

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

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

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17. CONSPIRACY OF THE DRAGON

Friday's schedule was unforgiving under the best of conditions, and much less so, James realized, when awaiting a midnight adventure that, despite Rose's purported confidence, could well end in monumental disaster. The morning began with a double Astronomy class in the high tower classroom. The fire had been stoked against a late winter storm, making the room almost stiflingly hot as the ancient Astronomy professor, Aurora Sinistra, droned on and on, calculating endless triangulation charts and plotting the orbits of planets, moons, and comets in her cracked, wispy voice.

James leaned with his chin on his right hand, struggling to stay awake amidst the cloying warmth and the monotony of the lecture. Next to him, Ralph doodled aimlessly on his parchment, adding superfluous underlines, circles, and arrows to his half-hearted notes.

James tried to imagine what they would find that night: Norberta hiding in an empty wharf warehouse on the edge of London, huffing the air impatiently between the nervous figures of Grawp and Prechka, who would be terrified themselves this close to the gleaming lights and noise of the city. How would the three of them get there in the first place? How would two giants (Prechka was over twenty feet tall, James knew) sneak through the outskirts of a major Muggle metropolis, especially with a forty-foot dragon in tow? The whole affair seemed preposterous from top to bottom. And yet, James had to admit, at least to himself, that it was the very preposterousness of the mission that gave it an air of tantalizing, haphazard exhilaration. It had been over two years since James had been on any adventure more risky than a midnight sneak to the kitchens for a bag of crisps. He was due. And Rose, it seemed, felt exactly the same way.

Ralph, of course, was having none of it. He grouched about the plan under his breath the entire way to lunch, and then offered every conceivable worst-case scenario he could think up as they made their way to Alchemy.

“What if Grawp and Prechka can’t control Norberta while they’re waiting for us in the wharf?” he fretted, speaking quietly and rapidly as they walked. “What if we get there and Norberta’s already escaped into London?”

“Then I guess it won’t be our problem, will it?” James muttered with a shrug. “We come home and read about it in tomorrow’s *Daily Prophet*.”

Ralph shook his head, clearly dissatisfied with James’ answer. “What if we get Norberta onto the ship and are spotted by, I don’t know, a police boat or something? Spotlights everywhere, and shouting bullhorns, and people with badges yelling ‘halt!’”

“Maybe we let Norberta take a swipe at them,” James suggested, aiming for Zane Walker style glibness. “If she gulps down one or two of them, the rest are bound to get the message and let us be.”

Ralph glared aside at him, obviously ill-amused. James wished Rose was along to rationalize away all of Ralph’s concerns, but she was busy with her own classes until dinnertime.

Fortunately, Alchemy and Divination occupied the rest of the afternoon, then, after a hurried dinner, Ralph announced his plan to return to the Slytherin dungeons for the evening, citing homework. James had a feeling that homework was the least of Ralph’s concerns, it being Friday night, but was happy enough for a reprieve from the big boy’s constant litany of frets about the upcoming mission.

Leaving him at the bannister, James whispered, “We meet just outside your common room at midnight, right? Hagrid will come unlock the moonpool beneath the lake.”

“Don’t remind me,” Ralph grouched, tossing up his hands and barely resisting the urge to clamp them over his ears. “Like, seriously, don’t remind me! I want to forget about this whole bleedin’ plan.”

“No backing out now, Ralph,” James prodded, leaning close to his friend. “Nobody knows when we’ll need you and that unbeatable wand of yours.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ralph rolled his eyes, reluctantly mollified. Then he added, “It sure didn’t help me against Odin-Vann the other day.”

James glanced at the boy where he stood on the first step down. “I was going to ask you about that. You were like a force of nature. What got into you?”

“Are you serious?” Ralph looked up, meeting James’ eyes with a piercing glare. “You saw the way he was dueling. Where’d *that* come from all of a sudden? That isn’t natural, and you know it. Something’s up with him, and his wand, and... and... everything about him. I checked up on him, you know.”

James had been about to comment on Odin-Vann's mysterious new dueling ability when Ralph's last statement caught him off guard. "You—you did *what?*"

"I checked up on him." Ralph repeated firmly. "Something we all should have done before traipsing off to the World Between the Worlds on his orders. I sent a note to Ted Lupin over in Hogsmeade."

James blinked at Ralph, realizing that his instinct, if not his suspicion, was dead-on. Odin-Vann had indeed gone to school with Ted at one point, along with a few others they could have spoken to, such as Damien Damascus, Sabrina Hildegard, and the rest of the Gremlins. He felt foolish for not thinking of the idea himself, but then shook his head, as if clearing it.

"Petra trusts Odin-Vann, and I trust her," he said. "But you haven't liked him since you first clapped eyes on him, have you? So, what did Ted say?"

"Not much good," Ralph said, and then sighed and glanced away. "Not much bad, either. Apparently Odin-Vann kept to himself most of the time. A real bookish type. Quiet, shy, the kind of bloke that hardly gets noticed by anyone other than the sort of bullies who sniff out people like that. He got pushed around a bit, according to Ted. He knew that Odin-Vann and Petra were close, but never thought anything of it. It was never a romantic thing. She was just a kid then. For her own part, she just seemed to feel sorry for Odin-Vann, especially when the older years gave him grief. They hung out in the library together mostly, since he could usually be found there surrounded by piles of books, almost like he was hiding behind them."

"Doesn't sound like much of a thing," James said with a shrug. "That could have been you if Zane and I hadn't met you that first day on the train and drug you kicking and screaming out of your shell."

"He's smart, though," Ralph added, his face firm. "That's what Ted remembers most. *Scary* smart. Like, he'd be president of Igor house if he was an American."

"Can't hate a bloke for being smart," James observed, "So what's your problem with him?"

Ralph shook his head, eyes narrowed. “I don’t know. I can’t put my finger on it. But I don’t trust him. More, I think he knows it. And that’s what makes me the most suspicious.”

“Why, because he’s trying so hard to win you over?”

Ralph glanced up at James again, surprised. “No. Because he’s not trying to at all.”

