

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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## 7. THE TRYOUT HE DIDN'T MISS

James finally opened and read the note in the minutes before his afternoon Divination class, waiting alone next to the ladder that led up to Professor Trelawney's perfumed and poufed classroom. He could hear the professor moving above, rearranging things and humming tunelessly to herself, emitting a faint jingle from her omnipresent bangles, beads, and bracelets.

He broke the seal and unrolled the scroll between his hands. The words were handwritten and scribbled, as if the writer had been either careless or in a hurry.

*Detention tonight, 9 PM. Amphitheater.*

A surge of relief washed over James, despite the note's banality. A dreadful suspicion had come upon him as he traversed the halls to the North Tower. This evening, he'd recalled, was the Quidditch tryouts. As Deirdre and Graham had pointedly reminded him on First Night, James had been rather cursed over the years with being unable to attend the tryouts—or failing miserably when he did. With that in mind, he had become grimly certain that the detention from Odin-Vann (and whatever unavoidable mission it entailed) would conflict with his final Quidditch tryout, completing his perfect record of misses and failures.

Odin-Vann's nine o'clock detention, however, was happily past the time of the scheduled tryouts. He might go to the pitch distracted by what was to come later that evening, but at least he would go to the pitch, and that was what mattered.

He wondered for a moment why Odin-Vann had chosen the amphitheater. Probably it was because the large outdoor space would be completely deserted, as it usually was when night descended. If anyone was still lingering around (it was, if nothing else, a rather popular snogging spot, James knew) Odin-Vann could dismiss the surprised loiterers.

In Divination class, Rose sat next to James and scribbled notes, none of which, James knew, had much to do with divination. Professor Trelawney burred on before her fireplace, tossing pinches of spices and powdered tinctures into the flames to create bursts of colorful sparks, inviting the students to “summon a trancelike state of receptiveness to the Fire Omens”.

James felt, as he usually did in Trelawney's class, most receptive of all to a nap. He shuffled the scattering of Octocards on the small table before him, and then became aware of Rose glaring at him. He

glanced at her and she darted her eyes toward her notes, which she nudged slightly toward him.

Written at the bottom in her neat, small handwriting, was: *Amphitheater tonight?*

James gave a small nod.

Rose used her quill to scribble out her note, and then added two more words: *No Ralph??*

James had observed the same thing, of course. He shrugged and shook his head.

Rose absorbed this with no change in expression. Dutifully, she scribbled out that note as well.

James allowed his gaze to drift over the room until he spied Ralph seated next to Trenton Bloch on a pair of burgundy poufs. Ralph looked ridiculous and uncomfortable, of course, balancing his gangly body on the cushion, which seemed ready to burst beneath him. His book was balanced on his knees, but the boy was paying it no attention. His eyes were half-lidded, drooping as James watched. The Head Boy badge glimmered silver on his robes, catching the light of the fire and the bursts of colorful sparks.

Maybe that was what was behind Ralph's suspicions about Odin-Vann, and the professor's exclusion of him from tonight's so-called detention. Perhaps Ralph's position as Head Boy made him seem just a bit too institutional to be trusted with what was likely to be an extremely secret assignment.

James regretted Ralph's exclusion. And yet he reminded himself that Ralph had, as recently as First Night, expressed his deepest desire to stay out of any unexpected adventures during his final year.

Later that evening, James wolfed his dinner as quickly as possible, then ran upstairs to his dormitory to change into jeans and a sweatshirt against the cool of the evening. Grabbing his Thunderstreak from under his bed, he clutched the broom against his shoulder and tramped down the steps, taking two at a time.

He was determined to arrive at the pitch early, and at this, for the first time ever, he succeeded.

Beneath a sky dimming from azure to purple, a stiff breeze buffeted the grass of the pitch, which was already filling with students. Like James, most carried their brooms slung over their shoulders, while others bobbed on them low over the grass, congregating in excited airborne knots. The house grandstands were filling with observers, some hooting and calling cheerfully to each other. In the Gryffindor grandstand, James saw Professor McGonagall sidling into a seat next to Neville Longbottom, who saw James' look and nodded at him encouragingly.

