

JAMES POTTER  
AND THE  
CRIMSON THREAD

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

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## 18. A BRIEF REPRIEVE

It was almost dawn by the time James and Rose made their way back to the portrait hole, feeling as if they'd been away for weeks rather than hours.

“My, just *look* at the two of you,” the Fat Lady said disapprovingly, raising the topmost of her many chins. “You both look a fright. And what brings you back at such an ungodly hour?”

“Venomous Tentacula,” Rose growled the password as if it was a curse.

“Well!” the Fat Lady huffed, gathering her stole tighter about her shoulders indignantly. With a creak, her frame swung open, revealing the deep shadows and cold hearth of the common room.

Without a word, the two separated and climbed their respective dormitory stairs.

James didn't know about Rose, but despite the numbing exhaustion of his body, he felt as wide awake as he'd ever been in his entire life. Creeping up the winding stairs to the somnolent dimness of

the dormitory, he was relieved to see even Scorpius asleep in his stolen place among the seventh years.

Unable to muster the energy even to peel off his damp clothes, James lowered himself to his bed fully dressed, collapsed upon it, and lay there staring up toward the nearby window. The snow had stopped and the moon was up, glaring back with its own glowing eye, illuminating the window's frosted edges like neon.

James' every thought was consumed with the grave consequences of what they had inadvertently caused that night. The journey home had been difficult and arduous, with hours spent on the broken ice of the Thames shoring up the Gertrude enough to brave the attempt, all while Zane cast *visum-ineptio* charms over the ship to make it look like a mere tugboat to anyone who might come to investigate the fracas nearby.

But now that it was over, the return trip ceased to matter completely.

They had set a dragon loose in Muggle London.

The very thought seemed preposterous. Laughable, even. And yet he could all too easily recall the crash of colliding cars and the screams of witnesses as Norberta clawed to the top of Tower Bridge, coiling atop its famed silhouette like a living gargoyle.

Hundreds of people had to have seen it, despite the hour. And even now, the fully-grown Norwegian Ridgeback was surely rampaging through the city, doing untold damage and spreading a wake of Muggle terror in every direction.

Zane had been right. As they'd departed the hobbled Gertrude upon finally returning to the Moonpool, he had pulled James, Rose, and Ralph aside and gravely said, "This is worse than the Night of the Unveiling. You know that, right?"

Hagrid had been utterly silent throughout the return journey, even as they all bid their solemn goodnights. He was in a sort of shock, James knew, caught between worrying about his poor, lost dragon, the knowledge that he had caused possibly the greatest breach of the Vow of Secrecy in a thousand years, and the reality that, by the following

morning, he may well be carted off to Azkaban to await trial for crimes too numerous to easily count.

And yet James simply couldn't comprehend the terrible scope of it all. Whenever he tried to imagine what was to come, or what he should do about it, his mind fetched up once again on that harrowing image of the dragon atop Tower Bridge, her tail whipping her flanks, her wings spread for balance, roaring a stream of liquid fire into the clouds.

He fell asleep without realizing it and woke up mere minutes later, or so it felt. The daylight outside the window betrayed the truth, however. It was the middle of Saturday afternoon.

James groaned and rolled over, clutching a hand over his eyes.

"Late night, sleepyhead?" A voice greeted him cheerfully. It was Graham. "You'll be in no shape for Quidditch tomorrow if you keep that up. As your team captain, I feel it's my duty to say I'm disappointed in you."

James groaned again, unable to formulate any meaningful response. As he swung his feet to the floor, realizing that he was fully clothed in grimy jeans, sweatshirt, and clammy socks, the memory of the previous night fell back onto him like a millstone.

"Oh, bloody hell," he muttered urgently to himself. "Graham, have you seen a newspaper today?"

Graham had not. "Why? Did you have *another* interview with Rita Skeeter?"

Breathlessly, James leapt out of bed, not even thinking to change out of his grimy day-old clothes, and ran down the spiral stairs.

No one in the common room had seen that morning's *Daily Prophet* either. James pushed through the portrait hole and ran toward the staircase, his feet clad only in socks, now loose and flopping damply from his toes.

He passed Peeves in the hall, and the poltergeist hurried to follow, sensing potential trouble and eager to exploit it however he could.

“Get away!” James called back over his shoulder, panting. “This is none of your business!”

“Things that aren’t my business are the best things of all!” the fat little figure trilled, bouncing happily from the walls.

Rose was just coming out of the Great Hall as James blundered to the bottom of the stairs with Peeves tittering close behind.

“Have you seen it? What’s the news?” James gasped, but Rose hurried to him, already shushing him with a finger to her lips.

“Ooo!” Peeves squeaked with high anticipation. “This is going to be good! I can just *smell* the beautiful stink of conspiracy about you both!”

“Away with you, Peeves!” Rose hissed, snapping her glare onto the poltergeist. “This doesn’t concern you!”

“All the better!” Peeves squealed, turning loops in the air. “Trouble, trouble for Peeves to double!”

Rose narrowed her eyes. When she spoke again, it was in a musing, sing-song voice. “Did you hear what they’re making for dessert tonight, James?”

Peeves halted in mid-air, his face suddenly suspicious.