A moment later, Ralph waved James goodbye and tromped down the stairs, clearly in a hurry. James watched him go, asking himself for the first time what Ralph might be up to at such an hour. It certainly wasn’t homework. Was it something related to his suspicions about Professor Odin-Vann? More, was Ralph right to be suspicious?

James shook his head, dismissing the question. It was only Ralph. He probably just had boring, tedious Head Boy responsibilities to attend to.

Without another thought, James turned and ran up the ascending staircase, jumping the trick step and taking the rest two and a time.



“This would be loads easier if we had the invisibility cloak,” Rose whispered as they skulked through the corridor at midnight, skirting the torches and ducking behind statues.

“I *know*,” James said tersely. “You can stop mentioning it.”

“I’m only saying,” Rose went on blithely, peering around the flank of a stone centaur, “A *true* gremlin would have found a way to nick the invisibility cloak without his father knowing, just for situations like this.”

“No other gremlin’s dad is head of the Department of Aurors,” James grumbled. “Why are we stopping? The Slytherin common room door is just around the bend.”

“Shh!” Rose hissed, flapping a warning hand toward James, still peering around the statue.

James held his breath and listened. A distant noise grew gradually louder: a sort of lilting rasp, a gravelly voice humming a very old tune that James knew from his grandmother Weasley’s wireless programs, only this version sounded like it was being played on a broken kazoo in a hornet’s nest.

Glancing back, Rose mouthed, “Filch!” She lunged back into the shadows, elbowing James aside.

“Ow!” James gasped. “Get off my foot!”

“Hush!” Rose breathed urgently, elbowing him in the ribs.

Footsteps accompanied the humming song now, shuffling closer, rounding the bend ahead. Amazingly, Filch seemed to have chosen the dungeon corridors to prowl tonight, and was headed right toward them. Then, worst of all, he began to sing.

“Oh, I’ve got a girl, a *beeyotiful* girl, the sweetest girl ever could be,” he wheezed under his breath, singing in a near monotone. “And for that sweet girl, with raven-dark curls, I’ll buy her a diamond and tea...”

The old caretaker’s voice came from just past the statue now. His shadow lengthened along the stone floor, swaying, accompanied by the scratch-shuffle of his boots. Another shadow trotted alongside, and James’ blood went cold. It was the ancient Kneazle cat, Mrs. Norris, sniffing the floor, her claws ticking and clicking lightly as she approached.

Filch’s foot came into sight just beyond the statue’s stone plinth and Mrs. Norris stole ahead of it. She turned immediately, swinging

the lamp of her green-gold gaze directly onto James and Rose where they hid. She opened her mouth to hiss at them.

And then, another voice joined in with Filch's song, this one rough and booming, echoing from behind him.

"An' we'll dance, we two, in a big curlicue, by th' light o' th' strawb'ry moon..."

Filch's boot stuttered in surprise, and then scraped the floor as it withdrew, pivoting back around. Mrs. Norris, however, didn't blink or turn toward the newcomer. She closed her mouth and a high, feline growl coiled in her throat.

"Rubeus!" Filch called gruffly, covering his surprise with anger. "Gods, don't torture me with your singin'. What are you doing about at this hour?"

James heard Hagrid's clumping footsteps and dared to relax ever so slightly. Next to him, Rose shooed silently at Mrs. Norris with her hands. The cat opened her pink mouth in a low yowl, showing all of her extremely pointy yellow teeth.

"Can't sleep a wink," Hagrid answered mournfully. "It's th' full moon an' the snowstorm. Too much white outside. Chases th' sleep clean away. Thought I'd come down to th' pool an' work on Gertrude."

"Ye gods," Filch moaned again in disgust. "How many times 'ave I told you, you can't name a ship 'Gertrude'. It's an embarrassment, it is."

Hagrid seemed unperturbed. "Tell you what, Argus, I'll consult you afore namin' the next one."

"We'll both be dead an' buried before you can afford another boat. O' that I'm certain," Filch wheezed. "Go on with you, then. I've got rounds to do."

With Filch's back turned, Rose dared to aim a kick at Mrs. Norris. The cat flattened her ears to her skull and swiped at Rose's trainer, drawing a ragged slash with her claws.

"S'fortunate I came across yeh, actually, Argus," Hagrid said suddenly, still unseen around the centaur statue. "Er, it seems I've

come down to th' dungeons without my ring-key to the Moonpool, fool that I am. Would yeh mind?"

Filch hemmed and hawed, grumbled and scratched at the rough flannel of his trousers. Then, James heard the sound of footsteps shuffling back down the corridor. "You'll forget your own head one o' these days, I wager," Filch muttered.

"Prob'ly right," Hagrid agreed cheerily. "I suppose I left the ring with my keys in the greenhouse after class."

"Aye," Filch muttered, taking the hint. "*Professor* Hagrid."

There was a faint jangle, then the clink and scritch of the ring-key slotting into place. A clack of sliding bolts echoed down the corridor.

Rose kicked at Mrs. Norris again, this time connecting with the old kneazle's hindquarters. She spun, hissed, and batted onto the cuff of Rose's jeans with her fore-claws. Rose throttled her ankle desperately, trying to shake the cat off, but to no avail.

For lack of a better idea, James drew his wand from his pocket and aimed it at the hissing animal. "Acervespa!" he whispered.

The white lance of the stinging hex struck Mrs. Norris between her bulging eyes and she somersaulted backwards, paws and tail flailing. She writhed in mid-air and struck the floor facing backwards, her legs splayed, the fur on her back raised into bristling hackles.

"Mrs. Norris!" Filch barked, raising his voice impatiently. "Come along now. We're not huntin' mice this night."

"True enough, Mrs. Norris," Hagrid chuckled. "S'matter o' fact, I'm fairly certain I saw some students making their way t' the Astronomy tower with mischief in mind. I called after 'em, but they don't fear me like they do the two of yeh."

"That's because yer a great ol' softie, *Professor*," Filch growled. "Come along, Missus. We've got bigger fish t' fry this night."

