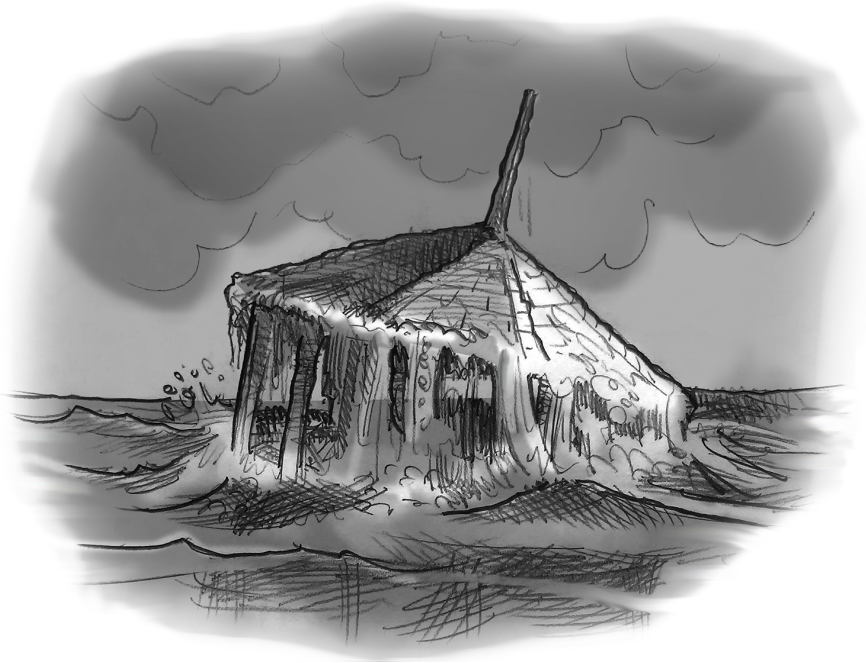


JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

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

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22. THE END OF THE BEGINNING

Professor Odin-Vann didn't return that night, or at all on Saturday.

James, Rose, and Ralph finally grew impatient on Sunday afternoon and knocked on his door, but to no avail. The sound of sneezing had stopped from within—either the recording had worn out or the trained mimicking beast had finally grown bored and either given up or escaped.

“Maybe he's asleep,” Ralph whispered, listening close to the door, but Rose shook her head.

“There's nobody in there. You can tell by the silence of it. He's not returned yet.”

As they wended their way disconsolately back through the weekend silent corridors, passing through sunbeams dense with floating motes of dust, James asked, “It *couldn't* have worked. Whatever he and Petra tried, it must have failed. Right?”

Rose shrugged and sighed. Uncharacteristically, she had no hypothesis or comment whatsoever.

The Daily Prophet weekend edition called the earthquake a “temporary shift in magical polarities”, quoting a technomancy professor from the wizarding university in Warsaw. “These things happen with cosmic regularity, though in cycles of decades or centuries, thus few alive experience more than one such event. There is nothing to be concerned about now that the moment has passed.”

The rest of the newspaper had been filled with stories of the effects of the quake, most fairly minor, but a few with serious consequences. A few houses and buildings had collapsed, not from the tremor itself, but from the brief interruption of magical force, breaking the spells that had kept the ramshackle old structures intact and upright. James mused that the Burrow probably would have been one such casualty if Merlin had not shored it up himself, being part owner and occasional resident. Other stories were variously bizarre or inexplicable. A wizarding zoo in Russia was suddenly overrun by freed beasts when its magical locks failed. Similarly, the American wizarding prison, Fort Bedlam, saw the escape of several inmates when their unplotable exercise yard suddenly burst out into the Muggle city of Phoenix, Arizona, appearing right in the centre of a busy Muggle park. Elsewhere, a wizarding warehouse full of crated vials of Floo powder mysteriously exploded, igniting the thousands of vials and thus sending bits of burning crate shooting like fireworks out of hundreds of random hearths all around Wales. One such Floo misfire lit a cottage on fire, burning it and a nearby barn to the ground. Thousands of injuries were reported worldwide, and, tragically, more than a dozen deaths, most from failed brooms during high altitude flights.

“Professor Jackson says it was no normal event, no matter what the papers say,” Zane proclaimed seriously from the Shard later that

afternoon. “There was an assembly in the theater about it and he told us everything. Basically, all the magic in the world is tied together in a huge invisible field, kind of like the magnetic poles of the earth. Something broke the field for a few seconds, completely disrupted it, like a huge hand flipping a switch, turning off magic for a few seconds. It came back on, but just barely. And nobody knows how long it’s going to last now, or how strong it will continue to be.”

“But what caused it?” James asked, keeping his voice low and leaning close to the Shard. “Was it Petra and Odin-Vann? Did they succeed in their plan?”

“I don’t know if it was them,” Zane admitted with a shake of his head. “I haven’t heard a peep from either of them. But if it *was* them, it didn’t work, and that’s the understatement of the century. The Archive’s been completely destroyed. The Loom is gone, no more than a pile of ash buried under a hundred tons of dirt and stone. Nobody knows for sure what caused it. But there’s *no* repairing it.”

Rose crowded over James’ shoulder where they huddled in a corner of the common room. Awed and frightened, she asked, “What does it mean? The Loom was the destiny of the whole world! How can it be destroyed?”

“Well, technically, the tapestry in the Loom was our destiny,” Zane shrugged vaguely in the mirror glass, “The Loom was just the machine recording it. And the Vault was protecting the whole kit and caboodle. For all the good it did. Point is, the Loom had been shut down ever since Judith broke into the Vault back in our third year and stole the crimson thread, bringing Morgan here. But at least there was always the possibility that it *could* be started up again if the thread was somehow put back, and some version of Morgan sent back to her own destiny. That’s what’s been keeping things together in our world, although less and less every day. Now...” He raised both hands, palms up, in a helpless gesture.

“But...” Ralph said slowly, “We’re all still here. I mean, right? So the world’s destiny can’t be really *ended*. Can it?”

Zane looked grave. “Professor Jackson says that the Loom was like the load-bearing wall in a house. Cut it down and the house may still stand for awhile out of sheer habit, but slam the wrong door or step on the wrong creaky floorboard, and *boom*. The whole place comes down forever. And he means *forever* forever.”

James shook his head fretfully. “But Petra was so *certain* it would work. What could have happened?”

Zane didn’t know, and no one else had the slightest guess.

As the evening wore on and the sun set on Sunday night, James found himself nearly mad with worry and confusion. In a moment of desperate inspiration, he leapt from his seat in the common room and tramped up the steps to his dormitory, Ralph and Scorpius following curiously behind.

“What are you about?” Ralph asked, frowning as James bent and heaved open his trunk.

Scorpius sat heavily on his own bed. “I think the stress has finally cracked him. I knew it was bound to eventually.”

James ignored them. Leaning over his trunk, he rooted inside, raking his hand through piles of laundry, wrinkled parchments, musty books, his new dress robes still wrapped in paper, some ratty and bent quills, his old trainers, his spare spectacles, and a surprising array of miscellany. Hectically, he tossed handfuls of random contents behind him, digging deeper into the recesses of the trunk.

“Where is it,” he grouched urgently to himself, his voice muffled in the depths. “I almost always carry it with me. The *one* time it might be *really* useful...”

Ralph approached tentatively and knelt down next to the trunk. A little worriedly, he asked, “What? What are you looking for?”

