

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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## 9. PEEVES PLAYS HIS PART

James slept long and late the following morning, awaking well past Saturday breakfast to an empty dormitory and feeling little inclined to get up. The leaden grey sky outside his window concurred with his lethargic mood. He stared at it from the rumpled mess of his bed, replaying the night's events. The grit of the destroyed black castle was still in his hair. Its dirt was grimed into the palms of his hands and beneath his fingernails. He was still wearing the jeans and tee shirt he had worn to greet Zane at Alma Aleron, only now they were sweaty and grass-stained.

He longed to spend an hour or three soaking in the fifth floor prefects' bathtub, and considered asking Ralph for the password. This, of course, would likely necessitate an explanation for why he was so grimy after a night's sleep, and while he did intend to tell Ralph everything that had happened, he didn't feel up to it just this morning.

Thus, instead, he merely lay in bed blinking at the autumn clouds as they rolled dully past his window, grumbling with distant threats of rain.

He'd assumed that his dream-journey would end once he, Petra, and Zane returned from the World Between the Worlds, but in fact he had spent another hour or more there with them, in the basement game room of Apollo mansion, explaining their adventure to Donofrio Odin-Vann and discussing what still remained to accomplish.

Petra was morose and quiet throughout, seated next to James on a low, sprung couch with her feet splayed in front of her, her shoes kicked off. Izzy seemed to sense Petra's mood, and joined her, lying her own smaller body on the arm of the sofa beside her sister, crossing her arms over her chest, mimicking Petra's pose perfectly.

Odin-Vann was ashen-faced at the idea that Merlin had somehow discovered the plan, and had somehow been summoned to confront the three of them.

"Not *us*," Zane shook his head. "*Petra*. She said it herself. The only person who can touch the thread is the person who it represents. I expect that means even old Merlin Magic-pants." He tried to give the nickname his usual familiar irreverence, but even he was still shaken by the memory of Merlin's terrible pursuit. "Maybe he has his own way of getting into the Double-you Bee Double-you."

Odin-Vann shook his head doubtfully. "I *would* say that absolutely no one can access the World Between the Worlds without the dimensional key," he said. "But this is the great Merlinus we are talking about, he who spent centuries suspended in the Transitis Nihilo, who traveled beyond death for a year only to return at his own strange bidding. Even if he couldn't cross the Nexus on his own, he

may well have been capable of establishing a sort of beacon to summon him should Petra ever touch the thread.” He shivered at the very thought.

“But if that’s the case,” James realized, sitting up in alarm, “then that means we trapped him in the World Between the Worlds when we left without him!”

This time it was Zane who shook his head. “The black castle was full of portals,” he said, standing and heaving open a nearby refrigerator. Bottles rattled in the door and he plucked one out, popping its top with a brief hiss. “Remember? They were escape routes for anyone who found themselves stuck there, taking them back to their own dimension. The castle may have ended up a ruin at the bottom of that dead ocean, but the portals are still there, and I bet they work just fine. Merlin will find his way back, somewhere and somehow, but drummels to donuts he’ll be as wet as a drowned Glumbumble when he does.”

“And as angry as a fire-demon,” James sighed.

“He didn’t see you,” Petra said dully. “All of his attention was focused on me. I made sure of that. He will be in a rage, but that rage will belong to me alone.”

James glanced at her. There was rage in her voice as well, albeit cold, banked to a deep-freeze of deceptive calm. She had run from Merlin, escaped from him, but only barely. How could that be? Shouldn’t the two of them have been very nearly matched there in the World Between the Worlds, each separated from their elemental powers? Was her strength divided, somehow? Had she spent a portion of it hiding Zane and James from Merlin, protecting them? Or was there something more to her seemingly reduced power?

He thought of the weakness he’d felt when she had summoned her powers in force. He thought, *I’m her battery.*

“Right,” Odin-Vann nodded curtly. “The point is, we’ve succeeded in collecting the crimson thread. All that remains now is to replace it in the Loom of the Vault of Destinies. This shall be my challenge, as it may well require some spell or enchantment to power it

back up again, sending it back to its native dimension and returning us our original destiny.”

Zane shrugged. “Or maybe just getting the thread back in the same place as the Loom will cause it to magically snap back into place, like a stretched rubber band being let go, or two magnets getting close enough to get caught in their own attraction, snapping together. Professor Jackson said something like that, back when the thread was first stolen. The destinies *want* to realign, he said.”

Odin-Vann frowned at Zane. “Your professor Jackson spends too much time toying with theory and too little time in actual magical practice. He thinks he knows much more than he does, which is precisely why he must not be involved in this mission at all, or know anything about it. When the time comes, Mr. Walker, I will summon you to assist me in returning the thread to the Vault of Destinies. I understand that you are wily enough to procure a key to the Alma Aleron archive, where it is housed?”

Zane shrugged. “I’m wily enough to get you a live orchestra to play *The Blue Danube* while you do it, if you want. You just say when.”

Odin-Vann agreed with a nod. “Once I am prepared, I shall indeed say when. If all goes as planned, the moment the thread is returned, Petra shall assume her new role as the Morgan of that alternate dimension. The original Morgan of that dimension, now dead and buried here, will become our version of Petra.”

Still lying on the sofa arm next to Petra, Izzy rolled onto her side and buried her face against Petra’s shoulder. She wasn’t crying, James sensed—she had surely already shed more than her share of tears over the impending loss of her sister—but neither was she ready to allow it to happen just yet. Probably, she never would be.

James found he was shaking his head, finally hitting on an objection that had been brewing in the back of his mind for some time. “But it can’t be that simple, can it?” He turned to look aside at Petra. “That other dimension’s version of you, the Morgan version, was evil. She partnered with Judith to steal Izzy from you, since she accidentally

killed her own dimension's version. She was willing to see my dad and Titus Hardcastle killed by the W.U.L.F.”

“She *wasn't* evil,” Odin-Vann corrected with grave certainty. “Morgan wasn't evil any more than Petra is, regardless of what the rest of the magical world may think. She was simply heartsick by the consequences of her choices. People will do surprisingly desperate things when they are heartsick. Morgan wasn't evil. She was simply broken, and crushed, and bereft.”

