



## 4. THE DREAM STORY

The crew of the *Gwyndemere* left the sails up now that the journey was fully underway. The wind filled them and helped propel the ship swiftly across the face of the ocean. For her own part, Henrietta drove through the water like a gigantic corkscrew, never slowing, her scales sparkling wherever her serpentine humps broke the surface, her serrated back slicing the waves neatly in two.

The day turned long, hot, and hazy bright. James, Ralph, Albus, and Lucy remained on the decks until tea, and then spent the rest of the afternoon in the galley dining room, playing Winkles and Augers or drawing at the long tables with Izzy. James was surprised at how good an artist Izzy was and how amazingly prolific her drawings were. Petra had provided sheets of cheap parchment for the girl as well as a collection of crayons and quills with magically colored inks that never ran out.

It wasn't just that Izzy's strokes were so confident and swift as she created her pictures; the pictures themselves were hauntingly engaging, somehow simplistic and complex at the same time. Entire landscapes would be summed up in three or four quick lines, whereas a tree on a hilltop would require fifteen minutes of careful, dense detail, overlaid with half a dozen unusual colors, creating something that almost seemed to hover on the parchment, or push past it, into some sort of invisible papery dimension. James tried studiously to mimic Izzy's style with no success.

Lucy sat across from them, her cheek resting on her forearm as she watched the blonde girl draw. “What’s that one, Izzy?”

“It’s the gazebo,” Izzy answered without looking up. “The one in Papa Warren’s lake.”

“You mean *on* the lake?” Lily asked, peering across the table from her own artwork, which was much less expressive and decidedly happier, with a huge yellow sun smiling down on a simple rendition of the Burrow.

Izzy shrugged. “Either way. I only saw it once. But I remember it. I’m drawing it for Petra.”

James leaned closer. There were two small figures standing in the gazebo, both girls, one taller than the other. Izzy had done a remarkably good job at representing both herself and Petra standing under the gazebo’s low roof. James couldn’t tell, however, if the gazebo was overlooking the lake, floating on it like a boat, or even submerged under its surface. Izzy wasn’t a witch, of course, so her drawings didn’t move, nonetheless there was something about the background of the gazebo picture that seemed to shift and pulse, just outside the range of vision. The drawing was strange and surreal, and James found he couldn’t look at it for very long.

At the opposite end of the galley, Persephone Remora sat playing a complicated octocard game with one of her younger charges, a boy with lank black hair and pasty skin.

“Vampirates, I’ve no doubt,” she said loftily, carefully covering one of the cards with her hand. When she lifted it, the card had turned over, revealing a picture of a capering, grinning skeleton. “I suspect they normally only hunt the ocean’s face by moonlight, but it may well be that they smelled the presence of their kin. Perchance they meant for us to join them.”

“Begging your pardon, Miss,” one of the kitchen mates commented as he gathered the tea cups and spoons, “but there ain’t no such thing as vampirates.”

“I’m quite sure that that is what they would have you believe, sir,” Remora sniffed delicately. “A secret and mysterious sect are they, known only to those who are doomed to be their prey.”

The mate shrugged. “As you say, Miss. Person’ly, I always did find that a deadly reputation worked much better on the open sea than mysterious secrecy. Saves you having to prove yourself over and over to every new ship you chase after. Frankly, even if they do exist, life amongst your secret vampirates sounds like nothing but work, work, work, if you ask me.”

“Excuse me,” Remora said tiredly, rolling her eyes, “but I don’t believe I did.”

The young man sitting across from Remora sighed. “Mortals,” he said under his breath, pretending that no one else could hear him. James saw the boy glance sideways, but James acted as if he hadn’t noticed.

Eventually, after a dinner of lobster bisque, fresh sea cucumber, and Atlantean colossal clam pudding, James stood on the deck again and watched the sun dip into the distant watery horizon, turning huge and red as it went.

“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight,” Barstow said, crossing his forearms on the deck railing next to James. “But that sky doesn’t look like anybody’s delight to me. Too hot and still, like a beast lying in wait. What do you think, James?”

James shrugged, unsure how to respond.

“I smell a storm in the air,” Barstow went on, nodding. “A big one, methinks. Not tonight, but in the morning maybe. Could be we’ll pass beyond it in the dark. Or it could be that we’ll need to be prepared for a bit of a blow tomorrow. I understand you played Treus in a school rendition of *The Triumvirate*. Is that right?”

James glanced at Barstow, who was grinning at him crookedly. James nodded sheepishly. “You’ve been talking to Albus. It was just a Muggle Studies production, so we didn’t do any of the magical bits, or at least not with real magic. The storm was just a big fan and a painted backdrop.”

Barstow nodded gravely. “But I bet it gave you some idea of how such things happen on the high seas. Don’t you worry. This won’t be any magical storm like what nearly overtook the fabled Treus and his crew. There’s no Donovan in a jealous rage, whipping up any tempests for us to sail into. Still, even your average, run-o’-the-mill Atlantic squall can put a scare into an unwary traveler’s soul. You’ll be prepared to keep everyone calm since you’ve had a taste of it before, even if it *was* just a big fan and a painted backdrop. Am I right?”

James nodded and frowned seriously, gazing out over the waves.

On the horizon, the sun seemed to bleed and ripple, bloated deep red. And then, so swiftly that James thought he could see it happening, it slipped beneath the rim of the world. Darkness fell over the ship like a curtain, with no stars this time, and only a low moon, thin as a sickle, on the opposite horizon. Lanterns were lit on the masts, but their light didn’t reach the water. The ship seemed to ply an invisible, cavernous lake, impossibly deep and full of mystery. Barstow went to take his shift on the brass chair at the ship’s prow, and James bid him goodnight. Not liking being alone on the deck between that featureless black sky and bottomless, invisible ocean, James quickly descended into the comforting closeness and warm lantern-glow below-decks.