“Ah-ha!” James suddenly cried, leaning back and brandishing something in his upraised hand.

Ralph peered at it, still frowning. “What is it? Looks like an old Winkle.”

James didn’t answer. Scooting back and pushing aside a pile of miss-matched socks and old arithmancy notes, he put the tiny parcel of

paper down onto the floor. Sitting back up, he scrambled to produce his wand, then pointed it at the parchment and uttered a short, breathless spell.

With a brief flash, the parcel of paper sprang open like an origami flower, blossoming into a sheaf of creased old parchments, covered in masses of scrawled handwriting.

Scorpius slid from his bed and moved to join Ralph and James, who leaned over the parchment, frowning with concentration.

James shook his head and squinted at the parchments. Wand still in hand, he raised it and said, “Lumos!” The wand lit, illuminating the old parchment with unearthly clarity. As always, Petra’s handwriting covered the pages, but now it was so hectic and dense, so scratched out and scribbled over, that it was a virtual ink-blot of chaos.

In a low, awed voice, Ralph asked again, “What *is* it?”

“It’s Petra’s dream story,” James answered, distracted. He reached and flipped over the top parchment. The backside was also covered with scrawled words and sentences, built up to a nonsensical stew, as was the page beneath. Almost nothing was legible.

“Her... what?” Ralph quavered.

James blinked and remembered that he had never shown anyone Petra’s dream story before. He had told them about it, but for some reason he’d never shown them. It had been his and Petra’s shared secret. Through it, she had sent him private messages on occasion, usually when he most needed to hear from her. At other times, the pages had offered a glimpse into the sometimes complicated and feverish world of her thoughts.

But it had never looked like this before. This was like a love letter to insanity. The scribbled words seemed to crawl over each other, pulsing with their own insectile life.

Without answering Ralph, James reached and scooped the parchments together again, shuffling them back into a stack and folding them over, quickly hiding their scribbled contents. The parchment crackled like dry leaves, suddenly icy cold. James could feel

it on the pages themselves, turning the edges brittle and chilling his fingers.

“Potter,” Scorpius said, raising his chin.

“I don’t want to hear it,” James said quickly, folding the dream story again, roughly, so that the old pages crinkled and tore. “It’s nothing. There’s nothing to see. I thought... maybe...”

“Potter,” Scorpius said again, and then pointed to the floor where the dream story had rested moments earlier. “Is that also yours?”

James looked aside at Scorpius, blinking rapidly and hugging the sheaf of Petra’s old parchments to his chest, feeling the cold of them seeping through his shirt. For a moment he didn’t register what the boy had asked him, but then he followed the direction of Scorpius’ pointing finger.

On the floor before James’ knees, between an old puking pastille and a dried out inkpot, was another piece of parchment. This one was even older than the dream story, torn from a larger sheet, frayed and creased from its long sojourn in the bowels of James’ trunk. Three words were written on the parchment, scrawled in James’ own hand.

He didn’t remember the note at first. And then, in a blink of memory, it flooded back to him. It had been during his second year that he had had the dream—a nightmare, in fact. Shreds of it flickered before his mind’s eye: Albus with a young woman, standing in a graveyard, his grandparents’ graves leaning nearby; the Dark Mark exploding into the sky overhead, shot from Albus’ wand in the young woman’s hand, lighting the cemetery with its eerie green glow; James himself appearing out of thin air, apparating with alarm in his suddenly older voice, warning Albus and his companion that it didn’t have to be like this, that others were coming, and that they wouldn’t waste time with words...

Only now, thinking back on the dream five years later, James fully understood: the young woman in the graveyard was Petra. Of course she was. He just hadn’t known it then, because he hadn’t yet discovered that Petra was the Bloodline. *Or* the Crimson Thread.

He looked down at the old note.

When he had awoken from the dream, he had gotten up from his bed and, compelled by a sense of phantom, inexplicable resolve, penned those three words on a scrap of spare parchment. He didn't know why, not then and not now. He had only known that the dream had demanded it somehow. He had only believed that someday, somehow, the words would mean something.

He looked up at Scorpius again. Scorpius wasn't looking at the note, but at James, his eyes narrowed.

"I've always wondered," the blond boy said, as if musing aloud. "Were you sleepwalking when you wrote that? Or would you remember it again when you came across it?"

James felt suddenly exhausted, almost as if he had been hollowed out of all emotion. He merely shook his head at Scorpius, who had clearly observed him writing the note years earlier. "Both, maybe. I didn't remember writing it until now. I don't even know why I did. It doesn't mean anything. It's just a line from the play."

Ralph leaned over the note and read it. "The play? You mean *The Triumvirate*?"

James shrugged. "We were putting it on that year. For Muggle Studies. I was playing Treus, remember? It's just one of my lines."

Ralph picked up the old note and examined it critically. On it, the ink had dried to a brackish brown, the color of congealed blood. James looked at it in Ralph's hand and then read the words again, this time aloud.

"Beware... foul Donovan."

Ralph looked up at him, his brow knitted. He balled the note in his hands and shrugged impatiently. "It's nothing. Just an old script cheat-sheet, right? What was that *other* thing?" He nodded meaningfully at the dream story where James still held it folded against his chest.

James shook himself, then reached and stuffed the scribbled parchments back into his trunk. "Also nothing," he sighed harshly. "I

thought it might give us some news, but it doesn't. It's useless, just like everything else."

Ralph pushed himself up from his knees, clearly preparing to protest, but at that moment a sound of running feet echoed up the nearby stairwell. Graham Warton appeared there, leaning in through the door and looking slightly put-out.

"Rose Weasley says you lot need to come right now," he announced. "She says he's come back, and he needs your help. Whatever the bloody hell that means."

James jumped anxiously to his feet, slamming his trunk as he went, and joined Scorpius and Ralph as they clambered past Graham, leaving him staring after them in annoyed confusion.

"And you can tell Weasley that I'm not your bleedin' secretary!" he called after them.

A moment later, shaking his head, Graham tromped back down after them.

Unseen in the now empty dormitory, a ribbon of white vapor snaked from beneath the lid of James' trunk. Inside, the dream story steamed with cold, sizzling faintly as it chilled to absolute zero, freezing the socks and jeans all around it, cracking the glass in James' spare spectacles. Then, with a final, brittle hiss, the pages disintegrated into films of icy ash and fell apart, sifting into bone-white dust.

And far, far away, under the darkness of a cloudy night sky, a cold wind at her back, buffeting her dark hair, Petra relaxed her fists and opened her eyes. She sighed in mingled resolve and worry.

"James," she whispered. "Please, James... *stay away.*"



Odin-Vann, Rose informed them as they hurried through the corridors, was in the subterranean moonpool, watching the door and waiting for them. He had somehow managed to send word to her via her Protean duck, even though he didn't have a duck of his own. James, Scorpius, Rose, and Ralph slowed to a breathless stop as they joined the young professor, clambering through the door into the cool darkness of the underground lake. He closed the door immediately behind them, and then stood back and pointed at it with his wand. Without speaking a word, his wand spat an arc of electric pink at the lock, which clacked and latched firmly, presumably until he cast the unlocking charm. James had a moment to muse once again about the professor's sudden prodigious skill with his wand, after his earlier (and apparently infamous) magical impotence under stress. Now, he handled his wand with utmost confidence, and, perhaps even more impressively, with mostly non-verbal spells.