“Sleeping Toad Tarts,” Rose whispered tantalizingly. “Mmmm... miniature enchanted sugar toads twitching in Turkish Delight gelatin drops. Very tricky to prepare. Requires complete silence in the kitchen, lest the trays of sugar toads be woken before they’re properly embedded in the gelatin. Can you just imagine? Hundreds of candy toads leaping pell-mell about the kitchen with all the elves scrambling to catch them?”

James glanced up at Peeves and was surprised to see the poltergeist wringing his hands frantically, his piggish face screwed up with strain, like Ralph trying not to belch in class after chugging a licorice soda.

“It would be simply disastrous,” Rose went on, speaking in an awed voice, “if anyone, say, invaded the kitchen and started banging pots and pans while singing the Hogwarts Salute at the top of their

lungs. It's a good thing I don't know *anyone* who likes to do such things."

"MmmmMMH!" Peeves groaned shrilly, nearly popping with torment. He hovered a moment longer, his eyes going cross-eyed and his cheeks bulging with concentration, and then let out a bawl of helpless glee and swooped away, careening in the unmistakable direction of the kitchens, already breaking into the first verse of the Hogwarts Tribute.

"Come with me," Rose said, grabbing James by the elbow and steering him away toward a side corridor. "The library. And not a word before we get there."

James allowed Rose to drag him onward, once again marveling at her ability to manipulate lesser minds by giving them exactly what they most want.

Five minutes later, at a table in the farthest back corner of the library, with their backs to the wall and no one else in sight, James bent over Rose's edition of that morning's *Daily Prophet*.

The news story was surprisingly small, halfway down the second page. Not buried, exactly, but clearly not the screaming headline that they had expected.

## MUGGLE DRAGON SIGHTINGS IN CENTRAL LONDON CAUSE FOR INVESTIGATION

Ministry of Magic officials responded early this morning to persistent reports that a dragon had been sighted atop London's Tower Bridge and in nearby environs. Initially dismissed as mass hysteria induced by the numerous unrelated breaches of magical unplottability in Muggle spaces, eyewitness testimonies led Ministry investigators to believe that some incursion of a magical beast may indeed have occurred.

“A dragon is exceedingly unlikely,” explains Harry Potter, head Auror and lead responder to the scene. “But Muggle witnesses indicate that some fantastical beast or magical entity may well have temporarily escaped secure wizarding boundaries. Most likely the creature is simply a rogue boggart unwittingly set loose in the Muggle streets. We shall catch up to it forthwith, I am certain.”

According to official reports, the appearance of the creature occurred between 1:25 and 1:40 in the morning, where the beast was first observed over Tower Bridge, then soaring over Potters Field Park and vanishing into nearby Shard rail-yard. Ministry oblivators, now working round the clock, were dispatched to the district to alter the memories of nearly three hundred Muggle witnesses. Damage from multiple vehicle accidents was also magically repaired. Ministry officials caution, however, that with sightings of this magnitude, some residual memory and physical evidence is bound to remain.

Wolfram Tryce, Lead Obliviator, warns, “We are reduced to short-term memory extraction rather than full experiential replacement. All it will take is for two or three of the witnesses to encounter each other in their daily lives for their shared memories to resurface.”

As *Daily Prophet* readers are bound to know, the popular Hokus Brothers Circus, currently performing in wizarding London’s Diagon Alley, feature a Hebridean Black dragon that performs under the stage name of Montague Python. Circus owner and ringmaster Archibald Hokus assured this reporter personally that their dragon was present and accounted for throughout the entire night.

“Montague’s a registered beast, never out of our sight, and tame as a lamb, despite his fearsome size and reputation,” Hokus explained via floo early this morning. “And for good reason! Trained dragons are right dear, in every sense of the word. I don’t expect there’s another like him in the entire world, much as we might wish there was. And Monty’s been with us for so long now that he’s like a member of my own family.”

When pressed for whether the Ministry of Magic has been in contact with Hokus Brothers Circus to confirm the whereabouts of their dragon during last night’s sightings, Mr. Hokus assured that he is “cooperating in every possible way with the authorities.”

Curtailling suspicions in the non-magical community, the official explanation planted in Muggle news outlets for the sightings involves a runaway weather balloon and swamp gas build-up under the ice of the frozen Thames. “Oldies are still goodies,” Mr. Tryce explained—somewhat wearily, in this reporter’s tenured estimation.

“Well,” James sighed, overcome with tentative relief, “that’s a stroke of luck, isn’t it?” He pushed the newspaper back toward Rose, who collected and folded it again, looking nowhere near as relieved as James himself.

“Something’s fishy about the whole story,” she said in a harsh whisper, “Norberta is still loose in London, but nobody else has seen her since the middle of last night. How likely is that?”

“Maybe she got scared and found a hiding place,” James shrugged uncertainly.

“That’s possible, actually,” Rose admitted, “Norwegian Ridgebacks, when confronted with the unknown, will usually find a



familiar-looking hovel to retreat to, waiting out danger or confusion. The poor thing's probably terrified."

"Now you're sounding like Hagrid," James observed, surprised.

"Just because she may still get us all in the worst trouble of our lives," Rose sniffed, sagging low in her chair, "doesn't mean I'm heartless. Norberta didn't ask for any of this. She's just responding to instinct."

"It's Heddlebun who's to blame," another voice said, strained to a dense whisper. It was Ralph, sliding into a chair across the table, his eyes wide and serious. "I told you this whole affair was a disaster just waiting to happen!"

"I think it was me what told you all that Heddlebun couldn't be trusted," James said, shaking his head. "For whatever good that did."

