

24. THROUGH THE CURTAINS

As they neared the castle, the silence seemed to develop its own strange inertia. At first, James merely felt that there was nothing to say. And then, as the minutes passed, he began to feel as if spoken words would somehow spoil the moment--not because the moment was beautiful, of course, for it certainly was not, but because there was a brittleness in the air, a tension that spun out like spider's silk, that James was loath to break. As the gathering finally approached the cliff's edge upon which the black castle stood, James finally realized the truth of why everyone had grown so quiet: they were all afraid that there really *was* someone inside the castle, someone powerful and terrifying, who might hear even the softest whisper and come out to greet them.

When they stood before the massive open gates of the castle, however, speech became necessary.

James rasped, "Do we just go in? Should we... knock, like?"

"We just go in," Petra replied, her own voice hushed. "But keep a sharp eye out."

"Someone's watching," Lucy nearly moaned, peering up at the overhanging balconies.

Petra nodded. "I know. They're waiting for us."

James stepped alongside her as they moved into the shadow of the entryway. “Do you know who it is?”

Petra shook her head and pressed her lips together.

The inside of the castle was almost entirely empty. One enormous room yawned before the travelers, leaping up into shadowy vaults and stretching off toward pillared archways on the far side. The group’s footsteps echoed loudly in the darkness, making stealth impossible. The stone floor was covered with decades of blown grit and drifts of dead grass. As the troop crept into the center of the space, moving in a nervous huddle, James caught a hint of movement on the far wall. He peered into the darkness, squinting without his glasses, and made out a large framed shape. It was much larger than a man and filled with shifting shadows: a gently billowing curtain.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” Zane muttered, looking in the same direction as James.

Ralph nodded. “There are more of them. All around the room. I see at least a dozen.”

“They’re escape routes,” Petra said in a low voice. “Placed here by those who built the castle for those unfortunate adventurers who might end up marooned here. Each curtain will take the stranded traveler back to the dimension from which they came, although the where and when might be a bit tetchy.”

Nervously, Lucy asked, “How do you know these things, Petra?”

Petra shrugged. “I don’t know.”

“So they’re all like mini Nexus Curtains,” James said, looking around wonderingly at the gently billowing portals.

Ralph seemed heartened by this news. “So *all* of these will take us back to our own world?”

“I’d beware of them,” Petra warned. “They’re under the influence of she who has taken this castle. They will do what they were made for, but not without her capricious tricks. You may find yourself in the bottom of the Dead Sea, or a hundred feet over a live volcano. Beware of these portals unless there is no other hope.”

“Good advice indeed,” a woman’s voice said brightly. The sound of it echoed all around, rendering it huge and directionless. James startled, as did the rest of the group. All eyes scanned the dark space, seeking the speaker, but no one was evident.

“Who are you?” Petra called out. “And why have you attacked our world?”

“That’s not the question you *really* want answered,” the voice replied, still echoing broadly around the cavernous room. “Here, time may not mean much, but I assure you, in the world from which you come, it is still marching along as always, and there are things we must attend to, you and I. Let us not waste precious minutes on trivialities.”

James raised his voice and ventured, “Where’s the crimson thread?”

“A better question,” the woman’s voice answered, smiling, and a thin beam of light came into view, cutting through the heights of the room and alighting on a previously unnoticed scene. James

turned toward it and was surprised at what he saw. A collection of utterly prosaic furniture was laid out in the unmistakable arrangement of a bedroom. There was a narrow bed and side table, a chest, a desk, and a high-backed chair, turned so that it faced away from the travelers.

Petra's hand squeezed James' suddenly, nearly hard enough to hurt.

"The thread is there," the woman's voice echoed in answer.

James squinted toward the light. A small silver jewelry box sat open upon the desk. Visible just inside it was an opal brooch. Spooled around this, glinting in the light, was a length of metallic red thread.

Zane gasped. "The missing thread!"

Petra moaned, "My father's brooch!"

James broke away from the group. Steeling himself, he approached the desk, which stood nearest of all the furnishings. When he reached for the brooch, however, his hand froze. He felt the veins of his fingers go brittle a moment before the flesh crackled white all the way up to his wrist. Tendrils of icy vapor trailed behind as he yanked his hand away and hugged it to his chest, crying out in shock and fear.

"That was unwise," the woman's voice said, smugly amused. "But instructive, I am quite sure. Only she who owns the brooch may approach it."

"Why are you doing this?" Petra demanded, striding toward James and taking his hand into both of her own. After a moment, James cried out again as the feeling returned to it. He flexed his fingers experimentally and then glanced thankfully at Petra.

"I am not doing any of it," the woman answered, and James finally thought he saw her. A figure stood disguised in the shadows beyond the beam of light. Even in the darkness, he recognized the shape of her--the hooded robe, framing that beautiful, arrogant face. It was the woman he had first met in the halls of the Aquapolis back at the beginning of their journey. It was Judith, the Lady of the Lake.

"You are right, James," the woman said, as if reading his thoughts. She stepped forward slightly so that the light reflected up onto her features. "But only a little. I have taken the form of the woman that Merlinus once loved, but I have also adopted a trace of the woman your sorceress friend bargained for. If she looks at me closely, she will see it."

Petra peered past the beam of light toward the woman on the other side. Her face paled. "Mother?" she whispered.

"I am both and I am neither," the woman answered lightly, waving a hand. "I have borrowed from the shape of Merlin's Judith and your own mother, my dear, partly because it amuses me and partly because it was the condition of the bargain."

"The bargain," Petra said, still whispering. "But... I didn't kill Izzy. The dreams I had at the beginning of our journey were wrong. Izzy *didn't* die in the lake on that night. I called it off. The bargain was never completed."

“You didn’t kill Izabella,” the woman corrected, “but you *did* kill. You sent your stepmother into the lake in your sister’s place. By doing so, you only changed the *conditions*. The bargain itself was fulfilled. Your destiny insisted upon it. Thus, rather than recalling your beloved mother from the afterlife, you got... me. I arose from the lake on the night that you murdered your stepmother. You recalled me from the mists of the netherworld, my dear, in the place of your mother. I wish I could say that I was sorry, but alas, I am not.”

“*Who are you?*” Petra asked again.

“This is still not the question that begs to be asked,” the woman replied impatiently, “but if you must know, I am a Fate. There are three of us, although not in the way that you might think. The other two Fates do not know their own identities, and for now that suits me just fine. My true name would be unpronounceable to you, so you may simply call me Judith or the Lady of the Lake. I enjoy both titles.”

“Why are you doing this?” This time, it was Lucy who approached. She stood next to James.

“Why?” the woman said, raising her eyebrows in a surprised smile. “Because it is *my* destiny. And because I enjoy it. Need there be any other reason?” She laughed. “The truth is, I have been working toward this end for nearly a year by your time--almost since the moment I arose from the lake’s surface. It took me some time to find all of you, but once I did, I knew that you would lead me to where I needed to be. I even assisted when it was absolutely necessary. And sure enough, you led me to Alma Aleron and that delightful device known as the Vault of Destinies. The rest was eerily easy.”

James felt Zane and Ralph join him now. The group was once again complete.

Petra’s voice turned cold as she said, “What is it you want?”

“Still the wrong question,” Judith scolded, her smile turning brittle. “Soon I will grow impatient with you. Stop wasting our precious time. We have work to do.”

Zane spoke up then, his voice trembling slightly. “Give us back the crimson thread!”

“That is a demand, not a question.” Judith sneered slightly, turning her pretty face piggish for a moment. “And I cannot grant your demand at any rate.”

Petra made to reach for the brooch, around which was twined the tantalizing thread, but Judith chided her warningly.

“I would not be so bold, dear one,” she teased. “The brooch can only be taken by she who owns it.”

“But *I* own it!” Petra exclaimed. It was nearly a plea.

James took one more step forward, placing himself at the head of the group, his hand still intertwined with Petra’s. “Will you,” he asked, framing the question with great emphasis, “give us back the crimson thread?”

