something terrible that almost happened... but then somehow didn't."

James' heart thudded in his chest. He met the headmaster's gaze. "So... what I think I remember... really *did* happen?"

Merlin nodded again. "In a reality only one small step removed from this one, yes. You alone have lived both destinies. Everyone else alive in this sphere merely dreamed of the other possibility, vaguely and in part, because it was so barely avoided. Even I only know what I do because my prodigious arts were augmented by a mutual acquaintance. The man whom you once knew as Rechtor Grudje, among other names, may be a permanent inmate of the sanatorium ward of St. Mungo's hospital, but his skill at reverse prophecy is as powerful as ever. He, who now goes by the name of Timothy Dumbledore, is the secret third of our trio. He assisted me, and was much gratified to be of service. He is a changed man from the villain you once knew, you may be glad to know. He has been greatly benefitted in the years since his mind was freed of the caged memories of his legendary uncle."

James frowned, squinted with dawning bewilderment. "But... that couldn't have happened, could it? The whole affair of the Morrigan

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Web, that was from the *other* destiny! That couldn't also have happened here...?"

"Alas," Merlin said almost cheerfully, pushing back in his chair and producing a sustained groan from its joints. "You shall find that there are far fewer changes in this world than you might expect. In fact, it might be simpler for me to explain the few things that *have* changed—apart from the fact that the world continues to exist, of course—than those that haven't."

James sat up again, placing his hands on the armrest with interest. A beam of sunlight warmed his feet as it crept slowly across the office floor, tracking the climbing sun.

Merlin seemed to be enjoying a certain smug amusement. "The Morrigan Web did indeed happen, for example, almost exactly as you remember it. The Quidditch summit occurred. Your father and aunt and uncle were temporarily arrested for destroying the Crystal Chalice. Rechtor Grudje was confronted by his benefactor and nemesis, Albus Dumbledore, and that wizard's captive memories were extricated from his mind, allowing him to assume his original identity as Timothy, son of Arianna."

"But," James interjected, still frowning in consternation. "The Morrigan Web was only prevented because Petra was there to... to..."

The words trailed off as the memory of Petra surfaced in his mind. A coolness came with it, sadness filling in the spaces around his cautious, budding relief.

Merlin drew a solemn sigh. "You are quite right. Miss Morganstern was not there in our reality. She died tragically, years earlier, sacrificing herself for the safety of many others. Thus, she did not, as you may remember, use the Morrigan Web to lure the Lady of the Lake into a fateful confrontation. She did not hire the unusual Muggle detective to track and reveal the Lady's destructive plan."

James was dumbfounded. "But then... who did?"

"Her sister," Merlin replied simply, his eyes sharpening. "Miss Isabella Morganstern. Known to you and the rest of the world as Izzy. Much of what you might remember Petra Morganstern doing in that other history, young Izzy did in this one."

"Izzy...?" James repeated softly, leaning back into his chair again, weak with wonder. "But... she's not even a witch!"

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“Nor is she a Muggle,” Merlin said, raising a hand. “Not since her time with her departed sister. Izzy Morganstern is perhaps the most unusual living being currently on this planet. She is what might be described as a Guardian. She has subtle powers that derive neither from any witchy blood nor from the banked forces around her. She taps into something beyond all knowledge and technomancy, immeasurable and strange, something imparted to her by her sister, probably without her even knowing.”

James shook his head slowly, stunned, and yet somehow not particularly surprised. He looked back at Merlin again. “What else?”

Merlin nodded and drew a deep breath to speak. “The Lady known as Judith was utterly defeated on the night of the Morrigan Web. Her time in this world was already dwindling since her host, the unfortunate Mr. Odin-Vann, was killed the year previous, during a raid in Muggle New York City, on the night of a holiday parade. The joined forces of your father’s Auror department and the American Muggle Integration Bureau discovered Mr. Odin-Vann standing over the murdered body of an American senator, a man called Charles Filmore. It was not your father that fired the killing spell, however. It seems that young Mr. Odin-Vann was killed by a Muggle bullet, shot from the weapon of an American M.I.B. agent named Price. Self defence, since Odin-Vann was observed brandishing a wand. Later evidence suggests that Judith sacrificed her host in order to facilitate her own escape mere seconds earlier. Already dying in her absence, Odin-Vann was left behind as a distraction. This act of desperate cowardice sealed Judith’s fate, of course, since the death of her host uprooted her from our world.

“You might be interested to know that the Lady was eventually defeated not by young Isabella Morganstern’s uncanny magic, nor by the combined force of Mr. Titus Hardcastle and his squad of Aurors. She was attacked and ultimately dispatched by a certain pink snake, a manifestation of the fractured personality of an American witch that I believe you know rather well.”

“Nastasia...?” James exhaled, a smile of astonishment dawning on his face. “She *killed* Judith?”

“Not precisely,” Merlin shrugged, as if admitting a mere technicality. “Firstly, Judith was not killed, at least not in the human

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sense. She was banished forever back into the dark netherworld from which she came. And secondly, it was only the Ashya part of Miss Hendricks that attacked and unmade her. The other half refused to betray her erstwhile comrade. But unlike in the destiny that you knew, in *this* world, the Ashya half survived. She rejoined her twin self, Nasti. And while one would be hesitant to say that Nastasia Hendricks lives happily ever after, she *does*, at the very least, carry on as a rather troublesome and complicated student of Alma Aleron. You and she have become well acquainted, in fact. I believe the currently popular term for a relationship like yours is ‘frenemies’.”

James blew out a bemused, relieved sigh. “That sounds about right.” He sobered again. “But... if Petra never made it to Alma Aleron, that means the Archive was never broken into. So the Night of the Unveiling never happened?”

Merlin nodded and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. “With Petra Morganstern deceased, her thread was no longer a part of the Loom’s weaving. Thus, Judith had no option for switching the Looms and stealing the crimson thread of Petra’s unfortunate doppelganger, Morgan. That story never occurred in this history, and quite thankfully so.

“Instead, on the occasion you know as the Night of the Unveiling, I battled Judith personally, having tracked her after her escape from the murder scene of Senator Filmore. She had fled once again into the nearby ocean waters, where her strength was greatest. I foolishly pursued her, battling her in force. When she threatened to reveal her water-gorgon form to the coast of the city, and to attack it in fury, I summoned what power I had left and obliterated her, undoing myself at the same time.

“Alas, while it took me one full year to return from the realm of the dead, it took her mere weeks to reassemble. She was not yet weakened enough by the death of her host. This was my error. But thankfully, her destruction was yet only a matter of time.”

“So you went missing during my fourth year, just like in the alternate timeline,” James said, amazed. The headmaster was right. Fewer things had changed than he could have expected. History had indeed found a way to keep happening. And yet the outcome was

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magnificently different nonetheless. He looked at Merlin and prodded again, "What else?"

Merlin shrugged. "The Vow of Secrecy still erodes slightly, gradually each year. But this is only the result of plain entropy and time, not any devastating revelations." He bobbed his head, raising his eyes in thought. "You and your friends did manage to unleash a dragon into Muggle London, your mission complicated by a particularly disgruntled house elf whose service had been recently supplanted by humans, albeit of the magical variety. The Elven uprising is a nasty business, spurred on by inevitable changes in culture as time marches on. But it is no global revolution, as it was in your alternate history."