Rose adopted her most beatific expression and said, "It's no use laying blame now. What's done is done. Now we have to figure out what to do about it."

"Easy for you to say," Ralph said, his voice still strained with anxiety. "You're the one that said nothing would go wrong if we got involved."

"I never said nothing would go wrong," Rose commented primly. "I said we wouldn't get caught."

"S'not how I remember it," Ralph groused, folding his arms.

"So," James said, trying to bring the topic back on point. "If Norberta's hiding away someplace, like you Rose says, what exactly is the problem?" Unwilling to abandon his newfound relief, he tapped the newspaper and added, "Out of sight, out of mind, right?"

Rose turned her impatient glare back on him and rasped, "That was your *dad* they quoted in the article, if you hadn't noticed. He's no Ministry pencil pusher. That would be *my* dad," she admitted with another weak slump in her chair, before rallying slightly, "but even *he* wouldn't buy this line of tripe about a 'rogue Boggart'. That's pure rubbish meant to console stupid people. Nothing more."

James rolled his eyes in exasperation. “We get a huge break on what could be the worst news in centuries, and you’re complaining about it! We’re off the hook, don’t you see? What’s the problem, Rose?”

“The problem is this isn’t over,” Rose insisted in a firm whisper. “It can’t be! Norberta is still out there. And no matter what your dad says to the ‘tenured reporter’ at the *Daily Prophet*, he *knows* something’s up.”

“I’m with Rose,” Ralph nodded. “Only, not. Because I happen to think the best thing for us to do right now is go to Merlin and tell him the whole bleedin’ thing.”

“It’s fine,” James soothed, glancing back and forth between Ralph and Rose. He gestured at the newspaper again and asked, “Did either of you show Hagrid?”

Rose shook her head and blew out a sigh. “I expect he knows about it already. The poor old bloke was worried sick last night. He would have gotten a newspaper first thing, just to know the extent of the damage. But mark my words. This isn’t over. We set a dragon loose in London! It may be all clear for the moment, what with the Obliviators done with their work and the wrecks all mended. But Norberta’s still out there. We’re going to have to *do* something about that!”

“And I’m telling *you*, Rose,” James said, leaning forward and stabbing a finger down onto the folded newspaper. “It’s not our problem anymore! Norberta’s in hiding, and the Ministry is explaining it away with Boggarts and weather balloons and swamp gas. We should be counting our lucky stars for the breaks we got here, *not* looking for more dark omens to fret about!” he flopped back in his chair again and crossed his arms over his chest before commenting in a different voice, “Zane sure was a dab hand at those *visum-ineptio* charms though last night, wasn’t he?”

“Well, it’s hard to tell, isn’t it,” Rose sighed, collecting the newspaper and pushing it back into her bag. “Those only work on people who don’t know what they’re really looking at.”

“But you were impressed,” Ralph agreed, tilting his head. “I could tell. Admit it: you’re glad he came.”

Rose’s face flushed. It was a subtle thing, but James had known his cousin since she was a baby, and recognized it. She zipped her bag and avoided looking at him. “He’s an irreverent, juvenile, reckless, manically cheerful, dodgy, American rogue.”

James nodded. “And you like him for exactly everything that he annoys you for.”

He expected her to be angry, but she simply slumped over the table, chin on her crossed arms, and stared out over the bookshelves. “He’s no Scorpius, that’s for sure.”

“Ah,” James nodded, feeling rather bold. “Because *he* annoys you for everything you used to like him for.”

“Oh, I still like him. I can’t help it,” Rose shook her head on her arms, keeping her voice low. “But I hate myself for it. He keeps me in a confused tizzy most of the time. Every time I think we’re all smoothed out, he does something else infuriating. My school-work is suffering for it.”

Ralph glanced at her, frowning. “What are you talking about? You get top marks in every class.”

“But I’m not enjoying it. It’s all become a... a *drudgery*.”

“Wow,” James gave a low whistle. “A world where schoolwork is a drudgery. That’s more than I can imagine.”

“You’re some help,” Rose muttered disconsolately. “I don’t even know why I’m saying this to you two.”

James was tempted to tell Rose that Scorpius was simply no good for her, but he knew that it would be pointless. That was something she’d have to learn on her own, when she realized for herself that the sum total of their relationship was annoyance, heartbreak, and petty squabbles.

Instead, he mused, “‘Rose Malfoy’ sounds like a shade of sickening pink. Like that terrible stomach potion Grandma Weasley brews up whenever we get the flu.”

“Oh, thanks for that,” Rose sat up again and collected her bag. “That clears up everything.” She made to leave, then turned back to him and Ralph. “But seriously. This Norberta business isn’t over. We’ve made a mess, and something’s going to have to be done about it before it all comes crashing down on our heads.”

Without waiting for a response, she turned and walked away. James watched her go, arms still crossed over his chest, and then blew out a weary sigh.

He firmly wanted to believe that Rose was over-reacting and that Norberta was no longer their problem. He was less convinced it was true, however, than that Rose still harbored a secret, hopeless torch for Zane Walker, even from inside the emotional cage of her relationship with Scorpius.

Ralph was still looking back at Rose as she turned past a bookshelf and out of sight. “I hate to say it, but she’s right about Norberta. And you’re right about her and Scorpius Malfoy. What a right wazzock he is.”