“*That’s* the question I’ve been waiting for!” Judith cried out, clapping her hands with glee. “And I have an answer for you, James Sirius Potter, you wonderful, bold young man. The answer is no.”

“Why not?” James demanded, barely stopping himself from reaching for the thread-twined brooch again.

“Because *that is not* the crimson thread!” Judith exclaimed, delightedly. “And because the *real* crimson thread does not *wish* to go back!”

As Judith spoke, James perceived movement inside the beam of the light. He turned toward it and saw that there was someone else in the castle with them, someone who’d been there the entire time, seated on the high-backed chair, turned away from them. A pale hand moved on the arm of the chair, gripping it as the figure stood, arose to her full height, and turned around.

“You wonderful fools,” Judith breathed triumphantly, gazing at the young woman who now stood in the beam of light. “You failed to understand the true meaning of the Loom. That length of thread you see wrapped around the brooch is only a symbol. *She* is the *true* Crimson Thread, drawn through the Vault of Destinies from her own dimension, just as the symbolic thread itself was plucked from the Loom. As long as the symbolic thread stays here with us, *so... does... SHE.*”

James was speechless. He stared into the beam of light, unable to take his eyes from the young woman standing there, smiling weakly. Her hair was long and dark, framing a face he knew very well except for the eyes. There, he saw only a hollow deadness, lurking just under a pall of misery. Except for the eyes, the young woman standing inside the light, at home in that odd bedroom assembly, was Petra herself.

“Izzy,” the other Petra said, her voice cracking into tears. “I’m so sorry I killed you.”

“It was *you* I dreamed of,” Petra said, staring at her sudden twin. “Not me. In *your* world, you were too late. You killed her.”

The other Petra nodded slowly, not taking her eyes from the Izzy that stood just outside the light.

“So that’s *your* brooch,” James said, nodding toward the jewelry box. “You never went on the ocean journey with us, so you never lost it.”

“This is not the Petra you know, James,” Judith replied, finally moving into the light. “In her world, she never came to your home seeking refuge. Instead, she gave herself over to the destiny that claimed her on the night she killed her sister. She has abandoned good and forsaken love. She has nothing left, which is why she was so willing to join me. And after all, why wouldn’t she? I am her mother. She paid for me. She paid very dearly.”

The other Petra responded to this by leaning her cheek onto Judith’s shoulder.

“Petra,” James called out sharply, speaking to the young woman in the light. “That isn’t really your mother! Haven’t you been listening? She’s some evil beast from the netherworld, bent on creating chaos! Petra, she’s not even really human!”

“Don’t call me that name anymore, James,” the young woman in the light said sadly. “Petra is no more. Now there’s just me, Morgan.”

Judith nodded slowly and smiled. “My ‘daughter’ and I have been very busy ever since I drew her into your world. You see, the rules of the Nexus Curtain do not apply to either of us. She is not of your dimension and I am not human. We may pass through as we wish, although doing so does have its consequences. Dimensions don’t respond well to two of one person occupying them at the same time. Whenever my Morgan passed into your world, your Petra fell asleep. In truth, I suspect she even faded from your world, and slept here, on this very bed, trading places with Morgan. I suppose they *could* exist at the same time in the same world—for a time, at least—but it would not be without its own strange consequences. The fabric of existence would reject such a duality, and would strive to annihilate one of the dimensional twins, all in the name of balance. But this is neither here nor there. The fact is, we have passed through into your reality, on several, important occasions. We have, in fact, had quite the busy little lives in your world.”

James suddenly thought he understood. He narrowed his eyes angrily. “You!” he exclaimed, pointing. “*You* killed the leader of the W.U.L.F. and took over! *You’re* their new leader!”

“Oh my, no,” Judith laughed again, delightedly. “No, no, no, you silly boy. *I’m* not the leader of the W.U.L.F.” She gestured affectionately toward Morgan. “*She* is. She killed Edgar Tarrantus. Frankly, she was doing the man a favor. He’d grown so very *political* in his old age that he was very nearly a joke. More importantly, she killed the Muggle politician. They’d had other plans for him, of course, but Morgan here can be quite persuasive. In death, Senator Filmore will serve a much greater purpose. And besides, American politicians are, as they say, a dime a dozen.” She laughed as if she’d made a small joke at a party.

“Why couldn’t you just stay in your own dimension?” Lucy called out suddenly to Morgan, her face pale but stern. “I’m sorry that you bollixed it all up and killed your own version of Izzy, but why do you want to go spreading your misery around to somebody else’s dimension?”

“Why, that’s simple,” Morgan said, raising her cheek from Judith’s shoulder. She shook her head, as if amazed that the answer wasn’t completely obvious. “Because in your world, Izzy is still alive. Mother told me so. Here, I can get her *back*.”

And then, with horrible suddenness, Morgan made a beckoning motion with her right hand. Izzy jerked away from Petra and flew into the light. Morgan caught her and instantly drew a hand down over the younger girl’s face, putting her into a deep sleep. Izzy slumped.

“I’m sorry, Iz,” Morgan said, nearly sobbing with relief. “I won’t ever let you go this time. This time, I’ll keep you safe.”

Petra was rushing forward into the light, but she was completely unprepared for the bolt that struck her, emanating from Morgan’s outstretched hand. Petra flew backwards, bowling into James, Zane, and Ralph, who toppled behind her.

“Stop this!” Lucy cried, running forward with her wand in her hand, pointing wildly ahead of her. She had nearly made it to Izzy, was reaching for the younger girl’s limp hand, when Judith acted.

James saw it, but was helpless to stop it. He opened his mouth to cry out, but it happened even before he'd drawn the breath to scream.

"Die, little one," Judith laughed, and flicked a finger at Lucy, as if she was merely a fly. A bolt of green exploded against Lucy's side. Her head jolted sideways as her body flew into the air, turning almost gracefully. Lucy flew out of the light, dead in midair. Her wand fell from her hand and clattered to the rug, making no noise. There was a rolling thump as the girl herself dropped onto the shadowy stone floor fifteen feet away.

There was a pause of completely shocked horror. For one long, terrible moment, James refused to believe what he had just seen. Then, with perfect finality, the reality of it fell upon him and he cried out, using the very breath that he had drawn to warn his now dead cousin.

"*NOOO!*" he shrieked, screaming the word so long and loud that sweat sprang out on his brow and his vision doubled. He saw Judith laughing at his horror, saw Morgan clutch Izzy even closer to her, ignoring the dead girl on the floor nearby. Zane and Ralph were clambering to their feet, moving as if in a daze. Between them, Petra seemed too stunned to speak. Her eyes were so round, her expression so utterly transfixed with shock and rage, that she looked as if she couldn't even move.

And then, as Morgan and Judith carried Izzy toward one of the waiting curtains, Petra *did* move. She pushed her way through the makeshift bedroom, shoving furniture aside almost without touching it, chasing after the departing women.

"Wait!" James cried out desperately, grabbing at Petra's arm. "What about Lucy? We can't just leave her here!"

Petra seemed not to hear. Across the vast room, Morgan and Judith passed through one of the billowing portal curtains and vanished. Petra began to run. Her dress streamed out behind her and coldness beat from her in waves.

"*Petra!*" James shouted, turning his plea into a hoarse demand. "*We can't just leave Lucy!*"

He caught up to Petra, clutching her arm so hard that she finally stopped and spun around. When she turned her gaze upon James, he stumbled backwards. Her eyes were horrible--flashing like diamonds in a winter sun, yet dark as tombs. She blinked and seemed to recognize him, although her expression didn't soften.

"I'm sorry, James," she said. "There's nothing I can do for Lucy. She's dead. But Izzy is still alive and she needs me. I can't stay here."

James buried his face in his hands, overcome with helpless misery. He glanced back and saw Zane and Ralph kneeling over Lucy's body, lifting her hands as if to help her up. They didn't understand yet, or were simply refusing to believe it.

"*But she killed Lucy!*" James exclaimed, crying out with such affronted wretchedness that his voice splintered.