With a practiced flip, James dropped his broom forward, allowing it to dip and bob up next to him. He caught it, threw a leg over it, and kicked upwards, letting it carry him into the cool air. Spying Graham Warton and the Gryffindor group gathering in the shadow of the burgundy grandstand, James piloted over to join them, making a long lazy arc around the goal rings.

"First-years," Graham called out, raising a hand to his mouth. "Here's your chance. Grab a broom, get it in the air, and let's see if you can lap the pitch."

The first-years tryout, James knew, was mostly just tradition, ever since his own dad had earned a spot on the team at the age of eleven. In truth, it was extremely unlikely that any of the youngest students would earn a place on the team, unless they were almost supernaturally talented.

Sanjay Yadev was among the few first-years who made the attempt, and the look of stubborn determination on his face was both inspiring and a little comical. The boy kicked off and succeeded in completing a single, swift lap about the pitch, easily overshadowing the other three.

"Not bad," Graham called with a nod. "Now let's see you dodge a Bludger."

One of the leather balls was trapped under Graham's foot, straining and wriggling frantically to get loose. Graham raised his foot and the ball squirted into the air. Graham used the bat in his hand to

give the Bludger a directing whallop, aiming it for Sanjay where he slewed to a halt in mid-air, suddenly wide-eyed.

The Bludger angled up at the boy, emitting a low whistle as it spun.

Flustered, Sanjay seemed to attempt both a left and right feint at the same time, yelped in sudden terror, and then turned away, throwing both arms up around his head. The Bludger struck the tail of his broom, sending the boy into a spin. Secretly, James gave Sanjay credit for not being thrown from his broom entirely.

The gathered Gryffindors broke into laughing applause as Sanjay recovered and drifted down to the pitch, his cheeks burning in embarrassment.

“Next year, Yadev,” Graham called encouragingly. “You’ve got the control. Now you just need to get bruised a little. Have your sisters pelt you with apples all next summer. Get used to things flying at your head at deadly speed. You do that and maybe we’ll have a spot for you.”

James felt his chest tighten, knowing that his turn was now up. He glanced around and noticed that, apart from him, almost everyone waiting had been on last year’s team. Lily swooped alongside him on her trusty old Shuriken and gave him a sideways smile.

“You’re here, at least,” she commented with mock surprise. “That’s a victory, whether you make the team or not.”

“Thanks,” James muttered, tightening his grip on his broom.

“Don’t worry about it, big brother,” she said, lowering her voice. “You’ll do fine. I’ll let you have a free goal if you like?”

James was tempted for a moment, but shook his head. “No. I need to own this. Don’t do me any favours.”

Lily nodded and leaned forward, propelling up toward the goals so fast that her cloak snapped behind her like a flag.

James sucked in a deep breath, held it, and launched upwards as well, joining the swirl of players overhead and doing his best to tune out the observers from the stands and the confusion of the other teams as they conducted their own tryouts all around.

As the ground fell away and the evening wind buffeted through his hair, the tension in James' chest was slowly replaced by a sort of eager serenity. He knew what he was doing, after all. Lily was right: he had made it to the pitch. Strangely enough, the most difficult challenge was already over. All he had to do now was show what he knew. And despite a late affinity to broom-riding (it was no skim, after all), he now knew quite a lot.

As the evening sky compressed from azure to deep indigo, James performed his laps, each one faster than the other, flashing past the goal rings as Lily applauded and cheered him on. He dodged and feinted as Graham swatted Bludgers at him, and much to James' surprise and relief not a single one made contact. He took three shots at goal as Deirdre tossed Quaffles up to him. One missed, another bounced off Lily's broom handle as she spun to swat it away, and the third sailed through clean, neatly threading between her outstretched hands.

Finally, since James was trying out for Seeker, Graham released a Snitch, letting it swoop and circle up into the night sky, darting like a golden dragonfly in the dying light. James chased it, knowing that he had bare seconds before the tiny winged ball was lost amongst the rest of the swirling players from all four teams. He ducked and slalomed through Slytherins and Ravenclaws, who called out in annoyance at his passage. He barely avoided colliding mid-air with Julien Jackson, dropping beneath her like a stone before rocketing up again, swooping to meet the snitch as it streaked past her shoulder.