“And when I go to replace her in her world,” Petra said, still staring blankly into the shadows. “I will be broken and crushed and bereft as well. I will be more Morgan than Petra myself. I'll have lost the people I love the most. It will be exactly as it should be.”

The chill in her words was terrible to James. She sensed this. Without looking at him, she felt for his hand between them, squeezed it, and held it.

*You're one of those people*, the touch of her hand seemed to say. He didn't know if the thought came directly from her, via the invisible cord that connected them, but he didn't doubt the sentiment, either way. He squeezed her hand back and drew a deep, shaking sigh.

Odin-Vann suggested that he be the one to safeguard the crimson thread until the time of its final use. “For the very reason it was hidden in the World Between the Worlds by Morgan: because it is far too magical to go unnoticed. Despite recent events, Hogwarts is still one of the most magically fortified places on earth. There, I can keep it hidden.”

“Just like Madame Delacroix did with the Merlin throne,” Zane nodded and shrugged, “back during our first year, when we were all still just wide-eyed innocents, untainted by the tribulations of responsibility.”

Petra rolled her eyes at Zane, but there was a ghost of a smile there as well.

Odin-Vann held out a small leather-bound jewelry box, open like a clamshell. Petra stood and placed the crimson thread in the box, which Odin-Vann snapped closed, never touching the thread himself.

James had an idea that the professor wouldn't have been able to hold the thread even inside the jewelry box if Petra had not placed it there with her own hand, granting her unspoken permission.

James also had an idea that Ralph, were he there, would object strongly to Odin-Vann's possession of the thread.

"And this," Odin-Vann said, tugging the unicorn horseshoe from his pocket and handing it to Petra, "I assume you can return to its rightful place of protection?"

Petra accepted it with a weary nod. "The curators of the Tower of Art will never know it was gone."

Shortly, James felt the pull of the collapsing dream-visit. The walls of the game room darkened. Voices became insubstantial, like noises heard underwater. And then, for a long time, there was only darkness. He returned to his bed via the dark, much more quietly and subtly than he had left.

James spent most of that Saturday midday listlessly haunting the common room, making half-hearted attempts at his Herbology reading assignment and other homework. He had just begun an essay on the seventeen-point mental checklist required before Disapparation (he had only recently begun the class on the subject, but would not be making any actual attempts for several weeks), when Rose came through the portrait hole, followed by Scorpius.

Joining James at a corner table, she demanded explanations of everything that had happened the previous night, and James, in turn, berated her lateness in warning them of Merlin's departure.

"Late nothing!" she hissed at him, leaning close, her eyes stern. "He never left at all! At least, not in any way that the Map showed."

James frowned. "But you sent the Duck warning. One magical battle too late, of course, but you sent it. What do you mean he never left?"

Scorpius unslung his knapsack and pushed it across the table to James. "The Map," he gestured at it. "It's there inside. It shows the headmaster all right, just as expected. We followed his movements

precisely, all night, from right here in the common room. He started out in the entrance hall. Then he went to the library.”

Rose nodded. “And then he went down to the laundry. We wondered about that, but what do we know? Maybe he checks in on the house elves every night. He’s the headmaster.”

“But then he went to the girl’s third floor bathroom,” Scorpius went on, arching an eyebrow. “So we got a bit suspicious.”

Rose counted off on her fingers as she recited, “*Then* he went to the Ravenclaw common room. Then a broom closet. The potions classroom. An empty teacher’s lounge. The kitchens. A supply cupboard.”

“And then he spent some time at the top of the stairs just down the hall,” Scorpius said, tilting his head. “So we poked out to see what he was up to.”

James looked from Scorpius to Rose, baffled. “So? What was he doing?”

“Who knows?” Rose said meaningfully. “All we found was Peeves defacing a statue with a stolen lipstick. Peeves *wearing Merlin’s black ring on his finger!*”

James blinked at his cousin for a moment, trying to absorb the implication of this.

Rose grew impatient. “Merlin gave his beacon stone ring to Peeves for ‘safe keeping!’” she made sarcastic air-quotes with her fingers. “We tried to take it away from him, told him it was a powerful dark relic, but he acted like we had insulted his dear beloved mum! Er, assuming poltergeists *have* mums...” She frowned a little uncertainly.

“So Merlin tricked the Map into thinking *Peeves* was *him*,” James finally understood with a thoughtful nod. “But how did Merlin know to do that last night?”

“He didn’t!” Rose perked up again. “That’s just the thing! Peeves told us Merlin entrusted him with the ring almost *two years* ago!”

James considered this for a moment and didn’t find it particularly surprising. “Well, I did tell him about the Marauder’s



Map. Blokes like Merlin are keen on keeping an eye on everyone else, but not so keen on having any eyes kept on him. But it's not exactly safe to let Peeves run around with the beacon stone, is it?"

Scorpius shrugged dismissively. "It's probably the safest place of all. Merlin's about the only person Peeves is afraid of. Also, the little imp's too stupid and petty to understand the ring's significance, and too fanatically jealous of his 'sworn duty' to let anyone else so much as look twice at it."

Even Rose couldn't argue with this logic.

Later that evening, James found Ralph in the library and attempted to explain Odin-Vann's "detentions", and the events that had followed. Ralph's face was stoic as he listened, his arms folded across his big chest and his eyes glaring pointedly at nothing in particular.

"So, Odin-Vann invites you, Zane, and Rose on some secret, dangerous mission," he finally said, still avoiding James' eyes. "But leaves me out of it completely. And you believe him when he says it has nothing to do with the fact that I don't trust him."

James shrugged a little. "He said Rose and I were enough. And he was right, more or less," he admitted reluctantly. "Zane only came because he was the one that emptied out Apollo Mansion. Other than that, we were just there to protect Petra. Turns out we were about as helpful as a pair of Flobberworms."

"My wand's a part of Merlin's staff, if you remember," Ralph said, raising his chin and finally turning his gaze on James. "If I'd been there, I might have been able to get Merlin's attention with it, at least. Did you think of that?"

James hadn't. Before he could think of any response, however, Ralph went on.

