

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

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LOVINGLY BASED UPON THE WORLDS AND
CHARACTERS OF J. K. ROWLING

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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 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 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 was almost inaudible. “Another house elf, by the name of Dobbyfoggynpuddleneff.”

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 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.

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.

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.

Voices 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.

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.”

“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 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, 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."

"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.



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—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’.”

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 student's 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'."

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 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 chucked 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 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 bedsheet, 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' yeh! 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 bustled 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, 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.

“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 manticores 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. 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 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 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 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' 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.

“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’.”

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.



NEXT CHAPTER:

BLACKBRIER QUOIT!

GRANDMOTHER EUNICE!

A NEW SORT OF WIZARDING ARISTOCRACY!