Mrs. Norris shook herself, snapped her pink jaw at the air as if a cloud of gnats was circling her head, and then darted in a frantic circle, hissing at her own tail. The stinging hex had apparently scrambled the old cat's brain, at least for the moment. James couldn't

quite bring himself to feel sorry for it. Finally, a little drunkenly, she trotted away, bumping the centaur plinth as she went.

As James listened, still cramped into the statue's shadow with Rose, he heard Filch's shuffling departure as the old caretaker hurried back to the stairs, Mrs. Norris clicking along behind. Hagrid resumed his song, singing in a gruff baritone, "An' happy we'll be, my Princess an' me, like the dish what run off with the spoon..."

James and Rose emerged from behind the statue and ran lightly to meet Hagrid, who looked back at them with no surprise, still singing the old song. When they joined him, he bowed his head and muttered, "Saw yer foot kickin' at ol' Mrs. Norris, Rosie." There was a chastising note in his voice.

"She was about to get us caught," Rose whispered defensively. "All I did was try to shoo her away. *James* shot her with a stinging hex!" She turned and raised her eyebrows at him. He glared back at her reproachfully.

To change the subject, he asked Hagrid, "Did you really forget your ring-key?"

Hagrid chuckled drily and brandished the emerald ring on his left hand. "Course not. But I had to get Argus away from yeh somehow, din't I?"

He reached for the partially open door to the subterranean pool, but it suddenly clunked shut of its own accord. A second later, the latch rattled and the door pushed open again, this time revealing the golden firelight of the Slytherin common room. Ralph bustled out, bumped hard into Hagrid, and nearly rebounded back inside again, dropping something as he did. It was a rubber duck, once bright yellow, now faded and dulled with fingerprints. He recovered, grabbed at it, and blinked guiltily up at the half-giant.

"Sorry I'm late," he whispered, trying vainly to act nonchalant. "Mind if I bring along a... erm, little friend?"



“What do you mean, ‘a little friend’?” James asked as the quartet hurried down the rough terraces of the subterranean lake. “That’s your Protean duck. Who do you need to send a message to?”

Unlike the last time they were there, the air over the waves was icy cold, misted with snow crystals. The cavern waterway was fringed with a brittle crust of ice, but the inverted lake above was frozen completely solid, forming a bulging black depth, dense and inky as onyx. Hagrid’s blockade runner, Gertrude, rocked low in the darkness, moored to a stone jetty. Waves slapped restlessly at its long hull.

“Well, like you and Rose said,” Ralph huffed, his breath forming gray clouds, “we can’t afford to get caught, no matter what. So I sorta thought there’d be safety in numbers. And... well, I made arrangements.”

“Hold on,” Rose said, turning around in front of Ralph and stopping him, barely, with a hand on his chest. “You made ‘arrangements’?”

“What’s all this?” Hagrid called, distracted, as he uncoiled the ship’s rope from an iron bollard. “Yeh lot comin’ or what?”

Ralph shifted nervously from foot to foot. “I just felt more comfortable with the idea of having a little back-up is all...”

James narrowed his eyes. “Your Protean duck?”

Ralph tried to conceal the yellow rubber duck in his big hands. “No, not the... look, it’s nothing. Can we just get on with it?”

“Let’s take a look, Ralph,” James said, reaching for the duck. Ralph pivoted and pulled the duck away, inadvertently placing it within easy grasping distance of Rose, who plucked it from his fist.

“Don’t squeeze it!” Ralph warned, turning in alarm and raising both hands, but he was too late.

“*Grotty blighter!*” the duck’s squeaky voice declared.

Instantly, a burst of pale blue smoke exploded between Rose and Ralph. Out of it, a voice seemed to resolve out of immense distance, forming a single word: “GeronimooOOO!”

And a figure burst from the blue smoke as if in full sprint, plowing into James and knocking him clean off his feet. He landed on the cold stone floor with the figure atop him, knocking the breath from his lungs in a whoosh.

“Ooff!” the newcomer exclaimed in James’ ear. “Who’d I land on? No way the Ralphinator would go down that easy. Are you a bad guy? I was told there might be bad guys.”

“Zane Walker?!” Rose cried, her voice so high that it was barely audible. “How...! What...!?”

Ralph rolled his eyes and snatched the duck back out of Rose’s hand. “I asked him by floo to be ready if we needed any help,” he declared impatiently. “He was just *supposed* to be on standby in case we ran into trouble.”

“Brrr!” Zane shivered, clambering off James and dragging him back to his feet. “Cold here! Where are we? Antarctica?” He was dressed in his Zombie house uniform, but with the tie loosened and the sleeves of his shirt unbuttoned and flapping. “Good thing I wasn’t having a swim in the gymnasium, eh?”

James wheezed, “But... how are you here? No one can Apparate onto Hogwarts grounds!”

Zane straightened and hugged himself against the cold. “No Apparation required. It’s another Experimental Communications test project.” He raised his right hand and pushed back his sleeve. A yellow symbol was printed neatly on the inside of his wrist.

“Is that,” Rose squinted, and then pointed vaguely toward Ralph, “his Protean duck tattooed on your arm?”

Zane dropped his arm again. “Does the phrase ‘quantum chromodynamics’ mean anything to you?”

James merely stared at his friend.

“Me neither,” Zane agreed. “But old Stonewall’s been yakking about it for months. Quarks and gluons, freons and peons, I don’t even know. Point is, the ink in this here temporary tattoo is technomantically identical to Ralph’s duck. Squeezing it once causes the atomic waveform to collapse, bringing me here in an instant. I’ll need to warn Raphael about that re-entry. Phoo! You did explain it all to them, right?” This last he addressed to Ralph.

“This just goes to show,” Ralph said, glaring reproachfully at Rose, “Just because you *see* a duck, doesn’t mean you should *squeeze* it!”

“First rule of technomancy,” Zane agreed sagely.

From the jetty, Hagrid called quizzically, “Walker? Is that you? What in purple blazes...!”

“Hi, Hagrid!” Zane said, turning and sauntering to the ship. “Nice place you have here! You don’t happen to have a coffee maker aboard that thing, do you?”

