

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

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

© G. NORMAN LIPPERT, 2017



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.”

“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.”

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, pricking 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 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 perfunctorily, 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.

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.

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.”

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 jellyworts. 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 wave of coldness fell 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."

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," Debellows 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*?"

"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," Debellow 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.

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 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. He 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.

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?”

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 Kreachter 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 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 step-sister, 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 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.

He wanted to put his arm around her but didn't dare. He wanted to breathe 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 Horcruces, 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."

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?"

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 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.

“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 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.

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."

“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.



NEXT CHAPTER:

**HAGRID CONCOCTS A PLAN!
HEDDLBUN'S SECRET TALENT!
RALPH DOES HEAD BOY STUFF!**