Quietly, he made his way to the tiny stateroom that he was sharing with his brother and Ralph. For now, the room was empty. Two sets of narrow bunks framed a single porthole with a sink below it. The porthole window was seamlessly black, like an onyx eye. James twitched the small curtain closed, then hunkered and pulled his duffle bag out from beneath the lower bunk on his right. A moment later, he clambered up to the top bunk, his wand lit and Petra’s parchment parcel in his hand. He sat cross-legged in the center of the rough, woolen blanket, set the seamless packet onto the pillow, and tapped it with his glowing wand.

“*Revelierus*,” he said carefully. Like an origami flower, the parchment blossomed, unfolding and spreading, until it had returned to its original form. A small sheaf of loose parchment, covered in Petra’s neat, dense handwriting, lay on the pillow. James could read the title, written in larger, flowing script along the top: *The Girl on the Dock*. It was underlined darkly, the lines embedded in the parchment, as if they had been made with a lot of force. James realized he was holding his breath. Slowly, he let it out, picked up the first page of Petra’s dream story, and began to read.

*The Girl on the Dock*

It is the middle of the night. The moon is huge and high, reflecting off the surface of the lake. I lead Izzy by the hand, out of the woods and toward the shimmering lake. Suddenly she stops.

“I don’t want to go there,” she says.

“Why not?” I say. “It’s only the lake”.

“I just don’t want to go, that’s all,” she replies, shaking her head.

She is afraid, yet I do not think she has seen the dagger I carry concealed in my other hand.

“It’ll be alright, Iz,” I say. “I’ll hold your hand the whole time.”

Izzy looks at the lake and then up at me with large, serious eyes and nods once. We continue toward the dock, but she stops again at the top step.

“I don’t want to go any further, Petra.”

“But I want to show you something,” I say. I am surprised at her reluctance. I tighten my grip on her small hand and coax her down the stairs to the wooden planks of the dock.

“I don’t want to see the gazebo,” she says. “It’s creepy. Please, Petra.” I realize she has remembered the incident with the dead spiders; the day I saw my mother’s face in the lake, the day I understood I could still bring her back, if only the sacrifice was great enough. The dead spiders were only enough to show me her reflection. To speak to her, I must offer something much more. I told Izzy that I was looking down in the water because I could see the old sunken gazebo in its watery grave, but she suspects more. She is unusually sharp in my presence. Her own mother would barely recognize her.

“It’s not the gazebo that I want to show you,” I tell her.

“What then?” she asks.

“My mother.” I answer, and raise the dagger in one hand, Izzy’s open palm in the other. She screams and begins to struggle, pulling away and trying to pry her hand out of mine.

“Stop fighting me, Iz,” I plead. “It’ll only hurt for a moment. Just a little blood...that’s all. I need to talk to my mother! She’ll tell me what to do, Iz. She’ll tell us both.”

Izzy is terrified and my words do not calm her. Some part of me knows I should stop, and yet I do not. I must finish the task. I grip her wrist and lower the dagger point.

Izzy screams again and pushes me. I lose my balance as I grab the wooden piling, dropping the dagger into the lake and releasing Izzy’s hand. To my horror, she falls into the water with a loud splash and I suddenly remember that Izzy cannot swim.

“Izzy!” I cry out frantically, dropping to my knees on the dock. I hear her thrashing at the black water but I cannot see her. “Swim to me!” I shout and prepare to jump in after her.

“No!” I hear a voice in my thoughts say firmly. “*no... wait...*”

Izzy is flailing in the water and yet I remain there, watching.

*“This was your intent all along... The girl must die. Only then will you have peace.”*

I am frozen in place. I watch Izzy begin to sink beneath the dark water. I shake my head.

“I didn’t mean for this to happen,” I say. “It can’t end this way.”

*“No one will know,”* the voice says soothingly. *“Her body will eventually be found. A tragic accident... You will mourn her properly. You, with your own mother at your side.”*

I glance around the lake and look intently back toward the woods behind me.

“No one is coming,” I say, amazed and surprised.

*“No,”* the voice deep in my thoughts agrees, *“the boy James does not come this time. The misguided force of good has no voice here. ‘Good’ is a myth. There is only power. Nothing else matters.”*

James stopped reading. His eyes were wide, shining in the wandlight, and his heart was pounding so hard that the parchment shook in his hands.

*Merlin predicted this,* he thought, nearly saying the words aloud. Back at the end of last term, when he, James, and James’ dad had met in the Headmaster’s office to discuss the aftermath of Petra’s encounter with the Gatekeeper, Merlin had warned them that Petra’s battle might not truly be over.

“Don’t think that, despite her actions,” he had said gravely, “she will not lie awake on cold, lonely nights, pining hopelessly for her dead parents, and wondering, wondering, if on that fateful night in the Chamber of Secrets she made the *wrong choice*.”

Now, if any of what James was reading in Petra’s dream story was true, he knew that she had indeed wondered those very things. According to the story, she was still haunted by the events of that night, and had subsequently seen her mother’s face in the surface of the Morganstern Farm’s lake, after she, Petra, had dropped some inexplicable load of dead spiders into it. The spiders functioned as a tiny sacrifice, giving Petra one more fleeting glimpse of what she had lost in the Chamber of Secrets.

Somehow, incredibly, Petra appeared to possess the power to recreate the Gatekeeper’s awful bargain, only this time without any outside interference. Still, if the dream story was accurate, even then she had not consciously meant to sacrifice Izzy in order to retrieve her mother from the dead. She had meant only to offer the lake some of Izzy’s blood, in order to simply talk to the vision of her mother, and hear her guidance. But then, apparently, things had gone very wrong, and the horrid voice of Voldemort had taken advantage of it, pushing Petra to commit the act she was meant to have committed in the Chamber of Secrets: the murder of another human being.

