

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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8. THE THREAD & THE BROOCH

Absolutely nothing had changed since James had last set foot in the World Between the Worlds. He sensed it not just by looking around, but with something deeper and more pervasive inside his own heart and mind. He remembered someone commenting on it during their previous visit: *time doesn't take any time here*, they had said.

He hoped it hadn't been Lucy who'd said it. The thought of her made his heart as heavy and cold as stone.

Silently, James led the way out of the cave of the portal and up the curving stairs carved into the bare rock of the plateau. Beneath them, iron-grey waves crashed against the cliffs, sending up dull mists. They were the exact same waves as before, since unseen by any other human eyes. The wind was stiff but unscented by salt, strangely dead to the senses.

After a few minutes' climb (although it might have been hours or even days, considering the banal timelessness that gripped the terrible place) the stone stairs curved up onto a broad plateau, carpeted with hushing yellow grass. At the very end of the plateau jutted the black castle, its spires and turrets scratching at the sky, its hollow windows tall and staring like a hundred shocked eyes.

James took Petra's hand with his left, holding his wand at the ready in his right. In spite of everything, he exulted in her touch. It was fleeting, and soon she would be gone from him forever, but for now he soaked in the unspeakable comfort of their laced fingers, committing the feeling to memory.

The three walked in silence for some time, approaching the castle. Despite its looming turrets and dark stone walls, he felt no sense of foreboding this time. Unlike their last approach, the castle was now completely empty. Also, he now knew its story. The castle had been built as an escape route by friends of a certain dimensional traveler and his companion unicorn, both of whom had fallen prey to evil witches and wizards in the world of men. It was that unicorn's horseshoe, long parted from its bones, that had made this journey possible. The castle was a sort of way-station, filled with portals magically powered to take any travelers back to their native dimension. This, the builders wordlessly implied, was preferable to the risk of interaction with those that had killed the Rider and his Mount.

"That sky," Zane finally said, keeping his voice low in the endless, half-daylight. "Looks like a giant bowl beaten out of lead, turned upside down over the world."

“There are no stars in that sky,” Petra agreed with a shudder. “It never gets dark. There’s never a dusk or a dawn. It just never ends.” She squeezed James’ hand. “Let’s hurry and get this over with.”

The castle drew closer with teasing slowness. Wind whispered in the grass, and the sound almost teased at meaning. James found himself straining to hear words among the shushing hiss. He shivered and shook his head.

“Are you certain about all of this?” he asked Petra, half to distract himself, half because he really wanted to know. “I mean, are you absolutely positive there’s no other way?”

Petra drew a long, silent breath. Letting it out, she said, “There’s no other way. I wish there was. Donofrio and I have discussed it over and over. I’m the Crimson Thread. I’ll need his expertise to assume the role of Morgan, that other dimension’s version of myself. But once we’re done, everything will finally return to normal. As long as I am in our own world, I tear it further away from its original destiny. Chaos takes more of a foothold. Who knows how many things are different now already than they should be?”

James shrugged and shook his head. “So there’s a few Muggles stumbling into the courtyard of Hogwarts, is that such a big thing?” He knew he was oversimplifying things, but went on anyway. “Maybe the world really would be better off if the Muggles found out about us. Have you thought about that?”

She glanced aside at him, gave him a wry smile. “I’ve thought about it. And you have, too. You know how that ends. Conflict and war are inevitable in a combined world. But I’m talking about more than that. Maybe, in an untouched and untainted world, you won the Clutchcudgel tournament for the Bigfoots just because it was the right thing to do for the team, for pure fun, and sport, and honor, not because you had to for my sake.”

Zane scoffed. “And maybe Professor Newt teaches cheesecakes to fly and it rains chocolate syrup on Thursdays.”

Petra laughed a little. “And maybe James’ Aunt Hermione is the new Minister of Magic.”

James tried to laugh along, but another thought struck him, and he couldn't stop himself from saying it aloud. "Maybe my cousin Lucy never died here in this stupid, dead place."