Rose turned back to Ralph, planting her hands on her hips.

“What?” Ralph demanded, shoving the Protean duck into his coat pocket. “He was just supposed to be a back-up plan! I told him to be ready even though we probably wouldn’t need him.”

James sighed, “How much does he know about the plan?”

“Almost nothing,” Ralph said, sagging a little. “He said he preferred it that way, and quoted something about crouching lions and hidden dinosaurs.”

“That sounds like Zane,” James nodded.

“And what sends him back, then?” Rose asked, still glowering at Ralph.

“Two squeezes of the duck.”

Rose jabbed out her hand, palm up, silently demanding the duck back.

“Hold on,” James said, gently pushing Rose back a step. “Now that he’s here, he may as well come along. If he wants to. And of course he does.”

“Are you serious?” Rose demanded, turning her glare onto James. “Is there anyone else you want to invite along? The Minister of Magic? Rig Mortis and the Stiff-tones, maybe?”

“There’s safety in numbers,” James soothed, pressing Rose down toward the jetty, where Zane had joined Hagrid. “Besides, it’s Zane.” He turned to Ralph and offered him a wink. Ralph nodded wryly.

“Hey guys!” Zane called up to them, pointing at the gangplank as Hagrid levitated it into place. “We’re gonna go rescue a dragon! By boat! Pretty wild and crazy stuff, eh?”

Rose groaned.

Five minutes later, they stood on the bow of ship, blinking in the light of a single lantern and adjusting to the incessant sway and rock of the waves. Heddlebun was already aboard and waiting for them in the wheelhouse, nervously wringing her knuckly hands. Hagrid and Rose began bustling about the deck, tugging ropes taut and retying knots, closing and battening portholes, checking hatches, calling to each other in indecipherable boat jargon. They enlisted Ralph’s help, since he was big enough to lug the coils of rope and swing the enormous booms. From James’ vantage point, the ship looked nearly as long as the Quidditch pitch, but very narrow, divided along its length by a covered paddlewheel and the wheelhouse. Two masts jutted up, one each from the bow and stern, festooned with rigging and limp canvas sails.

“So what’s the name of this tub?” Zane asked James, holding onto the railing for support.

“The Gertrude, apparently,” James answered.

Zane nodded. “That’s an atrocious name.”

“Finally, something you and Filch agree on.”

Zane lowered his voice, “So, what’s the news from Petra?”

James glanced aside at his friend. Zane's American directness always took a few minutes to adjust to. He considered how to answer for several seconds as the boat rocked beneath them, Rose, Ralph, and Hagrid still calling to each other over the stern.

Finally, he said, "We kissed."

Zane nodded slowly, meaningfully. "That's sure not going to make things any easier, is it?"

James sighed and leaned against the bulkhead.

"And Merlin?" Zane prodded. "Any word from him since the World Between the Worlds?"

James shrugged. "Nothing. I don't think he saw us at all. He was too busy with Petra."

"She ended up with the crimson thread from the loom," Zane recalled. "But Merlin got her brooch. Do you think she'll leave this reality without it?"

James hadn't considered the question. The whole point of going to the World Between the Worlds was to capture back the symbolic thread, without which Petra couldn't hope to assume her new role in it's native dimension. But he remembered now how quietly bereft she had been about losing her father's brooch. He shook his head uncertainly. "I don't suppose it matters. She'll be leaving this world forever."

"All the more reason to take the most meaningful memento of all with her," Zane said with uncharacteristic gravity. "Maybe Merlin knew what he was doing when he captured it. Maybe he sees it as a way to lure Petra to him."

James wanted to agree, but couldn't. "You haven't seen her lately. She's *committed*. She'll fight anyone who gets in her way, including any of us. And she has the worst sort of help imaginable. Both Judith and the shred of Voldemort in her blood seem to want her to go through with it."

Zane cinched up the corner of his mouth and cocked his head in the thoughtful expression that James knew so well. "But why would *they* want to help her? Judith especially? Petra is her toe-hold in our

world. The only reason Judith can even exist here is because of the bargain that happened when Petra killed Izzy's mother. If Petra vanishes away to some other dimension, Judith has no host here. She vanishes away, too. Right?"

James shrugged. "That's the theory, I guess. So I don't know why Judith would want her to go through with the plan. All I know is that she knows *I* don't want Petra to leave, and she warned me to stay away from her."

"Sounds like a no-win situation, doesn't it?" Zane offered, studying James' face by lantern light. "Either you lose Petra and Judith wins, or you win Petra and the whole world pays for it."

James had nothing to say to that. He bowed his head and pushed a hand up into his hair, tugging at it.

Beneath them, the boat suddenly seemed to surge forward, throwing both boys off balance.

"We've got time to make up," Hagrid boomed from the wheelhouse. "Ever'body inside or below decks! This is like to be a wee bit bumpy!"

Stumbling against the increasing momentum of the ship, James and Zane hurried to the wheelhouse, ducking in through the narrow metal door on its side. There, they found Ralph, Rose, and Heddlebung gripping a brass railing along a rust-stained rear wall. Before them, a console bristled with instruments, dials, and levers, dominated by an enormous ship's wheel. Hagrid stood before this, gripping the wheel's protruding handles and turning it this way and that with tense concentration.

"It's a wee bit tight just through here," he muttered to himself.

"Just out of curiosity, Hagrid," Zane asked brightly, moving alongside Rose and gripping the brass railing with one hand. "How many times have you done this?"

Hagrid offered a quick sidelong glance. "How many times? Oh. Wellnow. Technic'ly..." He released one hand from the wheel, splayed his fingers, and counted silently under his breath before admitting, "Erm. Zero."

Outside the expansive fore window of the wheelhouse, the bow of the ship tilted and swayed, angling ponderously toward one of the giant tunnel throats that surrounded the subterranean lake. Engraved across a stone at its top was the word LONDON. On either side, iron braziers held goblinfire torches. Their yellow light played over the black waves and glimmered in the spray that pulsed on either side of the Gertrude's prow.

"I sorta figured that," Zane shrugged, firming his grip on the railing.