James was stunned, not so much by the power of the story, but by the nagging question: *how much of it was true?* He recalled the short bit of Petra and Merlin’s conversation that he and the gremlins had listened in on with Ted’s Extendable Ears. In it, Petra had referred to the dream, commenting that it was a reminder that one decision can have monumental repercussions. So where, in the dream story, did it stop reflecting what had actually happened on that night? How much of it was real, and how much was plain and simple nightmare? Obviously, Izzy had survived that night, either because she had never really fallen into the lake or because Petra had somehow managed to rescue her. But how? James furrowed his brow and bent over the pages again, reading on.

I look out over the water again. I can no longer see Izzy, but a figure is rising from the center of the lake. I can see, even in silhouette, that it is the shape I have so longed to see. My mother stands on the surface of the lake. She begins to walk to me, her arms outstretched, and yet I am torn. I cannot let Izzy die! I shake my head and peer down into the water, trying to find her with my thoughts. My wand is broken. I no longer remember how to do the magic without it but I must try. I raise my arms out over the water, close my eyes and concentrate.

“*What are you doing?*” the voice inside me asks.

“You are right,” I answer, as firmly as I can. “No one is coming. *I am being the voice of good. I am choosing it myself...*” I force the figure of my mother from my mind. I focus on finding Izzy.

*“Don’t be a fool!”* The voice is becoming angry now. *“Once before you thought you had changed the course of destiny, yet here you are now. You have only postponed the inevitable.”*

I cannot sense Izzy in the depths of the lake but something is hidden in the darkness. It has been a long time since I have moved anything without my wand but I discover that the power is still there; buried but not forgotten. I direct all my energy to the object below.

Something in the water begins to move—something large. As a result, the figure of my mother slowly begins to sink again.

*“You are not the only one with powers at your disposal...”* The voice seethes at me. *“I am you and you are me. You cannot choose the light while I choose the dark!”*

My left hand is suddenly icy cold. Frosty tendrils extend from it out onto the lake toward the sinking figure of my mother, forming a narrow sheet of white ice. She rises again to the surface and walks toward me on the icy bridge. My power is divided and weakened. I cannot maintain my hold on the large object in the water.

*“Give in!”* the voice commands. *“Good is a myth! All that matters is power. Embrace your destiny or die fighting. You are not good. There is no such thing.”*

I look at the face of my mother. All I have to do is reach out and take her hand.

And suddenly I realize that I don’t care.

“Good is only a myth if good people stop believing in it,” I say out loud. “I may not be good but neither am I evil. Whichever direction I go is up to no one but me!” I feel warmth come over me. My hand is no longer cold. I close my eyes, concentrate and the object of my attention begins to rise once more toward the surface of the lake. I see the water mount up in a boil, slowly at first and then with a great surge. With a roar of falling water, the old gazebo lifts from the lake, resuming its original position at the end of the dock. It is waterlogged and draped with seaweed, but completely recognizable. And lying in the center of its rotten floor is Izzy.

I rush to her, kneel beside her, and push the wet hair back from her face. Her eyes are closed and she is not breathing.

“Izzy,” I whisper close to her ear. “I did it! I made the right choice, Iz.”

She does not move. I look at her pale face and touch her forehead.

“Please don’t be dead, Izzy,” I beg her. “Please...” I close my eyes and cast my mind into Izzy’s small body. I feel warmth inside her soul but she doesn’t respond. She has lost hope and is dwindling away. I cannot give up... I *will not* give up... I feel tears on my face and I try again.

“Come back, Izzy,” I plead silently, speaking directly to that diminishing spark of her life. “Please come back.”

There is no response. Izzy’s eyes do not so much as flutter. I begin to panic. “Don’t go Iz, I need you. You’re all I have left. It shouldn’t end this way. It can’t end this way. Good will win out in the end. It has to...” I hold my sister in my arms and rock back and forth, searching for that spark. “No... No Iz... Don’t be gone. Don’t leave me alone...”

I open my eyes and look down at my sister’s face...

Here, Petra’s story stopped for a space of several lines. James looked at the blank space, but it wasn’t entirely blank. Petra had begun to continue the story three more times, and then scribbled out the results, violently and completely, obliterating the shapes of her neat handwriting. The quill had leaked, leaving ragged black blots on the parchment. Finally, much more roughly, Petra’s story continued.

Izzy lays in the darkness of the gazebo, cold and still, unmoving. The guttering spark of her life is gone. Izzy is dead. As dead as the gazebo. As dead as her dolls back in the bedroom of the farmhouse. Izzy is dead, and I am the one who has killed her.

“No,” I insist. It can’t end this way! I made the right choice! I fought the darkest desires of my soul, and overcame them, all by myself, with no outside intervention. I chose *good*. Good *owes* me!

“No...,” I say again, raising my voice, “this isn’t how it’s supposed to turn out. You’re supposed to be alive! This isn’t how the story ends!” My voice is rising, both in pitch and volume. I stare down at the pathetic figure below me, refusing to believe what I see. Izzy’s body lays in the center of the gazebo floor, soaked and limp, filthy on the rotten planks.

“No!” I scream now, scooping the small body into my arms. “NO!”