When Odin-Vann turned back from the door, however, James' eyes widened. Dirt and blood stained the professor's face like a mask. His eyes were haunted, sunken and wild in their sockets. His clothing was torn, partially burned, and grey with gritty dust. He paused, noting the students' shocked expressions, then made a conscious effort to calm his features. He raised his left hand, took a step toward them, and nearly collapsed before Rose and James caught him, one under each arm.

"Professor!" Rose cried, "What happened!? Are you OK? Should we go for Madame Curio?"

"No!" Odin-Vann barked, gasping in pain as his knees buckled. "No, I'm all right. It looks worse than it is, I promise. And there are far more important matters at hand than my wellbeing. I need your help. Or, rather, Petra does. Now more than ever."

Ralph's voice was stoic, almost cold, as he crossed his arms and cocked his head. "What happened?" he demanded firmly. "What did you do? Tell us before we agree to any more help."

"Ralph!" Rose scolded him loudly. "What's wrong with you! He's hurt, can't you see?"

"He's bleeding and dirty, I'll give you that," Ralph countered. "But he somehow survived the destruction of Alma Aleron's Archive, *and* the Loom in the Vault of Destinies. He's *responsible* for what happened. I, for one, am feeling far more inclined to turn him over to Merlin and the Watch then to help him. What's he going to destroy next, eh? What's his newest brilliant idea?"

"Ralph!" James said, sudden anger burning his cheeks, but Scorpius overrode him, his drawling voice sounding almost bored.

"Deedle is right," he commented, and then caught himself and turned to Ralph. "Sorry. *Dolohov*, is right."

"Thank you," Ralph sighed. He hadn't drawn his wand, but James could see that his hands were itching to do so.

Odin-Vann seemed to regain his footing and his strength. He straightened his robes and nodded at Ralph. "You're right. I'm sorry for rushing you. It's been..." He laughed drily. It was a short, somewhat mad sound. "It's been a strange few days for me. But I can't blame you for being extremely suspicious. I would be as well. I shall tell you everything you wish to know, if I can. And yet I cannot emphasize enough, I fear, that time is very much now our enemy."

Ralph nodded to himself and firmed his jaw. "Fine," he said, exhaling harshly. "Start by telling us exactly what happened on Friday afternoon."

Odin-Vann looked up at Ralph, meeting his eyes with impatience and desperation etched onto his face, but then, with a force of apparently Herculean effort, he calmed himself again. "Very well. But let us go to the ship. It is our destination, at any rate. If you hear my short tale and decide to help, then we shall embark immediately. If not..." He shrugged and shook his head, "Then you are free to return to whatever remains of our lives."

“Hey guys!” a voice called from the vicinity of Hagrid’s ship where it bobbed on the dark waves. James turned to look back, surprised. He recognized the voice and, even in his distress, couldn’t help smiling. The figure of Zane Walker stood on the deck of the Gertrude, his hands cupped to his mouth as he called, “You all gonna stand there kibitzing all night? I’m starting to feel a little left out.”

“Petra asked for him as well,” Odin-Vann sighed, turning back from the ship. “And she brought him here. The same way that she brought me back. By opening space like a door. She can do that now. She can do... well, just about anything.”

“Except return the crimson thread,” James commented pointedly as the crew began to hurry down to the waiting gangplank.

“No,” Odin-Vann agreed, limping as he walked. “Opening a path to the right dimension is beyond even her powers. For that... she will need all of us.”

The group’s footsteps clumped and clanked up the gangplank to the deck of the Gertrude, where Zane greeted everyone with his irrepressible grin and a hearty handshake, as if he was a cruise director welcoming a gaggle of tourists. Above them all, the inverted mirror of the Black Lake hung precipitously, clapping its own waves and dropping cool mist.

“Let us sit,” Odin-Vann said, and James could hear the exhaustion in his voice. “Just here, on the deck. I don’t have it in me to go below. This won’t take long, I hope.”

James hunkered down along the outside railing and felt the gentle roll and dip of the ship beneath him. Odin-Vann sank to an awkward sitting position against the wheelhouse, while the others formed a rough circle.

“Petra found me in my dormitory,” Zane admitted quietly to James. “Didn’t knock or anything. Just stepped right out of a black hole and onto my fake yeti-skin rug. I about peed my pants, and that’s saying something. We Zombies pride ourselves in expecting the unexpected.”

“What did she say?” James asked.

“She said that time was short and you lot would need me to do what needed to be done,” he answered with a shrug. “And that’s pretty much word-for-word. She was in a major hurry.”

“So what needs to be done?” Ralph asked, turning back to Odin-Vann.

The young professor shook his head wearily. “With the Loom destroyed, there’s only one more chance to set everything right,” he answered. “One last way to replace Morgan with Petra and reset the balance. But it will take all of us. Petra plays the most important part, and it will cost her everything, a higher price than I am willing to admit, in fact. But without us—without *you* lot—there’s no hope whatsoever.”

Ralph asked again, his eyes narrowed, “*What* did you *do*?”

“Someone sabotaged us,” Odin-Vann answered flatly, meeting Ralph’s accusing stare. “I had prepared so carefully, so thoroughly. I was ready for anything that might go wrong with actually restarting the Loom and replacing the thread. The spellwork was *perfect*. But we never even got a chance to try it. The moment we approached, we triggered something. A boundary hex of some kind, attuned either to Petra, or the thread itself, or both. The Vault contracted like a fist. It didn’t crush the Loom—that device was far too magical to be destroyed by brute strength. But it compressed its power, condensed it with titanic force, until it simply combusted. The Loom consumed itself with the blinding singularity of its own compressed energy, and the Vault exploded. The repercussions demolished the Archive and ruptured the magical fabric of the entire world. But worst of all, it halted the inertia of our dying destiny entirely. There is nothing supporting us anymore. No fate. No purpose. No providence, or luck, or fortune. We are untethered from any intelligible directing force whatsoever. If we don’t succeed with this last, final chance... there may be no world for us to come back to.”

“But...” Rose said, her voice low with awed worry, “What can Petra *do*? Where can she go now to accomplish her task?”

“There is only one place,” Odin-Vann acknowledged, dropping his eyes to the deck between them. “One place where decisions still matter, where destiny can play its part.”

Scorpius seemed dubious. “And where is that?”

“The past,” Odin-Vann said firmly, and looked up at Scorpius without raising his head.

Ralph frowned. “The *past*? What do you mean? Are you talking about... Time Turners?”

Rose shook her head. “Time Turners can’t change history,” she said tiredly, glancing from Ralph to Odin-Vann. “At least, not *major* history. That’s their fatal flaw. The past has a sort of inertia. The bigger the event, and the longer ago it happened, the more it will find a way to *keep* happening, no matter what you do in the past to try to change it. Besides, a Time Turner is a personal device. Go back in time and walk a mile in any direction, you’ll stumble right out of its influence and back into the present. Right, Professor?”

“Time Turners are for reliving short moments in the recent past, by one or two people, in a small vicinity,” Odin-Vann agreed unhappily. “Changes *can* be made in that past, but only if their effects haven’t yet had major repercussions in the present. Rose is right. Once history has been made, trying to change it in the past is like trying to steer this ship with a teaspoon. It would have to be something that almost happened right anyway, but didn’t for some reason. And it would take monumental, immeasurable power.”

