

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

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

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5. JUNIOR AURORS IN TRAINING

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

of the magical world was right in opposing Petra, that James and his friends may have been on the wrong side all along.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

year, Mr. Potter's ordeal is near an end. It is his younger classmates that he worries about. 'Ask them,' he suggests, clearly hinting at their corroboration."

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

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

"Headmaster Merlin won't even give a thought to it," Graham nodded. "If he reads it at all, which I doubt, he'll probably like it. Nothing breeds order quite like a fearsome reputation. I think that's an exact quote from him, in fact. When you look at it that way, seems like Skeeter's doing him a favor."

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

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

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

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

James drew his wand.

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

It was Ralph that stopped him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Crisply, she folded the newspaper, glanced piercingly around the room, and then dropped the bundle back onto the table before

Edgecombe's bowed head. He snickered silently, still flitting his eyes back and forth between his cronies.

Gradually, the noise of conversation filled the hall again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"James," he rolled his eyes with a smile. "Don't you ever knock?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Zane,” James said, meeting the blonde boy’s eyes through the glass of the Shard. “She’s made a Horcrux.”

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

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

“She *did* kill someone,” James said in a hushed voice, sinking lower on the sofa. It wasn’t a topic they discussed much, but they all knew it. “Her step-mother, Phyllis. She was a perfectly horrid woman by every account. Hated her own daughter, Izzy. Drove Petra’s

grandfather to suicide and may have been responsible for her first husband's death, according to some. She and Izzy killed her together, somehow. They sent a tree after her."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James slumped again. "If only it was that easy."

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

"And who is that?" James asked limply.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Zane nodded. “Precisely.”

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ralph glanced back and was relieved to see Rose approaching,

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh good,” she said, “I’m not too late again.”

“Who invited *you*?” James exclaimed, taken aback.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

James sank in his seat and muttered under his breath.

“Excuse me, Potter?” Scorpius clarified innocently. “I didn’t quite catch that.”

Ralph blinked in surprise and glanced from James to Scorpius. “I think he said ‘duck yourself...?’”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ralph asked, "But, why would she do it?"

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

“But a Horcrux,” Lily said, dropping her eyes gloomily. “Ever since Voldemort, people *know* dark magic like that stains a person’s soul, makes it twisted and broken. Can her goodness survive those effects long enough to finish her plan?”

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

“Eww,” Lily grimaced and shuddered.

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

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

“Well there’re really only two things we can do,” Rose said after a long, meaningful pause. “First of all, James, you must use your dreaming connection to Petra to watch her as closely as possible.”

“I will if I can,” James nodded. “I don’t think I have a lot of say about it, either way. Petra, neither, no matter how hard she tries. But why?”

Scorpius answered, “Because little Albus might be wrong about Morganstern’s ability to stay pure as the wind-driven snow while tapping into the mouldy-Voldy bloodline. The tapeworm, as he calls it, may grow fat enough to take her over completely. If that happens,

she won't care about finishing her mission. She'll become the enemy that the magical world already believes she is."

James wanted to argue. He wanted to point out that Petra, being a sorceress, was stronger than Voldemort had ever hoped to be. The guttering shred of that villain caged in her soul was a mere flickering candle compared to her roaring bonfire.

But he remembered that look in her eyes, underneath the shame and sadness—that buried, ironclad spike of defiance. *You won't understand why I must do this, James, the look said. You can't understand. And I don't blame you. But please, don't dare try to stop me. I won't allow even you to stand in my way...*

"What's the second thing we have to do?" Ralph asked, turning to Rose.

Rose sighed deeply, resolutely. "We have to help Petra," she answered with a slow nod. "Any way we can. We have to assist her in completing her mission to take the place of the Crimson Thread. Because Scorpius is right. If Petra is tapping into the power of the Bloodline of Voldemort, that shred of ghost won't be content to merely help her. It will seek to rule her. It will persuade her to give in more and more. If it succeeds, Petra may well lose the will to complete her task. She may truly become the She-Voldemort."

James shook his head firmly. "That's crazy," he insisted. "Petra isn't like him--"

"James," Lily said, her quiet voice interrupting him more effectively than a shout. "The worst thing Voldemort ever did was kill and create Horcruxes. Petra is the only other person who's done the same thing. I don't like it any more than you. But the fact is, she is *already* more like Voldemort than any other living person. She isn't thwarting the Bloodline anymore. She's *using* it."