“Yes!” the voice in the backroom of my mind commands coldly. “*You cannot fight your destiny. You tried to in the chamber of the pool, and you tried to tonight, and yet... fate prevails! You and I are one! Give in to your powers. Embrace the paths you have opened. It is too late to turn back now. All that is left is power, but that is not a bad thing. In time, you will come to accept what happened here tonight. In time, you will be glad of it, for it makes you who you are, who you were meant to be from the very beginning. Fight it no more. You are tired of fighting, aren’t you? Now, at the end, you see that fighting was always futile. Fighting your destiny only destroys you, and all that*



*you love. Embrace it now. Embrace it, and perhaps destiny will repay you. After all, the path of power has many, many benefits...*"

I listen to the voice. I am helpless not to. For the first time, I listen, and I do not argue with it. The voice is right. There is no fighting my destiny. What had been meant to happen in the Chamber of Secrets had not been prevented, only postponed. I gained nothing by choosing good, succeeded only in raising the price that I must inevitably pay. Now, Izzy is dead, and good is annihilated. The voice is right. All that is left is the path of power.

I stand slowly, lifting the light body of my murdered sister. I will bury her, in the woods, beneath the cairn that represents her. And then I will leave. I don't know where I will go or what I will do, but I have a strong feeling that those decisions will mysteriously take care of themselves. Suddenly, it is almost as if I am merely a passenger in my own mind. My body seems to move of its own accord, carrying me back along the dock, my sister's cold body dripping lake water in my arms. I am glad to give in. It is too hard to fight, too hard to think. Destiny has claimed me, and I am happy now to relinquish control to it. What is left now to fight for anyway?

In the darkness overlooking the lake, the great old tree stands in Grandfather Warren's field, its leaves whispering like a thousand voices.

Sometimes, I can still hear those voices. Even when I am awake.

James dropped the last page onto the small sheaf of parchments. He was shaking and his forehead was beaded with sweat in the dark confines of the upper bunk. His mind raced as he considered the remarkable, inexplicable implications of the story.

If any of it was true at all, then how had Petra performed the magic? In the story, she admitted that she had broken her own wand, for reasons James couldn't begin to guess. So how had she performed a feat as amazing as levitating a long-sunken gazebo out of a lake? Obviously, that part simply couldn't have actually happened. But then, James remembered the events of that very morning, remembered how Petra had simply closed her eyes, as if in deep thought, and then, a moment later, how Henrietta's harness chain had magically reattached to the ship, allowing them to escape the pirates' trap.

James tried to remember if Petra had had her wand in her hand at the time and realized he couldn't. Frankly, he couldn't remember seeing Petra's wand even once since her arrival at the Potter home, months earlier. But that was simply crazy, wasn't it? No witch or wizard could do magic without their wand, at least not anything specific or meaningful. There had to be a reasonable explanation for it, and James had a strong feeling that it all revolved around the question of which parts of Petra's dream story were true and which parts were just that: a dream.

*I think she asks me to come because she needs me here to prove that the dreams aren't true, Izzy had said the night before, while Petra had still been writing. She needs me here to prove that I'm still alive.*

In James' memory, Izzy's words mingled with those of Professor Trelawney, the horrible prophecy she had made on the morning that he had left Hogwarts: *The fates have aligned... night will fall, and from it, there will be no dawn, no dawn, save the dawn of forever fire...*

Strangely, powerfully, James felt a deep sense of fear and doom. It hovered over him like a shroud, almost like the pall of a Dementor. He shook himself, and then, almost desperately, tapped the parchments again with his wand, closing them once again into the seamless, featureless packet, hiding Petra's words, shutting off the voice of Professor Trelawney in his memory.

He jammed the packet of parchment under his pillow and leapt down to the floor, hungry for light, for the sane babble of the voices of his friends and family. He very nearly slammed the door to his stateroom as he entered the narrow corridor, heading for the galley. Ralph and Lucy would be there, as would Albus and Lily, his parents, Neville Longbottom, and the rest. What James wanted most was to tell someone what he had read, but of course he couldn't. He had promised Petra that he would keep her secret.

Perhaps she would be in the galley, though, as well. Maybe he could tell her, and ask her about what was in the dream story, find out how much of it was real, and how much (hopefully most of it!) was just a dream. Suddenly, he wanted that more than anything.

But Petra wasn't in the galley. A cursory look around the decks and the narrow corridors revealed no sign of either her or Izzy. Apparently they were in bed already.

Later, however, James would wonder otherwise.



The next morning dawned hazy and bright, still as a tomb. The ocean was nearly flat, with barely a breath of breeze to disturb it, so that the wake of the *Gwyndemere* lay like a highway behind her, spreading into the shimmering distance. Henrietta plowed on, her great scaly head occasionally breaking the surface and flinging fans of water all around.

“The doldrums,” Barstow explained to James, Ralph, and Lucy after breakfast. The four stood on the bow, watching another mate operate the steering pole on its brass chair. “Technically, it’s where a bunch of huge Atlantic currents all meet and cancel each other out, making a sort of dead space in the middle of the ocean. But it’s more’n that if you ask an old sailor like me. It’s a cursed place. If Davey Jones really does have a locker, it’s right below our feet, fathoms down, in the still darkness of the deepest deeps.”

“Cheerful stuff, that,” Ralph commented, shaking his head.

“It *is* pretty queer, when you think about it,” Lucy said, leaning on the railing and looking down toward the shadow of the ship on the rushing, leaden water. “It’s almost like we’re floating on a cloud, high up over some alien, hidden landscape. Who knows what wild creatures live down there, not even knowing there *is* a surface, much less magical ships that can scoot along the top of it, sitting on the mysterious boundary between the air above and the secret world below. Puts things into perspective, in a way, don’t you think?”

Merlin had approached along with Harry, Neville Longbottom, and Percy Weasley. The Headmaster smiled faintly at Lucy but didn’t say anything.

“So,” James asked, looking between the three men, “where were *you* lot yesterday morning when we were getting squeezed between three pirate ships like a walnut in a giant nutcracker?”

“We were below-decks, as per instructions,” Merlin said mildly, still smiling that strange, small smile. “You must understand: we are at sea. Here, the word of the captain is law. As adults, *we* are in the habit of abiding by the law.”