Dimly, James realized that someone was tracking alongside him, mirroring him like a shadow.

"Should I let you have this?" a familiar voice called, straining to keep pace but teasingly jovial. "Or do I take it now and save you from future embarrassments?"

James could think of no response as his brother careened along next to him, nearly shoulder to shoulder, also tracking the Snitch.

The golden ball dipped and angled downward like a missile. James dove, driving his broom straight down after it, committed to

catching it even if it meant cratering himself in the pitch below. Albus whooped and lunged to follow.

James reached, straining, nearly climbing off the end of his broom, and felt the wings of the Snitch beating against his fingers. Next to him, Albus broke off the chase as the ground swam dreadfully up beneath.

At the last possible second, James snapped his fist closed on the Snitch and threw himself backwards on his broom, yanking it upright with all his strength. The force of the arrested motion made him feel as heavy as a boulder. His legs unhinged beneath him and his shoes nearly sprang from his feet before the unforgiving ground of the pitch flung up to meet them, smacking them back onto his feet. His heels thudded down, but rather than crashing, James' feet skated along the earth, kicking up rooster-tails of dirt and torn grass, before swooping back into the air, slowing as gravity reluctantly gave him up.

He was panting, his hair wild and fluttering, his eyes as wide and glassy as crystal balls. The Snitch was held in his fist so tightly that James wondered if he'd need to pry his fingers loose one at a time. Dimly, he became aware of the sound of cheering and laughter.

"I thought for *sure* you were going to smash yourself flat as a dinner plate!" Deirdre cried, swooping alongside James and clapping him on the back. "That was the most recklessly brilliant flying I've seen in forever!"

The rest of the team gathered around as James drifted to a landing near the Gryffindor grandstand. He could still scarcely believe that he had succeeded in catching the Snitch. As his feet touched the grass again, he forced his fist open, revealing the tarnished golden ball and its furled wings.

A woman's rather shrill voice spoke up from the nearby grandstand stairs. "I don't know whether I am more impressed by your resolve or concerned for your lack of self-preservation," Professor McGonagall commented, "But allow me to remind you, Mr. Potter. It is *only* a game."



James nodded at the professor faintly as she eyed him and then turned to leave, following the rest as they streamed happily out into the night.

A hand plucked the Snitch from James' palm. "As much as I hate to say it," Graham said, throwing an arm around James' shoulders. "McGonagall's right. Brilliant flying is one thing. But if you go and kill yourself first time out, we'd be in dire straits for a Seeker the rest of the season, wouldn't we?"

James glanced aside at Graham, and saw that, despite the boy's apparent concerns, he was grinning with barely concealed excitement.

Somewhat breathlessly, James asked, "So, do I make the team?"

Graham turned suddenly businesslike and gave a shrug, stepping away to slot the Snitch into its place in the Quidditch trunk. "I'll write up the roster tonight and make the official announcement sometime tomorrow. Lots to consider. But you made a good showing. A very good showing indeed."

James wanted to press Graham for an answer now, but sensed that it would be futile. Either the boy was enjoying stretching out the suspense, or he truly didn't know whether James would make the team or not. Either way, there was no point in trying to wrinkle an answer out of him now.

"Nice one, James!" Lily said, bumping James with her shoulder as she passed, drawing him along with her. "For a moment there, I thought I was going to end up an only child. Frankly, I could see an upside to it."

The rest of the team gathered around jovially as the crowd poured away from the pitch and toward the glow of the castle. Many hands clapped James on the back and ruffled his sweaty hair, many voices congratulated him on an amazing, if manic, performance.

And as James joined in, laughing, glad to be, at least for the moment, absorbed into the camaraderie of the team, he thought to himself that he probably owed Albus a secret thanks. Whether his brother had intended it or not, his teasing attempt to steal the Snitch had been all the impetus James needed to risk life and limb to win it.

If James indeed made the team, he would do so on his own grit, determination, and merit. But there was no question that it would be Albus' brotherly rivalry that had sealed the deal.