The ship began to accelerate as it neared the designated tunnel. James realized that the lake water was funneling into the tunnel's maw, drawing the ship steadily forward as it approached. Hagrid threaded the wooden wheel back and forth, muttering urgently under his breath.

"Hold on, now," he announced, reaching forward and tugging a large lever down with a thunk. "I'm told this is where it gets a bit hairy."

A resounding clank and a thud shook the entire ship. James gasped as the bow mast suddenly hinged ponderously backward like a falling tree, dragging its rigging with it in a series of twangs and whip-like whooshes. With a vibrating shudder, it folded over onto the wheelhouse, thumping into place, and James realized this was a necessary maneuver if they were to fit into the tunnel mouth without shearing the masts right off.

The ship sped forward, tugged into the rushing current, and the tunnel yawned before them, as dark and featureless as a well. Then, with sickening speed, the Gertrude plummeted inside.

James' stomach lurched slowly, inexorably, up toward his throat and he felt himself lighten in his shoes as the tunnel angled downward, drawing the rushing lake water into a roaring rapid, dragging the ship dizzily into its force. Hagrid kept his hands fisted on the ship's wheel, but now he seemed only to be hanging on for dear life, struggling to keep the ship steady and facing forward against the titanic momentum of the tunnel river. The only light was the lantern that swung from a post on the bow, now tilted backward and swinging,

casting wild shadows in the pool of its dancing light. Dimly, spray erupted on either side of the Gertrude as its prow dug into the current. Droplets blew back and blattered the window like driving rain, blurring the view beyond, drumming loud enough to make speech nearly impossible.

James wondered how long the journey would take. London was quite some distance away. And yet he had some idea that this was not, strictly speaking, a journey of mere miles. He sensed forces in play, compressing time and space into something teasingly plastic. The Gertrude rocked precipitously to starboard, riding the current as the river curved right. The hull shuddered and jounced, and James had the terrible suspicion that it was scraping the tunnel wall, grinding wood against stone. A few moments later, this happened again, but to the left, with the ship rocking hard to port and hanging there, compressing beneath the power of its own inertia.

“How much farther, Hagrid?” Rose called, her voice a shrill ribbon against the shuddering roar and blat of spray on glass.

“We’re a-gettin’ close,” Hagrid boomed back, leaning to consult a large brass dial. James saw an ornate arrow on the dial shimmying close to a heading printed in white letters: LONDON, THAMES. “We’ll surface just around the Isle of Dogs, south of Canary Wharf!”

James was grateful to know that the rollicking journey was nearly over. He wondered briefly how Norberta would handle the voyage back. She would surely be terrified and cramped, lying low in the hold below decks.

Then, James’ eyebrows shot up as he realized what Hagrid had just said.

“What do you mean,” he shouted to the half-giant, “that we’ll *surface*?”

Hagrid struggled with the wheel, his ham-sized fists bunched on the protruding handles. “Like the Durmstangs back during the Triwizard Tournament!” he bellowed. “We burst up to the surface! Don’ ask me how it works. I jus’ know it does!”

The tunnel suddenly slanted upwards at a steep angle, forcing James' knees to buckle. The river ahead compressed and narrowed, beginning to roar up over the bow in clapping waves, closing over it. The lantern snuffed out, leaving nothing but perfect blackness, violent motion, and deafening noise.

"But Hagrid!" James cried, struggling to be heard over the din, "The Thames is *frozen* right now! First time in a decade! The surface will be as hard as stone!"

It was too late to do anything about it. James didn't even know if anyone heard him. He felt small hands grasp onto his trouser-leg and realized that it was Heddlebun groping in the dark for something to batten onto.

When the bow struck, it hit with such force that every window shattered. Hagrid rammed against the wheel hard enough to splinter and snap it in two. James, Rose, Ralph, and Zane flung forward, stumbling headlong against the console and its array of dials and instruments. Shattered glass and freezing water sprayed in every direction, filling the air and peppering James' hair and face.

Blue light bloomed over the ship as it arrowed up, and then, as its momentum exhausted, fell slowly forward, tilting down, down, as if it were falling right over the edge of the world. Finally, with a thudding slam, it smashed flat onto a heaving expanse, rocking, groaning deep in its hull, and crunching against some brittle, ragged obstruction.

James flung pebbles of glass and ice from his hair and grappled upright against the console. Cold air blew in through the broken window, carrying a freight of fluffy snowflakes and the unmistakable city smells of rotting rubbish, factory exhaust, and dead fish. Huge chunks of ice slid back and forth on the Gertrude's bow as the ship rocked, slowly coming to rest. Beyond this, James recognized the hulking shapes of warehouses and dark freighters looming in the fog. The Thames was indeed frozen over, forming a pale blue highway marbled with white, except for the scarred black hole that the Gertrude had smashed through.

“Holy hinkypunks,” Zane breathed, steadying himself next to James. “I bet that was even better than the Aquapolis bubble tube you told me about.” He considered this, and then shrugged. “Or worse, depending on your perspective.”

“Worse,” Ralph moaned, clutching his head. “*Definitely* worse.”

“Everyone all right, then?” Hagrid said, climbing clumsily to his feet and brushing broken ice from his shoulders. “Rosie? You OK?”

“I think we’re going to have to realign the rudder,” Rose said breathlessly, shaking the hair out of her face. “If, that is, it’s still there.”

James glanced down in weary annoyance. “We’re here. You can let go of my leg now.”

Heddele turned her enormous eyes up to him in surprise, as if she’d forgotten where she was. Then, sheepishly, she released her death-grip on his shin and backed away, her ears drooping.

“Well then,” Hagrid sighed briskly, clapping his hands together. “I guess we won’t have t’ remember where we parked, now, will we?”



The damage to the Gertrude was much more visible from the ice of the Thames as they descended via Hagrid's folding gangplank. Rose stalked fretfully along the jagged edge of the frozen hole, ignoring the precarious cracks and fissures, muttering to herself. Inside the hole, now surrounded by gently heaving chunks and shards of pulverized ice, the ship looked as if it had been squeezed in a giant fist. Sprung planks and splintered decking were evident from stem to stern, and the once sleek length of the hull now seemed to have a distinct and troubling angle to it, causing the bow and stern to point slightly up out of the water, while the mid-ship waterwheel and boathouse rode much lower in the waves than was exactly comfortable to James' eye.