James sighed and stood up, finally deciding, reluctantly, that he should change out of last night’s grubby clothes. “This whole affair’s gone totally quantum. Way over our tiny heads. See you later, Ralph.”

As he made his way back to the Gryffindor tower, he mused that, much like Norberta loose in central London, Rose’s love life was just one more thing that he, James, couldn’t do anything about.



As the weather is wont to do during those first ambiguous days of early spring, Friday night's snowstorm was followed by a wave of unseasonable warmth on Sunday. The balmy air chased the snow into sullen, crusted dregs in the castle's shadows, revealing the matted yellow grass beneath and summoning cascades of pallid icicles from the eaves and turrets. The ground squelched beneath James' trainers, soaking them through, as he made his way to the Quidditch pitch for the evening's match against Ravenclaw.

He was eager to get back onto a broom again after the long break, and was hoping to finally prove himself worthy of his position as Seeker. Thus far in the season, Gryffindor was in third place, following Ravenclaw and Slytherin. If they could snatch victory in today's match-up, they would climb to second with dreams of a possible tournament win. If they lost, they could most likely kiss the trophy goodbye.

The grandstands were full to overflowing, noisome and drumming with cheers and tramping feet, as James took his place on the field for the pre-game captains' handshake.

The match that followed was hard fought and mostly textbook. The air was clear beneath a bright grey sky, allowing for perfect visibility and offering almost no cross-breeze. James banked and swooped in search of the Snitch, keeping one eye out for rogue Bludgers as well as George Muldoon, who played Seeker for the Ravenclaws. As James swooped low over the Ravenclaw stadium, with the sun setting just beyond the streaming banners overhead, he spotted Edgar Edgecombe and his cronies, Ogden and Heathrow, seated in the front row, calling jeers through cupped hands. Dimly, James realized that he hadn't thought of them in weeks, and was very glad of it. Perhaps, he mused, he had heard the last of their petty, pointless antagonism. Even as he swooped on, however, he expected this was too much to hope for.

Gryffindor maintained a thin but persistent lead over Ravenclaw throughout the match, but nowhere near enough to secure a victory. James knew that the extra few points on the scoreboard would come to naught if Muldoon spotted and snagged the Snitch before he did. Suspense tightened in his chest like a noose as the sun dipped low over the grandstands and the match grew tense, feverish with anticipation.

James had not seen the Snitch the entire match, and knew that it simply must make an appearance sometime soon. He scanned the wild fracas of players, watched the wallop of Bludgers and the lob of Quaffles toward glinting rings. He heard Lily grunt with effort, managing to knock back shot after shot. Gritting his teeth, he waited and searched, straining his eyes so hard that they ached behind his glasses.

And then, with a glimmer of sunset gold and a streak of fluttering wings, there it was: the Snitch bobbed behind Ashley Doone as she hovered before the Ravenclaw goal rings. Then, it formed an arc of bronze as it dipped, banked, and zipped across the pitch, heading straight toward him.

James watched it approach, his breath caught in his chest. Surely, it wouldn't be this easy. And of course, it wasn't. The Snitch zigged in the air, angling away into the setting sunlight, and James hunkered over his broom, launching forward in pursuit.

From his peripheral vision, he tried to see if Muldoon was giving chase as well, but the sunset light made it impossible to tell. Eyes locked onto the fluttering golden ball, James twitched and banked through the melee of players, ducking under Bludgers and doing a full barrel-roll beneath Stebbins, Gryffindor's lead Beater.

"Go James!" he heard Graham call, followed by a surprised whoop from Deirdre as he blew past her. The crowd bellowed with a surge of excitement, and James knew that Muldoon must have joined the chase now as well. The match was likely only seconds from being over.

Suddenly, Ashley Doone was in front of James, careening straight into his path as she abandoned her post at the goals, attempting to block his course. He ticked his broom to the right and dipped his head, careening so close beneath her broom that its tail bristles combed his hair. When he glanced up again, Muldoon was swinging up alongside, his brow lowered, his face set in a grim scowl.

But he was too late, and James knew it. He exulted in it. As Mudoon struggled to catch up, James stretched out his hand, saw his shadow flicker over the swooping shape of the Snitch, and caught it.

It was like catching an apple out of a tree in Grandma Weasley's orchard; just as natural and easy as snatching a dinner roll from a plate. He blinked at his own fist and the golden wings that fluttered against his palm. As he looked, the wings stilled. The match was over.

Amazed and grinning with delight, he glanced aside at Muldoon, who tugged his broom to a disgusted halt and dropped his chin to his chest, his sweaty hair falling over his face.

The grandstands erupted into deafening applause.

"And thanks to some solid flying and the eagle-eye of James Potter," Josephina Bartlett cried from the announcer's booth, "Gryffindor plucks a second-place standing from the grasp of tonight's rival, Ravenclaw!"

Firework charms popped and sizzled all around as the rest of the team piled around James, hooting with delight and boosting him up between them.

Lily threw an arm around James' shoulders in mid-air, and James decided, then and there, that he could forgive her for blaming him for their earlier loss against Slytherin. Apparently, sport could be both the greatest divider and the strongest unifier. None of it may be especially important in the long run, but for the moment it felt like the only thing that mattered in the whole world.

Until, moments later, as James was descending to the pitch, circling like a dandelion seed with the rest of team Gryffindor still hollering and congratulating each other all around him.