"We have to help her replace the Crimson Thread in that other dimension," Rose finished, watching James' face intently, "before she changes her mind about doing it at all."

James didn't agree with Rose. But he didn't argue.

Resolved, if unhappy, the troupe began to stand. There were no sounds other than the scrape of chairs on the stone floor and the creak of the door as it opened.

They were halfway down the hall before Albus suddenly piped up.

“I almost forgot why I was looking for you in the first place,” he glanced aside at Ralph, James, and Rose. “Debellows said your first duty as ‘junior aurors in training’ has come up.”

“But, it’s Saturday,” Ralph protested, slumping. “This is supposed to be a replacement for *class* time, not weekends.”

“Hush, Ralph,” Rose said, shouldering the big boy aside. “What’s Debellows want us to do?”

“Search me,” Albus shrugged. “He just said to meet him outside the headmaster’s office at four this afternoon.”

Rose stopped in her tracks, her eyes going wide. “And you just *now* remembered to tell us!?! You do know that it’s...” She consulted her watch frantically, and then nearly shouted, “five past four already!”

Albus shrugged again. “I’m a messenger, not your bloody secretary.”

His words were lost on Rose, however, who had spun on her heels, already retreating back along the corridor at a dead run. James and Ralph glanced at each other, and then scrambled to follow, pelting as fast as they could in Rose’s wake.

They would have made it to the headmaster’s office only slightly late if they hadn’t been stumped, of course, by the gargoyle that guarded the spiral staircase. There, they spent several agonizing minutes attempting every Old Welsh and Celtic former password they could remember, all to no avail. Eventually, steps rang from above as people began to descend the staircase from the headmaster’s office. Debellows himself came into view first, followed by Professors Votary, Heretofore, and McGonagall.

“Ah,” Debellows commented, spying the students standing around the gargoyle. “And thus your first foray into Aurorship goes much awry.” He clucked his tongue and gave a condescending smile.

“We’d have been on time, er, more or less,” Rose said, slumping back onto a windowsill, “If your messenger had remembered to give us the password.”

“Ah, but I didn’t provide it to him,” Debellow chided, raising a pedantic index finger. “One never shares passwords with those whose duties do not require them. No, your instruction was to meet me here, outside the Headmaster’s office, where I would have escorted you inside at the proper time. Alas, when the proper time came, you were not to be found. Methinks there is some small lesson here.”

James, along with Rose, was about to protest, when another set of tramping feet rang down the spiral staircase, revealing the last person James expected to see: his own father, wearing his official robes, apparently in close conversation with the headmaster himself.

James ran to meet him at the bottom of the stairs, and then paused, suddenly aware of the presence of so many observing teachers. He attempted to replace his expression of breathless curiosity with one of mere professional interest, and knew that he was not exactly succeeding.

“James,” his father smiled at him and clapped him on the shoulder. James was nearly as tall as his father now, though both were still half-a-head shorter than the imposing bulk of Headmaster Merlinus nearby. “I’d been told I might see you upstairs. Delayed, were you? No matter. Here you are now.”

“Yeah,” James answered, exquisitely aware of the many watching eyes nearby. “We’ve officially begun a sort of work study, exchanging class-time for on-the-job Auror training. Er, all three of us.” He indicated Ralph and Rose as they joined him.

“Hi, Uncle Harry,” Rose said perkily, ignoring the mutter of nearby voices as the teachers drifted away, led by Headmaster Merlinus.

Harry cocked an eyebrow. “All *three* of you, eh? Your mother will be so proud that you’ve managed a promotion to seventh-year, Rose.”

“Hush!” Rose said, turning grave and slitting her eyes toward the departing teachers. “I’m not doing a thing you wouldn’t have done, Uncle, and don’t you dare say otherwise.”

Harry nodded wisely and mimed locking his lips. He seemed as cheerful as ever, James thought, and yet something seemed to hang in the air about him, muting his mood and darkening his eyes. Perhaps only James, having grown up with him, could sense it.

“What was that all about, Dad?” he asked seriously. “What’d we miss?”

Harry nodded, turning serious as well. He seemed to consider for a moment. “You three,” he nodded, marking each with his eyes, “you’re all looking to become Aurors, are you?”

James nodded, as did Rose next to him.

“I suppose so,” Ralph answered, frowning a little. “As such. I mean, I’m not all that keen on having loads of dark witches and wizards shooting killing spells at me all day long. But, you know. It’s something to do.” He shrugged as Rose rolled her eyes.

“Good enough, then,” Harry said. “Walk with me.”