Back at the common room, the evening's festivities were in full swing, what with tomorrow being Saturday and everyone's minds full of Quidditch and weekend cheer. James tried to adopt an air of dejected surliness as he eventually stowed his broom, ran a comb through his wild hair, and made his way toward the portrait hole for his "detention". Rose met him there, looking equally morose. But as the pair finally ducked through, leaving behind the raucousness and warm glow of the common room, their moods changed completely. They darted breathlessly through the halls and down the stairs, wending their way to the far corner of the castle and the arches to the outdoor amphitheater.

When they finally reached it, the huge doors were unlocked, leading out to a moon-filled natural depression lined with stone seats, all descending and arcing around the stage at the bottom. James had participated in several events here, not the least of which being his own performance as Treus in the Muggle Studies production of the wizarding classic, *The Triumvirate*. Unlike any of those times, however, the amphitheater was eerily empty now, silent and drifted sparsely with the first autumn leaves. Clouds scrubbed the starry sky, occasionally blotting the full moon and casting the amphitheater, and the forest beyond, into inky shadow.

Donofrio Odin-Vann arrived shortly after nine, finding James and Rose waiting in the back row, huddled in the nighttime chill.

"Right," he said in a hushed voice, glancing around to assure that they really were as alone as they felt. The only light was the silver moon-glow and a narrow band of gold that fell from the open doors of the castle. "I apologize for the ruse that I was forced to use to bring you here. Ostensibly, you shall be cleaning the aisles tonight, scooping up old candy wrappers and programs. But in truth, we have a much more important matter to attend to."

"Without Ralph," Rose said, standing and brushing herself off.

Odin-Vann blinked at her as if he didn't immediately know of whom she spoke. "Oh. Yes. Without Mr. Deedle. We only need the three of us this time. Inviting any more would be to increase the risk of being noticed." He paused and looked from Rose to James. "You don't think I deliberately excluded him because of his words the other night, do you?"

James stood as well, brushing dead leaves from his jeans. "Well. The thought had crossed our minds."

"I trust the three of you as much as any single one," Odin-Vann said briskly. "Which is, I must admit, exactly as far as necessity demands, and little further. This is indeed dangerous business, as Mr. Deedle was very correct to point out. Feel free to tell him of tonight's mission if you feel so inclined. I won't prevent you, and it probably will be best for him to be kept up to speed in case of future developments. But believe me, his lack of involvement tonight is purely pragmatic."

"So what's going on?" Rose asked, hushing her own voice but unable to hide her anticipation.

"Right," Odin-Vann said again, glancing around at the rows of dark, empty seats. James realized that the man was nearly crackling with nervous energy. "Tonight, we help Petra accomplish the first and most vital component of her plan to replace the Crimson Thread."

The familiar sinking sensation fell over James again—the mingled hope and reluctance he felt every time he considered Petra's mission. "What part is that?"

Odin-Vann looked at him directly. "We have to collect the symbolic Crimson Thread that was left in the World Between the Worlds. Without it, Petra cannot fully assume her role as Morgan."

Rose blinked rapidly up at the professor. "We have to go through the Nexus Curtain? We have to visit the place where Morgan, the evil Petra, and Judith hid out and planned their W.U.L.F. attack on Uncle Harry and Titus Hardcastle?" Her tone was even more hushed, bursting with equal parts trepidation and heady excitement.

“Well, yes and no,” Odin-Vann nodded vaguely. “*You* won’t, actually, Miss Weasley. But you shall perform perhaps the most important task of all.”

Rose looked taken aback but didn’t object, at least not yet. Odin-Vann went on, turning to James.

“According to Petra, James, you have in your possession a singularly useful map of the school grounds. Is that correct?”

“The Marauder’s Map?” James confirmed. “Yes, I still have it. Dad let me use it year before last to keep an eye on Lily and Albus, making sure they didn’t skive off on Hogwarts weekends before they were allowed. It’s still hidden in the bottom of my trunk.”

“And a particularly powerful cloak of invisibility?” Odin-Vann cocked his head, his eyes nearly sparking with interest.