Seated in the second row of the Gryffindor grandstand was James' father, the unmistakable and legendary Harry Potter. He was smiling with pride, but not cheering. On his right was James' Uncle, Ron Weasley. And next to him, resplendent in her scarlet and gold scarf and bushy brown hair, was his Aunt Hermione. They were all three watching him, smiling tightly, and yet there was something in their eyes that said that they had not, in fact, come to Hogwarts, strictly speaking, for the evening's Quidditch match.

Rose was waiting next to the grandstand as James touched down and collected his broom.

"You saw?" she said, reading the sudden ashen look on his face.

He nodded. "Have you talked to them already? What are they here for?"

"Let's just say," Rose said, pitching her voice low and offering him a meaningful look, "that none of them really think it was a boggart that showed up in London the other night."



The plan, according to Rose, was to meet up in Hagrid's hut at nightfall. She hurried back to the castle in order to Duck the message to Ralph while James retreated to the locker area and changed out of



his Quidditch gear. He could barely bring himself to wait until that night to know what the meeting with his dad, aunt, and uncle was about. Worry and alarm fanned out in his veins like cold acid, infusing him with low dread, but there was nothing he could do about it. In the wake of the Quidditch match, the three grown-ups were scheduled for a private dinner with Headmaster Merlin and several teachers, ostensibly to discuss the continued disintegration of the Vow of Secrecy and theories about how to shore it up in the short term. James had the distinct idea that this was only a ruse meant to throw off suspicion. The real reason for their visit would be illuminated later that night in Hagrid's hut, for a much more select group.

He showered, hurried to dinner, and couldn't bring himself to eat. His stomach was in knots at the thought of what might be to come. What did his dad know about the Norberta debacle? Was Hagrid going to be sent to Azkaban? Had *the Daily Prophet* been fed a deliberately sanitized version of the story? Perhaps Norberta was even now continuing to tear a ravenous swathe of destruction across London! But how could such a thing possibly be kept quiet?

Finally, desperately, he confided his worries to Rose as they left the Great Hall.

"That's idiotic," she said with a patronizing sniff. "But I'm glad you're at least taking the thing seriously now."

"I've always taken it seriously!" James exclaimed, albeit in a low rasp, "I just hoped that the problem had gone away by itself. Can't blame me for being optimistic, can you?"

"There's optimistic and there's irresponsible," Rose said with a shake of her head.

As they neared the stairs, Ralph huffed toward them, his Head Boy badge glinting in the evening light. "What's this all about, your parents coming here and arranging some secret meeting at Hagrid's?" he panted. "Are we doomed? We're completely doomed, aren't we?"

"Cool your cauldron," Rose said, "If it was as bad as that they would have carted us all off the moment they got here, not waited to meet all quiet-like under cover of darkness."

“I *told* you it was a massive mistake,” Ralph grumped, leaning against the balustrade to catch his breath. “No more of this! We tell them everything. Agreed?”

“Maybe,” Rose hedged, raising a placating hand.

“And Merlin, too,” Ralph insisted. “And not just about this whole dragon affair. About everything. Petra, Odin-Vann, the Crimson Thread, the whole thing.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” James hissed, tugging Ralph, with considerable effort, into a dark corner beneath the stairs. “Not a chance! Are you completely mental?”

“I’m the sanest one of all of us,” Ralph protested, keeping his own voice low but clearly resenting it. “We’ve made the mistake before of not trusting Merlin and our parents! But this is too big for us to make that same mistake again!”

James opened his mouth to object, but Rose spoke before he could. “Merlin and our parents are sworn to capture Petra by any means necessary, not to help her. You know that, Ralph. You *saw* what happened when Merlin and Petra clashed in the World Between the Worlds.”

Ralph ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Has it occurred to you two that maybe they’re *right* to try to stop her?” He glared at them each in turn, and then shook his head, overruling their objections. “Look, I trust Petra as much as I trust either of you. I believe she *thinks* this is the only plan that will work. But just because Petra has awesome powers doesn’t mean she’s always right. And don’t even get me started about Odin-Vann. He’s as dodgy as a rubber galleon. I trust Merlin and our parents ten times more than I trust *that* skinny prat. We need their help, and you know it.”

Rose merely gave a hard sigh and turned to look at James. Clearly, she had been struggling with this very dilemma.

And it was only in that moment that James finally understood his biggest reason for keeping Petra’s plan a secret. The weight of the realization chilled him all the way to his heels. Rose saw it on his face, as did Ralph, who blanched a little himself.

“What is it?” he asked, dropping his voice to a whisper. “What do you know?”

James shook his head slowly. “It’s not what I know,” he breathed, leaning against the wall and sliding down into a weak crouch. “It’s what I’m afraid could happen. What *will* happen, if we tell Merlin and our parents.”

Ralph hunkered down as well. Rose knelt and smoothed her skirt over her knees. “They’ll try to reason with her, won’t they?” she said reasonably. “If they can get her to listen, they’ll try to talk her out of her plan.”

James shook his head again. “But they won’t succeed. Petra is completely committed. She’s made a *Horcrux* just to assure she can carry out her plan. No way that Merlin and our parents will be able to talk her out of it. That means they won’t have any choice but to try to stop her however they can.”

Rose’s face paled now as she nodded, beginning to understand. “And if they oppose her by force...”

Ralph’s shoulders slumped. “People will end up getting hurt. Maybe even killed.”