"Reaching farther back, you and your Alma Aleron friends in Bigfoot house still won the Clutchcudgel tournament during your third, inspiring year. You, along with Misters Walker and Deedle, still travelled back into nineteenth century Philadelphia and observed the death of the villain, Ignatius Magnussen. You collected the relic unicorn's horseshoe, just as you remember, and used it to tread the World Between the Worlds. The single difference is that you accomplished these tasks only to prove and locate the hiding place of the rogue Lady, who had indeed escaped into that mysterious realm to regain her strength after our battle, with her human host always in tow."

James asked, "And it was Izzy alone that accompanied us into the World Between the Worlds?"

Merlin nodded meaningfully. "Your father, as you are likely now remembering, took Petra's final request very seriously. He took Izzy into your home, considered her as a daughter, sister to you and Albus and Lily. There, she matured swiftly. Tragedy always has that affect upon those who survive. But Izzy's growth was quite clearly augmented by her time with her stepsister Petra. Almost from the start, she showed razor-sharp insights bordering on the precognitive. She practiced strange, burgeoning powers. And she devoured books. Every book she could get her small hands on, reading, and absorbing, and memorizing, always adding to her powers with knowledge and wisdom. And yet, unlike her sorceress sister, Izzy's peculiar magic was somehow purified by her Muggle heritage. The mind that her hateful mother had called simple was, in fact, the mind perfectly suited to harbor and

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subordinate some of the most eerie powers imaginable. Evil will never have the slightest foothold in her. Nor vengeance. Nor selfish ambition.

"And she no longer lives with my family," James said, as his memories slowly returned.

"She does, sometimes," Merlin admitted. "Your family will always be her home. But she has other places. She is a young lady of many secrets. But unlike virtually every other person on the planet, one can be certain that Izzy's secrets are kept not for her own questionable motives, but for the benevolent security of the world that she inhabits."

"She and her dolls," James remembered, his eyes widening slightly. "Beatrice. And Mr. Bobkins. And all the others. She takes them with her most of the time. Only, sometimes when she doesn't, you get the strongest feeling that she left them behind on purpose, and they're not *just* dolls. They aren't scary, exactly. They're even a little comforting to have around, because they're hers, and they reflect her. But they do seem to be *thinking* things. Watching the world for her, maybe."

Merlin sat forward in his chair again, as if recognizing that the meeting was nearly concluded. There were classes to get to, James suddenly remembered. N.E.W.T. examinations were underway. He himself had several more to attend to.

The headmaster moved a few parchments on his desk. "I expect that as time passes, the history you once knew will again be supplanted by the history you now occupy. While most things remain in near perfect continuity, you will find a few unexpected details here and there. Your Aunt Hermione, for example, is the Minister of Magic."

James had been getting to his feet, but he dropped back again with those words, his eyes bulging so wide that they blurred slightly. "You're *joking!*"

Merlin shook his head soberly. "Decent men joke not about politics. She is indeed the Minister, replacing Mr. Loquacious Knapp nearly two years previous. Further such minor shocks shall occur in the coming days. It would be wise to be prepared for them, lest your friends worry for your mental health."

Aunt Hermione being Minister of Magic did not strike James as an example of a 'minor shock', but he understood the headmaster's point nonetheless. He made to get up from the chair once more, finding

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himself already reluctant to return to the old mundanity of classes and schoolwork, despite—or perhaps because of—his immense relief.

But a thought came to him then, and he settled back into the chair.

“A question, James?” the headmaster asked, arching an eyebrow, putting down his parchments.

James shook his head distantly, unsure how to even ask, not knowing what words to form the ideas with. Finally, groping, he said, “What was it that happened between Petra and I? The silver thread that connected us for those lost, undone years. The shared power between us. The payment that she apparently had to make in the end to save us all...” He sighed deeply, running out of words, and looked up at Merlin, a little helplessly.

Merlin leaned back again and steepled his fingers. “You are more aware than many others, I think, of what makes a Horcrux, and how it works. Am I correct, James?”

James frowned a little. “A Horcrux is a bargain with dark magic. A dark witch or wizard can make one if they kill another person. The horrible power of that act lets them break off a part of their soul, and secure it in case their body gets killed.”

Merlin consented to this description, imprecise as it surely was. “It has been said that evil cannot create. It can only pervert. And this is true in the case of the Horcrux. For that dark magic is only a shadow copy of a much greater and more powerful Deep Magic. The ancient ones called it the Lex Carita, and this is the pact that your grandmother made for her son, Harry Potter, and that you made on behalf of Petra when you were ready to die to save her.

“And yet the Horcrux and the Lex Carita are in no way twins. They are exact opposites. Where a Horcrux hoards the taker’s life via another’s murder, the Lex Carita preserves another’s life via the giver’s sacrifice. While a Horcrux’s bargain is capricious, always seeking to renege its promise, the Lex Carita is a pact of charity, always giving many times more. This is why your connection to Petra followed you into the past, before the moment of its very creation, while Petra’s Horcrux abandoned her the instant that she left her natural timeline.

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But most importantly, the Horcrux offers only a poisoned half-life, where the Lex Carita grants perpetual and striving wellbeing."

James' thoughts darkened as he listened. When Merlin finished, he looked up at the headmaster, meeting his eyes. "But if this Lex Carita thing is supposed to bring wellbeing to the person it saves, then why did Petra end up right back on the Gwyndemere? Why did she have to die?"

"You assume your own definition of a person's wellbeing," Merlin said, not without sympathy. "Wellbeing doesn't mean mere happiness and safety. Wellbeing extends to the very depths of a person's role in the tapestry of destiny. Petra was indeed a crimson thread, for her balance was in the red. She told you so herself: she had killed. The guilt of murder claimed her and defined her. Her turning point was not the Night of the Unveiling, or the gazebo in the lake, or even the Chamber of Secrets. Petra's turning point was when she turned pain into vengeance. It was when she joined her own sister's small powers with hers to kill the girl's very mother. For that reason, the Lex Carita pact was less interested in preserving Petra's mere life. It was intent on helping her balance the scales of her deepest soul."

James found this an immensely and exquisitely unsatisfying answer. He pushed back into the chair, arms folded, his face set into a dark scowl of resolve. Perhaps someday he would accept this concept of greater good, and deeper right, and intangible redemption.

But not right now.

For now, he only mourned Petra. Silently, angrily, and hopelessly.

A minute later, he tramped down the spiral stairs to the Gargoyle corridor, just as classes resumed and doors banged shut all around, cutting off the noise of settling voices and squeaking chairs. A warm breeze, smelling of mown grass and lake mist, pushed through the windows lining the left wall. James stopped and took a deep breath, orienting himself to this imminently familiar yet delicately different reality.

"James," a girl's voice said from the corridor behind him, echoing in the falling silence.

James turned around, and then took an involuntary step backward, his breath catching, his heart pounding up into his throat.

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“What?” the girl asked, smiling with bemused surprise, “you look like you just saw a ghost. Other than Professor Binns, of course, whose class I am currently late for.”

“You...” James breathed, blinking with fragile, unexpected joy. He moved to her, stood in front of her, looked her up and down.

His cousin Lucy blushed a little in her Hufflepuff uniform. Her dark eyes darted to the window. It had been years since she had gotten over her crush on him, but clearly there was still a hint of something more than friendship between them. It wasn’t like they were blood relatives, after all. She used her right hand to comb a stray raven lock out of her eyes.

“I heard about what happened yesterday,” she said, glancing back up at him. “About how you went a little mental with triple-six fever and apparated off to a cemetery or something. Millie told me. The whole Hufflepuff common room was having a laugh about it. I told them it wasn’t at all funny and that you surely had a good and important reason for what you did.”