Petra and Zane fell silent as they walked. Next to James, he sensed Petra nod slowly.

They spoke no more as they finally walked into the dull shadow of the castle. As before, it stood perched over the very edge of the far precipice, either because the cliff had eroded disastrously away beneath it, or because the structure did not rely on anything so prosaic as gravity for its foundation. Looking up at it, James saw the building now for what it really was: merely a totem, a monument meant to funnel wanderers into the main chamber, a cavernous hall surrounded by pillars and lined with empty archways. Each archway was hung with wafting curtains, and James knew that each formed its own dimensional portal.

As the three stepped into the space, their footsteps echoing up into shadowy, vaulted heights, they encountered the same scene that they had left years (or seemingly only moments) before. A broad stone floor was drifted here and there with dead grass, occupied in its very centre by an unmistakable, if surreal, arrangement of bedroom furniture. There was a low dresser and mirror, a bed, a chair, a woven Oriental rug. A floor lamp with a pink tulip-shaped shade lay broken on the floor. James remembered it falling as Petra had stalked through the arrangement, pushing the furniture aside without touching it, fueled by rage in pursuit of Judith and Morgan.

The symbolic crimson thread, plucked from the Loom of the Vault of Destinies, had accompanied Morgan here, waiting with her, twined around an opal brooch.

James remembered Petra's version of that same brooch. She had worn it on her cloak during their ocean voyage, apparently a gift from her dead father, purchased while she had still been in her mother's womb. Petra had lost her version of the brooch when she'd fallen from the back of the ship—and been so heartsick about it that she had nearly followed it to her own watery tomb.

Morgan, the Petra from another reality, had never gone on that ocean voyage, however. Her dimension's version of the brooch had never been lost at sea. Instead, it rested on this very dresser, glinting with the red of the strand wrapped around it.

James could tell even before they reached the disarray of the furniture, however, that the top of the dresser was now empty. Not even dust had collected on its flat surface.

Petra stopped in her tracks.

"Where is it?" she whispered urgently.

"I remember it," Zane said, stepping forward, and then glancing back. "The thread was here, wrapped around a piece of jewelry. It must have fallen."

James mused darkly, "Maybe Judith came back for it."

But Petra was shaking her head. "No one can touch the thread except she who it represents. Remember?"

James remembered. He had tried to collect the brooch and thread himself, only to have his hand frozen solid all the way to the elbow.

"Look around," Zane suggested. "Split up. Check every corner."

Slowly, the three began to circle the arrangement of scattered furniture, expanding in wider and wider arcs. James bent at the waist, his eyes wide, scanning the blocks of the stone floor, scrutinizing every crevice. Soon enough, he found himself moving around the portal arches and their drifting curtains. He realized that each portal emitted a faint noise: a low ribbon of whisper-song, like that which he'd fancied hearing in the grass of the plateau.

He kept a distance from them while examining around them as close as possible. Was it possible that the brooch and thread had rolled through one of the portals? Surely, the dimensional gateways only worked on living things, didn't they?

Still bent at the waist, studying the cracks of the floor, he nearly bumped right into Zane.

“It’s not looking good,” the blond boy whispered. “Something or someone must have gotten here before us.”

James didn’t want to admit that his friend might be right. In the pit of his stomach, however, he had the faintest, teasing sense of another presence in the castle. Not Judith this time, but a deepening sense of being observed. He glanced around helplessly.

Petra’s voice rang from across the room, waking a stir of echoes in the high ceilings. “Found it!” she cried happily. “It was right here all along! It fell into one of the partially open dresser drawers and—”

The stone floor suddenly shook, so hard and violently that it kicked both Zane and James right off their feet. They fell backwards onto the stone blocks, which cracked all around them. Deep crevices appeared and snaked away in every direction, bursting with sharp grit. The entire castle seemed to sway at the ferocity of the quake. Deep, startled groans and creaks filled the room as dust sifted down, clouding the dark air.