"You lot are keeping Merlin out of this, but I think that's a huge mistake. Everyone else might be mad with paranoia about Petra. Maybe even your dad and the Auror department. But Merlin's better

than that. It's a mistake to keep him out. I think that's why Odin-Vann didn't include me."

James shook his head. "I really don't think so, Ralph," he said, dropping his voice to a whisper. "I trust Merlin just as much as you do. But he's the head of the school, and that makes him part of the machine that wants to catch and stop Petra. He may be Merlinus Ambrosius, but even *he* has to obey the laws of the land now. Just like my dad. And besides," he added, trying not to be stung by Ralph's words. "Odin-Vann *wanted* us to tell you about it. He said it was best to keep you in the loop, just in case Petra needed us again."

This was a slight exaggeration of Odin-Vann's words, James knew, but he thought he could be forgiven for it. Ralph sighed and returned his gaze to the far wall.

"I don't trust him," he muttered. "And more importantly, I don't *like* him. I don't know what it is. But he's wrong for you lot, and he's wrong for Petra."

James leaned forward on the table dejectedly. "It won't matter much longer, it looks like," he murmured glumly. "They'll be returning the crimson thread to the Loom soon. Petra will be gone from our world forever. Odin-Vann may be dodgy and unpredictable, but when that happens, he'll just be a dodgy and unpredictable Charms teacher. Nothing more."

Ralph softened slightly. "So when's that going to happen?"

James shook his head. "Dunno. Zane has to get them into the Archive to do it, though. He'll tell us via the Shard just as soon as Odin-Vann gets everything ready and sets the date."

"Will we see Petra again before it happens?"

James considered this, and then shook his head again, slowly. "She wanted me to tell you she missed seeing you, and Rose, too. I think that was her way of saying goodbye. Probably to all of us."

Ralph nodded sadly. There didn't seem to be anything left to say on the subject.

At another table across the library, Millie Vandergriff sat with a group of other Hufflepuffs, their heads together and whispering animatedly. Her profile was to him, and James considered it as he watched her. She was pretty, he realized. More, he wanted to go to her. He wanted to sit down with her and her friends, to lose himself in their conversation, and forget the sad worries that hung over his head like storm clouds. Millie didn't command his heart like Petra did—he had no illusions about that—but neither did she promise the inevitable heartbreak and regret that his love for Petra demanded.

He wished Millie would look over at him, perhaps wave him over. He would hold her hand under the table if she allowed him. Maybe later, he would walk her to the Hufflepuff common room door, and she would kiss him again.

Or maybe *he* would kiss *her*. And this time, he allowed himself to muse, it would be full on the lips.

She did not look around at him, however. She was too engaged with her friends, covering her laughter with one hand, pushing her blonde hair back behind one ear, completely oblivious of James' pensive, considering gaze.

Soon enough, he got up, gathered his things, said goodnight to Ralph, and left.

Graham was just posting the Quidditch roster on the notice board near the portrait of the Fat Lady, surrounded by a group of curious onlookers, when James approached. He almost asked Graham directly if he'd made the team, but realized he didn't want everyone to hear the response, just in case the answer was no.

He shouldered toward the notice board and scanned the names, his pulse suddenly thudding in his chest. When he reached the bottom of the list, his heart plunged. His name wasn't there.

But then he realized that he had skimmed the list too fast, scanning it almost without reading, searching only for his own name.

It was there after all, but reversed, last name first, so that his eye had initially skipped right over it.

*POTTER, JAMES: SEEKER*

James' heart leapt upwards again, now trip-hammering. He felt such a deep, sudden sense of elation that he swayed on his feet, nearly faint with relief and surprise.

He had been waiting for this moment ever since his first year, and had begun to suspect, deep down, that it would never—*could* never—happen.

Only now did he realize just how much he needed this good news.

“Congratulations, James!” Lilly said, joining him and nearly hopping with excitement. “Mum and Dad will be so proud! Both of us playing for Gryffindor, me as Keeper and you as Seeker! We're *destined* to take home the trophy this year!”

James' face split into a helpless grin. He nodded, then shook his head in wonder, and then nodded again. Lily laughed and pulled him toward the portrait hole.

“Come on!” she enthused. “Let's get the whole team together and start planning formations! *Oh*, this is going to be simply excellent!”

James was still speechless, but he agreed with a nod, allowing his sister's enthusiasm to drag him along, into the warmth and light of the common room, where a round of spontaneous applause greeted him. James' face reddened, but he didn't mind. He saw Deirdre and Graham beaming at him, along with Xenia Prince, Marcus Cobb, Walter Stebbins, and the rest of the Gryffindor team. James had gotten

what he wanted after all: something to distract him from the worries and sadness of the past several hours.

As the team surrounded him, patting him on the back and ruffling his hair, James thought: this might almost, possibly, be better even than kissing Millie Vandergriff again.

But only *almost*.



The school year finally began to settle from the exciting unpredictability of new classes and schedules to the familiar pattern of assignments and homework, busy week-days and too-short weekends. Autumn stole over the grounds like a thief, absconding with the hot afternoons and leaving footprints of mist, even curling frost, on the morning-bright windows. The Forbidden Forest began to replace its seamless green with hues of coppery orange, neon yellow, and glossy maroon. The wind became stiffer across the lake, which shivered into choppy waves, as if applauding the oncoming change of seasons.

For James, as the days turned into weeks, there was no more word from Petra, nor any night-time treks to see her via the invisible, private ribbon that connected them. He didn't sense that she was shutting him out so much as that she, like him, was simply in waiting mode, with little to do while Professor Odin-Vann prepared the recaptured crimson thread for its return to the mystical Loom from which it, as the symbol of Morgan, had been plucked. According to the Professor, there was a good bit of magic that needed to go along with the returned thread in order to reset the Loom and jump-start the Vault of Destinies again.

Or perhaps, James mused disconsolately, the young professor, like James himself, was simply reluctant to see his old friend vanish from the world forever, and was finding reasons to delay her departure. Zane believed this firmly, implying, via the Shard, that Odin-Vann and Petra were much more than friends.

"His eyes go all ablaze whenever he's around her," he insisted one afternoon, half-a-month after the debacle of the World Between the Worlds. "You saw it yourself. When they talk about what he calls her 'final mission', he gets so antsy he looks like he's about to jump right out of his skin. They obviously have a thing."