“But not Petra,” James whispered. “That’s the whole point of the Horcrux. They may resort to trying to cut her down, but it won’t work. And then...”

“*She* will attack *them*,” Rose said in a small voice. “Petra will kill anyone who stands in her way.”

James felt cold to the bone as he nodded. “She’ll do it because she thinks it’s the only way to save the entire world. She’ll hate it. But she *will* do it. Because she believes she is strong enough to make the hardest choice of all.”

Rose added, “And because her soul is already stained with *one* death.”

Ralph stared down at the floor between them, apparently thinking hard, mulling over the cold truth of their words. “So,” he muttered, “if we tell Merlin or our parents, they may end up dead.”

And it would be partly our fault, because we set them up to oppose someone they can't possibly defeat."

None of them responded. After a long moment, Ralph raised his head again.

"Not even Merlin?"

James looked at Rose, then Ralph. "Merlin would be our best hope. But remember what happened when he confronted Petra at the parade in New York, on the Night of the Unveiling. He tried to stop her. He used his staff on her. And it didn't even stun her. He was nothing to her."

Ralph frowned, still struggling with the idea. "But the city is her element! It's the source of her power! Sure, she was more powerful than him there. But maybe next time..."

With a deep sigh, Rose said, "*If* there's a next time, Petra will make sure the odds are stacked in her favor again, just like they were in New York. She knows Merlin's weakness. She won't let him have any advantage over her. She will defeat him. And when she does, he won't *ever* come back."

Ralph simply scowled and stared at the floor again. He didn't like it. James could see that. But neither could he argue with it.

Without a word, the three went their separate ways. They didn't see each other again until nearly nine o'clock, as they congregated in the entrance hall and slipped out into the cold of the night.

Hagrid's hut glowed with yellow light. A ribbon of grey smoke issued from its stone chimney, just like always, and yet James had never felt less welcomed by the familiar hut than he did now. He was mad with suspense about what was to come, but also trembling with trepidation that he might be about to get into the worst trouble of his life.

A noise suddenly wafted across the blue evening glow of the lawns, stopping James, Rose, and Ralph in their tracks. It was faint but unmistakable, and it was the last sound they expected to hear coming from the depths of the hut.

It was laughter. Several voices, all different timbres, were laughing in unison, forming a melody like an old song, long forgotten.

James glanced aside in alarm and met Rose's puzzled gaze. Ralph gulped audibly.

"Is that a good sign," he whispered, "or a bad sign?"

Rose shrugged uncertainly, and then, more slowly, resumed her short trek across the lawn. James and Ralph followed tentatively.

The laughter came again, growing louder as the three approached the hut. Rose raised her small fist and knocked once, softly, almost as if she hoped not to be heard. The hut went immediately silent. Several seconds later, the door budged open and the shaggy bulk of Hagrid's head peered out. His dark eyes flicked over the three students, then he nodded and stepped back, tugging the door open with him.

James followed Rose and Ralph inside and glanced around.

Seated around the huge table, their faces illuminated in the glow of a single lantern, with the dishes of a late tea scattered between them, were Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, and his wife Hermione. They were dressed in dark jeans and heavy sweaters, their faces merry but quiet as they looked up at the newcomers, as if reluctantly prepared to get down to the business of the night.

Hagrid shut the hut door with a clunk and gestured toward the table. "We was just discussin' old times," he acknowledged. "Lot o' memories with these three. Not all of 'em good, but definitely more of 'em than not."

Hermione nodded and pointed to a small chair beneath the window. "I remember you sitting right there, Ron," she commented, "vomiting slugs for a good quarter hour. Is that one of the good memories or the bad ones?"

James' father tried not to grin. Ron rolled his eyes and shook his head. "You're a laugh riot, Mrs. Weasley. If you recall, that was a result of me trying to defend your prodigious honour."

"And failing admirably," Harry agreed. "But it's definitely the thought that counts."

Hermione put an arm around her husband and dipped her head to his shoulder. "I do remember," she said warmly, "And I'll never forget it."

"Nice catch out there today, James," Ron nodded, turning to James with a crooked smile.

James moved into the light of the table, looking from face to face for some sign of what was going on. His father saw the question on his face and gave a brief nod.

"We know about Norberta," he admitted. "And before you give Hagrid any grief, no, it isn't because he told us."

Hagrid raised both of his slab-like hands as he settled back into his chair. "Didn't utter nary a word. Not this time."

Rose narrowed her eyes, moving to budge onto the chair next to her mother, who shifted to allow room. "So, how *do* you know, then?" she asked, looking cagily around the table. "And, er, *what* do you know?"

Her father spoke up then, raising a hand to tick off points on his fingers. "We know about the plan to steal off to London to facilitate transport of a certain unregistered Norwegian Ridgeback whose living arrangement with the giants had become tenuous, at best. We know that the plan, such as it was, went terribly awry, leading to said dragon's escape into the city proper, causing hundreds of poor Muggle Londoners to soil their britches in mortal terror."

"Ronald," Hermione clucked her tongue in disdain.

"And," Ron went on, not missing a beat, "we know that, fortunately for everyone involved, said dragon—a certain female named, through no fault of her own, Norberta—quickly went to ground, hiding herself away somewhere within the confines of the city proper, and is apparently still there, scared and waiting until such time as she is discovered, or becomes hungry enough to have to go hunting for food."