With a warm rush, James remembered. He remembered his cousin’s unfailing loyalty, her boundless inner strength, her almost unconscious leadership. His smile widened into a helpless grin, and then a laugh of pure delight. Unable to help himself, he threw his arms around her and gave a brief, fierce embrace.

“Blimey,” she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder, “I don’t think it deserves all *that*. Get off me before anyone gets any weird ideas! Especially ‘Dolohov’ and Rose.” She pushed him away, a little ruffled, but clearly pleased nonetheless. “Come on,” she said, hefting her knapsack. “Walk with me to class. And tell me the truth...”

“Anything you want,” James agreed, nearly bursting with good humour. Together, they turned and made their way along the hall, walking in and out of warm sunbeams.

“Did you have a good reason for what happened last night?” she asked, glancing aside at him critically. “Only, I know you don’t have the best record when it comes to odd excuses. Sorry,” she shrugged a little apologetically. “You *did* miss six whole years of Quidditch tryouts.”

James laughed again and shook his head. “Last night’s excuse is no better or worse than any of the others, I guess.” He looked aside at

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her again, unable, at least for the moment, to take his eyes off her. "But that's a boring thing to talk about. Tell me what's been going on with *you*, Lu."

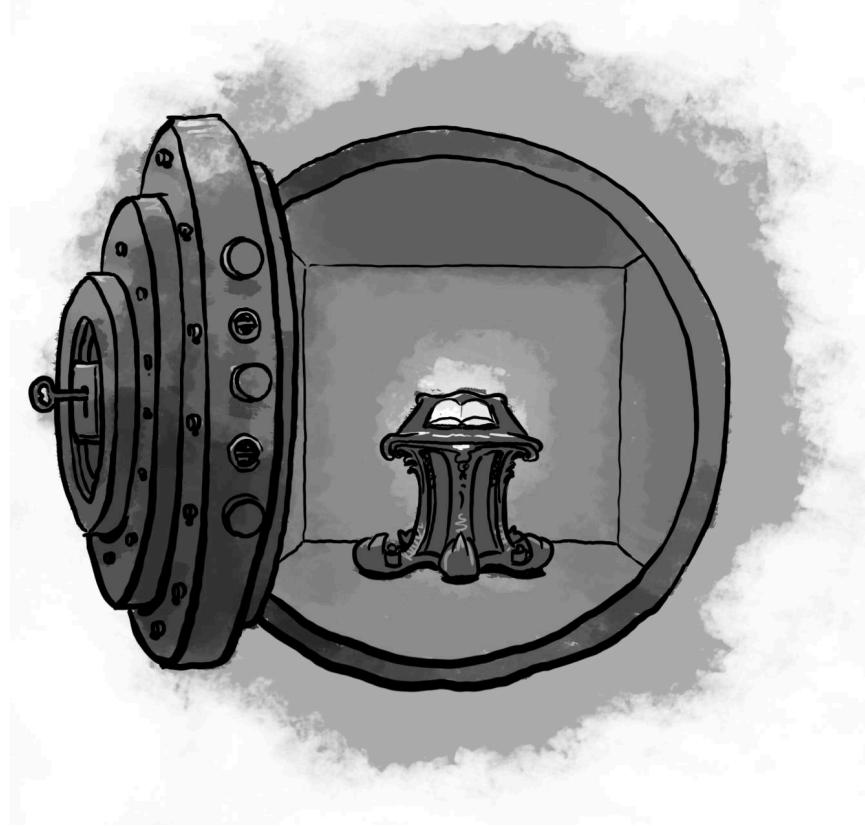
She shot him another bemused look. "Are you sure you're all right? You act as if you haven't seen me in months."

"More like years," he grinned, his eyes twinkling with mischief. "Tell. And I want to hear absolutely everything."

She shook her head at him as if he was having her on somehow. She didn't answer his request on their way to History of Magic.

But she did answer it eventually.

In the years to come, she told him absolutely everything.



## EPILOGUE *NINETEEN YEARS LATER*

“It was right here,” James said to the young girl at his side. “Right here on this stretch of lawn that I graduated almost twenty years ago. Of course, the actual ceremony took place over in the amphitheatre, like it will today, with the families and everything. But that was just the boring part, where we wore our formal robes and they gave out the diplomas and we all shook the headmaster’s hand and they played the Hogwarts salute on bagpipes and harpsichord. The *real* party was later that night, right here on the lawn overlooking the lake. They put up a huge white tent—only it was nowhere near so huge on the

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outside as it was when you went in—and we had Rig Mortiss and the Stifftones play live, and we all danced and ate loads too much, and I and Zane Walker and some of his Ravenclaw mates snuck out the back for butterbeers and even a few firewhiskeys, and Ralph and some of the teachers caught us but just chastised us for setting a bad example, since we were all already graduated and there was nothing they could do to us anymore.”

“*You* drank firewhiskey at your graduation?” the girl asked.

“Well, I *pretended* to. I never did have much of a taste for the stuff. But Zane said I was a hinkypunk’s uncle if I didn’t, and even I wasn’t immune to a little friendly peer pressure back in the day.”

The girl frowned. When she did, she looked a lot like her mother, Lily. “It’s weird to think of the headmaster as ever being young enough to get into trouble for one firewhiskey.”

“Well,” James hemmed, “I’m not officially headmaster yet. Not until Neville hands out the diplomas at *today’s* ceremony.”

“Neville is Headmaster Longbottom, then?” the girl asked, reaching to take her uncle’s hand. She tugged him back toward the castle and the amphitheatre beyond. “Why’s he retiring, anyway? He’s not *old* like Headmaster Merlin was when he retired. Or McGonagall before him. I mean, yeah, Headmaster Longbottom’s old, all right. But *they* were positively *geologic!*”

“Merlin really wasn’t all that old,” James smiled and shrugged, allowing himself to be pulled along. “He just looked like it. He’s still around, unlike McGonagall, God rest her grumpy soul. Merlin just has other things he wants to do. He doesn’t stay in any one job or place for very long. He’s restless. He did his part here.”

“Same for Headmaster Longbottom?” the girl asked, squinting up at him in the sun. “He has other things he wants to do?”

James nodded uncertainly. “Herbology is his passion. He wants to travel the world. Discover new species of man-eating trees and whatnot. Write books about them. It’s his first love.”

“What about you? Will you still be here when I start Hogwarts in a few years? Or will you get tired of being headmaster, too?”

James considered it. “You know, Arianna, I don’t think I will get tired of it. I think I’ll stay here until I am a very, very old man. Perhaps even geologic.”

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“Now *that’s* old,” Arianna agreed gravely.

Together, they walked around the Sylvven tower to the amphitheatre, which droned with assembling voices.

Zane was at the ceremony, as was Ralph and Rose, each with their spouses, each wearing dress robes except for Zane, who sported a dark suit with a bile yellow tie. His wife Cheshire kept distractedly checking a scroll of thick parchment, nicking it out of her purse and unrolling it in her lap, peering down at it.

“They’re fine,” Zane muttered aside at her as the ceremony got underway. “They’re with my mom and dad. They had kids of their own. Greer and I managed to survive.”

“Joanna and Quentin are a serious handful,” Cheshire whispered back. “It’s not *their* survival I’m worried about.”