Scorpius said, “So if history can’t be changed, how can going back to the past help us?”

Odin-Vann shook his head, growing animated, “I don’t mean traveling back in *time*,” he said, lowering his voice with urgency. “I mean going someplace that Petra has already been before, someplace with deep, elemental meaning to her, someplace that defines her. We need an object, a talisman that will connect Petra with Morgan on a quantum level. That way, when we open the rift between dimensions, it will connect with the proper place and time, taking Petra back to Morgan’s original world!”

“But,” James said, “I thought there was no way to open a rift directly into another dimension? You have to go through the World Between the Worlds, and there’s no way to find one specific dimension from inside there. It would be like finding a single star in a billion galaxies.”

Odin-Vann was shaking his head again, his eyes bright with fervor. “*No*. It *is* possible to go straight into another dimension. But no one has ever tried it because it’s only a one-way trip. And the cost is... terrible. But it is only possible if we can find the right talisman, the right key to Morgan’s original world!”

“So, what’s the key?” Rose asked.

Odin-Vann looked at James. And suddenly James knew the answer.

“Her father’s brooch,” he said in an awed voice, and shuddered.

Zane nodded, even as his mouth dropped open in revelation. “It’s exactly like the brooch Petra lost on the back of the Gwyndemere when she fell overboard! You saved *her*, but *it* sank forever! The one Merlin captured was *Morgan’s*! She never went on the ship with you, because in her world Izzy died and she went mad with loss! The brooch is from that other dimension!”

Odin-Vann said, “It’s our only hope. It connects Petra to Morgan in the most fundamental way—through a love they both shared. And it’s from Morgan’s original world, making it the perfect key. If we can get it, then it is just possible that Petra can accomplish her mission after all.”

James looked at the professor. “But, why do we need to go anywhere for it? Merlin has the brooch, doesn’t he?”

Odin-Vann’s face hardened. “Merlin is a wiler and more cunning character than any man who ever lived. It was he who somehow divined that Petra had traveled to the World Between the Worlds in search of the thread, and who confronted her there. It was he, I am willing to wager, who sabotaged the Loom to prevent us from utilizing the thread and completing our mission. He is not a man who would keep the brooch here at the school, where Petra might come and

win it back from him. He has hidden it.” Here, his hard eyes glimmered with a mad light. “And I know *where*.”

“And how, pray tell,” Scorpius asked, arching one eyebrow, “could you possibly know that?”

Odin-Vann smiled grimly. “Merlin is powerful,” he admitted. “But he relies far too much on that power. I, on the other hand, am *not* powerful. I spent my life being *mocked* and *ridiculed* for my weakness. Which means that I came to rely most heavily on my *intellect*.” He tapped his bloody temple grimly, meaningfully. “The headmaster’s reliance on raw power is his greatest weakness, and with your help, we shall exploit it.”

“Well,” Ralph said with a resolute sigh, climbing back to his feet. “I’m out.”

“What?!” James asked, surprised. “Are you serious? What do you mean, you’re out?”

“I *mean* I’m going back to my common room and finishing my Ancient Runes homework and going to bed,” Ralph replied, glancing around the gathering. “And the rest of you should best do the same. This bloke is right *mental*. He’s opposing Merlin. You heard him say that, yeah? Merlinus Ambrosius!”

“He’s not *opposing* him,” James rasped, pitching his voice low. “He’s just... Merlin doesn’t know what he’s *doing* this time. He doesn’t understand Petra’s mission. That she’s the world’s only hope! He would confront her instead of help her, and he would probably end up dead!”

“You think so?” Ralph said, raising his eyebrows. “Merlin’s no fool, no matter what this nutter says. We should have gone to Merlin months ago with this whole mess. He could fix it. He *would* have worked with Petra. And she would have been a damn sight better off partnering with the headmaster than with this... this...” He gestured at Odin-Vann where he still sat, leaning against the wheelhouse.

“Ralph,” Zane said, climbing to his feet as well. “Are you going to go tell the old man? I mean, you have every right to your opinion

and all. But it's a little late in the game to be switching coaches now, isn't it? If you tell on us," he shrugged helplessly, "then it's all over."

Ralph heaved a huge sigh as he glared at Zane, and then Ralph, and then Rose.

"Don't look at *me*," Scorpius said, raising a hand, palm out. "*I'm* just here because it's better than watching Warton and Finnegan snog in the common room."

Ralph finally shook his head weakly, hopelessly. "What good would it do me to tell *now*? It's too late, like you say. But I won't be a part of this anymore. It's not right. I should have done something about it months ago. I should have stood up to *him* when there was still a chance to make it right." He turned to Odin-Vann again, his face going stony with angry disgust. Then, without looking back, he turned and stumped down the gangplank.

From his seat on the deck, Odin-Vann raised his wand, aimed it at the far off door, and tapped it. A spit of pink light flashed and, distantly, the door latches unlocked.

"Mr. Malfoy," Odin-Vann said a little coolly. "You can leave now as well. Petra only asked for James, Rose, Zane, and Ralph."

Scorpius shrugged. "I think I'll stay, actually," he said. "I can't fill Dolohov's shoes, of course. Mainly because they're ten sizes bigger than mine. But I'm a curious sort. I'd like to see how this plays out. Assuming nobody else minds."

He glanced aside at James, Zane, and Rose. Zane nodded.

"Fine," Odin-Vann sighed, finally pushing to his feet. "Then we leave tonight. Right now, in fact. Petra awaits our return, and we don't have a second to spare."

Rose glanced at James, her eyes worried. James understood. It was all happening so fast, without any chance to think about what they were about to do. And yet, really, did they have any choice? He hesitated for only a moment, and then, to Odin-Vann, asked, "Where are we heading to?"

Odin-Vann's eyes narrowed and sparkled again with that keen, slightly hectic gleam. "Morganstern Farm," he answered. "To the lake, and its dead, sunken gazebo."

Zane cocked his head. "Why there?"

Odin-Vann turned to the wheelhouse and wrenched open the door. "Because it's the very last place in the world that Merlin would expect us to look."



Odin-Vann piloted the ship himself. The ship's wheel was nearly as tall as he, but he held onto it with determination, turning the Gertrude toward a different tunnel entrance than they had traversed before. This one had no destination inscribed across its arch, but the professor—or the ship itself—seemed to know where to go.

"It's not the same without Ralph," Zane said quietly. On James' other side, Rose nodded.

James looked at Scorpius, expecting a snide comment, but the blond boy said nothing, merely looked ahead, toward the approaching darkness as the tunnel sucked the Gertrude in, drawing her inextricably into its rushing current.

The masts folded with a heavy thump. Darkness swallowed the ship and dizzying speed replaced the gentle rocking of the moonpool.

James barely noticed it. He held onto the brass railing bolted to the back wall of the wheelhouse, watching the repaired lantern as it swung over the bow, providing the only light in the rushing maw of the tunnel.

“We must be quick,” Odin-Vann called without looking back. “Each of you will have a role to play.”

“And what will those roles be, exactly?” Scorpius called back.