"What were the odds, eh?" Hagrid said with a shrug. "This river freezes over, what, every few decades? And it just had t' 'appen this year, o' course." He seemed to view it as a mere humorous aside, rather than a potentially debilitating stroke of fate.

"We lost the bow mast," Rose called, her voice thin with distance as she rounded the front of the ship. "*And* the bowsprit and masthead. The rudder is hanging on by a toothpick, but that's sort of academic, since the wheel is smashed in two." Behind Rose, Heddlebun slunk along closely, wringing her hands, glancing around as if trying to see in every direction at once. The house elf appeared exquisitely uncomfortable this close to the Muggle city.

"We can *reparo* most o' that," Hagrid soothed, keeping his voice low over the expanse of ice. "An' what we can't, we likely don't need, at least fer the journey back home. It'll be fine, Rosie."

"We can't *reparo* what's been torn off under the ice," Rose said, clearly struggling to control her exasperation. "But assuming enough bits of the window glass are still scattered around the deck, we should at least be able to seal up the wheelhouse and mend the wheel. *We may* get back home, but just barely. Assuming there are no *other* unexpected disasters along the way."

Zane clapped Rose lightly on the shoulder. "That's the spirit, Rosie."

She gave him a withering glare. James knew that it was a short list of people who could get away with calling his cousin “Rosie”, and Zane Walker was not one of them.

Ralph shook his head at the wounded ship, eyes wide. “Thanks, but I think I’ll take a cab home, if you don’t mind.”

“It’ll be fine, Ralph,” James said, not fully believing it himself. “We’ve rode in worse. Er... probably.” With some effort, he turned the big boy around and the group began to cross the ice, heading into the shadow of a ramshackle pier and the extravagantly derelict hulk of a warehouse beyond. The rusty walls and roof of the structure sagged ominously. The windows were enormous square sockets, fogged with grime wherever they weren’t broken and gaping like shocked eyes. The decrepit building made even the bedraggled Gertrude look like a showroom model by comparison.

“If all went well,” Hagrid said, boosting Rose onto the pier from the ice, “Grawpie and Prechka should be awaitin’ just inside, along with Norberta. We’ll get ‘er out, onto the ship, and be home before the clock strikes two. Grawp and Prechka can be on their way back to the mountains under cover o’ darkness. Neat as can be.”

Shivering as he climbed a metal ladder onto the concrete pier, Zane said, “Your optimism is an inspiration to us all, Hagrid.”

Heddlebun stole from shadow to shadow, her huge eyes bulging as she took in the unfamiliar sights. Rusted barges lined the pier, locked into the ice and loaded with gloom. Snow skirled and wafted all around, clouding the air and forming ghostly haloes around the security lights that lined the pier, erected on leaning wooden poles. Hagrid paused just outside the range of the nearest lamp and raised his right arm. In his hand he held aloft what appeared to be a cigarette lighter. He clicked the button on its barrel and the security light winked out.

In a low voice, James asked, “Where’d you get a Deluminator?”

Rose answered smugly, “I liberated it from dad’s dresser over the holidays. *That’s* how a Gremlin does things. Feel free to take notes.”

Hagrid used the Deluminator to snuff the remaining lights along the pier one by one as the troupe made their way along. They climbed ramps of iron stairs to higher levels, and then followed a length of broken pavement toward a line of enormous bay doors. Every door was closed and locked with a rusted chain and padlock, except for the door at the very end, which was wrenched up and badly dented, its chain dangling and swinging in the low, whistling wind.

“That’s the one, then,” Hagrid nodded, clumping closer to the looming warehouse. Keeping his voice low, he added, “Stay close now. And keep quiet.”

Hugging himself and huddling next to Hagrid, Zane asked, “How do we know they’re in there?”

As if in answer, a huge, grating noise shook the warehouse. The metal doors rattled on their tracks and a few remaining windows tinkled, shattering in their frames. A burst of yellow light briefly illuminated the darkness inside, dissipating into orange flickers.

“Either that’s them,” James gulped, “Or the boundaries of the magical world are *way* worse off than we thought.”

Hagrid crept into the shadow of the open bay door. Inside, just visible in the gloom, was a cavernous space surrounded by banks of high windows. A lacework of struts and girders crowded the upper reaches. From these hung complicated machinery that James assumed had, at one time, operated cranes for moving cargo.

Hagrid’s voice was an echoing rasp in the darkness as he called, “Grawpie?”

Another grating grunt filled the space, and James smelled the familiar chemical reek of Dragon breath. A burst of yellow flame illuminated the pocked concrete floor, piles of old shipping crates, the carcass of a lorry propped on blocks, and three dark bulks hiding behind it.

“Grawpie!” Hagrid cried, relieved, and hurried toward the lorry, the others following close behind. “Prechka! And sweet Norberta! You made it!”

James' feet gritted on the broken concrete floor as he hurried to stay close to Hagrid, but he faltered as the giants stepped out from behind the lorry. He'd forgotten what it was like to be in close company with such gigantic people. Grawp's head peered over the lorry's cab, his hair as thick and matted as a thicket of briars, his Quaffle-sized eyes glimmering reflections of the high windows. Prechka, however, dwarfed even him. Looming amidst the girders high overhead, her head looked impossibly small on the mountainous bulk of her shoulders. When her feet came down on the concrete floor, it cracked and buckled. The rafters shook, sifting thick dust down onto the smaller people below.

Grawp spoke with slow emphasis, in what he clearly thought was a careful hush. "Brother Hagrid. Grawp and Prechka hide, but Norberta *loud*. Norberta smell other dragon in Sea of Light."

"There, there," Hagrid reached and patted his half-brother on the elbow. "Yeh done well, Grawpie. Both o' yeh. We'll take Norberta from 'ere. Heddlebun?"