Rose’s husband, Aleksander Volkiev, whom they had first met at Durmstrang back during James’ fourth year, sat as rigid as a statue, his chin up-thrust, his back as straight as a tyre iron. His slate grey robes fit him as if they had been sewn directly onto his body by elves. Considering how little James knew about Volkiev’s Belarusian magical heritage, it was entirely possible that they had been.

James recalled, somewhat wistfully, that Rose and Zane had dated for a fairly long few years. In the end, his brash irreverence had overpowered his irrepressible charm, and she had tearfully called it off. Volkiev, by comparison, was an icy Siberian river compared to Zane’s American waterslide, and was therefore (unfortunately, in James’ unspoken opinion) a much better fit for Rose’s serious, practical mind. Their own oldest child, Fred Aleksey, was in attendance alongside them, wearing his first year Hogwarts robes. He sat just like his father, bolt upright and stoic, but his face and green eyes were entirely Weasley. James had a suspicion that there was more than a little mischief hiding beneath that practiced posture. He would have to keep an eye on young Mr. Fred Aleksey. Albeit, not *too* close an eye. He did want the boy to have a *little* fun.

Ralph and Ashley Doone (now Dolohov) sat together on James’ right. Ashley’s belly was as round as a punch bowl beneath her strained robes. She rubbed it with one hand and fanned herself with the other. Ralph’s face was a carefully constructed mask of respectful attention, but

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James knew that the big man was constantly, almost obsessively, shifting his eyes to his wife and their unborn child. Throughout the ceremony, he checked on her quietly, offered to fan her with his program, or simply stroked the back of her head, doting on her with almost comical devotion.

James couldn't blame him. They had been childless for the nearly twelve years of their marriage, which was exactly eleven years longer than Ralph had wanted to be. Ashley bore his ministrations with affectionate patience, smiling wanly in the afternoon sun.

Arianna sat with her own parents, Lily and Graham Warton—a union that James could not begin to understand even to this day, a decade after it had been announced to the world via a surprise wedding in Hogsmeade. It seemed to work for them, if occasionally tumultuously, judging by the number of times that Lily showed up at her parents' old house in Marble Arch "needing to talk"!

More familiar faces dotted the assembled crowd. James saw Scorpius and Nastasia halfway around the bowl of the amphitheatre, him watching with stoic boredom, her peering down at the parchment in her own lap, scribbling things with her finger. Her hair was no longer pink. Today, it was a sort of aquamarine at the crown of her head, fading to a bright acid green at its flounciness, pixie tips. It would probably be neon blue by the time they arrived at the reception. They were not a happy couple, quite. And yet they were somehow perfect for each other, James thought, sharing their time between her residence in Muggle New York city, where she was a freelance writer and "professional malcontent", and wizarding Diagon Alley, where Scorpius had followed in his father's footsteps at Gringotts bank.

Their own three children, Wentz, Beckett, and Urie, were apparently at their London flat in the charge of their house elf nanny.

Hagrid was also in attendance, of course, near the front, his broad back and now-grey bushy hair blocking at least three full seats behind him. Elsewhere, James spied Gennifer Tellus and Noah Metzker, Uncle George and Ted Lupin, Lucy and her grown sister Molly, and of course, the couple whose firstborn son they were there to celebrate, Damian and Sabrina Damascus. They sat near the front, on the row opposite Hagrid, beaming with fierce joy as their son, young Damian Junior, crossed the stage and accepted his enormous rolled

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diploma from headmaster Longbottom, who shook the boy's hand firmly and smiled. There was, James saw, a stiffness in Neville's smile, a certain admonitory brittleness at the edges.

Damian Junior ignored this. He tucked his diploma under one arm, turned to the crowd, and raised both fists to his head. He jammed his extended thumbs into his ears and stuck out his pinkies, wagging them energetically.

"Gremlin salute!" his father cried from the audience, jumping to his feet and returning the gesture, his square face positively brick red with pride.

Gennifer Tellus hooted and jumped up as well, as did Ted Lupin, Noah Metzker, and a few of the other original Gremlins. Zane was on his feet, joining in the gesture even before Cheshire knew what was happening. The crowd murmured with mixed laughter and annoyance. Cheshire yanked Zane frantically by his coattail, pulling him back down into his seat.

James wanted to join in, but reluctantly chose not to. It would likely be considered unseemly for an incoming headmaster. Besides, he had never been particular good at Gremlinery.

On the stage, Neville rolled his eyes and shook his head, drawing a weary hand to his brow.

Later that night, the white tent was once again erected on the lawn overlooking the lake. Most of the families had gone home, but Ralph, Rose, Scorpius, and Albus had stayed behind, ostensibly to serve as chaperones, although James well knew that they were mostly there for their own nostalgic reasons.

The group divided their time between halfhearted patrols around the tent for illicit consumption of firewhiskey and a largish round table near the tent entrance, where they congregated and reminisced and caught up on each other's new lives.

Ralph, like Scorpius, had followed in his father's footsteps, becoming the official technical security liaison to the Ministry of Magic. He alone had been responsible for the complete and comprehensive update of the Rules of Secrecy, which encompassed everything from Artificial Stupidity hexes for Muggle GPS devices to new official terminology of the ages-old Vow of Secrecy that all magical citizens took

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upon coming of age. Thanks to him, the wizarding world was, if not more secure than ever, certainly no less secure than it had been back when James himself was a first year and a lone Muggle reporter had forced himself, via pure bloody-minded determination, through the unplotable boundary of the Forbidden Forest and into Hogwarts School.

Rose had become a partner in Weasley's Wizard Wheezes, opening its first American location in New Amsterdam to much fanfare and unexpected success. She was now negotiating store franchises in locations all across both America and the UK, while juggling the more prosaic responsibilities of taking care of their younger son, Ivan Arthur, while Volkiev trained to assume command of the Harrier Corps from the soon-retiring Viktor Krum.

Zane had become a writer of fiction stories, partnering with the Muggle detective, Marshall Paris, for a series of novels based on his completely bizarre and inexplicable adventures. His first novel, "Bullets are Forever", had not been a bestseller, but it had been popular enough to gain the attention of a huge wizarding publishing firm in New Amsterdam. His latest book, "X Equals Revenge", was the fifth in the Marshall Paris series, slated for release during the upcoming Christmas season.

"That's the key," Zane said conspiratorially. "I could publish my grocery list, and if it came out on the first of November, it would sell like lemonade at Hades' gates. It's all a racket! But a racket that works in my favor, so I don't complain one tiny bit."

James knew there was more to Zane's success than mere release dates, but appreciated his old friend's tactful self-deprecation.

Albus, of course, didn't talk much about what he was doing. As chief deputy Auror, second only to their dad, there wasn't much he was allowed to talk about, at any rate. Instead, Rose asked him about his wife, Fiera. Albus responded happily, talking about her and their daughter, Fiona Constance, with the deliberate detail of a man avoiding other, more sensitive topics.

Altogether, they offered up the typical middle-aged laments, obligatory and blithe. They were all living pretty much exactly the lives that they had hoped and dreamed of, even if, in actual practice, those

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lives were rather more prosaic and bland than they might ever have expected.

The gathering toasted James' new position, clinking various glasses of butterbeer, blackcurrant wine, and one firewhiskey (Albus, of course). They lamented the continued lack of a Gryffindor house ghost, ever since Nearly Headless Nick had made it into the Headless Hunt, well over two decades earlier.

When the party was over, or at least winding down to its final dregs, James abandoned the tent and made his way to the empty Gryffindor common room.