James looked at Odin-Vann, who didn’t seem prepared to answer that question just yet. Then, seeming to consider his words carefully, he said, “We shall come up in the centre of the farm lake, but it will be difficult to keep the ship from beaching on the shallow shores. Mr. Malfoy, you will stay in the wheelhouse and keep us steady, hands on the wheel.” He glanced aside quickly, his eyes bright with the reflection of the swaying lantern ahead. It cast wild, swooping shadows in the darkness. “Rose, you and Mr. Walker will raise the gazebo from its sunken state. It will be very heavy and waterlogged, but I know that you can manage it together, as well as keep it upright while I collect the hidden brooch. And James...” He glanced back again, fleetingly meeting James’ eyes while struggling with the ship’s wheel and the rushing dark beyond. Grey water exploded around the speeding bow, throwing rafters of mist back against the windows, blattering them noisily and blurring the view beyond. “James, you shall assist me in retrieving the brooch.”

“That hardly seems like a two person job,” Scorpius observed.

“After what happened at the Archive,” Odin-Vann replied darkly, “I won’t be taking the slightest chance.”

The journey took longer than James expected. The Gertrude rocked up one side of the tunnel, then another, barreling through seemingly endless dark. After a while, Rose covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” she warned with a deep, gulping breath.

“Nearly there,” Odin-Vann said, steeling himself as the tunnel angled upward beneath them. James tightened his grip on the railing

and planted his footing. Water welled up over the bow in waves, and then washed over it in a flood, submerging the lantern and rushing over the windows. The roar of air was swallowed up in a deep, gurgling boom as cold darkness engulfed the Gertrude. The ship angled steeply upward, still blasting forward, but now through seamless, rushing depth. The lantern continued to glow, forming a bottle-green halo through streaming bubbles.

And then, much smoother than before, the ship burst out onto wide open surface, keeled ponderously forward, and, with a shuddering smack, buried its hull in white-capped waves.

Anxiously, James stepped toward the windows and peered out through streaming droplets. The waves were choppy and fast, dully illuminated by moon glow through rushing, scrubby clouds. No land was visible in any direction, only a dark horizon, unbroken and flat.

Zane pressed in alongside James. “This... is a pretty big woodland lake, isn’t it?”

“We’re not to Morganstern farm yet,” Odin-Vann explained, releasing the wheel and exhaling harshly. “Going to Oswestry isn’t like going to London—it’s not a straight shot. This will take some good old-fashioned sailing, I’m afraid. We’re just past the Isle of Man. When we see the lights of Liverpool we’ll submerge again and come up through the lake on Morganstern farm.

Scorpius glanced aside at the professor. “It’s a good thing you know how to operate a ship like this, isn’t it?”

Odin-Vann shrugged wearily, and then reached to pull a brass latch. With a click, a ratchet, and a whip-crack of rigging, the masts creaked upright again, shuddering into place. “The ship’s been charmed to take us where we want to go. All we have to do is wait and watch.”

“How convenient,” Scorpius nodded, turning back to the dark view beyond the window. “Morganstern did the hexing herself, did she?”

James glanced at Scorpius.

Odin-Vann frowned and blinked, then shook his head faintly. “Petra? Oh. Yes, of course. She charmed it. I wouldn’t have any idea how to do such a thing.”

“Thus, I assume,” Scorpius mused, seeming to merely think aloud, “that we are committed to our destination no matter what.”

Odin-Vann didn’t answer. To the assembly, he said, “I’m going to go below to wash up and try to sleep for an hour. Wake me when the coast comes into sight, eh?”

“Aye-aye, Cap’n,” Zane said, standing rigid and giving a stiff salute.

“I really am going to be sick,” Rose moaned, and pushed toward the door. Cool night air and mist rushed in as she heaved it open and fled out onto the wet deck, angling toward the railing. Odin-Vann followed her and turned toward the stairs into the ship’s hold.

“*He* certainly seems to have relaxed now that we’re underway,” Scorpius commented, gazing after the departed professor.

James tilted his head at Scorpius. “What are you getting at?”

“I don’t know what *he’s* getting at,” Zane said, rubbing his stomach, “but Petra nabbed me just as I was heading down for dinner, and I’m starved. Does this tub have a galley, you think? A snack bar? A vending machine, maybe?”

James glanced back at him. “Seriously? How can you eat at a time like this?”

Zane shrugged, unperturbed. “Saving the world makes me hungry.”

James determined that accompanying Zane was marginally better than simply waiting in the wheelhouse. Leaving Scorpius, they slipped out onto the dark decks and explored around. There was very little to see. Above decks, the wheelhouse, paddlewheels, and masts were the only structure. Below decks, most of the space was separated into cargo holds, divided down the centre by a narrow hall. Close to the bow was a small common area for the crew, where James had sat with Merlin and Millie on their return trip to London. Here, Professor

Odin-Vann lay sprawled on the bench, one arm over his eyes, one leg kicked out onto the deck, feet akimbo. He snored fitfully.

“Here we go,” Zane whispered, wrenching open a series of small cupboards. He rummaged and withdrew a cellophane-wrapped package. Squinting in the low light, he read the label. “Halberd’s Humble Hardtack’. Ever heard of it?”

James shook his head, distracted.

Zane used his teeth to strip off the wrapping, revealing a stack of biscuits that looked, both in size and color, like roofing shingles. He shrugged and bit one. Then, he bit it harder. Unable to crack a corner off the allegedly edible biscuit, he lowered it and struck it against the edge of a counter. It knocked like stone. He sighed mournfully and tossed it away.

Rose joined them a few minutes later and the threesome sat in the hold, not talking, leaning in time to the rocking rhythm of the hull. Nearby, Odin-Vann continued to snore haltingly.

Growing stiff and frustratingly bored, James stood and headed back along the hall that divided the cargo areas. No one joined him.

Scorpius was seated against the wall at the end, his knees up and his hands dangling over them.

James plopped down next to him.

“Why did you really come along?” he asked. “It sure wasn’t out of the overflowing goodness of your heart.”

Blandly, Scorpius said, “You wound me, sir.”

“I’m serious.”

Scorpius gave a weak shrug. “You don’t really believe that cock-and-bull story Odin-Vann told about finding Morganstern’s talisman on her grandfather’s farm, do you?”

James sat up and turned to Scorpius. “The brooch? What do you mean?”

“I mean, the likelihood of *him* outsmarting the headmaster is about as likely as you beating Dolohov at Wizard chess. In short, not at all. He’s either deluded—which is entirely likely—or he’s lying.”

“But...” James shook his head, caught between alarm and annoyance, “why would he lie? He’s helping Petra, isn’t he? Just like we all are.”

“Just like *you* all are,” Scorpius corrected. “*I* just came along to keep an eye on Rose and Walker. He’s got a *thing* for her. And I’m the jealous type.”

“Don’t change the subject,” James said, watching the blond boy closely. “You think Odin-Vann is lying to us? Do you agree with Ralph about him? That he’s not to be trusted?”

“*Don’t* tell me you haven’t figured it out yet,” Scorpius sighed. “It was you that wrote the note to yourself after all. Surely you don’t need me to spell it out for you.”

“You know what I’m sick of?” James suddenly declared, gesturing angrily with both hands. “People hinting at big, important revelations without ever just giving me a direct answer! Millie’s grandmother, Headmaster Merlin, and now you! Out with it, or learn to keep your dodgy suspicions to yourself!”

Scorpius allowed a small smile, clearly enjoying James’ discomfiture. Then, he nodded and grew serious again. “It’s all in your note. You remember the play, just like I do. The roles are all in place, now just as they were then.”