“*Petra Morganstern*,” a massive, booming voice announced, echoing so broadly that it vibrated in every surface.

James recognized the voice, and his stomach seemed to plummet all the way through the floor.

Light blared, illuminating the cavernous room like a flash of purple lightning, etching perfectly black shadows behind every pillar and archway, turning every spreading crack into a chasm.

Zane grabbed James’ arm, clutching tight.

“It’s Merlin!” he said, his voice thin in the disastrous noise.

In the centre of the floor, a figure stood tall, holding a staff aloft in its right hand. The staff burned with purple fire, roaring dully and emitting that blinding, cold glow. Beyond it, turning to face the sudden shape, Petra squared her shoulders, closing her fist over the brooch and thread in her right hand.

“Headmaster,” she said calmly, and her own voice reverberated throughout the room, though clear as crystal bells. “You shouldn’t have come. I don’t want to end you.”

“Nor I you,” Merlin declared with sincere regret. “I was summoned the moment you touched the thread, as rite of my guardianship of both you and our world. Give the thread to me. Return with me as your ally, not your warden.”

Petra was shaking her head. “You can’t hold the thread. Only I can. Because I now belong to the world and the dimension that it came from. Please, don’t oppose me.”

James still had his wand in his hand. He aimed it at Merlin’s broad back, not even sure what spell he meant to cast. Zane grabbed his wrist and pushed it upright, however.

“What are you doing?” he rasped in James’ ear. “We can’t fight Merlin! We brought *knives* to a *gun* fight!”

“Let me go!” James insisted, struggling, but it was too late. A shockwave of magical energy bowled both boys backwards, emanating from the point where Merlin’s and Petra’s powers suddenly collided. James struggled against the force of it, but it was a constant blast, streaming through his hair and battering at his clothing. He pushed laboriously to his feet against the howling gust and strained his eyes, desperate to see. Even as he did so, however, a wave of debilitating, inexplicable weakness washed over him. The world turned grey and he felt himself swaying, as if some secret force were sucking his energy away. James grabbed him, holding him upright as James’ knees went loose beneath him.

Across from them, Petra and Merlin were locked in sudden battle, she with her right arm outstretched, palm open, he with his staff extended full length. Connecting between them, dual bolts of blinding energy converged and obliterated each other, creating the constant magical gale. Petra’s power was palest blue, blasting like shards of ice. Merlin’s was electric purple, crackling with forks of lightning.

At the point where both bolts collided, terminating each other in apocalyptic annihilation, a tiny shape floated, revolving slowly in midair. It was the brooch with the thread twined tightly around it. As James watched, weakened and dreamy, the shape twitched, first jerking

back toward Petra, and then lobbing again toward Merlin, locked in shifting stalemate.

They were fighting over it, engaged in a devastating tug-of-war. James had a moment to marvel: if this is how powerful Petra and Merlin were when separated from their elements—her from the city, and him from nature—then James and Zane were very fortunate indeed. They surely could not have survived otherwise.

And yet James himself felt strangely wasted, like a husk, drained and withering. He drew a gasping breath, willing himself back into motion. Clumsily, he broke free of Zane and trained his wand on Merlin again, hoping that he could distract him, if nothing else. He chose a disarming spell, spoke it as loud as he could, but the wand in his hand didn't so much as spark.

"It's no good!" Zane called against the torrent of magic and the quake of the castle. "They're drawing their power from every source, including our wands! There's nothing left for us!"

They're not just draining power from our wands, James thought. She, at least, is draining it from me. From the invisible cord that connects us. I'm her battery!

"GO!" Petra's voice suddenly blared, so loud and ringing that it shivered the air, setting up harmonics of reverberation in the very stones and blocks of the castle.

"She means us!" Zane cried, grabbing again at James' arm. "The whole place is coming down!"

James felt it now. The floor was canting disastrously, tilting further at every moment. The pillars creaked and leaned, beginning to topple as if in slow motion. And still James couldn't break his eyes away from Petra.