Not much had changed. There were a few newer chairs and tables. The sofa beneath the window had been replaced with one that was, while still threadbare and sagging, not quite as threadbare and sagging as the one that he remembered. The bust of Godric Gryffindor, chipped and battered, stood on the mantel, just begging to be used in one more game of Winkles and Augers.

James' old bed up in the boys' tower had long since been refinished, the words WHINY POTTER GIT expunged permanently from its headboard. This was probably a good thing, considering his new position. And yet he felt a certain wistful sadness about it.

He sighed and sat down on the sofa facing the coals of the fire. It was too warm for the flames to need stoking. They were only there for effect, offering mere ruddy light and little heat.

A blonde woman was seated on the chair nearby, her eyes glinting in the light of the coals.

"Petra would be very proud of you," she said.

James nodded, knowing it was true. "She would think the post was beneath me, probably. She would say I should be Minister of Magic, not headmaster."

"I don't think so," the blonde woman said, smiling sadly. "Political posts are for crusaders or puppets. Headmasters are the ones who really change the future. They provide the subtle pebbles of destiny that shift the rivers of the future. She would be glad you were here. She would applaud you."

James glanced aside, and smiled ruefully. "How are you, Izzy?"

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Izzy shrugged. She was older than a young woman now. In her prime, if such a person could be said to *have* a prime. James secretly suspected that she might never grow a year older as long as she lived. Not unless she desired it, and allowed it. "I'm well. I can't not be. I expect you know that."

"Wellbeing is more than safety and happiness," James said with a sigh, turning back to the fire.

"I know," Izzy answered, a smile in her voice.

They sat in comfortable silence for a minute. Izzy was a like a sister to James, although a sister that he had never fought with, or tattled on, or been embarrassed by in front of his friends. She was all the warmth and knowing of a beloved sibling, with none of the jealousy or spite.

Of course, she was also completely unlike any other human being. She was, as Merlin had long ago said, a Guardian. It was less a description, James had come to discover, than an ancient title. Such beings had apparently lived long, long ago. Some legends said that they still did, although now in secret, forever hidden, watching and guiding from the backstage of reality. James wondered sometimes if that was where Izzy went when she withdrew from her childhood home with the Potters, when she seemed to step right out of the world of regular people, both magical or Muggle.

He suspected he would never know the truth about that. Izzy had never explained, and he had never had the audacity to ask.

"I saw Deirdre Finnegan the other day," she finally said, speaking as if to the dying embers. "She said to tell you hello."

James shook his head ruefully. "Don't start."

"She's very beautiful," Izzy shrugged. "Much more fetching now than she was even back when you two were in school. She intends to apply for the Transfiguration position. She's very good. I think she would make a wonderful addition."

"I know what you're getting at," James said, his smile softening only a little. "It's not any additions to *Hogwarts staff* that you're dreaming up. It's very sweet. But stop."

"Tabitha Corsica is between husbands at the moment," Izzy commented with a sly smile. "What with her working for the

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Department of Ambassadorial Relations, she'd be traveling so much that you'd rarely see each other anyway."

James rolled his eyes. "You're very amusing."

Izzy's smile softened. "And then there's always Lucy. She's never really gotten over you, no matter what she says."

"Enough," James sighed. "Lucy and I... look, it's complicated. And not just because we're technically family. I love her, of course. And we did see each other for awhile."

"On several occasions, I recall."

James glanced aside at her. "Our story isn't over yet, I suppose. But for now, it's at a bit of a stalemate. She's busy studying for her doctorate in advanced technomancy at Alma Aleron. I'm here, getting ready to start a new career..."

Izzy met his eyes knowingly. "A bachelor headmaster *isn't* a requirement, you know."

"I know," James answered with a sigh. "It's not that. Really. I just..." He shook his head faintly. "It's not that I'm not looking. Or that I'm disinterested. I go out sometimes. And who knows: maybe someday someone will come along. Maybe Lucy. Maybe even Deirdre. Definitely not Tabitha Corsica. But, for now... I'm happy. My life is... uncomplicated. I'm content."

Izzy nodded, seemed to consider this thoughtfully for a minute. Then she looked at him and said, "If anyone else said that, I think they'd be lying, both to me and themselves. But in your case, James... I believe you."

James smiled at her, happy to be known.

They chatted a little longer. Izzy asked about Albus and Lily, Mum and Dad. And then, as the clock struck midnight, she stood up. James stood as well. He walked her to the portrait hole, and she gave him a hug. It was affectionate, lingering, and over too soon. And yet, as always, James felt comforted by the nonverbal promise of many more hugs to come, in a future that was, if unpredictable, at least steady.

Izzy would see to that.

She left via the portrait hole. James knew that once the painting swung shut, Izzy would likely vanish from the school altogether. She

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didn't have to use doors. But leaving via them, at least in other people's presence, was a kindness and a courtesy.

He considered going upstairs to the boys' dormitory and finding an old student bed to sleep in. It was a ridiculous thought, of course. It made him smile. His trunk was already stowed in the formal guest quarters adjacent to the headmaster's suite, just waiting for him to move across the hall tomorrow and start his new life.

He would not look back. Not when there was so very much to look forward to.

Thus, he decided to go to the guest quarters after all. He was confident that he would sleep exceptionally well, and awaken ready for whatever new adventures awaited him, this time from the other side of that ancient, foreboding headmaster's desk, with the Sorting Hat snoozing on its shelf behind him.

Perhaps he would even get a phoenix.

On that note, he climbed through the portrait hole, leaving the portrait of the Fat Lady, snoring daintily in her frame, to swing gently shut behind him.

In the empty darkness of the Gryffindor common room, a shadow moved. It had been there the whole time, only perfectly still, knowing that stillness made it invisible. That was simply one of the rules. The shadow had watched Izzy and James speak, listened to them with affection, and a little amusement, and a touch of old, deep sadness.

The shadow was the shape of a young woman. She had long dark hair, somewhat windswept, but rakishly so. She wore a pale blue hooded jumper over a calico dress and work boots. She had deep eyes the peculiar blue of moonlight on a frozen pond.

She was considering what name she might choose for herself. All the ghosts had special names, after all. There was the Bloody Baron, and the Grey Lady, and even Cedric's silly Spectre of Silence.

She thought she might call herself *the Crimson Thread*. It wasn't a phrase that had any meaning in this world anymore. That story had never officially happened. Nor, technically speaking, was her thread crimson anymore. Now it was the pale, pervasive blue of her eyes. But still. It had a nice ring to it. People would probably respond well to it.

It was memorable.

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The new Gryffindor house ghost considered these things for a long moment, and then drifted back into the shadows, planning, musing, considering...

She had plenty of time to decide. Her schedule was empty. Her tasks were done.

Her conscience was clear.

*THE END*

*Except possibly not.*

James was well over a year into his tenure as Headmaster when an idea came into his head. It was almost as strong as the ideas that had preceded his feverish fugue during the days of the triple-six enigma, except that this one, he knew, was no alternate dimensional intrusion.

For one thing, he really had spent a holiday with Millie Vandergriff, back during his seventh year of schooling. He remembered very clearly sitting at a formal Christmas table with her grandmother, the countess Eunice Vandergriff, who was, quite remarkably, still alive and, if only metaphorically, kicking. In truth, James didn't think the countess had deigned to do anything so undignified as *kicking* even when she had been a young woman, sometime during the beginning of the previous century.