James slumped. “Yeah, yeah. Petra is Princess Astra,” he said with a roll of his eyes. “And I’m Treus, blind with love and all that. What’s the point?”

“Like I said, *you* wrote the note,” Scorpius answered loftily. “All I’m saying is that here we are, in the final act. The two of you are on centre stage once again. And *I* think you wrote yourself that note for a reason.”

“I dreamed a crazy dream,” James shook his head dismissively. “About Petra in a graveyard with Albus. I woke up with an idea in my head. It made no sense, but apparently I wrote it down. I barely remember doing it. I was probably still dreaming.”

“It’s called ‘automatic writing’,” Scorpius said, sliding an eye toward James. “We learned it in Trelawney’s first class. Just because she’s a daft old nutter doesn’t mean there’s no such thing as prophecy.”

James frowned. “I pay as little attention in her class as I can,” he admitted.

Scorpius rolled his eyes, and then said, “Automatic writing is what happens when your subconscious knows something that your waking mind doesn’t. It’s when the buried part of your brain takes over your body for a moment to send your waking mind a message.”

James considered this, and then shook his head again. “I don’t see what the message could be. It’s just a line from the play. Beware foul Donovan.”

“Not *actually*,” Scorpius said. “Nowhere in the play are those three words spoken. Treus comes close during his rallying speech. But the word ‘beware’ isn’t anywhere in the script.”

James blinked as he thought back to the play. He tried to recall his own lines. Reluctantly, he realized that Scorpius was right. Still, it was just as likely that his second-year self had gotten the line wrong in the note as it was that the three words had any prophetic significance.

He mused on it, strained and concentrated, trying to determine what the words could possibly mean in their current situation. But nothing came to him. Finally, mentally exhausted, he gave up.

A minute passed, and then he said to Scorpius, “You really should just break up with Rose.”

Scorpius glanced aside at him, his brow darkening. “I don’t know if I’m more impressed that *that’s* what you’re over there mooning about, or annoyed that you would actually say it.”

“Neither,” James said, staring darkly down the length of the hall. “I just realized I don’t care what you think anymore.”

Scorpius relaxed a little. “Facing the possibility of the end of the world does that, I suppose.”

“I’m serious,” James said dully. “You don’t even know what to do with her. I swear, you deliberately lash her emotions back and forth

just because you wouldn't know how to have a normal human conversation with her."

"This from the person who can't choose between an entitled, bossy aristocrat and a neurotic criminal sorceress."

James drew an annoyed sigh and blew it out. He wanted to argue with Scorpius. He wanted to tell him that he, Scorpius, wasn't a bad *person*, exactly, he was just bad for Rose. But there didn't seem to be any point. He realized, almost clinically, how late the hour probably was. Midnight? Even later?

His jaw cracked as a monumental yawn overtook him.

Next to him, Scorpius kicked out one leg and leaned aside, turning away from James.

James no longer cared. Weariness stole over him, weighing his eyelids down, turning his muscles into sandbags.

He gave in to it, and time began to stretch out, first dulling every sensation, and then turning minutes into hours.

He did not dream.

A sudden hard shudder wracked the ship, and James felt himself falling forward. He flailed in confusion, not sure which way was up, his head still reeling, thick with tattering dreams. A wall of cold, worn wood slammed against him, and he realized, very dimly, that it was the floor of the hall.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows and pried his eyes open. The light was different. Thin pencil-beams of grey daylight lanced down from above, shining through cracks in the upper deck.

Scorpius groaned in bleary irritation, struggling up from his own prone position on the floor.

"We fell asleep," James rasped, his voice hoarse. He scrubbed his face with his hands, raked them through his hair. "We slept through the night. Had to have. Are we there?"

"I need a loo and a cup of black tea," Scorpius answered grumpily, pushing himself to his feet and then slumping back against the wall. The ship rocked gently beneath them, accompanied by the distant slap of waves.

James turned and stumbled back along the hall, still bleary with sleep, but forcing himself to alertness.

Rose and Zane met them at the stairs, Rose with her hair bushed out in sleepy tangles, Zane blinking and squinting up into the gloomy dawn above. Together, without a word, they tramped up the steps into cool air and drab, stormy daylight.

Odin-Vann stood on the bow, in front of the wheelhouse. He looked back when he heard them coming, his eyes bright and wary.

“We’re here,” he announced in a hushed voice, and pointed ahead.

James moved to join the professor, blinking against the pall of white fog that surrounded the ship.

“I don’t see anything,” Scorpius said flatly, passing James and peering all around.

“It’s there,” Odin-Vann nodded. “Just visible through the fog. Trees on all sides and there, just ahead, the old dock and the sunken gazebo. James, you’ve seen this place, yes? At least, the decades’ past version of it that Petra can conjure? You recognize it, don’t you?”

James inched toward the bow railing and peered critically out over the leaden waves. Now that Odin-Vann mentioned it, he could see the shadows of trees, an encircling wood, all shrouded and ghostly beyond the lurking fog. He turned his gaze to the front. The bow did indeed seem to be pointed at a skeletal dock. It swam in and out of drifting grey mist.

“This is it,” he nodded. “In Petra’s version, the gazebo is still there, at the end of the dock. But the version in our time is broken away and sunken. I don’t know how deep.” He glanced down at the water, but nothing was visible through it. The waves slapped at the hull, reflecting the clot of the sky, turning the lake into a shifting, broken mirror.

“We’re drifting,” Odin-Vann said, his eyes still on the dock in its mantle of fog. “Scorpius, take the wheel and keep us in the centre of the lake.”

“I didn’t want to say so last night,” Scorpius replied, tired and terse, “But I don’t think that’s how boats work.”

“Go!” Odin-Vann said with sudden strength, turning back to Scorpius. His eyes were wide and sharp, either on the edge of panic or triumph. “Rose, Walker, raise the gazebo. Aim for the water just in front of the broken dock!”

Scorpius, James noticed, backed up to the wheelhouse but didn’t enter it. From the shadows, his narrowed eyes watched Odin-Vann keenly.

Rose and Zane approached the rocking prow and drew their wands. Sharing a quick glance, they aimed for the dock, and then dipped their arms slightly, toward the restless waves beneath.

“Wingardium Leviosa!” they both called in unison.

James sensed more than heard the surge of magic which fired into the depths. Nothing happened at first. Then, subtly, a deep groan arose from the deep. Odin-Vann moved slowly alongside Zane, his gaze rapt. James sidled in next to him.

“Professor,” he whispered, even as he watched the water at the base of the dock. A surge of dense bubbles pushed the surface into a low swell. “How did you find out that Merlin had hidden Petra’s brooch here? Did she tell you?”

Odin-Vann’s gaze didn’t flicker from the bubbling disturbance. More deep groans and creaks emanated from the cold depths. Zane and Rose frowned in tense concentration.

“Come, James,” Odin-Vann said, holding out his hand and swinging one leg over the railing. James glanced up at him in surprise. “Come!” the Professor said in a commanding rasp. “And look!”

He nodded toward the waves below the bobbing bow. There, a haze of white solidified a wave, freezing it into a sudden ice floe, which arose silently, like a surfacing submarine. The floe pressed up against Odin-Vann’s boot, supporting his weight. “See? Petra’s power accompanies us. Come. I will need your eyes and courage to accomplish our task.”