"Then they should pay for it," Petra said, and her voice rang in the high chamber of the room, building on its echoes until it sounded like a chorus. James looked back again and saw Zane

and Ralph crossing the floor to join them. Lucy's body hung limp in Ralph's arms and Ralph, James saw with real surprise, was crying. Tears streamed down the big boy's face, making shining tracks on his cheeks.

"We did everything we could, James," he said pleadingly. "But we ran out of ideas! Even my wand won't do anything! And I tried! I really did!"

James found himself nodding at his friend. "I know, Ralph," he said, and tears filled his own eyes, tears of mingled misery and rage. "I believe you."

"Let's go get those two witches," Zane seethed in a low, fierce voice. His face had gone as pale as a gravestone.

"Neither of them are witches," Petra said, turning back to the wafting fabric of the portal curtain. "But that won't help them when I find them."

With a shuddering breath, James moved alongside Petra and gripped her hand once more. It was so cold that it almost stung. Together, with Ralph in the rear, still carrying Lucy's body, the four strode toward the curtain and vanished into its sweeping folds.



When the curtain swept back from them, James blinked into darkness. Noises rang out all around--scufflings and shouts, the whoosh and crackle of spells, all forming the unmistakable clamor of a magical fight. A streak of green lit the space and James saw a man nearby, dueling a wildly grinning witch.

"Where are we?" Ralph called, his voice frightened.

"The Department of Mysteries," Petra replied grimly, striding forward. "But not in our time. Don't touch anything. Don't even raise your wands. This is not our destination. It's only a trick."

James matched Petra's stride, but couldn't avoid looking around. What he saw sent a chill deep into his heart. The dueling man was his father's godfather and one of James' namesakes: Sirius Black. His black hair clung to his face in sweaty tangles as he manipulated his wand.

"Give it up, Bellatrix," Sirius grunted, jabbing forth with a Disarming Spell. "You've always been far better with your tongue than your wand."

The wild-eyed woman cackled eagerly, deflecting the spell and parrying with another green curse.

“We are not real to them,” Petra called out, walking directly between Sirius and Bellatrix as they battled. “Unless we stop and take possession of this reality, it will not recognize us. Don’t interfere! There is another curtain straight ahead. *That* is where the Lady of the Lake and Morgan have gone. We must keep on.”

James looked and saw what Petra meant. Straight ahead of them, no more than fifteen paces away, was another Nexus Curtain, identical to the one through which they had already passed. Petra strode toward it purposefully and James matched her stride for stride.

“James!” Zane exclaimed, grabbing at his friend’s shoulder and pointing. “Look over there! Is that...?”

James knew the story of where they were. He knew what the battle was about and what was about to happen. Sirius Black was going to be killed, sent through the veil that wafted even now behind him--the veil through which, ironically, James and his companions had just come. And yet, as he looked toward where Zane was pointing, James was stunned almost to a standstill.

His father moved at the perimeter of the battle, engaged in his own struggle. His glasses were crooked on his face; the famous scar marked his forehead. He appeared to be almost exactly the same age as James himself.

“We could stop it,” he said, reaching out to grasp Petra’s arm. “We could stay here and stop it all. We could save Sirius and stop all the terrible things that happened afterward!”

“James,” Petra said, pausing only for a moment, “you’ve been here before. It’s the bargain of the Gatekeeper all over again. We can’t change what’s been done, no matter how much we might want to. History will find a way to happen, no matter what. Our destiny is elsewhere. Come.”

Reluctantly, James agreed. The troop moved through the battle, unscathed and unseen, and stepped into the soft folds of the second portal. As he went, however, James couldn’t help looking back. Sirius was taunting Bellatrix for her failure to strike him and she was raising her wand, her teeth bared in fury and black glee. And then, thankfully, the fabric of the curtain swooped around James and he felt that reality drop away behind him.

This time, when the curtain passed over the travelers, they moved into the noise and heat of an even larger battle. James recognized their surroundings immediately: it was Hogwarts, although not quite as he knew it. Witches and wizards crowded the hall, engaged in outright war. In the near distance, James saw Bellatrix Lestrange again, only this time she was dueling his own grandmother, Molly Weasley, her face nearly unrecognizable with grim ferocity. More faces became visible in the fracas: his long dead Uncle Fred, whom he knew only from pictures; Ted Lupin’s mother, Tonks; even a much younger version of Oliver Wood, fiercely battling alongside Horace Slughorn. The floor vibrated beneath James’ feet and enormous legs moved beyond the windows--a giant was just outside, its club rising to deliver a blow to the decimated castle. A snarling shape leaped over the crowd in a blur, landing directly beside James and flashing its bloody teeth. With a jolt of terror, James realized that it was the infamous Fenrir Greyback, the werewolf.

“None of it can harm us,” Petra called out, approaching a third wafting curtain. “So long as you do not engage in what you see. Try not to look.” James heard the reluctance in Petra’s own voice, however. If not for Izzy’s kidnapping, she herself might have stopped and joined the battle, regardless of the consequences.

The travelers stepped into the third curtain.

Screaming met them this time. It was a woman’s voice and James saw her almost instantly. She stood before a wooden crib, clutching a baby to her chest, shielding the tiny shape with her hands and arms. At her feet lay a dark-haired man. He stared unseeingly up at the ceiling of the small room, dead, and James recognized himself in the man’s features--it was his grandfather, of course, James Potter the First. A high, cold voice overwhelmed the woman’s screams and James found himself walking directly in front of the figure of Tom Riddle, still young and bursting with malevolent strength.

“Make it easy on yourself, Lily,” the Dark Lord instructed, raising his wand. “In a moment, there will be nothing left for you to live for anyway.”

“Go!” James screamed out, pushing Petra toward the next curtain, which wafted in the doorway of the room’s small closet. “Either stop him from killing her or go! Go! I don’t want to see it!”

Lily Potter continued to scream and James fled through the curtain, tears of helplessness and rage blurring his vision. A flash of blinding green light followed him, briefly but memorably.

And then they were in a small dingy kitchen. A woman was seated at a rickety table across from a man James recognized: Lucius Malfoy, although much younger than James had last seen him. He was drawing a cloth-wrapped object from his robes, placing it onto the table next to his empty teacup.

“Unwrap it, Mrs. Agnellis,” he said quietly. “It is for you.”

She did, and it was a singularly ugly dagger, its blade tarnished nearly black, as if it had been rubbed with soot.

“No!” Petra moaned this time, pausing. “No, Mum! Don’t do it! He’s lying!”

James touched her shoulder, drawing her back. “It won’t change anything,” he urged softly, hating himself for doing so. “You were right before. It’s all a trick. We have to save Izzy.”

Petra nodded, but didn’t take her eyes away from the woman at the table. James saw the resemblance between the two.

“It’ll hurt only for a moment,” Lucius said soothingly.

“Go on,” Zane said, nudging Petra gently. “One more curtain. There’s nothing we can do here and you don’t want to watch.”

Petra nodded again, but still she did not move. Finally, she shook herself. She glanced at Zane, Ralph, and James, even at the sad bundle of Lucy’s body in Ralph’s arms, and then sighed deeply. She turned, saw the billowing curtain in the corner of the kitchen, and walked toward it.

Somehow, James knew that it was the last of the portals. They had passed through the Gauntlet. For better or worse, whatever was about to come, there would be no turning back.

When the final Nexus Curtain unfolded around them, the travelers were once again met with the noise of a crowd.

James blinked, his eyes dazzled with flashing lights and monstrous hulking structures. People pressed in on him from all sides, thronging and jostling. It took several seconds for James to realize where and when he was.

“New Amsterdam!” Zane called out, raising his voice over the noise. “Why are we here?”

“Is it the present day?” Ralph asked. “*Our* present day?”

Next to James, Petra swayed on her feet for a moment, as if disoriented. She clutched James’ shoulder, and he covered her hand with his.

“Are you all right?”

She nodded uncertainly, and then seemed to recover herself.

“We are back to our own day and time,” she said with grave confidence. “Morgan is here. We are both here together.” Suddenly, she turned and led the group through the throng, angling toward bright lights ahead.