But Heddlebun, James noticed, was already about her work. The tiny elf had ducked under the derelict lorry and was now whispering to Norberta, who lowered her huge serpentine neck to listen. The dragon's breath, which had been short and chuffing with anxiety only moments before, now came in slower, longer gusts, with less reek of brimstone. James couldn't make out Heddlebun's words. He couldn't even tell if she was speaking a language he understood. But Norberta comprehended well enough, and that was all that mattered. A coil of tension unwound from James' shoulders, and only in its absence did he realize just how worried he had been about the prospect of leading Norberta back to the ship.

The ground shook as Prechka lowered to one knee behind the lorry. Impatiently, she pushed it like a toy, making room for her bulk. The lorry rocked as it slid on its blocks, scraping and crunching along the concrete floor. Zane had to leap backward as it reared precipitously near him.

“Prechka afraid,” the giantess said, and the low throb of her voice caused more windows to rattle and shatter around the dark warehouse. She put out her hand and Hagrid reached up to take it. His fist was just big enough to grip the end of her grubby index finger, and yet he held it as if she was a child, and then kissed the back of one huge knuckle.

“Yeh can follow the same path back home that you took here, can’t yeh?” Hagrid asked, looking up at her shadowy bulk.

James knew that giants had a special sense that allowed them to retrace their steps perfectly. And yet Prechka looked troubled.

Carefully, Grawp said, “We come back to old cave home now. We live by brother Hagrid at Hogwarts.”

James glanced back at Hagrid in time to see the colour fade from his cheeks.

“Now we talked about this, Grawpie. Yeh can’t come t’ Hogwarts. It’s not allowed, remember? Why, they’ve made me send away even my last few Skrewts. What would headmaster Merlin say if he learnt yeh two was back livin’ in the Forbidden Forest?”

“Grawp and Prechka be quiet,” Prechka said, raising her index finger to her lips in a gesture of solemn secrecy. The timbre of her voice could be felt through the soles of James’ shoes. “Headmaster never know.”

Hagrid was shaking his head sadly. “I’d love nothin’ more, loves. But we just can’t do it. Yeh have t’ go back to the mountains. Yer tribe needs yeh. And yeh need them. It’ll be all right. Maybe, when all o’ this Vow of Secrecy bizness is cleared up, why I can make arrangements for yeh to comes an’ visit then. How would that be, eh?” He gave the giants an attempt at a grin.

Grawp and Prechka looked at each other and seemed to commune for a long moment with their eyes. Finally, Grawp looked down again and said, “OK, brother Hagrid.”

Hagrid sniffed, and nodded, and collected himself. “That’s good, then.” Perking up a little, he said, “So, yeh both remember how

to summon the hidin' charm I sent yeh, right? Do yeh still 'ave it with yeh?"

Grawp reached up and rummaged in the thick burlap of his collar, retrieving something hung about his neck on a hank of rope. James was surprised to see that it was an old automobile tyre, threaded right through the centre like a ring. "We hide when hear people," Grawp said. "Like this." He squeezed the tyre between his thumb and forefinger and muttered, "Obscuro."

Nothing happened. Both giants remained exactly where they were. And yet, somehow, James' eye refused to see them. Where Grawp hunkered, James instead seemed to sense a huge grey trash bin half-buried in plastic bags of rubbish. Where Prechka knelt, he perceived a rusting water tower on thick iron supports.

"That's a camouflage talisman!" Zane exclaimed. "Maybe the best I've ever seen!"

"Hagrid," Rose said, clearly impressed. "Did you do that?"

"Now don't go acting all surprised, yeh lot," Hagrid answered, stifling a smile of sad pride. "Jus' cause I teach Care o' Magical Creatures doesn't mean I fergot how to use a wand. It's just a little somethin' I whipped up fer their journey here and back. Couldn't expect 'em to travel without any kind o' magical help, could I?" He glanced tentatively at Rose and added, "Do yeh really think it's a good one?"

"It's excellent, Hagrid," she nodded, still squinting at the disguised giants, trying to see them.

"Whoa!" Ralph said, backing away. "I think they're moving, but I can't really tell!"

James glanced up and was alarmed to see what appeared to be the trash bin tilting up onto its end as its rubbish bags rolled and clustered all around it, forming and re-forming into new piles. The water tower leaned on its iron supports, which creaked and moaned with the sound of wrenching metal.

“Give ‘er another squeeze, Grawpie,” Hagrid called up, cupping his hands to his mouth. “I could only pump so much magic into that tyre. Save it for when yeh need it, why don’t yeh?”

A moment later, the disguises blinked away and James could once again recognize the monstrous shapes standing in the dusty gloom. Hagrid nodded in relief.

Ralph announced, “We should be off, then, right?”

“Before I freeze my tuchus off,” Zane agreed. “Not that this hasn’t been a great time. Seriously. Let’s do it again next week.”

Hagrid called to Heddlebun, “Is Norberta ready to go, then?”

Heddlebun paused and raised her head, her huge ears pricking up. “We’re ready,” she said, her voice very tiny after the boom of the giants.

Hagrid said his goodbyes and allowed the giants to leave first. Their hulking forms blocked out the blue night-glow as they lumbered through the broken bay door. Within a minute, the sub-audible thump of their footsteps blended into the constant thrum of distant traffic. They were gone, wending their way carefully back into the outlying villages, and the mountains beyond.

“They’ll be safe,” Hagrid whispered, staring hard at the empty bay door. “Makin’ their way back home. They’ll be just fine, won’t they?”

James realized that Hagrid was trying to convince himself as much as anyone else.

Rose put her hand on Hagrid’s shoulder where he hunkered in the dark. “Of course they will. You equipped them. And they’re smart, in their own way.”

For giants, James thought, but didn’t say. After all, Hagrid himself was half-giant, and he had conjured one of the best camouflage talismans James had ever seen.

Hagrid nodded decisively. “Right then,” he whispered, and tossed a glance back toward Heddlebun and the coiled shape of Norberta. “Let’s be away, then.”