James, re-tying his tie after mid-day Quidditch practice, shrugged and shook his head at the Shard where it lay propped on his bed in the Gryffindor dormitory. He knew what Zane meant by "a thing", of course, and didn't like it in the least. Not because he didn't think it was true, or even likely—it was far more plausible that Petra would fall for the worldly-wise older man than the younger friend still in school—but because he hated the thought so intensely. He hated the jealousy it provoked in his chest mostly because he loved Petra himself, but also because he liked Professor Odin-Vann. He liked the professor's odd quirks and restrained fervor and his commitment to helping Petra.

Still, if the young man did harbor a romantic affection for Petra, how could James blame him? Maybe, at least, it meant that Petra would enjoy her last days in the world she was born into. If

James' love for her was true, he would want her to be happy, right? Even if that meant finding comfort and love in another man's arms.

The thought made him prickle all over as he knotted his tie violently under his chin, his hair still damp from a cursory shower.

With a yawn, Zane said, "But I still think this whole 'magical catalyst' thing Odin-Vann's on about is complete Doxie doo." It was still morning, Zane's time, and he was lounging in his pajamas—a pair of too-short bottoms printed with bright blue snowflakes beneath an orange tee shirt—seated cross-legged on the rumple of his bed with a steaming mug of coffee balanced on one knee. "I may not like old Professor Stonewall much, but I trust his gigantic noggin. If he says all that's needed is for the thread to be put back into the Loom, then that's the way it is. Snap, bang, and Petra is gone to her new dimension. But I guess there's no harm in being overly prepared, right? Especially if it's just an excuse for the pointy-bearded professor Odin-Vann to have a few more romantic evenings with his doomed love."

James said goodbye to Zane abruptly and stuffed the Shard back into his trunk, not wishing to think any further about Odin-Vann and Petra having "romantic evenings", no matter how doomed.

The truth was, as the days began to tick by like minutes on a clock, James knew that he had to get over his own hopeless affection for Petra. It would only make it harder for both of them to do what needed to be done. And if Petra was indeed romantically involved with Odin-Vann, then perhaps that was all the better.

James, on the other hand, had Millie Vandergriff.

Almost without any official declaration, the two of them had become what Zane referred to as "a thing", and subtly, the dynamic of James' entire school experience had changed.

Millie met him occasionally in the halls and walked to classes or meals with him. Sometimes (though not always) she would reach for his hand and hold it lightly as they walked, talking breezily of this or that, pretending to ignore the electricity of their laced fingers, while other students (usually girls) watched furtively and whispered.

Millie often joined James, alongside Ralph and Rose and sometimes Scorpius, for study sessions and homework in the library. She even came, on rare occasions, to hang out with James in the Gryffindor common room. He returned the gesture once, going to see her in the Hufflepuff quarters, which were low and warm, accessed by a tunnel behind a stack of barrels near the kitchens. James was welcomed by the Hufflepuffs, but didn't feel quite at home there, despite the mellow wooden furniture and the round dormitory doors reminiscent of a hedgehog's warren.

Another thing James discovered, with a mixture of pride and consternation, was that dating Millie meant that she (accompanied usually by a small gaggle of her girlfriends) attended his Quidditch practices. She and her entourage would be seated high in the Hufflepuff grandstands, usually chattering obliviously, except when Millie applauded James for some well-executed maneuver. He was invariably embarrassed on these occasions, and yet the sight of her guileless smile and unabashed cheering warmed his heart, even as the air turned cool and crisp all around.

He liked Millie. He liked the way her eyes sparkled when she saw him in the halls, and her unselfconscious precociousness, and the way she didn't *always* reach for his hand, or sit next to him in class, or accompany him into the Great Hall for dinner. If she had obsessed and fawned over him (the way Chance Jackson had begun to with Albus, although Albus himself seemed not to mind) James would have quickly felt stifled and overwhelmed. Instead, Millie maintained a sense of pleasant, teasing unpredictability and mystery.

Often, instead of joining James at his table in the library, she would breeze past and sit with a group of fellow Hufflepuffs. He would glance up at her throughout the evening, watching her laugh with her friends, or bite the feather of her quill as she read, or practice spell-motions with her wand while studying the diagrams in *The Caster's Lexicon*. But every now and then he would catch her glancing up at him, just as he was her. Usually she would look away, smiling sheepishly. Sometimes, however, her eyes would lock with his, briefly,



sharing a surprisingly intimate moment across the hushed anonymity of the library.

James became aware that Millie's family was what Scorpius referred to as "old magic": exceedingly wealthy, historically pureblood, and aristocratically connected. Millie herself scoffed at any suggestion that her family was influential in any way, or that she took any cache from it if they were.

"I barely represent them at all, much to my mother's chagrin," she told James with a wry smile. "You'll meet the Vandergriff kith and kin soon enough, I hope. You can make up your own judgment about them when you do."

On some occasions James felt bold enough to kiss Millie, usually in the evenings after he walked her to the Hufflepuff common room, where they huddled in the nook formed by the stacks of barrels. He would kiss her until her lips formed a delighted smile and she withdrew, her face as flushed as his, whispering breathless goodnights. He would watch her duck into the hidden entry, and then walk back the way he'd come, hot and tingling beneath his collar, blaming it on the flickering torches that lined the walls around the kitchens.

Sometimes he thought guiltily of Petra. When he did, he would insist to himself that she was probably doing the same thing with Professor Odin-Vann. After all, it wasn't like James and Petra were, or had ever been, "a thing". Petra wouldn't feel jealous of Millie. She would be delighted that James was happy.

He repeated this to himself, while simultaneously hoping that it wasn't remotely true.

Midnight Quidditch started up again, and as much as Graham had warned James not to be involved, he simply couldn't bring himself to stay away. It wasn't merely that it counted, in James' mind, as extra team practice. He also relished, more than anything, the chance to ride his beloved skrim, surfing the dark air in ways that no broom could quite duplicate.

Scorpius informed James of weekly matches via notes passed in Herbology class, which James quickly read and, per arrangement, immediately fed to the giant potted Cobra Lily.