Ralph looked up at the looming skyscrapers and the rain of parade confetti. “But why are we here, in New Amsterdam?”

Petra stopped at the perimeter of the crowd, where the view opened onto a section of the closed-off city street. “Because this is where *she* wants us to be.”

James jostled to get next to Petra and saw.

They stood on the edge of the Memorial Day parade route, which cut straight through the main thoroughfare of the great city. Flat wagons lined the avenue, covered in festive decorations and oversized tableaux, most decorated in red, white, and blue colors. The floats were stopped now, halted by a police helicopter which sat incongruously in the center of a wide intersection, its rotors revolving slowly. The parade crowd watched with avid interest as policemen in riot gear moved in an urgent circle, their weapons raised, surrounding two men. The men stood in the center of the street, flooded with spotlights, their arms held over their heads. James recognized both of them. One was Titus Hardcastle. The other was his father, Harry Potter.

“That’s them!” a woman’s voice called out, heard by the entire crowd. James glanced wildly toward the sound and saw Judith herself, pointing, her chin raised and her eyes bright. “*They* killed Senator Filmore! I saw it myself in that basement hideout right behind you! His body is there even now, next to their names, written in his own blood! Look! They’re terrorists and murderers! Arrest them!”

Nearby, Morgan stood at the edge of the crowd, still cradling Izzy against her shoulder, as if the girl had fallen asleep while waiting for the parade.

The police approached Titus and Harry cautiously, hunkered low, their weapons raised. Near the helicopter, two men in black suits spoke urgently into a handheld radio and James recognized them as the men from the Magical Integration Bureau, Price and Esposito. Harry and Titus did not attempt to flee their captors or use spells to escape. There were far too many Muggle observers. Television cameras surrounded the parade route, installed on tall gantries, even now broadcasting the event live to the entire country. James marveled hatefully at the perfection of Judith's plan.

"She means to have your dad arrested, James!" Zane cried, pushing James out into the street. "Stop them!"

"I can't!" James shouted back. "The whole Muggle world is watching on TV! The giant Disillusionment Spell that hides New Amsterdam from the Muggles won't work on magic we perform right in front of them! It'd break the Law of Secrecy! Why do you think Dad and Titus are just going along with them?!"

"Look!" Ralph shouted suddenly, pointing into the air over the street.

James looked and felt as if the entire world had dropped out from beneath him. One hundred feet over the New York intersection, floating like a cloud of bats and hidden from the Muggle observers below, were dozens of broom-borne wizards in black robes. It was the W.U.L.F., waiting for their moment to strike. They could be stealthy, James knew. They simply had to wait for the helicopter to rise into the air, bearing their enemy, Harry Potter, and they could strike it down easily, perhaps freezing its rotors or cursing the pilot dead in his seat. To the observers below, inured by the city's massive, constantly refreshed Disillusionment Charm, the crash would appear as a freak accident.

Judith knew that Harry Potter and his Aurors were her greatest enemy in her pursuit of chaos. She didn't just mean to see him arrested. She meant to see him dead.

"We can't let it happen!" Zane insisted, staring up at the swirling dark wizards.

"But we can't use magic!" James insisted. "The Vow won't let us! We couldn't do it even if we wanted to!"

"Some of us can," Petra said, her voice as flat and cold as iron. With that, she stepped out into the street and raised her right hand, her fingers splayed. A crackle of light exploded from it, but Petra did not aim it at the helicopter. Instead, she flung it out over the avenue toward the young woman who held her sleeping sister.

This time, it was Morgan who was unprepared for the attack. Petra's bolt struck her in the shoulder and threw her backwards into a lamppost, which bent ominously at the force of the blast. Izzy flailed from Morgan's arms, but did not fall. Instead, she floated in the air, levitated by Petra herself as she strode out into the street.

"Wake up, Iz," Petra said, lowering her sister gently to the ground. "Come back to me, love."

Izzy blinked as her feet touched the pavement, and the crowd backed away all around her, frightened by the blast and the sight of the magically floating girl.

“Petra! The helicopter!” Ralph called out, hoisting Lucy’s body in his arms. The crowd was becoming agitated, progressing toward raw panic.

“Drop your weapons!” an amplified voice roared out. James spun toward it and saw a policeman in riot gear pointing an electric bullhorn at his father, who held his wand in his upraised hand. Behind the policeman was the Magical Integration Bureau agent named Price. He was pointing at Harry Potter’s wand, instructing the officer to take it from him.

“Ms. Morganstern,” a man’s voice declared suddenly, coming from directly next to James. He glanced up and was shocked to see Merlinus Ambrosius. The big man stood at the edge of the crowd, his eyes locked onto Petra as Izzy rejoined her in the middle of the street.

“Headmaster,” Petra said, taking Izzy’s hand in her own. Strangely, she didn’t seem terribly surprised to see him there.

“I know what you are thinking, Ms. Morganstern,” Merlin said. “And I understand. I have been following your progress--all of you--very closely. I applaud your ingenuity and spirit, but this must end here.”

“You big sneak!” Zane suddenly exclaimed, glaring up at Merlin. “*You* kept the third Shard of the Amsera Certh, didn’t you? You’ve been using it to listen in on all of us!”

Merlin ignored him. To Petra, he called, “Come back, my dear. Join us. We cannot stop what is about to happen, but we do not have to watch it. We have all seen enough terrible things.”

“But we *have* to stop it!” James exclaimed, boggling up at Merlin. “They mean to kill my dad! You’re *Merlin!* Stop the engine of the helicopter with your magic! Freeze it to the ground or something!”

“The woman who calls herself Judith has foreseen every possibility,” Merlin answered, gravely apologetic. “Their combined magic is like a shield around the helicopter, preventing even myself from interfering with it. It *will* take off and it will have your father inside it, along with Mr. Hardcastle. What happens after that, I’m afraid, is beyond our control. I am sorry, James.”

In the intersection, the whine of the helicopter began to cycle up. The rotors spun faster as Harry Potter and Titus Hardcastle were led to it, surrounded now by the police in their armored riot gear. Grit and confetti began to spiral up from the intersection under the force of the helicopter’s backwash.

Petra did not move to join Merlin at the edge of the crowd.

“Ralph!” James cried suddenly, turning and grasping the bigger boy’s shoulder. “Give me your wand!”

James expected Ralph to waste several seconds asking for an explanation, but to his credit, he simply hugged Lucy’s body to him with one arm and dipped into his back pocket with the other. Wordlessly, he handed his oversized wand to James. It wasn’t the first time that circumstances had required such an exchange.

James gripped Ralph's wand and leapt into the street. He pointed the lime-green tip toward the police helicopter even as the doors shuttled closed on its side, enclosing Titus Hardcastle and his father.

"*Protego!*" he shouted, putting as much force into the command as possible. Rather than the bolt of bluish light he had expected, enveloping the helicopter with a spell of protection, Ralph's wand merely emitted a muted flicker, hardly brighter than a Muggle camera flash. James stared at it furiously, and then leveled it again at the helicopter.

"*Congelo!*" It was a Freezing Charm, meant to lock the helicopter onto the ground or seize up its engines. Instead, there came only a puff of cold air, which blew back into James' face. He tried again, crying out in frustration. "*Salvio hexia! Stupefy! Confundo!*"

He felt the magic of each spell snuff from the wand the moment it appeared. Nearby, parade watchers observed him with worried confusion, wondering at the odd boy with the green-tipped stick.

"Let me try, James," Petra said firmly. She raised her hand again, fingers splayed.

"Petra!" Merlin warned sternly, but the bolt of light shot from her hand even as he spoke. It leapt toward the helicopter, but exploded after only a few feet, illuminating the street around Petra brilliantly but briefly. The crowd recoiled in alarm, but the scene around the helicopter remained unchanged.

"Morgan's power is identical to yours!" Merlin roared. "She is preventing you from interfering! There is no way to thwart their plan! If there were, I would do it myself!"

"Don't listen to him, my dear!" Judith called out suddenly, cupping her hands to her smiling mouth. "He is weak! Only you know how weak he is!"