“Ah, no,” James admitted, drooping his shoulders. “I tried, but Dad keeps that safe and tucked away at home. That’s caused too much trouble in the wrong hands. He doesn’t exactly trust me with it anymore.”

Odin-Vann pressed his lips into a thin line and nodded curtly. “Ah. Well. No matter, then. The Map is the most important tool for tonight. Can you give it to Miss Weasley?”

James nodded and glanced at Rose. “Of course.”

“Excellent,” Odin-Vann went on, becoming intent. “Your job, then, Miss Weasley, will be to watch the Map tonight. It may require you to be awake all the way until dawn, but it is essential that you keep alert.”

Rose looked deeply disappointed. “You mean, I’m staying here?”

Odin-Vann nodded patiently. “I need you to stay and act as sentinel. It is an absolutely essential duty. You must keep an eye on the headmaster at all times. Assure he stays inside the castle. And if he does not, if he vanishes from the Map, even for a moment, you must let us know somehow.”

“The Protean ducks,” James suggested, glancing at Rose. “I’ll take mine. If Merlin leaves, you can duck me a message. But,” he turned back to Odin-Vann. “Why are we concerned with Merlin?”

“Because noble as he may be,” Odin-Vann sighed reluctantly, “he, like the rest of the wizarding world, will attempt to capture and stop Petra. Unlike the rest of the wizarding world, however, *he* may be capable of succeeding.”

Rose agreed to this with obvious reluctance. She had never been to the World Between the Worlds, and James knew that her curiosity about it must be nearly overwhelming.

On the other hand, as they both knew, it was where their cousin Lucy had died. James had a sense that this was the main reason Rose did not push any harder to come.

“What about me?” James asked. “Will we start at Alma Aleron? Will Petra meet us there? Is Zane involved?” At that thought, a jolt of nervous excitement fanned out in him. “That’s why she contacted him, isn’t it? I tried to ask him about it, but he’s been out whenever I try to raise him on the Shard!”

Odin-Vann was shaking his head. “All of those details will come to light soon enough. Your job, James, is to do exactly what you did a few weeks ago, when you appeared to both Petra and myself. Your job is to travel to her via the connection you seem to share. She has opened her end. She expects you.”

“You mean,” James said, deflating slightly. “My task is... to go to bed?”

Odin-Vann shrugged. “However you did it before, do it again. I am permitted to leave the castle. You are not. But you can make your own way to Petra, it seems. Do so this night. If it works as I believe it does, you will travel to wherever Petra is, without anyone knowing you’ve even left your bed. Accomplish that, and the rest will take care of itself.”

James did not feel anywhere near as certain of his ability to accomplish this task as did Odin-Vann, but he nodded slowly, his mind spinning.

Rose was clearly unhappy with the plan, but didn't seem inclined to argue about it, at least not to Odin-Vann himself. With their business concluded, for the moment at least, the three returned to the warm glow of the castle.

"We are clear on our roles, then?" Odin-Vann whispered, pausing beneath a hanging lantern.

Rose nodded soberly, still frowning.

James shrugged. "I'll do my best."

Odin-Vann studied his face intently, and then nodded. "Give me an hour. And then, just go to sleep. Petra will more than allow you to come through. She will summon you. It will work. Just be prepared."

James wasn't entirely sure what being prepared entailed under these circumstances, but he nodded anyway.

Odin-Vann parted from them at the next corridor. James and Rose continued on, each lost in the dense fog of their own thoughts as they made their way back to the common room. Outside the portrait hole, Rose stopped James and whispered, "Do you trust him?"

James blinked at her. Amidst his mingled worries and excitement about the night's plan, he hadn't even given that question any consideration. "I... I guess so. I don't see much reason not to."

Rose nodded slowly, her eyes drifting. "You're right, I suppose. Petra trusts him, apparently. Still..."

"I'll get you the Map," James said, nodding to himself. "And maybe you can hex me with a sleep charm before I go up. I feel about as far from sleep right now as I've ever been."

Rose agreed to this and the two climbed through the portrait hole, each filled with their own stew of excitement and worry.