He told no one of the Night Quidditch matches, especially Ralph, who would have felt exquisitely awkward knowing of such things in his new role as Head Boy. And yet, despite informal rules to the contrary, James was by no means the only official house Quidditch player who also appeared in the clandestine matches. His sister Lily had been on the night league even longer than she'd been playing for the Gryffindor team. Both Nolan Beetlebrick and Trenton Bloch appeared on the Slytherin night team. Julien Jackson had begun to play for the Hufflepuffs only after she had snuck out the previous year to chastise Stanley Jasper, the daytime Hufflepuff Seeker, about his extra-curricular involvement, only to become swept up irresistibly in the night league herself.

As usual, the teams compensated for their nights of lost sleep via a special potion brewed by Scorpius and Ashley Doone from a questionably legal plant called Somnambulis. Officially, Professor Longbottom had ceased growing the plant three years earlier. Unofficially, Scorpius was still able to "steal" a fresh supply every three weeks from a cluttered back corner of the greenhouse.

Professor Longbottom himself still attended some night league matches, albeit anonymously, dressed in a deep hooded robe and rarely speaking. Nor was he the only secret observer. On any given night, the grandstands were peppered with as many as two dozen robed and disguised figures, most seated well away from each other, all slipping away wordlessly as the matches concluded. James was quietly certain that one of the observers was, in fact, Professor McGonagall, as evidenced by her familiar purposeful walk and rigid posture.

Unlike daytime matches, which were wild and deafening affairs, the night league was characterized by feverishly hushed matches, punctuated only by harsh whispers, the whoosh of the gently glowing Bludgers, and the occasional bone-rattling crunch and yelp as one of the balls struck its mark. The loudest moments were when rasped

arguments broke out over the always nebulous and changing league rules, or when goals were made, whereupon hoarse cheers and jeers would waft over the pitch, accompanied by the dull thumping of gloved hands, applauding by moon glow.

At the end of the third match of the season, as Scorpius was summoning the blue-glowing Bludgers and forcing them into the old trunk, James approached with his skim clutched under one arm, dripping sweat, his shoes soaked with pre-dawn dew.

“There’s one thing the Night League is still missing,” he said, half whispering in the misty dark. “Something to really set it apart from the daytime matches.”

“Playing in the pitch dark of the wee hours on one of those daft flying ironing boards isn’t enough for you, is it?”

“Game magic,” James nodded, ignoring Scorpius’ grumpy mood. The Gryffindors had just lost to Hufflepuff, after all, although James himself wasn’t particularly upset about it. The daylight teams were set to compete later that week, and James was confident of a solid win for *that* match-up.

“Game magic?” Scorpius scowled, his face lit blue by the glow of the struggling Bludgers. “That’s from that ridiculous American game. Cudgelclutch. We don’t do that.”

“We *don’t*, but we *should*,” James insisted. “All we’re doing now is playing Quidditch in the dark.”

“With skrim optional,” Lily suggested, coming alongside James and mopping her brow with her sleeve.

“And snitches only worth twenty points,” Julien Jackson piped up smugly. “Sorry James. A good catch isn’t enough to seal a victory when the moon’s up.”

James nodded, unperturbed. “Night league’s different enough, but it could be better still, while also keeping us sharp with our wands. Game magic brings a whole new level of play. Imagine using a gravity well charm to redirect a Bludger away from your head. Or a Bonefuse hex to make your opponent drop the Quaffle!”

“Gravity wells? Bonefuse hexes?” Lily frowned. “Those aren’t in the Caster’s Lexicon.”

Coming alongside his team captain, Stanley Jasper nodded, warming to the idea. “Yeah, I’ve heard of that! Spells invented only for sporting matches! I’ve used magic during scratch games back home, playing against my older brothers, although it was never legal or anything. Just a way to keep things interesting.”

“You’re just looking for an unfair advantage,” Julien suggested, narrowing her eyes at James. “You’re already good at those spells. We’d all still have to learn them.”

James shrugged, switching his skim to his other arm. “Game magic isn’t hard to learn. Most of it’s just variations on traditional dueling spells. But if you don’t feel like you’d be up to facing off against me…” He blinked up at the dark sky mournfully.

Julien frowned. “You’ll have to try harder than that to bait me, Potter,” she said, poking him in the stomach with her broom handle. “But if you want game magic, we’re more than a match for you. You get us a Clutchcudgel rulebook with approved spells and watch what happens. You want gravity wells? We’ll give you gravity wells deep enough to suck the paint off your skim.”

James grinned. “*Now* you’re talking!” He realized as he said it that Zane Walker seemed to have rubbed off on him over the years, at least a little.

The only class James had any serious difficulty with—apart from his usual lackadaisical attitude towards studying and essay deadlines—was Apparition. Despite its only being a twelve-week optional course offered by the Ministry of Magic for qualifying seventh years, he’d become so bored with the class that he wished he’d never asked his parents for the nine Galleon laboratory fee to sign up. This was because the first ten weeks of the course, much to his disappointment, were devoted to an intensive study of Apparition technomancy, its myriad dangers, and the seemingly endless legal ramifications of improper use. The instructor, a Mr. Wilkie Twycross, was a very old man with white hair as fine as dandelion fluff and glasses

so huge and thick that James feared an errant sunbeam might cause the man's eyebrows to burst into flame. He insisted, in his high, tremulous voice, that Apparition was "a binary process, allowing no luxury of a learning curve. You will either do it perfectly and properly, or you will fail abominably. There is no in-between. Apart, of course, from the very real possibility that you may Reapparate in-between two floors, or much worse."

He eyed James as he said this, his pale blue pupils magnified to the size of eggs behind his bulbous eye-glasses. James pretended to take notes. On the top of his parchment were the words *Destination*, *Determination*, and *Deliberation*. He had foregone any further note-taking, choosing instead to studiously apply more and more emphasis to Twycross' initial "three Ds", adding multiple underlines, quotation marks, circles, and arrows. As Twycross droned on, beginning again his prescribed pre-Dissaparation checklist, James sighed and lay down his quill.