He remembered, very clearly, their discussion about the significance of the House of Black.

It is more than a landholding and title, she had told him. More than a mere name.

The colour Black *meant* something. It protected and regulated some elemental human force, just as the Greene Barony had once been charge of the force of jealousy and ambition, and the Marquess of Rose had moderated the fickle tides of love.

But the Countess had refused to tell him what the House of Black was the charge of. Or perhaps she had been *unable* to tell him.

Because perhaps she did not herself know, or remember.

The idea had come back to him many times over the years as a mere curiosity. Something he might one day choose to investigate on a whim, should he have the time and the inclination.

Until the dreams began in earnest.

Except that they weren't *dreams*, exactly, as much as they were simply an ill-defined sense of urgency, like the echo of a loved one's voice, calling out in need, or some important but forgotten appointment, nagging at memory. Even during daylight hours, in his office or seated at the head table at meals, James would be overcome

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with a shock of directionless panic, as if he himself was a student again, a nervous first year waking up and realizing that class had already started, the exam was about to begin, and he had barely enough time to struggle into his robes and dash, hair mussed and shoes untied, as fast as he could to the classroom door before it shut him out, too late, doomed to fail.

He had no idea what was behind it all. He only knew that it had something to do with Countess Vandergriff's odd suggestions about the dusty title he would one day inherit, and the significance of the name Black, and the responsibility of some ancient, fundamental stewardship.

The answer came from the least of all expected sources.

"You should go to Grimmauld Place," one of the headmaster portraits said with a sniff.

James at first didn't know which one had spoken. He had been sitting in his office that late fall evening staring at a book, reading the same line over and over, his mind completely distracted and driven by phantom urgency, making both concentration and sleep impossible.

Somewhat irritated, he glanced over the portraits and asked, "Who said that?"

"I did," a portrait in a high, cobwebbed corner answered in a nasal drawl. James squinted into the dimness above. It was the portrait of Phineas Nigellus Black. He didn't think he'd ever actually heard that particular portrait speak, although he did know that the same portrait of the dodgy old headmaster sometimes occupied an empty frame back at the Black estate.

James considered the portrait. "Why should I go to Grimmauld Place?"

"Because you are clearly agitated to the point of near complete uselessness here. I recognize the signs. Go and spare us your frustrated sighs."

"But why *there*, exactly?" James pressed suspiciously.

But Phineas Nigellus merely crossed his arms and leaned back, his face dropping into flinty-eyed shadow.

"You'll get no more answers from him, methinks," the portrait of Dumbledore suggested, peering up and out of his frame. "But I

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expect his counsel, limited though it is, may prove fruitful to your current state."

"Do *you* know anything about this?" James asked, lowering his eyes to the nearer portrait.

Dumbledore shrugged enigmatically. "I only know that we are all obliged to assist the sitting headmaster in whatever way we can, via our own unique perspectives. Phineas Nigellus' perspective might arguably be the most unique of all."

From the cobwebbed shadows, Phineas Nigellus harrumphed haughtily.

The portrait of Severus Snape feigned sleep, unconvincingly.

"Go," a woman's portrait sighed, speaking in a high Scottish brogue. "I for one can't bear to watch you sigh and squint at the same page in that dratted book for one more minute."

James nodded. Even if the old headmasters (and headmistress) had no clue what they were talking about, a short trip might well clear his head. And he hadn't been to Grimmauld Place in years.

He left that very night.

Even as headmaster, there was no apparating out of Hogwarts castle, apart from examination times, when, as he well knew, the restriction was temporarily lifted. Thus, he donned his cloak and his new black peaked hat and left the office briskly, leaving the door to creak shut on its own behind him.

The halls were nearly empty, despite the lack of any Argus Filch or Mrs. Norris to strike terror into the hearts of wayward students across the campus. Mrs. Norris the cat had died nearly fifteen years earlier, at the tender age of forty-nine—ancient even for a Kneazle. Filch had outlived her unhappily until only three years previous. James still remembered Hagrid's long eulogy at Filch's funeral. The event had packed the country church outside Hogsmeade, much to James' surprise. He'd wondered at the time how many of those attending were former students who half expected the irascible old caretaker to climb back out of his casket, possessed of sheer stubborn ill-temper, and amble back to the school, zombie-fashion, to continue his cantankerous duties from the afterlife.

That didn't happen. But the sight of Hagrid crying openly during the eulogy, blowing his nose noisily while a huge framed portrait

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of Filch's scowling visage looked on, rolling its eyes in disgust, was perhaps an even odder sight.

Now, the caretaker's post was occupied by young Edgar Edgecombe, and never a more fitting replacement could there be. Edgecombe himself seemed to have long forgotten his spite toward James as a student. Now, the stout young man was the very picture of sniveling respect and deference, simpering to the staff out of one side of his mouth while lashing venomously at students from the other.

James knew he should keep a fairly tight rein on the nasty little man. But he also knew from experience that nasty little men tended to be rather useful when it came to maintaining a sense of order, so long as their bite was not permitted to exceed their bark.

James left the castle via the old rotunda entrance and met a hard, cool breeze from the distant Forest. The lights were lit in Hagrid's hut. James was tempted to go knock, to share a late-night toddy with the beloved old professor and groundskeeper.

But he did not. Now that his journey was underway, he felt a slowly growing inertia behind him, pressing him forward, driving his strides through the hissing grass. The moon was a gigantic bone-coloured eye over the lake, presiding over its rippling reflection.

James entered a Forest trail, walked a quarter of the way toward Hogsmeade, and then apparated with a decisive *crack*.

The world snapped back into place around him in mid-stride. He was in a cramped Islington street, crowded with parked cars, blowing trash and dead leaves. He slowed and looked up, turning to his right.

Number twelve Grimmauld Place wasn't visible, of course. Numbers thirteen and eleven pressed close together, now so distractingly old and decrepit that no one even blinked at the apparent mistake in numbering. The streetlamp nearest was broken, casting a pall of shadows over James where he stood. Traffic could be heard beyond the rooftops, but nothing moved on the street in either direction.

James produced a key and summoned the entrance to number twelve, causing the flats on either side to rumble aside, like drunken patrons making room at a bar.

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No gaslights worked inside the old manor. Once inside, James lit his wand and startled when its glow shone on an exquisitely ugly, staring face, bare feet away.

"Good evening, Master," a deep bullfrog voice grumbled.

"Kreacher," James gasped, recovering. "How did you know I would be coming?"

"Kreacher's first responsibility is to attend his master's house with unfailing vigilance," the ancient house elf said with the tiniest hint of indignation.

James rolled his eyes. "The empty portrait of Phineas Nigellus told you."

Kreacher scowled and narrowed his eyes. "That as well, Master."

James sighed and took off his hat, hanging it on a cobwebbed rack near the door. "Did he tell you why?"

"He suggested you might wish to view the Vault, Master."

James blinked down at the knobbly old elf. Kreacher's innate brand of ugly had blossomed over the last few decades, turning him into a truly spectacular specimen of grotesqueness. His nose and ear hair alone could well have been used to paint a rusty cauldron. James lifted his wand a little higher, distancing it from Kreacher's attentive glower. "I didn't know that Grimmauld Place *had* a Vault," he said.

"Precious few do, Master," Kreacher nodded slowly. Then, as silent as a moth's wing, he turned and padded away, apparently leading James further into the dark house.

James followed, his own footsteps creaking the floorboards, the breath of his passage drifting in layers of cobwebs.