The common room was still half full of students. The walls rang with loud chatter and the crackle of the fireplace. Almost no one noticed the two students' return.

James ran upstairs to retrieve the Map. When he came back down, he found Rose seated on the loveseat beneath the window with Scorpius. He could tell by the tilt of their heads that she had told him

what was happening. James wasn't sure how he felt about that, but if it meant Scorpius would help Rose stay awake through the night, perhaps it was for the best. At least it meant that they weren't fighting for the moment.

Scorpius glanced up at James as he approached. James handed his knapsack past him to Rose. Inside it was the Marauder's Map.

"Don't forget to take your Duck," Scorpius commented, arching an eyebrow at James. "Assuming you really can."

"I think I can," James nodded. "I brought some of the dirt back from the place I went to last time. I think I can take with me whatever I'm holding. My biggest problem is going to be getting to sleep at all."

Scorpius shrugged. "Rose is a treat with a sleep charm. You'll probably collapse on the stairs before you reach the first-years dormitory. Say hello to your daft American friend, should you see him."

James smiled at the thought of Zane, even under these circumstances. Scorpius pretended not to like the blonde American, but James knew better. Wherever Zane and Scorpius weren't complete opposites, they were extremely alike. "I'll give him all your love," he agreed.

The three whiled away a disconsolate half-hour as the common room crowd slowly thinned. James was anxious to be underway, assuming the plan would work, but tried to obey Odin-Vann's timeframe as much as his patience would allow.

Finally, he stood and admitted that he could wait no longer. Rose nodded, drew her wand surreptitiously from the pocket of her jeans and flicked it at James, muttering something under her breath.

Nothing happened visibly, but James stumbled backwards a step as something soft seemed to whump him in the chest. He blinked and a wave of pleasant dizziness fell over him,

"Off with you," Rose commanded urgently. "Scorpius is right. You'll be dreaming on the stairs if you don't hurry."

James turned and made his way to the entrance to the boys' dormitory. The floor seemed to tilt gently beneath him, pulling him off course so that he bumped the edge of the door with his shoulder. The sensation was muffled, almost pleasant. The stairs felt steeper than usual. He leaned forward and used his hands to pull himself up the flights, both steadying and hurrying, nearly falling up the steps. Rose's sleepiness spell was indeed immensely strong.

He almost forgot to collect his Duck after all—nearly threw himself onto his bed fully clothed before remembering that final detail.

He fumbled in his open trunk, feeling more than looking. His fingers clutched the soft rubber and he clutched it to his chest, giving the Duck an accidental squeeze.

“Daft Dew-beater!”

James half-fell, half-crawled up onto his bed, his head swimming amiably, already dipping into a dreaming fugue.

His last incoherent thought was that the Duck in his hand was a Quaffle. He was flying over the nighttime pitch, preparing to score, but the goal rings were no longer guarded by Lily. Now, strangely, they were protected by the figure of Donofrio Odin-Vann, who opened his arms to block the shot. As he did, his cloak spread wide like dragon wings, seamlessly black, covering everything, covering the entire world.

James fell into the blackness, still clutching the Quaffle-Duck to his chest, and the blackness sucked him in. It streamed past him first like a wind, and then like a hurricane gale, and finally like smothering water, compressed and swift, carrying him helplessly faster and faster, breaking through the fog of Rose's sleep charm with a stab of sudden fear.

Fighting against the rushing dark, he finally broke through, gasped urgently, and sat up.

He was no longer in his bed in Gryffindor Tower. Instead, he was sitting on a cushion of fresh grass beneath a dusky evening sky. A huge shape hulked next to him. James blinked up at it, still muddy-headed, knowing that he should recognize the shape but not quite able



to do so. It wasn't until the voice spoke up next to him, startling him badly, that it all began to make sense.

"Sheesh, James!" Zane's voice rasped, full of shocked urgency. "Are you all right? Did that, like, hurt?"

"What do you mean?" James asked, clutching his head as if to hold it together. He turned to see Zane drop into an urgent squat next to him. Peering past the blonde boy, he asked, "Is that Apollo Mansion?"