James sagged into the last empty seat at the table, weak with a mixture of relief and embarrassment. To his father, he asked, "How did you work all of this out?"

“Simple,” Harry said, taking off his glasses and wiping them on his sleeve. “It’s my *job* to work things out.”

“We looked up the records of every registered dragon in a hundred mile radius,” Hermione explained. “It’s not exactly a long list. We checked out each one and determined they’d all been accounted for on the night in question. And since native Welsh Greens all stay far away from the cities by nature, that left only one option.”

Ron nodded. “A certain Norwegian Ridgeback that only a few people know about, and that we three are nominally responsible for.”

“We *four*,” Harry corrected, tossing a sidelong glance at Hagrid.

“Not to mention,” Ron added, “That several of the Muggle witnesses that night reported seeing a ship broken through the ice of the Thames. Some said it was a long old ship with masts and a great paddlewheel. Others said it was a regular old tugboat. Same place, same time.”

Hermione went on, “So we made some quick deductions, and then came straight here to ask Hagrid what, precisely, he was up to, and who else had come along for the ride.” At this, she turned to her daughter with a pointed look.

“What were we supposed to do?” Rose said shrilly. “Let poor old Hagrid go off and try to rescue Norberta by himself in that floating bucket of his? He would have, you know! We had an obligation to help, all three of us. It wasn’t my fault that Zane Walker ended up coming along for the ride! I wanted to send him back to Alma Aleron the moment Ralph Ducked him here!”

James saw what was happening an instant before his Aunt Hermione raised her eyebrows and turned to look back at her husband, a sly, knowing expression on her face.

“*Nary* a word,” Hagrid repeated emphatically. “It wasn’t me this time.”

Ralph smacked a hand to his forehead.

Rose looked from her mother to her father, then across the table to her uncle, who dipped his eyes to the tabletop and fingered his empty teacup.

Rose said, "You didn't know any of that... did you?"

"It's the oldest trick in the Auror book," James sighed, flopping back in his chair. "Convince them you already know everything, and then just sit back and listen. He's been doing it to Albus, Lil, and I for years."

"But...!" Rose fumed, her cheeks going deep crimson. "But you said...!" She glared at her uncle accusingly.

Harry said, "It's like I told you: it's my job to work things out. You were very helpful, Rose. Thank you."

Hermione turned to Hagrid. "How could you let them come?" she asked reproachfully. "That was extremely dangerous."

"No more than anything we did in our day," Ron said softly, "and for the exact same dragon."

"That's what I *told* them!" Rose spluttered. "We were just finishing what you started!"

Hermione gave her daughter a stern look. "Except that *we* succeeded. *You* lot set a dragon loose in London."

"Oh, don't blame them," Hagrid moaned, shaking his great head mournfully. "It's all my fault. I never should o' let 'em come along. Never should 'ave involved 'em at all. I was just so worried about Norberta. I wasn't thinkin' straight."

Harry reached around James' shoulders and touched Hagrid's arm. "There's no blame to be had. I know how persistent these three can be. Mainly because I remember how persistent *us* three used to be. There's nothing to be gained by pointing fingers now."

Ralph, still standing behind Hagrid's chair, piped up, "Especially since I tried to warn them over and over that the whole plan was a nightmare from the start!"

Hermione nodded with feeling. "Just like I tried to warn *these* two back when we were still students and Norberta was just a hatchling. *Somebody* needs to be the voice of reason."

"*Thank* you!" Ralph nodded, holding out his hands in a helpless gesture. "It's a thankless job, innit?"



“Prudence and discretion are rarely popular,” Hermione agreed wisely, now glancing aside at James, who sank lower in his seat.

“The *point* is,” Harry spoke up, “This is a serious dilemma that needs to be resolved. We all have a hand in causing it. So it’s up to us to try to mend it before any more Muggle Londoners are terrorized by a dragon in their streets.”

Hagrid nodded. “Or Norberta has to go one more day starvin’ and terrified in th’ city somewheres.”

Hermione gave him an impatient look. “*Or* any poor old gamekeeper gets sent away to Azkaban for the rest of his life. Let’s try to keep this in perspective, shall we?”

Harry sat up in his chair and put his spectacles back on. “We’ve been fortunate so far that Norberta went into hiding somehow. But it won’t last forever. The first task is to find her and get her out of the city without anyone else seeing her, Muggle or otherwise. The second task...?” He glanced across the table to Ron, who perked up.

“I spoke to Charlie this afternoon by floo. He says they’re pretty crowded now, what with the Romanian government rounding up and interring all registered dragons in his preserve. But according to him, there’s always a space for Norberta, even if it means letting her bunk with the twins in their apartment in Braşov.”

“But!” Hagrid said, sitting up in his seat and putting both hands flat onto the table. “I already made arrangements here! The barn’s all emptied out an’ a-waitin’!”

Ron suddenly arched his eyebrows and made a point of arranging the cups and saucers on the table before him.

“Hagrid,” Hermione said gently. “You *know* you can’t keep Norberta here on Hogwarts grounds. Headmaster Merlin may have a soft spot for dangerous creatures, just like you, but even he won’t turn a blind eye to a contraband dragon. And you can’t possibly think you can keep it a secret from him...?”

Hagrid sat rigid for a long moment, chewing his lips and staring hard at Hermione. Then he slumped back again, producing a strained creak from his chair. “I know,” he admitted sadly. “I’ve

known all along. It's daft, it is. I guess I was just hopin' that, once th' deed was done an' she was here..."