They walked along the corridor, passing huge windows and moving in and out of the brilliant afternoon sunlight. Harry didn’t speak, only marched along, knowing his own way along the halls and passages just as if he was still a student. They descended steps and finally passed through the old rotunda, heading toward its enormous but lesser used wooden doors. Only then, as they stepped out into the warm glare of the ancient portico steps, did Harry speak.

“You all were present when those Muggles stumbled into the Entrance Hall, I assume?”

James nodded, trotting down the steps to the brambly yard below. The lake lay beyond a low stone wall, shimmering copper in the lowering sun. “Everyone was. The whole school saw it.”

Harry considered this dourly. “It’s happening all over the magical world. The old protections are thin as tissue, if they exist at all anymore. Muggles are obeying the boundaries out of sheer habit, not

because they are kept out. But bit by bit, some of them are wandering in. Just like that family on First Night.”

Rose stopped next to the wall and peered up at her Uncle. “Is that why you were summoned here today? To talk about how to shore up the boundaries?”

Harry shook his head. “That’s already been done, as well as it can be. Merlinus was more than up to the task, and I imagine his unplottability charms are better than any other living wizard today. No, I was sent here today by order of the Minister of Magic himself.”

Ralph blinked in surprise. “Loquacious Knapp sent you? But why? What’s he care about some wandering harmless family at Hogwarts when there’s places like Gringott’s Bank and the giants’ mountain preserve at risk?”

“Because Hogwarts is well known to be one of the best and most heavily protected sites in the entire northern hemisphere,” Harry answered. “Knapp wanted me to see for myself, to hear from those who witnessed it, that the breach is so bad even here that an entire family of clueless Muggles was able to simply drive up to the gate and walk inside.”

James nodded. “Well, that’s pretty much exactly what happened. So what do we do?”

“You mean, as junior Aurors in training?” Harry favored his son with a sideways smile.

“Well, yeah,” James nodded, rising to the challenge. “If we can! This is all our problem, isn’t it?”

Harry gave a brisk sigh. “You’re right, James. All of you, you’ll have to do your part. I won’t belittle that. But there’s really only one thing the Minister believes we must do. Every official both above and below my rank agrees. Even Titus Hardcastle and the rest of the Auror department, they all know what must be done.”

Ralph frowned. “And what’s that?”

In answer, Harry reached into his robes. James assumed his father meant to produce his wand. Instead, he withdrew a small

scrolled parchment. He unrolled it, looked down at it, and then turned it around for all to see.

James had seen copies of it many times before. Each time, it gave his heart a sick little jolt, although over the past few years, as the posters had aged and been pasted over by adverts and graffiti, the jolt had numbed slightly. Seeing the perfectly crisp copy now held open in his father's hands, the sick, sinking feeling came back stronger than ever.

Petra's face was printed in black and white, unmoving, not because it wasn't a magical photograph, but because the girl in the picture was unconscious. It had been taken by the American arbiter, Albert Keynes, during the brief time after they had succeeded in capturing her. They had kept her in a magical sleep, knowing that they could not contain her if she was awake.

Beneath the photo were words printed in huge black capitals:

**UNDESIRABLE
NUMBER ONE:
PETRACIA ZOE MORGANSTERN
THREAT LEVEL 10+
DO NOT ENGAGE!
REPORT ON SIGHT**

“We have to capture her,” Harry said soberly. “She's where this all started. And before you begin, James,” he raised a hand to his son, “I know. We all do. You don't need to remind me. She did it to save us, me and Titus, back during the parade in Muggle New York City. But that doesn't change anything. Everything began to unravel from that moment. Every Ministry Technomancy expert agrees. Petra started it. In order to stop it, we must find her.” He paused, and then went on in a low, firm voice, clearly repeating the orders he himself had been given. “We must capture her, by any means necessary.”

“But,” James began, although the piercing look on his father’s face subdued his tone. “But, what if Petra is trying to stop it all herself? What if capturing her will keep her from accomplishing the job?”

His father’s gaze was direct and probing. James recognized the look and the posture behind it, the keen alertness. His father was in Auror mode. James had rarely felt the intensity of it turned upon him, but he did now.

“She’s had over two years, James,” he said, unblinking. “If she intended to set things right—which I would very much like to believe—she’s had time to do so. Instead, things have continued to go further wrong, and there are many who believe that she is directly responsible for those things. Up to and including the potential disaster that was the Morrigan Web. Even you have acknowledged that she had a hand in orchestrating that.”