"The very same," Zane answered distractedly, leaning to examine James. "Seriously, you're okay? You fell out of nowhere like a comet, hit the ground hard enough to rattle the windows!"

James' head was clearing slowly. With Zane's help he climbed unsteadily to his feet. "I'm fine. I guess. Really good to see you, mate. Am I really here? Alma Aleron?"

Zane shrugged. "As here as I am, looks to me. I think you dropped your Duck, though."

James glanced around and saw the rubber Duck lying a few feet away in the grass. He retrieved it and pushed it into his pocket. Taking a moment to look around, he finally recognized the bulk of Apollo mansion, home to Bigfoot house. It still sat atop Victory Hill overlooking the quadrangle and the enormous brick shape of Administration Hall, with its imposing clock tower. According to it, local time was just past six in the evening. The only major difference to the scene since James had last been there was the lack of the broken werewolf statue, which had long since been cleared away now that the Wolves' reign of unnatural Clutchcudgel tournament wins had been ended.

Returning to Zane, James said blearily, "It's good to be back, even if it's only for a little while. But how is this supposed to happen? We can't just open the Nexus Curtain like we did last time, can we? The house has to be empty, for one thing."

Zane managed to look mildly wounded. "Like I can't manage the simple task of clearing a house for an evening? I just told them the place had come down with a sudden infestation of Streeler snails." He

bobbed his head and glanced back at the plain, blocky façade of Apollo mansion. “Mainly because I infested it with Streeler snails,” he added with a shrug. “But it wasn’t hard to get everybody out. Tonight’s the first Clutch match between The Bigfoots and the Vampires. The snails were just insurance. I’m supposed to be clearing them out while everyone’s away. No problem. The Nexus Curtain works as a portal for every living thing from the cornerstone up. I hope those slimy, venomous little brutes are happy in their new home in the Double-you Bee Double-you.” He looked a little wistful.

James nodded. “So you have the horseshoe, then?” The silver horseshoe, James well knew, was the key that opened the dimensional gate, converting the entire house into a portal.

Zane nodded and patted the bulge in his jeans pocket. “I probably shouldn’t carry it around like this, should I?” he said in a hoarse whisper. “Who knows what kind of trans-dimensional radiation the thing gives off, eh? Ah well, it’ll either make it impossible for me to have kids, or make them super-powered mutants if I do. I should start thinking up possible superhero names.”

“Where’s Petra,” James asked, glancing around. “Or Odin-Vann. Have you met him already? Tall, skinny bloke with a little pointy goatee?”

“Petra’s inside,” Zane nodded at the mansion again, turning serious. “Along with Izzy. They have to stay totally out of sight until the last moment. That other dude is in there, too.”

“Izzy’s here?” James blinked. He knew he should have expected that. Petra rarely went anywhere without her half-sister, whom she protected intently.

Zane nodded. “They were talking about what will become of her once Petra zaps away into Morgan’s dimension. I think that Odin-Vann guy means to take care of her. Adopt her, maybe.”

James’ head spun for a moment. He couldn’t quite bring himself to imagine Petra abandoning Izzy, but of course it would be impossible to do otherwise. The Izzy in that other dimension, unfortunately, was dead.

At that moment, the door to Apollo mansion opened. Donofrio Odin-Vann stepped out, followed by a thin, young woman in jeans and a pale green jumper, her glossy dark hair pulled back in a ponytail.

At the sight of her, all the breath seemed to suck out of James' lungs. The color faded from everything in the world except for the young woman as she came lightly down the steps, meeting his eyes, smiling at him, faintly, but with genuine affection.

She approached him, reached for him, touched his shoulders. And then they were embracing. It was a brief reunion, but monumental in James' mind. He had not touched Petra in years. Had only seen her once, briefly, on the night that she had created her Horcrux. In his heart, she had become something almost mythical—a towering icon of both hopeless love and impending tragedy. And yet now, finally, here she stood before him, in his arms, half-a-head shorter than him. Her hair smelled of lavender. The embrace of her arms was strong, warm, utterly human.

And then she was letting him go, stepping back, looking up at him.