With that, he swung his other leg over the railing and stood atop the frozen, elevated wave. Another crackled into being before him, rising to meet his next step down, forming enchanted, icy stairs. A wintry chill wafted up from them, making James' breath suddenly puff a visible cloud. He shivered violently.

"Go, James," Zane said in a strained voice. "Once this thing's out of the water we won't be able to hold it up for long."

James nodded worriedly and climbed awkwardly over the bow railing. His foot skidded on the ice step below, then found purchase. Carefully, nervously, he began to follow Odin-Vann down, moving from frozen step to frozen step. Once James and the professor reached the level of the water, the stairs sank away with a deep gurgle, replaced by a bridge of ice, as thin as paper and brittle as glass, yet somehow strong enough to support their weight as they walked slowly, approaching the rising swell before the dock.

As James watched, peering around Odin-Vann's shoulder, he saw the spire of the old gazebo spear out of the gurgling boil. It was made of wood, but rotted and misshapen, barely sheathed in slimy white paint. It pushed upward, and a conical roof began to follow, its old shakes warped, as unruly as a hag's teeth. Water began to pour down the roof as it widened, unleashing the weight of the depths.

"Only," James whispered, more urgently now. "I had a meeting with the headmaster. He told me how he was keeping the brooch because he was hoping Petra would come to him. He had it with him, right there in his office. Did he... maybe... hide it here later?"

Odin-Vann didn't answer. He inched closer to the rising gazebo.

"Ungh!" Rose grunted from behind. "This... is *heavy!*"

"Just a little more," Odin-Vann called back, holding out one hand in a calming gesture. The ice bridge had narrowed as it stretched out, as if its power was weakening. Waves swamped serenely over it, wetting James' shoes as he turned sideways, edging along in the professor's wake.

Beware, foul Donovan, he thought. The words teased him, seemed to nag at him.

Surely you don't need me to spell it out for you, Scorpius had said the night before.

“Almost there,” Odin-Vann said, almost to himself.

A long, creaking moan emanated from the gazebo as it rose further into the grey air, casting off its freight of water. It was crooked, turning as it rose, wallowing like a bloated corpse. Slick drapes of seaweed hung from its edges and coated its upright supports.

James stopped as an awful idea began to form in his mind. The cold of the ice bridge welled up over him.

Beware, foul...

The roar of water was too loud to speak over as the gazebo disgorged from the lake, finally bobbing fully to the surface. Its interior was obscured by curtains of limp, slimy seaweed. As it settled, it rocked and turned slightly, groaning against the old pilings.

“Donofrio Odin-Vann,” James whispered urgently, his eyes widening in horrible, stunned revelation. *“Don... O... Vann!”*

The gazebo shuddered against the dock, and as it did so the seaweed tore loose from its roofline, falling away like a sodden veil.

Someone was standing inside the gazebo. The shape was barely a silhouette, wasted and skeletal, and yet still, somehow, recognizable by her long, sopping red hair.

“James,” she said in a chiding, rasping, ancient voice. “I warned you, did I not? On the lake just this past winter, I told you to abandon your Petra. And yet here you are. Predictable... to the last.”

Ahead of James, Odin-Vann's arm jerked spasmodically, whipping his wand up and back. James flinched in terror as it seemed to point at him and fire a bolt of blinding blue. The spell sizzled over his shoulder, however, striking a mark further away, back on the boat.

Scorpius grunted in surprise. James turned in time to see the boy flung back against the wheelhouse, his wand falling from his hand. A moment later, he collapsed heavily to the deck.

James drew breath to yell, but a sudden horrible pressure squeezed the air right out of him. The world spun upside down as he was lifted from the ice bridge and heaved away from the ship, pressed in the grip of a monstrous watery tentacle. A second later, he struck the cold, rotten floor of the gazebo, rolling hard enough to bash against the rear railing, smashing a leg through it.

“I would not!” Judith called toward the ship, her voice a hoarse shriek but still with the same imperious tone of command. “Drop this structure back into the depths and poor James goes down with it!”

James tried to struggle up, but his leg was tangled in the broken railing. Judith was standing directly before him, her once glorious robes now matted and sodden, rotted threadbare. Beneath, her body seemed to be all angles, mere bones and tendon. She stank abominably.

Thirty yards away, Zane and Rose still leaned over the bow of the Gertrude, wands outstretched, straining, eyes wide with shock and fear.

Between them and the gazebo, Odin-Vann stood on the ice bridge with his wand still raised, pointing back at the boat, but his face looking forward, eyes locked upon Judith. His expression was misty with something very near adoration.

“Professor!” James called, half attempting to snap the man out of the trance Judith had cast over him. Odin-Vann dipped his gaze for a moment, blinking at James, and his face hardened. James understood the terrible truth: Judith had not cast any entrancement over the man at all. He was doing this entirely of his own free will.

“*You* sabotaged the Loom!” James exclaimed with sudden, sinking surety. “But why?”

Judith answered, “The good professor and I have certain mutual interests, James.” As she spoke, she turned to look down at him. Her face, James now saw, was a shrivel of filmy ivory skin over bone. Her lips were gone, revealing the yellow grin of her teeth. Her eyes were like peeled grapes in the hollows of their sockets. But her hair was still long and red, draping her skull in wet ribbons. “As you

can see, I need a new host. Petra has broken from me. Without her, my time in this sphere is nearly over. But Mr. Odin-Vann is more than willing to take her place. He is *eager*.”

James recoiled from the horror of Judith’s dead stare. Trembling, he tore his gaze away from her and focused again on the professor. “But what could *you* possibly get out of it?”

Odin-Vann frowned and shook his head, slowly but firmly, as if James had finally confirmed something that he had been suspecting all along.

“You *really* don’t know, do you?” he said. “Early on, I thought perhaps you would prove different. When you were attacked and humiliated by the little bullies, Edgecombe and his friends. I hoped you might grasp the truth. But now I see that you really are just like all the rest. Too arrogant in your own perceived superiority to understand *what it’s like...*” He edged toward James, his face contorted into a mask of furious, age-old misery, “To be *mocked*. To be *belittled* at every turn. To be coddled like a *child* by those who believe they are good, and beaten down like a *dog* by those who know they are bad.” He moved forward more resolutely now, homing in on James, raising his chin and speaking with the fervor of long-suppressed rage. “Both of those acts arise from the same, pathetic delusion. That they are *better* than me. That they are more *powerful* than me. That I will always be what they *believe* me to be. A weak, slow, bookish, clumsy little *embarrassment!* But *now* the world will see. I used my *brain* to defeat them *first*. I made my *WAND!*”

He brandished it in his fist, which vibrated with manic tension. His eyes blazed.

“*Slow*, was I in the past? Now, I am the fastest wizard alive! Weak? Now I have the power of instantaneous strength. I have finally programmed my wand with every counter-jinx, every protective charm, every repulsion hex in the Caster’s Lexicon! Thus primed, it can sense and deflect any spell that *anyone* dares attack me with!” He drew a huge, firming breath and held it. “With this tool finally perfected, I *knew* I was unstoppable. But I also knew that it was not *enough*. I

needed not only to silence those who had tormented me, but to stand up against *all* who cling to the *pathetic illusion* of their own superiority. *All* of those who bumble through this life so *convinced* of their own goodness, their own virtue, their own idiotic *delusion of right!* And then... Judith found me.”

He looked aside at her, finally stepping up onto the warped floor of the gazebo and joining her.