"It's better this way," Harry nodded. "For everybody involved."

"Not fer Norberta!" Hagrid exclaimed, lifting his shaggy head again. "She'll go crazy, all cooped up with them Romanian Longhorns! They're not compatible with Ridgebacks, an' they're powerful territorial creatures, those Longhorns! Norberta's already half-lame, what with 'er bad wing! They'll sense weakness an' make mincemeat out o' the poor old girl!"

"It's already settled," Ron said, finally looking up from the table. "If we can get Norberta out of the city on your ship, we only have to get her as far as the wizard port in Bruges. We've arranged an airship that can get her the rest of the way to Charlie in Braşov, no questions asked, cash on the barrelhead."

"An' whose payin' fer it?" Hagrid demanded, clearly groping for any excuse to deny the plan.

"We all pitched in," Hermione said, watching Hagrid closely, letting him see her eyes. "And you can, too, if you want. It's less than you might think. And it's the least we can do. After all, we really are partly responsible for this whole thing. Even if some of us *did* try to act as a voice of reason before the fact." Here, she glanced up at Ralph and offered a small, commiserating smile.

Hagrid drew a huge, quaking sigh, and then nodded slowly. "I suppose yer right. But I won't let any o' yeh lot pay a single knut for th' transport. I've plenty o' money put away, an' no other ideas what t' do with it. This is as good a way to spend it as any. The best way of all, prob'ly."

Hermione nodded and relaxed in her seat.

Ralph asked, "So, if the first job is to find Norberta, how exactly do we do that?"

"There's no 'we'," Harry countered, looking up at the big boy, and then at James and Rose. "You three have done enough already."

All we need you for now is to help us pinpoint precisely where Norberta was headed. We'll take it from there."

"Thank you," Ralph said again, finally collapsing into Hagrid's huge armchair before the fire.

"But Mum—!" Rose protested, but her mother was already shaking her head firmly.

"Not a chance, Rose," she said, brooking no argument. "You have school tomorrow. No way I'm allowing you to stay out to who knows what hour tonight, even if I *can* keep my eyes on you this time."

James blinked in surprise. "We're doing it tonight?"

"We are doing it," his father clarified patiently, nodding aside at Ron and Hermione. "We can't afford to wait any longer. Norberta won't stay hidden forever. We need to find her now, and get her out of the city immediately, before this whole mess goes total disaster and we're all on the hook for it."

"Some more than others," Ron pointed out quickly, glancing around the table. "Just so we're clear on that. Yeah?" He turned his gaze apologetically to Hagrid, who nodded sadly.

Rose crossed her arms sullenly. "She was headed southwest," she admitted in a taut voice. "Low, skipping over cars and rooftops. She couldn't have gotten far."

Ron leaned past Hermione and kissed his daughter on the top of her head. "Thanks love. And for what it's worth, I wish you *could* come along. But your mum's right. What kind of dad would I be if I took you out dragon-hunting on a school-night?"

"A bloody brilliant one?" Rose suggested, glancing up at him from beneath her eyebrows.

"Spot on," he nodded gravely. Hermione elbowed him aside with a roll of her eyes.

"So where will she be hiding?" Ralph asked from the armchair. "The sewers, maybe?"

Hagrid shook his head. "Nah, nah," he sighed, "Norwegian Ridgebacks are powerful good at hidin', but they'll always look fer

someplace that feels recognizable to ‘em. Someplace that reminds ‘em o’ their ancestral homeland, all comfortin’ and familiar.”

“Charlie says the same thing,” Ron agreed. “He says they have strong memories burnt into their instincts of the lands and places they originally came from. He says all we have to do is find someplace that looks and feels like it might fit right into the Norwegian countryside, a hundred years ago.”

James frowned at his uncle. “In modern London?”

Ron shrugged. “Well... sure. You know. Something that feels Norwegian-like. So...” He looked around at the others, “what do things look like in Norway, then?”

“There’s lots of fjords,” Ralph suggested. “My dad’s always going on about the fjords. Says he means to take us there to see them someday. Says they’re a wonder of the world.”

Rose gave a brisk sigh. “There aren’t any fjords in central London.”

“All right, then,” Harry said with a nod. “So, buildings and things. What would look Norwegian enough to attract a scared and homesick dragon?”

Ron sat up and pointed at Harry in inspiration. “Moss on roofs! With, like, trees growing on top. Right? All fairy-tale and heavy wood and fancy cut-outs on the doors, that sort of thing.” He glanced aside at Hermione. “Er, right?”

“This is definitely a problem,” Harry said, “if none of us has any idea what architectural details might look Norwegian enough to attract a wayward dragon.”

“Um,” James said, his eyes going wide as an idea materialized, fully formed, in his head. “Will you let me come along tonight...?”

“No,” Hermione repeated, putting her hand down on the table. “We’ve already been over this—”

“IF,” James interrupted, glancing from his aunt to his father, knowing that he was severely pressing his luck, “*if* I can find us an expert on all sorts of architecture?”

Harry studied his son, his eyes probing, skeptical but reluctantly considering. “And just who,” he asked slowly, “might this architectural expert be?”



## ***NEXT CHAPTER:***

**BACK TO LONDON!**

**MERLIN SAYS WISE THINGS!**

**RON & HERMIONE TAKE THE CROSSWALK!**