"We have to save her!" he shouted, and bolted forward, mustering every ounce of strength he could. He didn't know what he meant to do. Perhaps he would merely bowl into Merlin from behind, knocking the big man over. He knew he had about as much chance at that as he did of lifting Hogwarts castle with his pinkie finger, and yet he couldn't stop himself.

This is exactly how Lucy died, he realized as he ran. The thought was strangely comforting.

He was still ten paces away when it happened.

The brooch, still locked in the conflagration between Petra's and Merlin's bolts, began to revolve faster. As it did, the thread unwound from it. It streamed along Petra's icy stream, stretching toward her, while the brooch spun into a blur, drifting back along Merlin's purple bolt, drawn toward his power.

The two parts separated with an explosive blast that extinguished both bolts. The thread flung into Petra's open hand while the brooch streaked toward Merlin. And then both figures were obscured by a thunderclap of rebounding energy.

James flew off his feet and rolled, banging his elbows and knees painfully along the broken floor. A moment later, his face was full of dry grass. He scrambled, not even certain which way was up, and lunged clumsily to his feet on the edge of the plateau, in the shadow of the leaning castle.

His strength had returned to him, but he barely noticed. The noise of the blast had not diminished. It grew, and James realized why. Slowly, disastrously, the castle was toppling over the cliff. Its black turrets and spires still towered above him, but seemed to lean slowly backwards, crumbling into a gentle blur as every brick began to separate, every window dissolved out of true, every cone of its roof began to implode in on itself.

Zane's voice was a thin wail against the roar. "James!" he called, scrambling out of the collapsing ruin and waving both hands frantically. "Run! *Run!*"

"Petra!" James shouted, convulsively stumbling into the descending shadow.

But then there she was. Pillars collapsed and shattered behind her as she pelted forward, her face smudged with grime, her jeans torn, showing the bloody scrapes of her pumping knees.

James reached for her, grabbed her hand as she lost her balance and began to fall. He tugged her forward, even as the castle utterly

gave way behind her, contracting in on itself and descending beyond the plateau like a vertical freight train, taking much of the cliff with it.

“Go!” Petra panted as James pulled her onward, onto the hissing grass. “It’s not over! He’s still coming! *GO!*”

She struggled to regain her footing and pelted onward, now pulling James along beside her.

Behind them, an explosion of dull grey water, as high and broad as a mountain, roared into the air, blotting out the dull sky and casting gloom over the plateau.

Zane was running ahead of James and Petra, but glanced back over his shoulder at the noise and the sudden shadow. He stumbled, wide-eyed, and Petra caught his collar with her free hand dragging him forward as well.

Lightning shot prisms from the wall of water, which fell away in torrents now, revealing a bright nucleus beyond. James didn’t have to ask what that nucleus was. The shape descended out of the air and set foot on the rubble of the castle’s former footprint, shaking the entire plateau.

“*PETRA MORGANSTERN!*” Merlin called in a voice of thunder.

“Run!” Petra panted thinly, breathlessly. “*Run!*”

The three ran. They ran like they had never run in their entire lives.

They reached the stone stairway and nearly flung themselves over the ledge in their panic. Turning and taking two, even three, steps at a time, they bolted down, following the curve of the cliffs and descending toward the crashing waves below.

Merlin was coming. The plateau shook with the tremor of his footsteps. The light of his staff bloomed back from the low sky, throwing hard, moving shadows into every crack and fissure. Merlin, somehow, was his own battery. And his power, even if only temporary, was still terrible.

Finally, exhausted and panicked, the three stumbled into the cave of the portal.

Only the portal, they now saw as they skidded to a horrified halt, wasn't there.

James' eyes boggled in the dimness. He knew what they should have found: the door of Apollo mansion, seen from the inside, hanging open and showing the comforting slope of victory hill and the quadrangle beyond. But there was no open door, no comforting evening light. No escape.

The ground shook. The angle of the purplish light outside changed now, reflecting directly down onto the crashing, heaving waves. Merlin had reached the stairs.