James glanced helplessly toward Judith. Next to her, Morgan had regained her feet. She had been hurt by her encounter with the lamppost--blood trickled from beneath her hair, staining her face--but her eyes were clear and cold, studying the scene before her.

Petra narrowed her eyes thoughtfully at Merlin.

"Don't let them hurt my dad!" James cried, unable to contain himself. "Please, Petra!"

"I don't intend to," she answered immediately, her eyes still locked upon Merlin.

"There is nothing that can be done, Ms. Morganstern," the Headmaster announced, raising his voice. He stepped into the street now, moving to get between Petra and the police helicopter. "Awful as this may be, Morgan's magic is far too great for us to defeat by subtle means, and the consequences would be disastrous if you intervened using overt methods. There are too many observers. You *must* recognize that."

When Petra spoke again, her voice was calm yet unnaturally loud. "You're *wrong*," she said flatly.

And then, to James' surprise and dismay, she turned around. Together, the two girls began to walk down the center of the New York street, away from the police helicopter as its rotors whooshed faster and faster, turning into a blur.

"Petra!" James called again, but his voice was drowned out by the increasing whine. Merlin's voice, however, rang out as clear as thunder over the packed, watching street.

"Petra Morganstern," he called. "Stop! Return to me."

"I think the Lady is right," Petra declared without looking back. "Your strength is in the vast expanses of nature. Here, in the deepest heart of the city, you are cut off from your powers. You are diminished almost to the point of helplessness."

"It would be a mistake to assume that, Ms. Morganstern," Merlin warned, and yet Petra walked on, increasing her stride as purpose seemed to pour into her. At her side, Izzy matched her sister's pace, hand in hand.

"I am different from you, though," Petra called out. "I am a sorceress. My power does not come from the wastes of nature. I sensed this truth the first time I set foot in New Amsterdam. *My* power comes from the web of the city, from the interconnected knot of humanity that lives and strives here. The thrum of their lives empowers me. I am a *new* kind of sorceress and *this* is my element. Here, you are no match for me. Here, I will do what no one but me can do. I will protect those who have protected me using *whatever means are necessary*." Petra raised her hand and one of the halted parade floats jerked sideways, sliding out of her way. It rammed into a line of dumpsters with a rattling crash.

The crowd observed this with growing alarm. Throngs began to break out into the street, running in all directions. Oblivious of this, the police helicopter first tilted forward on its skids, and then began to float upward, its engines falling into a steady roar. Above it, the W.U.L.F. agents swirled into position, raising their wands.

"You are mistaken!" Merlin cried out, beginning to follow Petra down the broad thoroughfare. "Petra! Remember the error of Eve! You will do far more harm than good!"

"*Enough* killing," Petra said with calm ferocity. "*Enough death*. No more. I cannot allow it, no matter the price."

"Petra!" Merlinus cried, and raised his staff to strike her. A bolt of white light sprang from it, connecting with the slight girl, but it had no effect upon her. Neither Petra nor Izzy looked back.

Above the din of the crowd and the roar of the rising helicopter, James heard Judith laughing triumphantly.

"Go forth, my sister Fates!" she cried shrilly. "Do what you were made to do! Together, you are more powerful than life and death! Call forth the chaos you have earned!" She laughed again, and at her side, Morgan blinked. She looked askance at Judith and frowned.

Oblivious of this, Petra raised her hand again and a second parade float lofted into the air, spinning gently. It crashed into a gas station, knocking the canopy over and shattering the windows of the small convenience store beneath it. Another float flew over the crowd and smashed against the

columns of a bank before crashing onto the steps below. Muggle New Yorkers ran in all directions, screaming in panic.

James was jostled from all sides as the crowd fled around him. He peered up, looking in the direction that Petra was walking. The avenue stretched away before him, wide as a river, leading toward the night-glitter of the ocean. Framed between the buildings, shining in a grid of spotlights, was the Statue of Liberty.

Suddenly, for no reason, James thought of his ride on the *Lincoln Zephyr* and his conversation with Chancellor Franklyn about the conjoined Muggle and magical cities that had even then unrolled past the train's windows. *The New Amsterdam Department of Magical Administration requested assistance from a foreign ally*, Franklyn had said, *in the guise of a very unique and gifted witch...*

"Petra Morganstern!" Merlin roared, stopping in the street, his staff held aloft next to him and his left hand raised imploringly. "Stop! Remember that the heart is sometimes a liar! You do not know what you are about to do!"

And to James' surprise, Petra did stop. Next to her, hand in hand, Izzy stopped as well. They looked up at the huge shining statue in the distance.

A uniquely talented foreign witch, James thought wonderingly, amazed in spite of the circumstances, *whose only job is to maintain the world's most perfect Disillusionment Charm.*

When Petra spoke, her voice rang out as loud as a cyclone yet as clear as silver bells. She spoke in the language of the giant witch before her.

"*Chère Madame*," she said, lifting her chin to the distant statue, "*baissez votre torche.*"¹

The entire crowd heard it, and paused even in their panic. Every eye turned toward the great woman's statue where it stood over the ocean, glowing greenly in its web of lights. When it moved, the metallic groan and creak carried through the clear air. Lady Liberty first turned her head, looking over her monstrous shoulder toward the city behind her. Her calm eyes spied Petra and Izzy where they stood in the center of the avenue. And then, so ponderously that the entire action seemed to occur in slow motion, the statue's raised right arm began to lower, bringing down its lit, golden torch.

The crowd gasped. It was a long, terrible sound, punctuated by the creaking moan of the distant copper figure. The arm lowered, lowered, and Lady Liberty began to hunker down, her great flowing robes pooling beneath her. She dropped her calm gaze to the ocean waves around her and then, with irreversible, balletic grace, plunged her torch into the ocean, extinguishing it.

A silent, gray explosion of water came up around it. From this came a sort of invisible, penetrating shock wave. It spread over the entire city, leaving a stunning numbness in its wake.

1

"*Dear Lady, lower your torch.*"

All around, the crowd had fallen completely quiet. Every eye blinked, looking around the city as if seeing it for the first time. Next to James, a man in a tweed cap peered up at a nearby skyscraper.

“They’re...,” he breathed, his voice a high, worried tremolo. “They’re... *flying!*”

James understood. The entire Muggle city was seeing for the first time the magical city that overlay it, covering it like a blanket. Eyes bulged up at the flying highways of brooms and magical buses, the heretofore unseen entryways, facades, and bridges built directly into the sides of Muggle skyscrapers.

And nearby, delightedly, the Lady of the Lake cackled.

Television cameras swiveled atop their gantries, zooming in on the sudden magical city which had appeared inexplicably out of nowhere. The police helicopter dipped dramatically as the pilot became aware of the sudden wizarding air traffic that surrounded his craft. The whine of the rotors rose to a distressed scream as the machine wobbled back down toward the intersection, struggling to avoid the nearby traffic lights and power lines. The landing gear touched the pavement and scraped along it, sending up a screech and a curtain of sparks. A moment later, the machine ground to a halt and the rotors began to power down.

Doors shuttled open on the helicopter’s side and bursts of magical red light shone from within. Titus Hardcastle jumped out, brandishing his spare wand and firing it immediately into the W.U.L.F. assassins above. They shot back with red and green curses, but were suddenly distracted by a spray of gunfire. Fortunately for Titus, the Muggle police below had recovered enough from their shock to remember their weapons. The officers scrambled behind a line of nearby vehicles, shooting randomly into the air at the swooping hooded figures. Harry Potter followed Titus out of the helicopter and strode purposefully toward Price, the Magical Integration Bureau agent, who shrank away from him. Harry reached for him, but only to pluck his own wand from the man’s inner coat pocket.

Pandemonium erupted throughout the street, echoing the clamor that arose throughout the entire city.