“She found me,” he said with sudden, soft rapture. “And she helped me to understand. Petra, my old school friend, would come to me. And when she did, I would assist her. Judith helped me to see that it was my duty. I must help Petra to rid herself of her curse once and for all. I must do this, with Judith’s help... by ending her.”

“No!” James barked, straining to extricate his leg from the broken railing.

“It’s the merciful thing,” Judith agreed in her cracked, swampy voice. “Secretly, even Petra herself desires her death. And then, with her out of the way, Donofrio will become my new host. Thus fully restored and once again rooted to this realm, we can finally rejoice that power will be in the hands of those who truly deserve it, and know how to use it.”

“Because, James,” Odin-Vann said, looking down at James now with a sort of benevolent sadness. “Judith really is right. It isn’t just *some* people who stumble through this life under the delusion of their own rightness. It’s *all* of them. And they are all... every one... fatally, insultingly, *wrong*.”

His voice grew leaden as he spoke the final words, and raised his wand, pointing it at James.

“Oh, bugger this!” a voice exclaimed from some distance away. James glanced up and saw that it was Rose. She jerked her wand upright, releasing the levitation spell.

“*Swim*, James!” she shouted desperately. Next to her, Zane stumbled, suddenly supporting the gazebo entirely with his own wand. He grunted, gasped, and broke his spell as well.

The gazebo dropped precipitously, struck the water, and began to roll over, immediately capsizing.

Odin-Vann stumbled, fell past Judith, and struck a side railing, smashing it and following it into the water.

A bolt of brilliant red struck the waves where he had fallen, exploding in a burst of steam. Rose was firing attacks from the ship, aiming for both Odin-Vann and Judith. Zane gripped his wand to join her.

Judith whirled. In a blink, she transformed into a cyclone of stinking black water, her force tearing the gazebo apart all around. Writhing tentacles uncoiled and scooped Odin-Vann from the water. His body was borne up into the throat of the waterspout, which roared, circled James with fury as he thrashed amidst the ruin, and then fled away out over the lake, bypassing the Gertrude and vanishing into the dense pall of fog all around.

“James!” Zane called, stabbing out his wand again. Breathlessly, he repeated the levitation spell. James, along with a messy assortment of broken railing, floor planks, and destroyed roofing, rocketed up out of the waves with breathtaking speed, streaming water in a corona.

“Yikes!” Zane gasped, grabbing onto his wand now with both hands. “A lot lighter than that crazy gazebo. Hold on while rein it in a little!”

Clumsily, trembling with exhaustion, he bobbed James, along with his entourage of sodden debris, over the deck and set him down. James stumbled as his feet met the planks.

“We have to go after them!” he gasped, grabbing onto a railing for support.

“None of us even knows how!” Rose cried helplessly, dragging a still-woozy Scorpius to his feet. “We don’t know how to sail this ship!”

“How hard can it be?” Zane said, stuffing his wand back into his pocket. “We watched Hagrid do it, didn’t we? All we have to do is set the destination lever back to Hogwarts. Down we go and we’ll be on our way back!”

“I don’t think it’s going to be quite that straightforward,” Scorpius said, pushing fully to his feet and pointing to the deck near James’ feet.

James glanced down. A chunk of rotten railing lay on the deck, transported aboard along with himself by Zane’s levitation spell. But as James watched, the broken wooden chunk melted away like an ice sculpture, losing all colour and draining into a loose puddle.

Behind him, a hunk of roof did the same. In a moment, all the gazebo debris had vanished into nothing but melted seawater.

“Oh no,” Rose said, her voice high and breathy. She ran to the railing and peered out over the waves.

Beyond her, the fog was drifting away, fading from view. Revealing...

Nothing. There was no encircling shore or fringe of woodland. Only dark waves marching off into further and further leagues, eventually stretching all the way to the horizon.

James reached the railing alongside Rose and looked out, speechless.

Faintly, Zane asked, “We’re not in any country lake... are we?”

“They got rid of us,” Scorpius mused aloud, almost as if he was impressed. “Odin-Vann and The Lady of the Lake. They got rid of us because we were the only ones who know enough to stop them.”

“But, where are we?” James asked, banging his fist down onto the railing.

“I think *where* we are matters less,” Zane said, nudging James and pointing upward, “than *that* does.”

James looked up. Revealed by the retreating fog, a low, hulking boil of clouds bore down on the Gertrude, driven before a rising, whipping wind. It was a storm front, dark as a bruise and flickering with goutts of lightning, rumbling with distant thunder.

“Am I crazy,” Rose breathed, eyes wide, “or does that storm seem to be aiming directly for us?”

“Into the wheelhouse,” James cried, finally engaging to action. He turned, grabbing Zane and pulling him along. “We need to get

back into the tunnels below, and as soon as possible! The storm won't be able to reach us there, and we can get back."

Fat drops of rain began to pepper the ship, striking with stinging force, pinging off the metal wheelhouse and pattering in the sails. Together, the foursome poured through the door of the wheelhouse. Scorpius tugged it shut with a heavy clang.

James moved behind the wheel, which was turning loosely back and forth with the increasing rock of the ship.

Wind suddenly tore over the deck outside, whumping in the sails and singing a high, whipping note in the rigging.

Scorpius scanned the instruments ranged below the window. Spying a large brass dial with an attached lever, he gripped it and tugged. The lever ratcheted, turning the dial past several notches. When it stopped, the readout showed a single word, white letters printed on black: HOGWARTS.

The wheel began to turn in James' hand, spinning ponderously and bringing the Gertrude about. With a lurch, it rocked forward. A spray of mist began to plow up beneath the bow. Then, heavily, the bow began to rise and fall on the waves, striking with sickening force and sending up gouts of spray.

The Gertrude drove onward, faster, but it did not submerge.

This was all part of Judith's design, James suspected. To maroon them far from any hope of escape, to set a murderous storm upon them, preventing their return, and hopefully killing them all. It was just as Scorpius had said: this was the final act, and the stage was set. It was *the Triumvirate* brought to horrifying life: a ruse of an ocean journey, a magical storm racing them back, and the villain Donovan, along with his ally, the Lady of the Lake this time instead of the Marsh Hag, forging ahead, ready and prepared to freely execute their final, fatal plan.

And yet their intent was no mere romantic conspiracy in pursuit of a seat of power. Their plan was to somehow kill Petra, leaving Odin-Vann to take over as Judith's host, harnessing her chaotic power instead of thwarting it.

As James finally grasped this horrible change of events, a surge of undiluted anger welled up in his chest. Odin-Vann had lied to Petra all along about helping her to fulfill her destiny as the Crimson Thread. He had never intended to help her save the world. He had lied to her, sabotaged her, fed her guilt and the madness of her scheme, only to betray her in the end in the worst way possible.

“But,” Rose asked James, not taking her eyes from the rushing waves and the advancing, terrible storm, “How can Odin-Vann and Judith kill Petra? They know she made a Horcrux.”

“Potter here knows better than anyone else,” Scorpius answered darkly. “Horcruxes can be created, and they can also be destroyed. They needed Petra alive for some reason, until this moment. Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

James knew that Scorpius was right. But he had a deep suspicion that Judith’s answer would be a lot simpler, and more final, than even Scorpius suggested.



NEXT CHAPTER:

RALPH MAKES GOOD!

MERLIN MAKES A MISTAKE!

JAMES MAKES A DEADLY CHOICE!