He knew he'd be excellent at Apparition when the time came. He longed to try it for the first time, even considered attempting it on his own, outside of class. He sat up again at the idea, telling himself he could recruit Millie and Ralph to do it with him. Ralph was less eager to attempt Apparition himself, but he would probably be glad of the chance to practice it first without an audience.

He picked up his quill again and, underneath the Three Ds, wrote: *Who's ready to bunk all this and just try it?*

Keeping his eyes on Twycross, he nudged Ralph on his right and slid the parchment toward him. Ralph read the note and shrugged a little uncertainly. James repeated the gesture on his left, for Millie's benefit. He half expected her to give him one of her eager, precocious smiles, but she merely blinked at him in awed surprise, and then scribbled a note beneath his.

*Apparition scares the hair off me! I would pay NOT to do it!*

James was mildly surprised, but didn't press it. He supposed it was possible to be frightened of Apparation, especially in light of Twycross' hectoring warnings. But James knew it was mostly quite

safe, if you understood what you were doing. He'd side-along Apparated with his mum and dad on many occasions, and they'd never been splinched, skunched, contrasected, unverted, or any of the other dire things Twycross warned about. They'd never left behind even a single fingernail or had so much as a sock turned inside-out.

At dinner, James suggested to Rose that the three of them sneak back to the classroom that evening to give it a try.

"Fine," Rose agreed, "But don't tell Scorpius. For once, I want to know how to do something before he does."

"You know how to do everything before everybody," James blinked at her, but Rose shook her head, glaring down the table toward her *on-again, off-again* boyfriend, with whom she was apparently back off-again.

"His parents hire tutors for him every summer to 'prepare him for the rigours of the next scholastic term'." This time she implied the quotes with a snarky tone, but James heard hurt more than nastiness in her voice. "But I doubt even *he's* been allowed to practice Disapparation before he's of legal age."

Regardless of Rose's reasons, James was glad of her accompaniment.

Seated a little further down the table from Scorpius was Albus, once again joining the Gryffindors to accompany Chance Jackson, whose crush on Albus was finally, apparently, being reciprocated. He allowed her to feed him strawberry slices with her fingers while he regaled her friends with some story or other. As James watched, the group dissolved into laughter and Chance threw an arm around Albus, leaning her head onto his shoulder.

"Ugh," James shook his head, turning away.

"Now you know how the rest of us feel whenever you bring Millie Vandergriff over for a snog," Graham commented.

"We study, that's all!" James insisted, surprised. He'd been very careful not to let anyone see him kissing Millie.

Deirdre rolled her eyes. “You two are snogging even when your noses are buried in books. It’d be adorable if it was a bit less painfully obvious.”

James’ face heated and he knew he was blushing fiercely. The truly embarrassing part was, deep down, he knew he wasn’t as infatuated with Millie as everyone thought he was, probably even her.

As he gathered his things and left the Great Hall, he realized that he felt, more than anything, like a total clod. After all, despite the heady thrills of kissing Millie and the tremulous mystery of dating her, he knew he was mostly using her as a sort of human shield, a distraction from the hopeless, doomed love that he felt for Petra.

He determined it couldn’t go on. It wasn’t fair to her.

But he also didn’t want to break her heart. Not yet, at least.

The holidays were coming soon. Maybe he could do it then, while they were apart for a while.

He felt slightly better having decided this, and relegated the worries to a back corner of his mind until the time came for him to act on this new plan.

That evening, he and Rose met Ralph outside the Apparition classroom.

“What do you keep looking for?” James asked, noticing Rose’s backwards glance for the third time as they gathered around the classroom door.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “I keep thinking someone is following us.”

“Who cares? We’ve got the Head Boy with us. We *can’t* be up to mischief.” James reached for the door handle and gave it a tug. The door rattled but didn’t budge. “Oh. Well. Unlocking a classroom door isn’t mischief, exactly. Especially the way Rose does it.”

Rose hid a look of pride as she fingered her wand. “I might have left my notes in there, after all. Or we might have heard a suspicious noise. We’re just doing our duty, checking it out.”

A suspicious noise suddenly echoed from the depths of the hall behind them—a scrape and a thump, as if someone around a corner

had dropped a book. Ralph jumped, and then ran a hand over his face in nervous annoyance.

“Stop winding me up,” he nudged James with his elbow. “If we’re going to do this, let’s get it over with. There’s no rule against practicing stuff we’re learning. And this classroom is usually unlocked.”

James had an idea that the classroom was locked right now because it was temporarily exempt from the anti-Disapparation spell that blanketed the school, but chose not to remind Ralph of that fact.

Rose spoke the unlocking spell and her wand burst a spark of golden light. The bolt clicked and the door budged open. James gave it a push and the well-oiled hinges swung silently, revealing the darkened classroom. The three crept inside.

By moonlight, the empty half of the room looked like a haunted dance floor, decorated strangely with pale hoops, three ranged beneath the windows, matched with three more beneath the chalkboard. The class tables and chairs were pushed close together in the rear of the room, overlooking the as-yet unused practice area.

“Well?” James asked, glancing aside at Rose and Ralph with an unexpected stab of trepidation. “Who’s first?”

“This was your idea, cousin,” Rose said, prodding him forward. “You have the honours.”

James nodded and swallowed hard. But then, suddenly, Ralph moved past him, stepping carefully inside one of the hoops.

“I’m Head Boy,” he gulped. “It’s, like, my duty to go first. To make sure it’s safe and all. Also,” he admitted, offering James a sheepish grimace, “if I don’t get this over with now, my nerve will go right out the window.”

James blinked at his friend, both impressed and suddenly worried. What if something *did* go horribly wrong? What if Ralph got splinched, or skunched, or contrasected? James realized he didn’t even know what contrasecting was. He cursed himself for not paying more attention in class.



“Rose,” he muttered out of the corner of his mouth, “what’s contrasecting?”

Rose glanced aside at him and frowned. “Why do you ask?”

James raised a cautionary hand to Ralph, opened his mouth to offer a warning, but at that moment the big boy squeezed his eyes tight shut, fisted his hand on his wand, and gulped a breath. The over-sized wand in Ralph’s hand sizzled suddenly with pinkish light, and then vanished, along with the boy himself, leaving only a bang of rushing air. An agonizingly long moment later, the pink light of Ralph’s wand illuminated the opposite side of the classroom and Ralph reappeared with a pop. He thumped to the floor and his knees buckled slightly.