In Times Square, traffic snarled to a messy halt around dozens of accidents. Cabbies leapt from their stalled vehicles and turned their faces upward, toward the dozens of enormous magical signs that had suddenly appeared, hovering over them. Dominating them all, completely obscuring the Muggle Coca-Cola neon, was a monstrous grinning woman with clockwork arms, mechanically raising and lowering a car-sized tin of Wymnot’s Wand Polish and Enchant-Enhancer. Every ten seconds, her teeth sparkled magically, popping like a gigantic flash bulb.

In Central Park, horses spooked and bolted before their carriages as an amateur Clutchcudgel match suddenly sprang into view over the lake, producing screams from the nearby joggers and feeders of ducks.

Along the newly erected elevated expansion of the New York City Subway system, a conductor encountered the shocking sight of a magical train as it barreled straight toward him, popping into existence along the same length of track. Panicked, the Muggle conductor jammed the

brakes. Lights flickered throughout the crowded compartments as sparks flew up from the locked wheels. The subway train squealed, lurched, and then derailed. Passenger cars jackknifed into zigzag patterns on the raised tracks, still screeching forward under the force of their inertia. Windows shattered and screams filled the cars, even as the magical train before it leapt into the air, spun sideways, and vanished beneath the elevated tracks, zooming onward.

Lincoln Tunnel became the sight of forty car pileup as motorists suddenly confronted the shocking sight of a flying hippogriff and its rider, swooping low over the traffic, its wingtips brushing the roofs of buses.

At LaGuardia Airport, alarms sounded at every terminal. Klaxons rang out over the runways, forcing planes to brake even as they lined up for takeoff. Airliners suddenly pulled up in mid-landing as warning beacons lanced out, warning pilots of the thousands of unidentified flying objects which had suddenly appeared, crowding the New York airspace.

Throughout the entire city, Muggles clamored to the windows of their apartments and office buildings, gaping at the strange flashing lights, alien billboards, and flying magical traffic. Some became alarmed enough to produce guns and make their way into the streets, demanding answers from the strange people that had suddenly appeared. Shots rang out, mostly aimed into the air, at the mysterious flying traffic, although, thankfully, very few bullets actually struck their marks.

Across the country, televisions tuned to the event. Muggle viewers sat awestruck, disbelieving their own eyes as the networks interrupted their normal broadcasts, preempting them with live footage of the incredible scenes in New York City. Around bars, living rooms, and hospital waiting rooms, televisions were turned up as viewers fell silent, slack-jawed. CNN showed a live shot of the Statue of Liberty, suddenly and shockingly hunkered on her base, her torch plunged into the ocean up to her copper wrist. The running banner along the bottom of the screen read, 'NY SENATOR CHARLES FILMORE FOUND DEAD/UNEXPLAINED MASS PHENOMENON OVERWHELMS NYC...'

And in the center of the Memorial Day parade route, Merlinus Ambrosius moved through the rioting throng, gathering James, Zane, and Ralph close to him, looking down at the pathetic form of Lucy Weasley, dead in Ralph's strong arms. Harry Potter pushed toward them through the crowd, his face stern. Behind him, shooting Stunning Spells up at the swirling W.U.L.F. assassins and the running looters that had suddenly appeared, stalked Titus Hardcastle.

Merlin surveyed them all gravely and then turned his gaze to the pandemonium that was unfolding all around.

"What happened?" Harry called out, surveying the rioting crowd.

With grim composure, Merlin replied, "Ms. Morganstern has relieved the world of its ignorance."

Just like Eve, James thought, frowning sadly. *She isn't evil, just mistaken. She ate the forbidden fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, and then she gave it to the rest of the world.* He shuddered as another thought occurred to him.

Merlin glanced down at him and his face suddenly looked very old. “What is it, James? What do you know?”

James sighed. “I was just thinking about Petra and Eve,” he replied, and then met the old man’s eyes. “I was thinking about how people have always called this city ‘the Big Apple.’”

Merlin nodded. “The fruit of knowledge,” he agreed morosely, “offered to the rest of the world. From here, just as with Eve, there will be no turning back.”

All around, the Muggle crowd roared and rioted, boggling up at the magical city above them. Car alarms blared as people abandoned the footpaths and clambered over vehicles. Glass shattered as store windows were broken, inundated by people seeking refuge from the frightening sights all around. Harry Potter and Titus Hardcastle continued to fire their wands into the air, Stunning the remaining W.U.L.F. assassins or chasing them into hiding.

Merlin spoke once more. “Do you know what else they call this city?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he went on. “They call it... ‘The City that Never Sleeps’.”

With that, he raised his staff in both of his hands, gripping it so tightly that his knuckles whitened. He coiled himself, uttered something incomprehensible in his ancient mother tongue, and plunged the staff back down again, driving it into the pavement like a spike.

A massive flash blinded James. It seemed as large as the sun, but heatless and silent. When James blinked and looked around again, he saw the flash still, like a dome of light. It spread along the canyon of the street, growing larger, rippling noiselessly over the thousands of Muggles gathered there. As it passed over them, lighting them for a moment with its bony glow, they froze in their tracks. Within seconds, the milling, heaving Muggle crowd fell silent and still, petrified by the receding blast, like ten thousand statues.

The television cameras shut down. Every electric light in the city flickered, buzzed, and went dark. Stoplights winked out over intersections and cars rolled to gentle stops, knocking bumpers dully on the crowded streets. Silence fell over the city as wizarding New Amsterdam surveyed the suddenly inert body of its sister, Muggle New York, silent and dark as a crypt below it.

James turned back toward Merlin and blinked in surprise. James, Ralph, Zane, Harry Potter, and Titus Hardcastle stood in a circle around the space where Merlin had been standing only moments earlier, but the big wizard himself was nowhere in sight. In his place, still vibrating faintly with the shock of its planting, was the rune-covered staff. The runes no longer glowed with their faint inner light. Now they were completely dark.

“Oh no,” Harry said into the sudden silence. He shook his head in woeful negation. James looked around at the frozen tableaux of Muggle humanity and then glanced helplessly up at his father. Harry wasn’t looking at the human statues that filled the streets, however. He was looking down at the dead figure of his niece, held in Ralph’s arms.

“Lucy,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. Gently, he took her body from Ralph and cradled it in his own arms.

“The woman is gone,” Titus declared somberly, scanning the petrified crowd. “And her protégé is dead.”

James blinked and followed Titus’ gaze. A figure lay on the ground amidst the sea of human statuary. A hitch rose in James’ chest as he broke away from the group and moved toward the shape. When he reached it, he knelt down.

Morgan’s hair had fallen across her bloody face, obscuring it. James could see immediately that the girl was dead just as Titus had declared. Protruding from her back, its jeweled handle glinting maliciously, was a silver dagger. For the third time that night, James’ eyes blurred with tears. Morgan--the Petra from some other, less fortunate dimension--had merely been Judith’s pawn after all. Petra and Izzy, Judith’s unknowing and unwitting sister Fates, had been the real prize all along. Once the Lady of the Lake had finished using Morgan, she had disposed of her, quickly and without a second thought.

Morgan’s eyes were open, staring calmly at the heel of a petrified man who had frozen in the act of jumping over her body. James bit his lips sorrowfully and then reached forward. As gently as he could, he closed Morgan’s eyes.

“We must go,” Titus said from behind him, addressing the group. “Merlinus’ Petrification Spell may only last a few hours.”

James stood up slowly and turned around. Harry drew a deep breath and then, still cradling Lucy’s body against his shoulder, lifted his wand to his throat.

“Attention, all magical denizens of New Amsterdam,” he called, sending his amplified voice echoing up into the canyons of the buildings. “You must leave this place immediately. It is no longer safe for you here. The city of New Amsterdam is now a compromised zone. Soon, the Muggle city below you will reanimate. When it does...” Here, Harry paused and drew a deep, reluctant breath. “When it does, it will be unsafe for you to be here. For the immediate future, you must evacuate as quickly and as calmly as you can. Take only what you need, and attempt to be gone by morning.”

Overhead, the magical city began to rumble nervously. The flying highways and byways, which had paused in alarm during the massive flash of Merlin’s Petrification Spell, fell into frantic, zooming motion.

Harry pocketed his wand and took James’ hand in his own.