James shook his head. “Fat lot of help you’d have been if we hadn’t gotten Henrietta’s harness fixed at the last second. We’d have been caught by pirates, and then who knows what would have happened?”

“Worse fates have befallen people on the high seas, James,” Neville replied, patting the boy on the shoulder. “I suspect everything would have turned out all right, no matter what. After all, we’re hardly carrying a shipment of Galleons for the World Wizarding Bank in New Amsterdam, are we?” He blinked and turned aside to Harry. “Are we?”

Percy shook his head. “I assure you, James, and the rest of you, everything was entirely under control at all times.”

James leaned against the railing next to Lucy. “Sure didn’t seem like it when we were flying over that last pirate ship, smashing its masts like tenpins,” he muttered. “But whatever you say.”

“So what do you think those pirates *were* after us for?” Lucy asked quietly as the adults meandered away, talking in low voices.

“Well, it wasn’t to ask us all to come over for crumpets and tea, that’s for sure,” James said darkly. “Barstow himself seemed pretty surprised by it. Seemed to say that it was pretty unusual for so many pirates to work together at once. I bet you a Galleon that my dad, Merlin, Professor Longbottom, and the rest of the grownups know a lot more about this than they’re letting on.”

“Well, that’s their job, I guess,” Ralph sighed. “And they’re welcome to it.” In a different voice, he added, “I hear we’ll be landing in America by teatime tomorrow! I can hardly wait, can’t you?”

Lucy nodded. “I’m ready to get land under my feet again even if it isn’t home.”

“You’ll love the States,” Ralph said confidently. “It’s totally cool there. Way different, especially in the cities. You can get food from all over the world on nearly every corner. And there’s Bigfeet, and old Native American magic, and loads of amazing wizarding places. There’s even a crystal mountain that you can’t even see until you just about bump into it. Even the Muggles told stories about that one, up until the American Magical Administration made it unplottable, a hundred years ago or so.”

“Bah,” Albus said grumpily, stumping up and plopping down onto a bench built into the railing. “None of it will be as cool as Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade. Who needs a stupid old crystal mountain? Or Bigfeet for that matter?”

“I think they prefer the term ‘Sasquatches,’” Lucy said carefully. “Or Bigfoots, even though it sounds a little odd, grammatically.”

“Stupid apes can’t even talk,” Albus grouched. “They can start telling me what to call them when they can say it in plain English.”

“That’s rather speciesist,” Lucy commented, but without much conviction. “What’s got you in such a foul mood?”

Albus rolled his eyes. “Mum just yelled at me for making a racket in the hallway. Me and Lily and Molly. We were just playing Winkles and Augers. I don’t see what the big deal is.”

“You were playing Winkles and Augers with Lily and Molly?” Ralph said, frowning. “But they aren’t even in school yet. Do they even have wands?”

James smiled ruefully. “Albus’ attitude toward the rules is pretty loose. He got both girls some cheap toy wands from Gorleone’s Novelties last time we were in Diagon Alley and he taught them some basic levitation, just so he has *somebody* to play Winkles with that he can actually *beat*.”

“I beat *you* last time we played,” Albus countered, raising his eyebrows challengingly. “Don’t pretend I didn’t.”

“That’s because *you* kept on playing after Mum called us for lunch and I went downstairs!” James cried, tossing his hands into the air.

“S’not against the rules, is it?” Albus replied evenly. “I mean, I could have just claimed you’d forfeited. I gave you the benefit of the doubt.” To Ralph, he grinned and added, “I won, two hundred and seventy-eight to five.”

“You can’t play Winkles properly in a hallway as narrow as the corridors below-decks anyway,” Lucy said, leaning back on the railing. “But besides that, why would your mum care? It’s not like anyone’s asleep or anything.”

Albus shrugged, bored with the topic by now. “Apparently Petra doesn’t feel well. She’s got seasickness or something. She and Izzy are in their cabin resting. We were at least two doors down from them anyway.”

“Petra’s sick?” James clarified, glancing at his brother. “Really?”

Ralph said, “You seem surprised. Lots of people get sick on boats. I’m surprised *I’m* not sick.”

“You still have one more day,” Lucy commented reasonably. Ralph nodded.

“I’m a little surprised, yeah,” James said, frowning his brow. “Petra just doesn’t seem like the seasick type.”

“So maybe it isn’t seasickness then,” Albus exclaimed, annoyed. “Maybe she has rickets. Or scurvy. Who cares? She’ll be fine by tomorrow night, won’t she?”

Ralph nodded thoughtfully. “Barstow says sailors used to be called ‘limeys’ because eating limes and oranges and stuff was a great way to keep from catching rickets out on the high seas, for some reason. Has Petra been eating any limes?”

“She doesn’t have rickets, you prat,” Lucy said, shaking her head.

“I bet there’s some limes in the galley,” Albus said, brightening. “We could take her some. You want to?”

“Just leave her alone, like Mum said, why don’t you?” James said, raising his voice a little. “Lucy’s right. Whatever she has, limes aren’t going to fix it. Just leave her be.”

“Oh, that’s right,” Albus said, rolling his eyes again. “Treus has to look out for his dear Astra. How could I forget? By the way, has she professed her ‘deep and abiding love’ for you yet? No? Ah well.”

James sighed and shook his head. He was used to his brother’s ribbing by now. He looked toward the mid-ship stairs, wondering if he should go down and check on Petra. Reluctantly, he decided not to. His mum was probably right. If Petra didn’t feel well, it would probably be best if they just left her alone. Petra would ask for help if she needed it.

Later that afternoon, however, as the sky lowered and turned ashy gray, James was surprised to see Petra and Izzy walking the decks. He saw the two of them from across the ship, he on the bow, and them on the high, angled floor of the stern, strolling slowly, hand in hand. He angled toward the mid-ship stairs, trying to move as casually as he could, hoping they wouldn’t come up the other side of the ship while he was aiming to meet them on the stern. He didn’t want it to appear that he was following them although that was exactly what he was doing.