“Brilliant, Ralph!” Rose said, moving to examine him, her eyes sharp. “You look fine. No visible splinching. And only a little residual magic,” she commented, glancing back over her shoulder. James saw it as well: a faint trail of pink light was still settling to the classroom floor, drawing a line from where Ralph had begun to where he now stood, breathing hard, his eyes wide and startled.

“Why did it do that?” Ralph panted, frowning worriedly at the settling pink glow.

“Magical exhaust,” Rose nodded, as if she’d expected this. “It’s all in Twycross’ book. First timers rely too much on the magic of their wands, rather than their own intrinsic power. They propel themselves a little, like disappearance is a spell to cast, not an ability to hone. It’s perfectly normal. You’ll learn to let go of the wand as you practice. Think of it as magical training wheels.”

“Wow,” Ralph breathed, and then gave a nervous laugh. “Look at me. I did it!”

James clapped his friend on the back, happy that his own momentary worry had gone unspoken. “I knew you were up to it, Ralph,” he lied. “Just wait until we tell Zane you nailed your first Disapparation! He’ll hate that he wasn’t here to see it!”

Rose shrugged. “Ralph could just Apparate to Alma Aleron and tell him himself.”

“No way,” Ralph raised both hands and took a step backwards. “Let’s not get crazy. A step across a classroom is way different than a trip across the ocean.”

Rose rolled her eyes impatiently, “Actually, no, it isn’t. Neither of you pay the slightest attention in class, do you?”

“Your turn, James,” Ralph gave him a friendly push toward the rings beneath the windows. “If I can do it, it’ll be a cinch for you.”

James nodded and approached the windows, placing his feet carefully inside one of the white rings. He gripped his own wand in his right hand, happy to use whatever “training wheels” were available to him for his first solo apparition. He turned around to face the opposite side of the room, and blinked in startled surprise.

Behind Rose and Ralph, three figures stood huddled in the partially open classroom door. Despite their silhouetted shadows, James could still make out their nasty grins and beady eyes.

“What do *you*, want?” he asked, masking his surprise with anger.

Rose and Ralph spun on the spot to see the three younger students peering around the door frame. Edgar Edgecombe was in the middle, flanked as usual by his mates, Quincy Ogden and Polly Heathrow. Ogden’s greasy black hair hid one eye as he glared at them, while Heathrow, the tallest of the three, narrowed her eyes with unmistakable glee.

“Get out of here, all of you,” Rose said, jamming her fists onto her hips. “This is a closed practice. You won’t even be in this class for six more years.”

“*You’re* not in this class,” Polly Heathrow said, raising her pointed chin at Rose. “And practicing Apparition is against the rules. Surprised I need to remind *you* of that, *Granger*.”

“The name’s Weasley,” Rose said, rising to her full height. “Granger is my mother, and I’m not her. Too bad for you, because she’d never even *think* of doing the things that *I’m* considering.” She took a step forward, brandishing her wand meaningfully.

“That great lunk-head behind you is the Weasley of the threesome,” Polly wrinkled her nose and pointed at Ralph. “The incompetent clod who’s only along for comic relief. ‘Head Boy’ my grandma’s knee-length knickers!”

“The Golden Trio, reborn!” Ogden sneered. “Potter, *‘the chosen one’*; Weasley, the bumbling *prat*; and Granger, the insufferable *know-it-all*. Think they can do whatever they want. Even curse a bunch of precious first-years.”

James raised his own wand now and took three brisk steps toward the door, opening his mouth, not even sure which hex or jinx was going to come out, hoping distantly that it wouldn’t be something *too* awful.

“I’ll tell you what, *Potter* and *Granger*,” Edgar Edgecombe interrupted James, still smiling nastily. “You pocket your wands and do a little Disapparation demonstration for us, and we won’t run off to the library to tattle on you for breaking into the classroom and performing illegal magic. Professor Heretofore’s on duty, and she’s in a detention sort of mood, I’d wager. Your call.”

James still had his wand out, pointed at Edgecombe. He bit back the spell that had been forming on his lips (the *Dancing Feet* jinx--he’d been a bit too careful, perhaps) and glanced aside at Rose. She was still glaring at the three, her wand raised but tilted slightly up at the ceiling. Suddenly she shrugged and dropped her hand to her side.

“Fine,” she said breezily. “I think you were up, James.” She turned to look at him, her face carefully composed to display no emotion at all. James knew his cousin, however, and recognized that this was her most dangerous expression of all.

He nodded slowly. “Right. Fair enough, I guess.” He glanced back at the three in the doorway. “But look, I don’t know what you lot are on about, but you’re completely mental. We’re not anyone’s ‘Golden Trio’.”

“Yeah,” Ralph nodded. “And besides, if you count Zane, we’d be more of a... what you think? A silver rhombus?”

Rose shrugged. “A trapezoid, I imagine. And let’s go with platinum.”

James blinked rapidly at Rose and Ralph. Ralph was simply nervous and blabbering, mostly worried about getting caught. But Rose was fuming with fury. It came off of her in palpable waves, despite her carefully blank face.

Lowering his wand, James turned and retraced his steps back to the white rings under the windows, stepping into the one in the middle. He turned around and tried to ignore the grinning glares of the three younger students in the doorway. It was impossible, of course. He could feel their eyes like hot little beetles, crawling all over him. He focused instead on Ralph and Rose, who stood in the shadows next to the chalkboard, near the matching three rings. Ralph offered him an encouraging nod, but his face was taut with worry. Rose’s mouth was pressed into a tight line now that she’d turned away from Edgcombe and his crew. Her eyes sparked like flints, although James couldn’t guess what she was planning.

He closed his eyes, fisted his fingers on his lowered wand, and realized with a cold shock that he had absolutely no idea what he was doing. All the confidence and assurance had leaked right out of him.

*Destination*, he recited to himself, *Determination*... and...? He couldn’t remember the third one.