"Where's the door?" Zane cried, his voice an octave higher than normal. He stumbled forward and felt around blindly, waving his arms. "It should be here! This is the spot! Our footprints are still right there from when we arrived! Door, please! Pretty please, with sugar on top!"

A high-pitched, muffled voice suddenly squawked from James' right side.

"Farty Fopdoodle!"

It was the Duck in his pocket, of course. Frantically, he tugged it out and looked down at it. A single word was now scrawled on it in all capitals: *MERLIN!*

"Great," James nodded, stuffing the Duck back into his pocket. "Real helpful, Rose."

"He's had to remove the horseshoe," Petra said quietly, her eyes thoughtful. "Don had to close the portal for a moment. Someone must have come. He'll put it back. We just have to wait."

"I don't think waiting is going to be an option for much longer!" Zane exclaimed with manic cheerfulness.

"Come here," Petra said, reaching out to Zane with her right hand and taking James' in her left. "We have to be ready."

Zane came to stand next to Petra, but kept his face to the entrance of the cave. Trembling, he stretched out his wand.

"What's the best spell to use on a sorcerer?" he asked, his voice cracking glassily.

Petra considered this for a moment as the ground shook. “What’s the worst spell you know?”

“Umm...!” Zane blinked.

Petra nodded briskly. “Not that one.”

A shadow moved outside the mouth of the cave. Pebbles and grit rained from the ceiling.

In the darkness of the cave, the door of Apollo mansion appeared, blooming with evening glow.

“Now!” James shouted, yanking Petra forward as he lunged. She dragged Zane behind her, even as a shape heaved in front of the cave mouth, blocking the light.

James’ next footstep stumbled onto the porch steps of Apollo mansion. The door slammed behind him as Zane barreled through, nearly bowling him over.

“The horseshoe!” James cried, his breath nearly gone, barely producing a dry croak. “Take it out! *Take it out!*”

Standing next to the cornerstone, blinking in surprise with his hands still on the silvery shape, Donofrio Odin-Vann plucked the horseshoe from its engraved bed.

The brilliant rose-gold lights in Apollo mansion winked out.

The portal was closed.

James collapsed past Petra, down the steps and onto the lush grass of Victory Hill. Zane followed, panting and nearly laughing with hysterical relief.

“Someone came back for a scarf!” Odin-Vann breathed, rushing to meet them, the horseshoe in his hand. “Somebody named Perkins! I told him he couldn’t go in yet because of the poison snails. He argued with me! Said that if that crazy zombie Zane Walker could handle them, so could he! I had to let him in! I put the key back in place as soon as I could!”

Wordlessly, James held up the rubber Duck in his hand, showing Odin-Vann the word scrawled across it in Rose’s hasty capitals. The professor’s face went slack and ashy with shock. After a second, his eyes darted from the Duck, to James, to Petra.

“Did you get it?” he asked, his voice a breathy husk.

Zane nodded wearily, still tittering with nervous laughter. “We succeeded. It was close, but we succeeded.”

James looked up at where Petra still stood on the steps. The knees of her jeans hung in frayed strips, stained with her blood. Her hair was wild and matted with dust, clinging to her sweaty cheeks and hiding her eyes. She raised a hand and showed her open palm. In it, looking like nothing more than a ball of red lint, was the crimson thread.

“We got the thread,” she said, her voice a low, hollow monotone. “But we *didn't* succeed.”

And suddenly James understood what she meant.

Petra may have told everyone, even Odin-Vann, that their mission was to retrieve the crimson thread. But Petra herself had gone to the World Between the Worlds for her own reason, a reason she may have cared about even more.

She had gone to replace her father's lost brooch.

And in that task, sadly, she had failed miserably.



NEXT CHAPTER:

**MERLIN'S UNWITTING HELPER!
MILLIE AND JAMES ARE "A THING!"
THE QUIDDITCH ROSTER IS POSTED!**