“But...!” James began, but his father overruled him again with a look.

“I know. You also tell me she had her reasons, and that she helped to stop it in the end. I want to believe you. If you’ll remember, it was me and your mother that put Petra up the summer her grandfather died. It was us who supported and hosted her during Keynes’ investigation. I’ve always wanted to believe the best of Petra, despite how it made me look to many of my peers and superiors. And that’s the problem, really. Now, people are watching *me*. They believe I won’t work as hard as I must to capture Petra. That’s why I must work all the harder.”

He sighed harshly and slumped a little, then looked up at James again with only his eyes. “She’s had two years, son. She’s had every chance I can offer her. Things are unraveling too fast to wait any longer. And that’s why I must ask you, all three of you...” Here he looked aside, turning the intensity of his gaze briefly upon Rose, and then Ralph, before bringing it back to James. “If any of you know anything about Petra—about what her plans might be, or where she might be found... if any of you have had contact with her in any way... you must tell me. Not because I am your father, and uncle, and

friend. But because withholding such information is now a crime punishable by law. Not even I would be able to protect you. Even if..." Here, he hunkered down and drew the three students into a close huddle around him. He went on in a near whisper. "Even if, when I was in your shoes, and knew things that no one else did, I might have chosen to keep that information a secret myself, despite every warning to the contrary."

"You never were one to bring lots of adults in on your plans," Rose agreed.

"You won't want to hear this," Harry breathed reluctantly, "but I'm going to say it because it's true. Things are different now. When I was your age, I didn't have grown-up allies in positions of power. Or if I did, I didn't know who they were, and wasn't certain if I could trust them, at least not until it was all over. Things are different for you lot. You have me, and Hermione and Ron, and Professor McGonagall, and Neville Longbottom. And Headmaster Merlinus, for heaven's sakes."

James tried not to smile, even in the midst of his consternation. "You sound like Grandma Weasley when you say 'for heaven's sakes'."

The Auror mode on Harry's face softened a little. "That's not a bad thing. Never a bad thing. But I'm serious. All of you. This is no longer the time to do things on your own. Besides placing the entire magical world in jeopardy, and possibly the Muggle world as well, it's a Ministry crime. And people I don't control *will* assure that such crimes are punished to the fullest extent. We have to end this. If you hear anything, learn anything, know anything... I need you to tell me. The sooner we can capture Petra..." He shrugged and his eyes drifted uncertainly. "Well, if she does intend to end this, same as we, then the sooner perhaps we can work together to accomplish that goal."

James wanted to tell his father everything he knew. But in that moment, he saw the doubt on his father's face. The Ministry wasn't interested in partnering with Petra. Capturing her meant punishment, imprisonment, possibly even total obliviation, or worse. The entire magical world blamed her for everything that was going wrong. They wouldn't be satisfied with anything less. In fact, considering how

powerful Petra was, the worst outcome—her own death, or those who opposed her—was the likeliest outcome of all.

Suddenly, darkly, James was secretly glad that Petra had created her Horcrux. In order to preserve and repair the magical world, she had performed the riskiest and most damning spell of all. All James had to do to help her... was lie.

Or not *lie*, perhaps. Merely omit. For a time. He glanced around at Rose and Ralph.

“We’ll tell you if we hear anything,” he said, still looking at Ralph and his cousin, not quite prepared to meet his father’s probing, knowing eyes. He considered his words carefully, quickly. “If we learn anything that will help you put an end to all this... then we’ll tell you straight away.”

This, he told himself, was not a lie, exactly. Because in his heart, he didn’t believe that anything his father did *could* put an end to the degrading destiny of the world all around. Only Petra could do that now.

His father studied him intently, his eyes neither suspicious nor gullible, merely watchful, as if he was recording every syllable for future consideration. James finally met his father’s gaze again, knowing that it was a mistake not to. After a moment, cryptically, the elder Potter nodded once, slowly.

“Good. That’s all I expect of you.”

The three straightened out of their conspiring huddle. Harry tucked the Petra poster back into his inner pocket, and then patted his robes, looking for something and muttering. “Where did I put that, then? Ah.” He produced a tiny black velvet bag that James recognized. It was weighed down from the inside by a single dense object—a pewter chess king of the non-magical variety, from a set once owned by James’ grandfather, Arthur Weasley. The piece normally decorated the corner of Harry Potter’s desk in the Auror department at the Ministry of Magic, except for moments like this.