James shivered. "When's the last time this place was cleaned?"

"Kreacher cleans Master's house twice per week," Kreacher rumbled with sepulchral patience. "Top to bottom, stem to stern."

James looked aside into the parlor as they passed. Dust lay in a thick film over every surface, clouding the tarnished mirror over the hearth, weighing down the closed velvet drapes. Clearly, Kreacher's concept of cleaning was a unique and interesting entity unto itself.

Together, the two wended their way through the dark kitchen and then down the narrow stairs into the cellar. There, no light shone at all apart from James' illuminated wand. Shadows loomed behind the

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old collection of mismatched furniture. The tiny wrought iron stove was as dark and cold as a grave.

Kreacher stopped next to the stove. Without turning back, he said, "Master's key, sir."

James looked at the elf's knobby back and hunched shoulders. "I... don't have any key."

"The Vault can't be opened without Master's key, sir."

James patted his pockets, half expecting to find a mysterious key in his robes. He found nothing but a few spare Knuts and an old train ticket. He shook his head and exhaled in frustration. "I don't have any key," he said again. "You're just going to have to open it yourself."

Slowly, ponderously, Kreacher turned his warty head and looked back at James with one huge, rheumy eye. He measured him silently, inscrutably. "*No one* can open the Vault without the key, Master. Not Kreacher. Not you. Not anyone in this wide world, or any others."

The sense of urgency descended over James again. Impatience came with it. Where would he find any mysterious key? Why had Phineas Nigellus sent him without telling him what he needed? He opened his mouth to demand an answer from Kreacher—an answer he knew he would probably never get—when a push of dusty air sighed down the stairway behind him. It was accompanied by a distant thunk, and then the unmistakable sound of hurrying footsteps, growing swiftly closer.

James turned on the spot and raised his wand warily, pointing it toward the stairs both for light and warning, as a figure began to clump down them.

The figure stopped on the second to last step, its own wand lit and held at head-height.

"Oh," the figure said, "Hi, son."

James slumped with relief and lowered his wand. "Dad! What are you doing here?"

Harry Potter tromped down the remaining step and moved to join his son. They were of equal height now, even if the elder Potter was still rather broader through the shoulders. His glasses reflected their lit wands brightly, but his smile was easy and comfortable, despite the fine lines that belied his age.

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"It's time, apparently," he answered with a shrug. "I knew this day would come. Just didn't think it would come quite this soon. The duty shall be yours now, such as it is."

"What duty?" James asked, unable to keep the impatience out of his voice. "I feel like a Howler's been going off in my own head for days, only it's just screaming me onward, not using any actual words. What's this all about?"

Harry put a hand on his son's shoulder and gave a commiserating squeeze. "I understand your frustration. Just think how it was for me! Sirius was dead by the time I got the calling. He wasn't here to do for me what I'm about to do for you. I had to find the key all by myself. About drove me mad. And Kreacher here was about as useful as a candyfloss broomstick."

Kreacher turned around fully and bore this comment with something approaching dark relish, scowling hard enough to curdle milk.

"What... key?" James asked with barely contained impatience.

Harry fished in the pocket of his robe and pulled out a simple key. It was made of some black metal, perhaps six inches long, ornately crafted with a ringed head, a long shaft, and complicated geometric teeth extending beneath. It was a handsome object, diminished only slightly by the layers of ancient tarnish and patches of rust that scuffed and darkened its surface.

"I found it in an iron lockbox beneath the bricks of the master hearth," Harry said, cocking his head at his son. "It was about the hundredth place I looked. If it wasn't for a handwritten clue I found in one of Sirius' old record sleeves, I would likely be tearing this place apart to this very day. Once the calling comes, there's no denying it. I expect you know that yourself, now."

James took the key from his father, held it in his palm. Despite its tarnish and rust, its weight implied a very fine construction, heavy and solid. He looked back up at his father, his eyes narrowed.

"Years ago, when I asked you about this, you acted like you didn't know anything."

"And you will, too, should anyone ask you," Harry replied soberly. "Although they won't. Not even Merlinus knows this secret,

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though he may have his suspicions. Now go ahead." He nodded toward the patiently waiting Kreacher.

James turned to the elf and, somewhat reluctantly, held out the key.

Carefully, almost reverently, Kreacher put out his huge hand, open, allowing James to place the key gently onto his palm. Kreacher closed his fingers over it slowly and turned away again.

"Apparently," Harry said softly as Kreacher stepped toward the blank brick wall beyond the stove, "before this room was a lounge or a servant's kitchen, back when it was first purchased by Slade Willibrord Black, it was outfitted as the antechamber to an ultra secret hidden chamber, long since forgotten. Pay attention to how Kreacher accesses it. He may not always be here to assist you."

James watched as the old elf raised the key and held it approximately sixteen inches from the brick wall. He shifted it minutely, as if searching for some hidden quadrant of empty space. And then, strangely, metal clinked on metal. Decisively, Kreacher pushed the key forward, slotting it as if into an invisible keyhole. It chinked home, and the old elf gave the key a single, clockwise turn.

Purple light bloomed out from the key, fizzing as it went, first revealing a round metal panel and the hidden keyhole. The panel was as black as onyx, engraved with ornate scrollwork in the shape of an old English letter B. The sizzle of purple light expanded still, spreading side to side, up and down, revealing a complicated circular door made of the same black metal, studded with bolts and rivets, festooned with crawling scrollwork that picked out every feature, embraced every detail. When it fully resolved, the door stood like a round layer cake turned onto its side, ten feet tall, comprised entirely of black iron plates, ringed and bolted together, as heavy as a cathedral and twice as imposing. The key still jutted from the centre, slotted into its key-plate.

Kreacher bowed his head and stepped backwards, retreating into a far corner.

James was dumbfounded. He had been in the cellar room dozens, probably hundreds of times. Never had he suspected that it had any secret significance.

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Tearing his eyes away from the huge Vault door, he asked his father, "Have you been in there?"

Harry gave a rather equivocating nod. "A few times. Three, in fact. Once to do the duty of our office. Twice... simply to see for myself, as you will now."

James looked at his father. Harry met his eyes and gestured with his hand. An invitation.

James stepped toward the door. On the right side was mounted a thick metal handle, curved to conform to the door's shape. James reached for it tentatively, touched it. He expected the black iron to be cold, but it was not. It was pleasantly warm, like the shade on a summer's day. The metal thrummed a little, as if connected to some secret, far distant power source. The vibration of it carried up to his elbow. He swallowed nervously, and then gave the door a tentative tug.

The door unlatched, its bolts already unlocked by the key. It swung silently, slow and heavy on well-oiled hinges. The initial tug was all it took. Inertia swung the door in an irresistible ponderous arc, revealing a sort of shadowy cell beyond. The walls, floor, and ceiling of the space were seamless stone, as if the room was hewn from one gigantic, perfectly solid block of granite. The cell seemed perfectly empty and dark except for a single object in the centre of the floor. It was a sort of plinth or pedestal, constructed of the same ornately engraved black iron as the door, anchored to the floor with fist-sized bolts. Its base was wide and curled into baroque twists. Its body tapered upward like a tree trunk, flaring delicately toward a flat, pedestal surface. A single, small object sat there, in a pool of mysterious golden light.

James stepped forward, up into the space. It was cool inside, cave-like, but not dank. The air was fresh somehow, mysteriously scented with running water and night-blooming flowers.