“I have sent word to your mother,” he said. “She and your brother and sister will Apparate here soon to meet us, and your aunt, uncle, and cousin Molly will follow them shortly.” He looked aside, inviting Ralph and Zane into the conversation as well. “Tell me exactly what happened, all of you, so that I may be prepared to give Percy and Audrey this awful news.”

James drew a deep, shuddering breath, but Zane answered first.

“She died trying to save Izzy,” he said gravely. “There’s a lot more to the story, but that’s the most important thing. That’s the only part that really matters.”

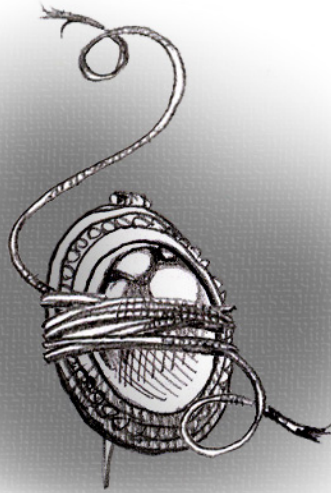
Together, as the group set out toward the nearby waterfront, weaving through the throng of Muggle statues, the three boys began to tell their tale.

The Lady of the Lake was gone, vanished away into hiding, as were Petra and Izzy.

Morgan, the unfortunate Petra from another dimension, lay dead with the ugly dagger still protruding from her back.

Confetti still sifted down into the eerily frozen, suddenly darkened streets.

And Merlinus Ambrosius was no more.



25. THOSE WHO STAYED BEHIND

Denniston Dolohov chose to remain in America, at least for a time.

An envoy from the Crystal Mountain had met Harry Potter and the rest on the docks that very night--the Night of the Unveiling, as it soon came to be called. Benjamin Franklyn was among the representatives from the American wizarding government, as was Professors Jackson and, to James' surprise, Persephone Remora, who was looking decidedly less composed than usual. Together, they extended their official condolences to Percy, Audrey, and Molly for their loss. Percy accepted this somewhat blankly, as if he was in shock. Audrey refused to look at her visitors or anyone else. Her eyes were red and swollen as she hugged Molly to her. Molly, James noticed, was sucking the first two fingers of her right hand--something she hadn't done since she was five years old.

Next, the envoy acknowledged Harry and Titus' innocence in the death of Senator Charles Filmore, but warned that this would be rather harder to prove to the Magical Integration Bureau. Franklyn vowed to do his diplomatic best on their behalf, but made no promises.

Finally, the envoy turned their attention to Denniston Dolohov, who had Side-Along Apparated directly to the harbor with Percy Weasley. James was surprised at what they said. They officially requested that Dolohov remain with them for the immediate future to help with the security and ambassadorial demands of the coming days and weeks. Being an expert on Muggle/magical security, as well as a Squib who had been raised among Muggles, Dolohov was just the sort of individual to assist in the daunting task at hand--that of protecting the city of New

Amsterdam and explaining its existence to the Muggle New Yorkers beneath it. Somewhat reluctantly (although not, James suspected, as reluctantly as he let on), Dolohov agreed.

James would have liked to have had more time to say goodbye to his friends, but it was an emergency situation and he understood.

“Bye Zane,” he said, reaching to shake the boy’s hand where they stood on the dark pier. “The ship will be here any moment, so…”

Zane threw an arm around James’ shoulders and drew him into a fierce embrace. When he released his friend, Zane’s face was pale and tense. “This changes everything, doesn’t it?”

James shrugged and then nodded. “That’s what Merlin said back when the Vault was first broken into.”

“Do you think the old man’s really gone for good?”

James did. He nodded.

“See you, James,” Ralph sighed. “I wish I didn’t have to stay behind.”

“You’ll be back soon enough,” James assured him. “Just be careful. Things are like to be pretty dodgy around here for the next bit.”

Ralph nodded morosely. “I know it probably won’t be much better back home, but still… this is where it’s all beginning. I’d really love to just put the whole mess behind me for awhile.”

“Sorry,” James said seriously. “I know. Try to get home soon.”

A foghorn echoed over the dark water of the harbor. James turned and saw the silhouette of a low ship approaching, weaving its way through the much larger ships moored nearby. Soon, the magical ship--not the *Gwyndemere* this time--would be at the dock. He and his family would climb the gangplank to its deck, leaving the rest of his traveling companions behind. His heart was low as he turned back to his friends once more.

“Take care of yourselves,” he said. “We can keep up via the Shard. You have mine and I can use Dad’s. Don’t forget.”

“We won’t,” Ralph assured him. “Tell Rose and the rest we said hi.”

James rolled his eyes, dreading the task of explaining all of this to Rose, but he nodded anyway.

The ship swept slowly into position alongside the pier. Ropes thumped to the dock and were secured to nearby bollards. The gangplank appeared.

It took only a few minutes for the Potters and Weasleys to climb aboard. Apart from a few hastily packed bags gathered by James’ mum, they had left most of their things behind, abandoned, at least for now.

Shortly, the ship was underway, gliding smoothly across the black waves beneath a cloudy night sky. James and Albus’ owls, Nobby and Flynn, had flown to meet them at the pier and now circled the ship like silent kites, alighting occasionally on the ship’s masts. James leaned against the

stern railing and watched. The New York skyline was eerily dark, lit only by the relatively dimmer lights of New Amsterdam.

“Why do you think she did it?” James asked quietly. Next to him, also leaning on the railing, Albus shrugged.

“To save Dad and Titus. Right?”

James shook his head vaguely. “I don’t know.” He thought for a long moment, and then said, “She could have done it some other way. Don’t you think? She could have... I don’t know... battled Morgan right there on the street and broken her spell over the helicopter. Or perhaps she could have just thought all those W.U.L.F. killers to death. She can do that kind of thing, you know. She doesn’t even need a wand.”

Albus nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed doubtfully. “But I guess she’d just had enough with death. Don’t you think?”

James sighed deeply. He thought of the journey Judith had forced them to take through the Nexus Curtains--all the killings and mayhem she had made them witness, all the loved ones murdered for the sake the struggle against evil. Even that had been part of Judith’s plan, pushing Petra to make her final, ultimate decision.

“She wasn’t just trying to save Dad,” James finally said. “She was trying to change it all. It was probably a huge mistake... and it’ll probably end in even more death... but maybe she was just tired of things being the way they are. Maybe this was just her final act of rejection.”

Albus frowned. “Rejection of what?”

James shook his head. “Everything,” he said grimly. “Just... everything.”

Albus considered this. After a minute, he stirred and dug his hand into his back pocket.

“Here,” he said, holding something out to James.

“My wand,” James said, taking the wooden shaft from his brother’s hand. “You found it down on the Clutch field?”

Albus shrugged and leaned on the railing again. “I thought you’d want it. I went looking for it after you lot went dimension-hopping.”

James shook his head slowly. “I’ll never figure you out, little brother,” he said appreciatively.

“Don’t even try,” Albus replied.

James nodded and rejoined his brother, leaning on the railing and watching the oily black waves.

Below-decks, James knew, his mum was putting Lily to bed, probably singing a nighttime song to her just as if everything was normal. Elsewhere, possibly in the captain’s quarters, his father and Titus Hardcastle were discussing what was to come. Uncle Percy and Aunt Audrey had gone down to their berth immediately, doomed to sleep in the same ship that bore their dead daughter. Molly had already been asleep by then, held in her mother’s arms. James guessed that Aunt Audrey

would probably not let go of her for the entire night, but would sleep sitting upright on the bed, leaning against the headboard, taking what comfort she could from the sleeping breath of her surviving child.

Lucy was dead. It struck James as completely impossible and ridiculous. Reluctantly, he replayed the memory of her last moments, recalled the horrible helplessness of watching Judith raise her hand with murder in her eyes. Lucy had been trying to save Izzy, and had acted almost without thinking, rushing forward into the teeth of her own doom.

With a shudder and a dry sob, James realized two things: that Lucy really was gone, and that he had loved her. It hadn't been the same sort of love that he felt for Petra, but it hadn't merely been the love of a cousin either.