By the time he got to the stern, however, neither of the girls was in sight. He looked around carefully, and then turned back to peer over the length of the ship. Apparently, Petra and Izzy had

gone back below-decks again. He frowned and shook his head. Far ahead of the ship, the sky was turning a deep, bruised color, darkening and condensing. It was a storm, just as Barstow had predicted, and the ship seemed to be heading right for it. As James thought this, a high wind twitched over the ship, threading through his hair and singing a high, momentary whine in the ship's rigging. James shuddered.

After a moment's consideration, he headed back down the stern and toward the stairs. There was no point in being on deck for a storm if he didn't have to be.

Even if it would probably be rather exciting.



“Make sure all of your things are well-secured,” Barstow said, stopping momentarily in the doorway. “Including yourselves. Find something solid to hold onto, and do so. Also, keep a bucket handy. Believe it or not, you're much more prone to seasickness below-decks, where you can't see the waves. There'll be enough of a mess to clean up topside afterwards without having to worry about any messes down here, if you take my meaning.”

James sat next to Molly and Lucy on a small bench in the captain's quarters, near the bank of curving stern windows. “Well, at least we can watch it from here,” he said somberly. “If we want to.”

Ralph shook his head. “I've never seen the sky look that color. That can't be natural.”

“So much for calm seas,” Lucy agreed, leaning into the purplish-gray window light. “Those look less like waves and more like the Scottish Highlands.”

James peered out the window next to her and saw that it was true. Unbroken by any shoreline, the waves swelled to nearly geological heights. At one moment, the view beyond the window seemed to look down from a high peak, overlooking a valley of sloshing, white-capped foothills. At the next moment, the ship would fall into the shadow of that very valley, buried in a trough of steely water and surrounded by marching oceanic mountains. James' stomach rolled with the motion of the waves and he looked away again, back to the comforting confines of the captain's quarters. Lanterns swung from the ceiling and tools rolled back and forth on the desk, striking the low railings that surrounded its surface.

“James,” his mum said from across the room. Lily sat on her lap, leaning comfortably back against her mother’s shoulder. Ginny glanced sharply at her son. “Did you close my trunk and batten it down when you were done getting the sweaters out?”

James sighed wearily. “I don’t know, Mum. Yeah, sure, I guess so.”

“Guess so’ isn’t good enough, James,” Ginny said sternly. She was nervous, James knew, and nervousness made her strident. “I have a whole collection of shampoo and perfume and hand cream vials in there, not to mention your father’s travel potions bag. If that gets knocked over, it’ll cause no end of mess, and if those potions of your father’s break...”

“It’ll be fine, Mum, quit worrying,” James replied.

“Go on, James,” his father said from where he stood next to Merlinus by the captain’s desk. “Run along before the waves get any worse. And bring me back that apple on the bedside table, if you would.”

“Ugh,” Audrey commented, clinging to Percy where they sat at a dark corner table. “How can you eat at a time like this?”

“I’m hungry,” Harry shrugged as James passed him. “And James...”

James stopped in the doorway, holding onto the frame to keep his balance on the swaying floor. “Yeah, Dad?”

“Leave my Invisibiliy Cloak in the trunk when you close it, eh?” Harry said, nodding and smiling a little crookedly.

James shook his head wearily but Albus crowed laughter from across the room.

The narrow corridor seemed to lean from side to side as James maneuvered through it. The stairs at the end of the passage were lit with swaying light from the window in the door above. James stumbled into his parents’ stateroom and saw that he had, in fact, left the trunk open and unsecured on the low table at the end of the bed. He clunked the lid closed and pulled the leather straps over it, looping them through a pair of brass hooks attached to the table, which was itself bolted to the floor. He glanced around and saw the apple his dad had asked for. It rolled back and forth in a bowl on the bedside table. Grabbing it, James turned and lurched back toward the stateroom door. He felt like he was walking uphill. A moment later, he stumbled through the door and caught himself against the corridor wall as the hill inverted, rolling beneath him. He looked at the apple in his hand and groaned, seeing that he had bruised it quite severely against the paneled wall.

A gust of air whistled through the corridor, bringing sea mist and the roar of the waves with it. James glanced to the side, up the corridor stairs, and saw that the door above had been pushed open, showing low, heaving storm clouds. A figure was silhouetted against the light, and James saw, with some surprise, that it was Petra. As he watched, she stepped out, letting the door blow shut behind her with a slam. Quickly, and without thinking, he followed her.

Wind pulled the door open the moment he thumbed the latch, nearly wrenching it from his hand. Sailors’ voices called thinly beneath the roar of the waves, the whoosh of the wind, and the creaking groans of the ship. Mist blew over the deck-like sand, scouring it and making James squint

as he looked around, scanning the narrow mid-ship walkway for Petra. He finally saw her, moving serenely up onto the stern, her dress whipping about her legs and a cloak flapping from her shoulders.

James stepped around the door and the wind changed, sucking it shut behind him so hard that he thought the glass window embedded in it might break. It didn't, fortunately. James hunched his shoulders and moved as quickly as he could along the walkway toward the stern stairway, following Petra.

Amazingly, he found her leaning on the high, stern railing, her forearms crossed in front of her, as if she was deep in thought. He approached her, calling out her name.

She looked at him over her shoulder, and smiled wanly. Her dark hair whipped and flailed about her face. "Hi James," she called back, raising her voice against the wind. She turned back to the ocean beyond.

"What are you doing up here, Petra?" James asked, moving alongside her and gripping the railing for support. "You should be below, with the rest of us."

"Did you read it?" Petra responded, ignoring James' question.