Upon the pedestal, a tiny book sat, open on its leather cover, its blank pages turned up to the light, as if waiting to be filled.

Harry moved close behind his son, unable not to look down at the strange little book and its blank, expectant pages.

"Merlin had a book like that," James breathed, both awed and confused. "I saw him with it years ago. He was reading it on Hagrid's ship. And on the morning after the Triple-Six enigma."

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"Merlin's is a copy of a copy of a copy," Harry said, his voice quiet and somber. The space seemed to inspire solemnity, not out of obligation, but out of a sort of innate, secretly giddy respect. James suddenly felt that he had to contain his emotions not because they were inappropriate, but because, if he gave them voice, he might laugh out loud with inexplicable joy, or break down into inconsolable tears, or draw his wand in search of a villain to best or a monster to slay. Here, in the presence of the Book, emotions were magnified into their purest, most visceral, gut-wrenching, and intoxicating selves.

Harry went on, keeping his voice low and steady, "This is the Book that all other books strive to be. It took me a little while to understand it myself. And even now, I grasp it only barely. Like a child grasps quantum technomancy."

James tore his eyes from the creamy, golden, waiting pages, turned to his father, wanting to understand. *Need*ing to understand.

Harry met his son's eyes. "Every magical title is a custody of the elements of humanity. And each one is defined by their colour. You have observed this yourself. Greene is for ambition. Rose is for love. Blue is for intellect. But Black... that one is different from them all."

James remembered. "Because Black is where all the other colours come together. It's every hue in one."

Harry smiled. "That's as true as our minds can understand. Black is the junction of all the other facets of humanity, where they combine and blend together. Black is the alchemy of love and hate, cowardice and courage, jealousy and intellect, revenge and redemption. It orders all the other colours and makes them into something cohesive, something larger and greater than the mere sum of their individual parts. The Black guardianship, James, is the element of Story."

James blinked at his father, unsure if he had heard him properly.

Harry nodded again. "We think stories are mere letters on paper. Just words spoken into the air. But in a multi-universe of infinite possibilities, there is technically no such thing as fiction. Somewhere down the line of the endless dimensions, every beautiful story is true. Our very lives may be some other universe's favorite tales."

James met his father's smile with a tentative one of his own. "So... this Book?"

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Harry looked down at it again, his eyes clearing. “It’s the ultimate true story. Yours, mine, everyone’s, in every version of our world, where they all tie together into the greatest plotline of them all. It’s not like the Loom in the Vault of Destinies. That is a mere recording of what happens. This Book is the future story that is yet to come, and the promise that it will all be worth it.”

James looked back down at the simple little Book. His intellectual mind found the idea preposterous on the very face of it. How could all good stories be true? How could this little book contain them all? But his deeper mind, the mind that had once called upon his love’s hidden powers to save her life—to save it so that she could eventually find redemption for her own soul—understood completely.

“The only real fictions,” he said, trying out the idea, “are the ugliness, the pointless tragedies, the losses without resolutions. They are lies written into the world by hate. But hate is a mere vandal, sadness only graffiti on the architecture of glory. Someday, if we are careful with our charge, hate’s work will be erased. All of those unfinished details and loose threads and unsatisfying heartbreaks will find their resolution. It will all be tied up in a perfect conclusion that redeems everything, erases all the losses, and compounds all the joys.”

Harry nodded. “Our charge is simply to assure that the Book remains open. To never assume that the last word has been written on a tragic chapter. To let the stories always go on, all drawing slowly to the universal and perfect conclusion that no single one of us can quite imagine. As long as the Book remains open... the storybook ending hasn’t yet been written.”

James wanted to touch the Book. He peered at it closely and realized that it wasn’t, in fact, completely empty after all. There were words there, forming and flowing, flitting like angel wings on the paper, almost but not quite invisible. He wanted to lean close, to try to read, but didn’t dare.

“This is a duty greater than either of us.”

“And yet,” Harry said, a little ruefully, “Men much smaller than you have borne it, and with hearts of pettiness and pride. For the stewardship of story does come with its benefit. There is just a bit more serendipity, a hint more luck, a touch of extra coincidental happenstance that somehow manages to always work in our favour, at least in the long

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run. I have known it in my life, even before learning of the Book. I expect you have as well."

James nodded. With a wistful sigh, his eyes still on the not-quite-empty pages, he asked, "Tell me about the other two times you came into the Vault."

Harry grew sober. "When Granddad died. I was very sad. I needed to see that there was still hope to be had. Hope for a future where even death might be obsolete."

James looked back at his father now. "And the third time?"

Harry met his son's gaze, his expression serious. "The Book called to me. Just as it called to you tonight, and for me to join you. It happened late during your seventh year of schooling. It was a dark time, if you recall. People were afraid, tormented by visions of doom. And no one was certain that they *were* mere visions. Many believed that the end was upon us. It was the night of the Triple-Six enigma when the story summoned me. And when I got here, when I opened the Vault, the Book was closed."

James nearly gasped at the idea. He whispered, "But how is that possible?"

Harry shook his head gravely. "I don't know how it happened, or why. No one had been inside the Vault. Perhaps the story closed on its own, simply because hope was so thin in the world. Perhaps some dark and inexplicable force had been involved, shutting the Book's pages via its own evil fascinations. But the Book called to me, it's custodian. And when I arrived, I found that it wasn't *completely* closed." He smiled faintly. "There was a bookmark."

He produced something else from the same pocket that had held the key. He offered it to James, delicately.

It was a chocolate frog card, beaten and dog-eared, its cardstock softened with age to the point of flimsiness. The portrait space on the front of the card was empty, but the banner beneath was still legible, if barely.

James read it.

Then he blinked and read it again.

He shook his head and looked helplessly at his father. "That's... my name," he said wonderingly, a little worriedly. "James Sirius

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Potter'." He turned it over and saw a block of text, white on dark blue. The first few lines read:

JAMES SIRIUS POTTER  
Headmaster,  
Hogwarts School of Witchcraft & Wizardry,  
Order of Merlin First Class, Double Awarded.  
Son of the legend, and legend in his own right.  
Famed for his pursuit and dispatch of the  
villainous and dastardly cabal know as...

Harry covered the card with his hand, gently taking it back with a smile.

"The future, apparently," he said, peering wryly at James over his glasses. "No one should know too much of their own. I don't know how this came to be in the Story, keeping its place. But clearly, like the Book, your own story is not yet finished. *Never* finished. And tonight, a new chapter begins. The key is now your responsibility, as is the Vault and its Book."

James nodded, although his mind was spinning, reeling. What could the chocolate frog card possibly mean? How could it have gotten into the Book, saving the proper place, from whatever distant, mysterious future was its origin?

He followed his father back out into the much more prosaic darkness of the cellar.

James closed the Vault door carefully. It was his duty now. He twisted the key back, relocking the cell and its strange talisman of hope. With a shimmer of purple, the door vanished away again. James tugged the key out of the invisible keyhole.

He pocketed it, and patted the pocket, content to feel the small, powerful weight therein.

From that day forward, he kept the key with him at all times.

His father kept the chocolate frog card.

And in the many years that followed, when James was sad (and he did have occasions to be sad) he thought of the Vault. He thought of the Story. Sometimes, very rarely, he visited it. He performed the duties of his stewardship.

He reminded himself.

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The Author was not yet finished. The sadness was only a chapter in the larger plotline. Heartbreak and loss were the only fictions. They would not last forever.

The happy ending was not yet written.  
But someday... *someday*... it would be.