Could he have done something to save her? Should he have acted sooner? Or held her back somehow? Heat rushed to his cheeks as he considered this, and felt the first deep pangs of regret.

I'm sorry, Lucy, he said in his thoughts, in the deepest depths of his heart, almost as if it were a prayer. *I should have done something. I should have stopped her from hurting you. Forgive me...*

In response, he remembered Lucy on the day of the Valentine's dance, when he had almost kissed her for the first time. *I forgave you that very night,* she'd admitted shyly, *I can't stay mad at you...*

But it was only a memory. Lucy's voice was stilled forever. Tears pricked James' eyes, but he refused them. He knew that if he let them come, they wouldn't stop coming for a long time, and he was just too tired to go through that now. He rubbed his eyes with his thumb and forefinger, pushing the tears away. Next to him, purposely not watching, Albus sighed sadly.

Beneath them, the ship cut a smooth wake through the harbor, heading out into the ocean and leaving the half-dark twin cities behind.

James felt terribly alone. Somewhere out there, falling further and further behind them, were Petra and Izzy. And what of Judith, the Lady of the Lake? Had she retreated back into the World Between the Worlds? James thought not. This was her world now--her chaos. She wouldn't miss it, no matter what. James had a strong, sinking feeling that none of them had seen the last of her.

Eventually, the pressing darkness became too much for James and Albus. Without a word, they walked along the deck and found the doorway that led below. They followed the corridor until they discovered the berth that belonged to their parents. Harry was there now, along with Ginny, who was indeed singing to Lily as she drifted to sleep.

At least they were still all together. That counted for a lot, if not everything.

That night, the five of them stayed together in a single berth, piled like cats on the two large beds.

The next morning, James unpacked what clothes he had. They had been hastily gathered by his own mum from his dormitory room before she'd Disappeared to meet them at the pier, and she had forgotten his favorite pair of jeans. He sighed, reminding himself to ask Ralph or Zane to send them to him, and was about to toss his duffle bag beneath the bunk when he noticed something

tumbling loosely in the bag's bottom. He raised it again and peered inside. In the darkness was a small bundle of parchment, closed so tightly that it didn't show the slightest seam. James recognized it immediately and his heart trip-hammered.

He touched the packet briefly, but nothing happened--no overwhelming visions or telepathic blasts. Carefully, he retrieved the packet and laid it on the small table of his room. Feeling a strange mixture of hope and trepidation, he tapped the packet with his wand, whispering the spell that would open it.

The parchments unfurled, blooming, as before, like an origami flower, but the pages were no longer covered with Petra's handwriting. Now, there was only one line, written in the center of the top page. James leaned over the parchment, his brow furrowing as he read.

Remember the silver thread. You didn't let go. For better or worse, I'll never forget that.

She hadn't signed it, but then again, she hadn't needed to. James closed the parchment packet again and simply stared at it. Finally, after nearly a minute, he picked it up. He put his wand in his right back pocket and the parchment packet in the left.

There, he carried it from then on, until the very last time he ever saw her.

The end.

So! It's over.

What do you think? I hope you enjoyed reading this story as much as I enjoyed laying it all down, brick by brick and stone by stone.

Book three, "James Potter and the Vault of Destinies", was simultaneously the hardest and the most fun of the three James Potter books I have completed so far. You can guess why, can't you? Writing the previous books (as I have said on more than one occasion) was like putting on a costume made famous by someone else. Hogwarts is a fun place to write, mainly because it was so well established by Ms. Rowling. We all know our way around there. Writing stories based there is easy, because most of the inventive work has already been done.

With book three, however, we went to Alma Aleron. There, nothing was invented beforehand. I had the indescribable fun (and yes, the occasional hard work) of creating that world from scratch. I hope it holds at least a candle to the classic castle that we all know and love. What do you think? Should we come back here again? Should there be more stories?

More importantly, should we dive deep into the Pandora's Box that Petra Morganstern opened at the close of this story? I tried to answer a lot of questions quickly by the close of this story, and yet I realize that it ends, more or less, on a gigantic cliff-hanger. After all, as James muses at the end, Judith is still out there, as are her "sister Fates", Petra and Izzy. The magical world has been thrust rudely into the face of an unsuspecting Muggle population. This (as Merlin so aptly pointed out) does indeed change everything.

Needless to say, there's a lot more story to go. I hope to tell it. I really do. But we shall see. More on that in a minute.

For now, as always, thanks so much for following along, Dear Reader! Without you, and without my constant companions at the Grotto Keep forum, these stories would have stopped long ago. Your encouragement and support, critique and comments, have been wonderfully inspiring. I appreciate them all, even if (sadly) I don't have the time to respond to every one of them.

Special thanks indeed to my secret beta readers (you know who you are). These are the people whose immediate feedback helped guide the story in a very meaningful way. They are the ones who found all the mistakes, all the continuity errors, all the screwy dates and timeline glitches, and helped pick out all those inevitable little passages that simply do not work, for any number of reasons. Because of them, this story is a far better thing than it could have been otherwise.

Thanks as well to my tireless editor, Julianna So, who works as always just for the love of the story. Let me extend similar appreciation to my editorial team at the Grotto Keep forum, who found the remaining errors that I put *back* into the story due to my own hasty edits.

As with my previous books, I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge some of the sources from which I have shamelessly borrowed in the making of this story. Many readers will notice the

myriad film and pop culture references that appeared in this book. From “Back to the Future” and “The Poseidon Adventure” to “Poltergeist” and “Nightmare on Elm Street”, this tale, being set in America, is simply crammed with amusing (at least to me) references to iconic American films.

More importantly, as “Curse of the Gatekeeper” was correlated to Ms. Rowling’s second book, “The Chamber of Secrets”, so this book is correlated to her third, “The Prisoner of Azkaban”. In this book, like hers, our heroes must work to free a wrongfully imprisoned friend, and succeed only to see that friend turned fugitive, vanished into hiding. One can only hope that Petra’s fate will be better than poor Sirius Black’s, but I cannot make any promises.

Finally, back to the question that I know many of you are asking—and in fact many of you have already begun to ask: WILL there be a book four (and five, six, and seven)?

You cannot see me do this, but before I attempt to answer that question, I sigh deeply.

The honest answer is, of *course* there will be a book four. It’s already in my head, as are the primary details of the rest of the series. I know how it will all end. And it will (if I may say so myself) be quite good. I am excited about the over-arching story that is in play here—the Megaplot, as I have come to call it—and yet...

And yet I don’t know *when* I will write it.

The same things are true now as were true when I finished “Curse of the Gatekeeper”. I don’t get paid for my writing, and I will *never* get paid for making James Potter stories. I have a “day job”, and fortunately, I like it (mostly). I do wish I could make a living with my writing, and have completed an entirely original novel in pursuit of that goal (“The Riverhouse”, which you can preview in part at www.riverhousebook.com). Breaking into the publishing industry is notoriously difficult, of course, and I am still working at it. If any of you want to help—say, if you have a relative who is a literary agent—well, you’ll know what to do, right? Heh. But for now, the reality is that writing James Potter stories is, by necessity, just a fun (and yes, tremendously rewarding) hobby.

If you really want me to get cracking on James Potter book 4, though, send me a note at merlinus@elderscrossing.com. Like I said, I read every note I receive, and the more notes of encouragement I get, the sooner I will probably be inspired to embark on the next book.

Frankly, I need a little break. But just a little one. I get bored easily.

There’s one person who could get me writing tomorrow, if you want to know. It’s the person to whom these stories are dedicated, from whose imagination all of this originally sprang. If Ms. Rowling sends me a note tomorrow and says, “Hey! So what’s the big idea with revealing the whole magical world to the Muggles? What happens next, you usurping Yank!?” you can bet I’ll be writing by tomorrow afternoon.

So. If you really want the book written immediately, then ask her to drop me a line.

And good luck! (he said with a crooked, knowing grin)

G. Norman Lippert
23 January, 2010
St. Louis, MO, USA