James nodded. "Yeah! I read it, already. I did it last night, but I couldn't find you when I was done. I wanted to talk to you about it, but..."

"I'm glad you read it," she said, still studying the monstrous waves beyond the railing. "It's important that someone else know the truth."

James looked aside at her. He knew he should get her below-decks, but he couldn't stop himself from asking the one question that he was most curious about, now that she had brought it up.

"What *is* the truth, Petra?" he asked, leaning forward. Something glimmered faintly on Petra's cloak and James saw that it was an opal brooch. She had only recently begun to wear it, and James could only guess that it had some special meaning for her. "What part of your dream story really happened? What part of it is true?"

Petra looked at him, her eyebrows raised slightly. "Why, all of it, James. All of it is true."

James shook his head, frowning into the misty wind. "That doesn't even begin to make any sense! I mean, in the story, Izzy dies! She's downstairs right now, alive as can be. We should be there too. Come on!"

Petra didn't move. "Oh, Izzy died all right. I killed her. Just because it didn't happen in this life, doesn't mean it didn't happen. You see, I'm sick, James."

James glanced back toward the heaving, rolling ship. Waves towered around it, casting it into their massive shadows. Men clung to the riggings, securing the sails. Far ahead, barely visible in the rushing mist, Barstow sat hunkered in the brass chair, wrestling with the steering pole, turning Henrietta into the waves. "I know," James said. "Mum told us you were seasick. Being up here won't help."



"I'm not seasick, James," Petra replied mildly. "It has nothing to do with the sea. Or maybe it has everything to do with the sea. It's just so... dead out here. Dead in the middle of everything, so very far away from home; from life and people and the noise of living. Here, there's no distractions from the dream. Here, the dream is just as real as reality. There's nothing I can do to shut it off."

James was becoming frightened, both by the storm and by Petra's strange words. "Let's go down below-decks, Petra," he said, touching the girl's elbow. "We can talk about it more down there. You can tell me what really happened on the night you took Izzy out to the lake. All right?"

Petra looked at him again, her eyes bright, searching. She sighed deeply. "Izzy lived. That's what happened. That's what I remember, at least. And it has to be true, doesn't it? Like you said, Izzy is here with us, alive and well. She lived. My mother fell back into the water when I brought Izzy back up out of the lake, carried in the sunken gazebo. I betrayed the resurrection of my mother to save my sister, and I'm glad I did. It was the right thing to do and I'll never struggle with that horrible, *awful* bargain again. But I *did* sacrifice *somebody* to the lake. Hardly anyone knows it. Damien, and Sabrina, and Ted. They saw what happened. What they don't know, though, is that we did it together, Izzy and me. We sacrificed Phyllis, Izzy's own mother, to the lake. We sent the Wishing Tree after her, made it carry her into the water, Izzy and I together, because Phyllis didn't deserve to live, not after what she had done to Izzy. Not after... Grandfather Warren..."

James frowned at Petra and shook his head. "I don't understand!" he called. The storm caught his words and bowled them away into the waves. "Izzy isn't even a witch! She's a Muggle, Petra! She can't do magic."

Petra shook her head slowly, distractedly. "She isn't a Muggle. She's a Muddle. She's caught right in the middle. Just like me."

James took Petra by the arm now, tugging her toward the stairs. "Tell me down below-decks, okay? You're going to be fine. Everything's going to be fine. Just come on with me, all right?"

Petra was still shaking her head. "Everything *isn't* going to be fine," she said, her voice rising in pitch, wavering. James was dismayed to realize she was afraid, nearly to the point of tears. "Everything isn't going to be fine at all. Don't you see? I didn't change the bargain. I just changed the conditions. I didn't sacrifice Lily, or Izzy. I sacrificed *Phyllis*, with Izzy's help. Because of that, I didn't get my mother back. But I got *something*. I sense it. Something... someone... came up out of the lake. I thought I could escape her, but I can't. The dream is coming from her, like slow poison. I caused her to be, and now... and now..."

"Petra!" James said, shaking her and making her look at him. "We have to get below now! The storm! We can talk about this later, all right? I don't understand what you are saying, but it doesn't matter right now. You have to come down and be with Izzy! She needs you!"

That seemed to get Petra's attention. She blinked at him, as if coming out of a mild trance. She nodded. "You're right, James. Of course. I'm sorry. Let's go."

James nodded with relief. Taking Petra's hand, he turned and began to lead her back toward the mid-ship stairs.

A crack of thunder cleaved the sky overhead and a bolt of blinding lightning struck the aft mast, splitting it in two. Lashing burst loose with a series of high twangs and the mast began to topple, groaning and swinging sideways. James watched with horror, ducking and pulling Petra with him, but there was nothing he could do. The mast spun unpredictably, still trapped in the rigging, and fell to the deck with a shuddering crash. One of the mast's arms swept over James' head, brushing his hair. A split second later, Petra's hand was wrenched from his.

"Petra!" he shouted, scrambling backwards, his eyes wild. The angle of the mast arm had scooped Petra clean off the deck. James' heart leapt into his throat and he threw himself toward the stern railing, his feet slipping on the wet deck. The mast had crushed part of the railing as it fell on it. Now, half of the broken mast jutted out over the waves, caught in a web of torn sail and rigging. Petra clung to the outside of the railing, tangled in the mast's rigging. Slowly, the weight of the mast pulled her away from the railing and she began to lose her grip.

James leapt forward and grabbed Petra's arm just as she slipped loose. She clutched his wrist as she fell away, yanking him forward so that he nearly went over the edge himself. He struggled to hold onto the railing with one hand while Petra dangled from the other.

"Petra!" he cried down to her. "I can't hold on much longer! Climb up!"