“One benefit of the diminished boundaries around Hogwarts,” Harry said, bouncing the small bag on the palm of his hand. “Portkeys

work much closer to the school than they used to. There was a time I'd have to walk halfway to Hogsmeade before this would have functioned." He looked up at the three gathered students again. "I assume I'll be seeing you lot soon enough, now that you're all officially junior Aurors in training?"

Rose nodded. "Until any of the teachers catch wise on my part, at least."

"But hopefully only during class-times, from here on out," Ralph added.

James only nodded, not quite trusting himself to speak.

"I'll give your love to everyone else," Harry said, his smile fading slightly. "And they send theirs to you. Until next I see you, then, remember: you know how to contact me, both personally and officially. I trust that you will, should anything... come up."

The three nodded as Harry watched. Apparently satisfied, he bounced the black velvet bag on his palm again, caught it, and then turned and walked several paces, as if he meant to stroll into the evening shadows of the Forbidden Forest beyond the old courtyard. Wind blew and switched through the tall grass at his feet. As James watched, his father upended the bag onto his open right hand, catching the pewter chess king as it fell out. With an eye-bending whoosh and a whip-crack of collapsing air, he was gone, leaving only the impression of his footsteps in the field grass below.

"We've crossed the Rubicon now," Ralph breathed fretfully, running a hand back through his hair and collapsing against the stone wall. "We're withholding valuable information from official Ministry investigation. Your dad's right, James. We could go to prison for this. Seriously."

Rose shook her head, more uncertain than denying. "We don't know any valuable information. Not yet. At least not so far as the Ministry's concerned. James just had a dream, that's all. Uncle Harry might understand the significance of such a thing. But his bosses would think he was daft if he brought it to them. James probably did him a favour, not telling him about it."

Thinking about it that way, James felt slightly better. Not a lot, but a little. Wordlessly, for lack of anything better to do with the remaining hours before dinnertime, the three clambered over the stone wall and meandered down toward the lake, watching the stiff breeze as it skated over the treetops and rippled the mirror of the lake, listening to the companionable, if somewhat tense silence between them.

It wasn't that James had never lied to his dad before. He'd lied to him on loads of occasions, regarding everything from windows broken while playing Winkles and Augers to who had left the Quidditch rulebook lying outside in the rain after an argument about blatant blatching.

But he had never lied about anything as serious as this, about anything that might get both he, and perhaps even his father, into serious trouble with people who could imprison all of them.

A pit of unease lay in his stomach, nagging at him, growing even as the evening rolled over the edge of the world and pulled the night behind it, cloudy and cool and wet with fog, like a portent, a damning shroud that chased James silently, even as he finally climbed the steps to his dormitory and fell into bed, restless and worried.

He hoped he would dream of Petra again, perhaps even go to her, as he had the previous week. He wanted to talk to her, to gain some assurance that she really did mean to set everything right, and that he, James, had done the right thing by guarding her secret even from the man whom he loved and respected most in the whole wide world.

When he finally slept, however, he did not dream of Petra. She had closed the conduit once more, even though it cost her much energy, and she could not maintain it forever. James knew this, even in his sleeping mind. The unplugged thread of her sorceress powers glowed between them, shifting from grey, to white, to deepest red. It pulsed. Even as she closed her end, James felt the strength of the thread banking inside him, storing up in him like a battery.

He had absorbed her powers before, even called on them from time to time, usually without even intending to. Her powers were

foreign to him, and completely uncontrollable. And yet he comforted in feeling the connection, the slowly intensifying energy that pooled inside him like a cycling dynamo.

Even in his dreaming mind, he mused: perhaps someday he would be able to use that banked strength to protect Petra again, just as he had on the back of the Gwyndemere those several years earlier. Only better, and more confidently, because he had absorbed so much of that weird energy in the time since. Petra was a sorceress, but unlike Merlin, her element wasn't the vast expanses of nature. She was a new kind of sorceress, and her element was the humming hive of the city.

James' dreaming, untethering mind mused with some tentative comfort: since he had first connected to Petra on that fateful ocean voyage, he had visited many, *many* cities. All of that absorbed sorcery strength was inside him, banked away, just waiting for the proper moment to be unleashed. When it came, perhaps—just perhaps—James could use it for good.

If, of course, it didn't kill him first.



NEXT CHAPTER:

CONFRONTATION WITH ODIN-VANN!

RALPH'S SUSPICIONS REVEALED!

FILCH'S "RULE 13"! (I THINK HE MADE IT UP)