"I'm sorry," she said.

He shook his head at her, speechless. Was she sorry for the way she had recently blocked him out, closing off her end of the their shared thread? Or for including him on this possibly dangerous mission? James couldn't tell. Possibly both. Or perhaps she was sorry for something else entirely.

"You should go now," Odin-Vann said. "We have very little time."

James frowned, finally tearing his gaze away from Petra. "You mean... you aren't coming?"

Odin-Vann nodded and drew a brief, heavy sigh. "I would be of little help where you are going. My mission is to stay here. I will keep Izzy safe, and watch the house. Should anyone approach while you are in the World Between the Worlds, I will need to remove the

horseshoe key. I will send them on their way by whatever means necessary and replace it once the coast is clear.”

There was something off-kilter about the way Odin-Vann spoke and avoided eye-contact, but James couldn't quite identify what it was.

“Where will Izzy be?” Zane asked, drawing his wand out of his pocket.

Petra answered, “She's in the basement game room. The cellar isn't part of the portal. She'll be safe there with the Disarmadillo and Don just outside. And she has her doll with her, Betsy.”

James nodded hesitantly. It was strange hearing the professor referred to as Don, but he supposed that's what all of his old friends and classmates called him.

Zane tugged the horseshoe from his other jeans pocket and handed it to Odin-Vann, who accepted it reverently. He turned toward the cornerstone and the engraved shape that, James knew, fit the horseshoe perfectly. The young professor glanced back over his shoulder.

“You have your means of communicating with Ms. Weasley?” he asked James.

James nodded, patting the Duck stuffed into his pocket.

“You both have a very important duty,” Odin-Vann said, looking at James and Zane meaningfully. “A grave duty more important than any other task on earth at this moment. Do you both know the true source of Petra's powers?”

James did know, but hadn't realized that Odin-Vann did. He nodded, a bit uncertainly.

Odin-Vann went on, more intently than James had ever heard him speak. “Petra is a sorceress. There may be none like her in all of history. Sorcery power is derived from a natural element. Petra's is the first of her kind: her element is the city. Where you are going, I need not remind you: there *are* no cities. There never have been, and there never shall be. While she is there, she will be at her weakest, drawing on her stored power alone, like a Muggle battery. You two are to be

her protection. You are wizards. You take your power with you. Use it well. Find and collect the symbolic crimson thread. And bring it and her back here safe. Do you understand?”

“They understand, Don,” Petra said. She placed an arm each around Zane’s and James’ waists, squeezing them both. “These two shall be my knights in shining armour, at least for the next hour. Open the portal already. As you say, time is short.”

Odin-Vann still glared at Zane and James, turning the silver horseshoe over and over in his hands. James had time to wonder: if the task of protecting Petra was so important, why was the professor not attending to it himself? He remembered his suspicions about the professor, about how he seemed to be magically stymied when under stress. It was almost as if pressure flustered him into impotence, turned him into a temporary squib. Was that why he was choosing not go himself, remaining to perform the much more menial duty of guarding the house?

Finally, Odin-Vann turned away and approached the huge conjoined cornerstone of Apollo mansion.

Petra stepped toward the door again, bringing Zane and James with her.

“I’m sorry,” she said again, glancing aside at both boys, first Zane, and then James. But then she smiled and added, “But it really is good to be together with you two rogues again. Tell Ralph I’m disappointed he isn’t here as well. And Rose, too.”

James nodded that he would.

A moment later, a blast of warm light exploded from Apollo mansion, silent but blinding, piercing from every window, keyhole, and door crack, even from the throat of the chimney.

Petra stiffened, drew herself up, and then gripped James’ and Zane’s hands on either side, squeezing. Together, the three stepped forward.

The door to Apollo mansion opened of its own accord, spilling a brilliance of colors, all fused into something rosy-golden, exerting

subtle force against their bodies while simultaneously drawing them forward.

As one, they held their breath, stepped over the threshold, and vanished from the world they knew.



***NEXT CHAPTER:***  
**THE WORLD BETWEEN THE WORLDS!  
THE THREAD AND THE BROOCH!  
CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION!**