"I'm caught!" she called back, and James saw it. The rigging was still tangled around her ankle, binding her to the broken mast. Behind James, horribly, a huge splintering crackle sounded. The mast dipped precipitously as it broke further away from the ship. Ropes twanged as they snapped, and the tip of the mast speared the waves, bowing under their weight.

"Use your wand!" James hollered down, his voice thin in the pounding wind. "Break the ropes with your wand!"

Petra hung from one wet hand, slipping slowly as the mast dragged her toward the mountainous waves. "I don't have a wand," she said, almost to herself. She looked down, examining the stormy ocean below, and then, suddenly, she gasped. "My brooch!" she cried out. She patted at her cape frantically with her free hand, searching. "My father's brooch! Where did it go? Oh no!"

"Petra!" James yelled, raising his voice as loudly as he could. "You have to use your powers! The ones you used in the dream story! Break the ropes with your mind! Do it now! Quickly!"

Petra didn't seem to hear him. The ship rolled horribly as the waves towered over it, crashing now over the decks. The sky loomed and swayed overhead. It had begun to rain.

"Let me go, James," Petra said, raising her eyes to him. They were calm and dark in the stormlight.

"What!?" James called back, redoubling his grip on her wrist. She was slipping away, and James realized that she was loosening her grasp on him.

She shook her head faintly. Her pale face looked earnestly up at him. "Let me go. This is how it is supposed to end. This will fix everything, balance it all back out again. This will send the dreams back into the water, where they belong. Let me go join my father's brooch. It's the only way. Let me go."

“I can’t do that!” James cried, struggling desperately to maintain his grip on Petra’s wrist. “I have to save you! I can’t just let you go! I can’t!”

“You can,” Petra said. It was a request. “James, if you care about me, you can. You can let go.”

“No!” James screamed, but it was going to happen whether he wanted it to or not. The rigging tangled around Petra’s ankle was pulling her down, towed by the broken mast as it sank into the waves. An ominous creak sounded behind James as the mast began to tear away, taking part of the deck with it. There was no fighting the force of the storm. It wanted Petra, and it meant to have her.

Petra’s fingers began to uncurl from James’ wrist.

“NO!” James cried again, leaning forward, fighting to hold her, panic ripping through him. “Petra! No!”

She let go, and his fingers slipped, collapsed onto nothing as she dropped away, still looking up at him, her face calm in the raging darkness.

“UGH!” James cried out involuntarily as something deep inside him tugged, horribly and suddenly, nearly yanking him over the railing once more. His eyes clamped shut at the pain of it, even as he braced himself against the railing. Something was pulling him from the inside, as if a cord ran straight through him and ended in his gut, anchored there by some powerful, unshakable force. It hurt. “Ugh!” he cried out again, and finally opened his eyes.

Petra was still dangling below him, but much further down now, so that waves roared up over her legs and hips. She stared up at him, her face shocked, wide-eyed. Between her hand and his, a glowing silver cord trembled, thin as thread but apparently very strong. So strong, James sensed, that it was very nearly unbreakable. It was magic, but not like any magic James had ever known, or even heard of. It was *Magic*, deep and powerful, coming from outside of him, like a current of electricity so huge and potent that it could kill him if he wasn’t careful. The silvery thread came from the center of his palm, trembling and humming. He wrapped his fingers around it tightly.

Petra raised her voice, crying up to him against the noise of the storm. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know!” James hollered back. “But I don’t think I can stop it! You have to climb up! I’ll pull you!”

“I can’t!” Petra answered. “My ankle’s still caught! It’ll pull us both under!”

As she spoke, the mast crackled and splintered further. With a low creak and groan, it began to pull away from the ship, finally letting loose.

“Use your Magic!” James yelled. “Like you did the other morning! When you fixed the harness chain! I know it was you, just like in the dream story! *Do it Petra! Now!*”

Far below, Petra nodded. She closed her eyes as the waves rose and fell around her. Thunder and lightning blasted overhead, but the silver cord held strong, connecting Petra and James, glowing

like a filament of starlight. Barely audible beneath the roar of the storm, a twang of breaking rope sounded and Petra grew suddenly lighter, buoying up out of the rolling waves. With a sustained shudder and a monstrous noise, the mast fell away from the ship. It crashed into the waves beneath Petra, sending up a deluge of gray water. Petra swung as she began to climb the glimmering thread, and James pulled her up, surprised at his own strength. It was as if power flowed into his arms from the thread itself, and still it tugged at his center, as if the thread's end wrapped around his very soul. For all he knew, it did.

Moments later, James helped Petra clamber over the broken railing. She collapsed against him, sodden and exhausted, and he stumbled backwards, barely able to hold himself up.

“What in the name of Neptune’s ruddy trident is going on back here?” a voice bellowed. Footsteps sounded on the deck and hands grabbed at James and Petra, helping them up. James didn’t recognize the sailors, but he recognized the look of annoyed alarm on their faces. The sailors hadn’t seen what had happened at the rear of the ship. They only knew that lightning had struck their aft mast, breaking it off into the sea, and now, on top of everything, here were a couple of teenaged passengers mucking about on the deck during an Atlantic storm.

“Get below-decks!” one of the sailors cried out, pointing. “What, are you both totally daft? Go on!”

James nodded, and then turned to look at Petra. He still had her hand, although the strange silver cord seemed to have faded away. Or perhaps it had simply gone invisible. “Are you all right?” he asked her.

She didn’t answer. Instead, she turned and looked back, toward the rolling, stormy waves beyond the stern railing.

“Goodbye father,” she said in a faint voice. She shuddered and her eyes were wide, wet with exhausted tears. “Goodbye. I’m sorry.”

*And thus ends chapter four. What did you think?*

Tomorrow’s chapter will be released at noon, CST, via [www.jamespotterseries.com](http://www.jamespotterseries.com). In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss and what’s happened thus far.