Herding James, Rose, Ralph, and Zane ahead of him, the half-giant led Norberta out through the open bay door and down the broken asphalt of the drive. Snow filled the air in a million fluffy flecks, sketching the shape of the wind as it surrounded the warehouse, scoured the pier, and escaped over the wasteland of the frozen Thames.

James glanced back, curious, and saw Heddlebun riding atop Norberta's head, bent low to her ear, whispering incessantly. With one hand, she patted the great dragon on the bunched muscles of her jaw. Norberta followed Hagrid as if in a trance, her head low and sweeping over the pier, her feet lifting and falling like a cat stalking through a garden, making no noise whatsoever.

Silently, the troupe threaded past the ice-locked barges and down to the frozen surface of the Thames. The Gertrude was barely a low, sleek shape amidst a panorama of drifting grey. Beyond this, London itself was merely a dull throb and a watercolor fog of lights.

"Easy now," Hagrid muttered nervously as Norberta settled her weight onto the frozen river. The ice groaned precipitously but held firm, at least for the moment. In a ragged line, with Ralph in the lead and Norberta following behind, the group began to trek toward the black hole in the ice where the Gertrude rocked, waiting.

Shivering but still chipper despite his hushed voice, Zane asked James, "So where'd you guys find the dragon-whisperer?"

"Heddlebun?" James shook his head. "She was a house elf in Millie Vandergriff's house. Got sacked just this past holiday after spending her whole life there. Somehow Hagrid got hold of her when he found out she'd lost her service and knew how to keep beasts calm. Pretty lucky, I guess."

"She got sacked?" Zane frowned, "I thought that hardly ever happened? What for?"

James sighed. Ahead of them, the Gertrude unsheathed slowly from the fog. The folding gangplank stretched out to the ice, tilting and creaking with the movement of the ship. "She was mad and desperate about losing her work to a load of Muggle servants. She tried to sabotage them into getting sacked, but got herself caught and sacked

instead. It was me that caught her, in fact. I was there for the holidays with Millie.”

Zane turned to glance at James, his brow lowering. “And you all *trust* her?” he asked, his voice suddenly incredulous.

James opened his mouth to reply, but a sudden commotion from behind startled both boys.

“Whoa!” Hagrid bellowed suddenly, “Norberta! WHOA!”

With a sound both low and terribly huge, the ice cracked beneath James’ feet, as if something very heavy had just pressed hard down on it. He felt the motion as the frozen expanse pitched, throwing him off balance. Zane grabbed his arm, keeping him upright, but just barely. Something buffeted overhead and the sky was momentarily blotted by a huge black silhouette. Dark wings whumped through the air, and suddenly, deafeningly, a roar broke over the ice. It was deep, long, and ululating, seeming to make the very snowflakes shiver in their course. This, James immediately knew, was no restrained bark of nervous energy. This was a full-on roar of hectic release.

Norberta couldn’t properly fly, James remembered, only glide short distances due to an old wing injury. She swooped over him and closed on Ralph, her shadow covering him as she lowered, scrabbling at the air, her claws swinging down toward the cracked ice.

“Ralph!” Zane cried, but the boy had already turned around. His eyes bulged in terror as the great beast bore down on him. Instinctively, he threw himself flat just as the dragon crunched down, rebounding from the ice with all four powerful legs, and lunging back into the air again even as the frozen river shattered beneath her weight. Ralph scrambled to hold on, now captive on a heaving chunk of loose ice.

Hagrid ran past on James’ right, still bellowing, leaping clumsily over widening cracks. Rose was close behind, running more nimbly, even as her boots slipped and scraped.

Norberta pumped her wings, lofted through the air, and kicked off again, this time from the deck of the Gertude, tearing up planks and

rigging with her claws. One wing walloped the air, the other, slightly out of synch, limped faintly, tugging her off course. Her swooping form was wreathed in swirls of snow, and James could just make out the shape of Heddleburn as she leapt from the dragon's head, grabbed onto the rear mast of the Gertrude, and swung up to perch on the furled sail.

"Elf work is for elves!" she called, her voice suddenly firm, as high and ringing as a trumpet. "Spread the word! This is just the beginning! Elf work is for elves, or the Muggle world will pay!"

James slid and stumbled to a halt as the shattered ice broke up before him. Norberta roared again, and the echo of it pealed over the Thames like thunder. With a wrench and screech of metal, she landed on the unmistakable shape of a Tower Bridge, clawed up to the top of its south stone tower, and coiled there, her tail whipping about her flanks, her wings raised and flexing for balance. She raised her neck, hinged open her jaw, and sent a gout of flame high into the snowy clouds. Yellow light filled the world like a beacon, illuminating every falling snowflake, glinting from bridge's suspended walkways. On the roadway below, cars squealed and tyres screeched. The noise of crashing metal and terrified screams was unmistakable even through the dark distance.

Then, with a sinewy lunge, Norberta launched again. Her wings caught the air, whumped down, and she swooped into a long, low arc, descending into the foggy glow of the city, where she was met with distant blares of horns and crumps of colliding metal.

James could barely believe what he was seeing. Zane scraped to a halt next to him, weighing down the giant chunk of ice they floated on and grabbing James' shoulder for support.

"NORBERTA!!" Hagrid bellowed, standing in silhouette on a heaving floe ahead, his legs splayed. Next to him, Rose clutched onto his coat for dear life. "NORBERTA! COME BACK!"

James turned, realizing that the force of the river had already carried them some distance away from the Gertrude. Frantically, he

scanned the rigging and masts, looking, but there was no longer anything to see.

“She’s escaped,” Zane gasped hopelessly, still clinging to James for support. “We’ll never see *that* little traitor again.”

A heavy shape slid up against James’ legs as the ice bobbed, allowing black water to bubble up over its edge. He buckled and fell backwards onto the object, which let out a hoarse “Oof!”

It was Ralph.

“I really do get tired,” he wheezed, rolling onto his back on the ice and throwing James off of him, “of being right... about these things.”



NEXT CHAPTER:

**LOOMING DISASTER!
MORE QUIDDITCH?
THE GOLDEN TRIO!**