Eyes still squeezed shut, he conjured a mental image of the classroom. He imagined the desks and chairs pushed together in neat rows on one side, overlooking the practice floor. There, he pictured three rings beneath the rank of windows, with him standing in the middle. Across the dim floor, three more rings lay in a neat row, powdered with chalk dust from the board above. James chose the middle ring, and concentrated on it, willing himself to go to it.

Something flexed deep in his mind. It didn’t happen instantaneously, as he’d imagined it would. Instead, the world seemed to slow down all around, to grow insubstantial, to shrink away, taking all sound and sensation with it. Silence like the first snowfall pressed against his ears. James remembered enough technomancy to

understand that he was entering a sort of flux-state now, becoming momentarily incorporeal, unfocusing from the here-and-now and refocusing on the there-and-then.

But then something startled him. There was an explosion of light and sound, illuminating the emptiness behind his eyelids and buffeting him with waves of force. He retreated from the noise and light, and his concentration faltered. His mental image of the classroom cracked, shattered, and he sensed his disincorporated form falling back into himself. It happened too soon. He felt the wrongness of it even before his feet stumbled to the floor again, disconcertingly far apart.

He came back to himself with a shock and a gasp.

*TWO gasps.*

He tried to open his eyes, and realized that he was seeing double. Or rather, he was seeing the classroom from two entirely different perspectives, each perfectly overlaid over the other, obliterating each other into nonsense. He swayed and clapped a hand to his heads.

Somewhere nearby, Ralph yelped and stumbled backwards, slamming his shoulder against the chalkboard, which rattled and rained bits of chalk to the floor. Rose gasped in shock.

From the doorway, Edgecombe's voice was thin with mingled awe and laughter. "Look at that! Will you *look* at THAT!"

"James!" Rose said, moving urgently into the middle of the room, between the rings, and looking back and forth swiftly. "Are you... all right?"

"What happened?" James asked, and heard his voice twice, echoing from both sides of the room. Dimly, he saw himself. It was like looking in a funhouse mirror, one that both distorted your shape into something inhuman and doubled the view. In one view, he saw his own head and shoulders, one arm, one leg, standing before the chalkboard, wobbling slightly. In the other view, perfectly overlaid atop it, he saw an exact duplicate of himself still standing one-legged in the ring beneath the windows.

There were two of him, but only almost. He was stuck in mid-aparation, half-duplicated, with neither part completely whole.

*"Holy hinkyunks!"* the two Jameses cried thinly, staring at each other across the dark and dusty floor. "I'm still over there!" The two versions of himself pointed at each other with their single arm each, one an empty left hand, the other a right hand still fisted on his wand.

"Well," Rose said with a helpless shrug. "At least now you know what contrasecting is."

There was a hiss of hysterical laughter, followed by a thumping of footsteps as Edgcombe, Heathrow, and Ogden scrambled and ran from the door. Their laughter turned to mean hoots, echoing back from the corridor as they hurried away, surely eager to tell everyone what they'd seen.

"Stop them!" James said twice, but Rose was already striding to the door, her wand snapping up in her hand. She leaned economically around the door frame and fired three red bolts in quick succession. The hooting laughter choked to silence, followed by three messy thumps.

"Oh, this is bad," Ralph said, his voice an octave higher than normal. He wrung his hands fretfully, glancing from Rose's raised wand to James' doubled form. "This is so bad! We're doomed! We're seriously, completely, totally--!"

"Ralph, get a grip," Rose said firmly, pocketing her wand again. "Go drag those three into a closet or something. Get them out of the corridor until they wake up again. I'll..." She glanced back and forth between the two partial Jameses. He saw her glance at him twice from his two different perspectives. "I'll go get help."

"Not Twycross," James said with his oddly doubled voice, struggling to keep his two forms standing on one foot each. "Odin-Vann."

Rose nodded, understanding. Briskly, she turned and bolted through the door, her robes flying.

"Oh, man," Ralph muttered again, his voice still unnaturally high. "Are you, like, OK, James?"

James rolled his eyes and felt a wave of dizziness at the doubled effect. “Never better. I love this. I can comb my hair without a mirror. Mum would be so proud. Go move those three twits before somebody sees them.”

Ralph nodded briskly, as if suddenly remembering the stunned first-years in the corridor outside. He turned jerkily, his heels scraping in chalk dust, and hurried through the door, apparently relieved to flee from the disconcerting sight.

James steadied himself. It was easier to stand on one foot each than he expected, and he realized it was because both versions of himself were still somehow connected through empty space. His consciousness was split between them, stretched across the centre of the room like a rubber band. And some small sliver of his mind, he realized, was still floating in the disincorporated ether of the flux. There, the view was not doubled, merely blank. Except not completely blank, now that he focused on it. He could see the faint glimmer of his and Petra’s silver/crimson cord. It stretched off in floating curls, fading into distance. He could probably follow the cord if he wished, leaving behind the alarming split of his form. But he knew instinctively that that would be disastrous. If he fled from his doubled body, he might never be able to come back to it again.

He sighed harshly, fear and annoyance settling in his mind in equal measures. He tried to focus on the classroom again, looking from his strangely doubled perspective, and saw something lying in the centre of the practice floor between the lines of white rings. Bright blue shreds of wrapper surrounded a tiny scorched starburst. James shook his heads, realizing at once what it was. Edgecombe had thrown a Weasley Wizard Wheezes firecracker into the room just as James had attempted his Disapparation. The seemingly planet-sized explosion he had encountered in the flux was barely a crack of noise and puff of sparks from a harmless novelty.

Harmless under any other circumstance, of course.

Ralph came back a moment later, huffing, with figures clutched under both of his arms. Ogden and Heathrow lolled like life-sized ragdolls as Ralph flung them onto a desk each.

“Not in here, Ralph,” the Jameses sighed. “I don’t want to look at their stupid faces. Especially twice at once.”

“We have to keep an eye on them,” Ralph shook his head, hurrying back to the door. “Odin-Vann will know what to do, right? He’s a teacher.”

“And you’re Head Boy,” James reminded him. “Use your, what do you call it, executive authority. Forbid them from talking about it. Give them punishments. Promise to take away a hundred house points if they blab.”

“It doesn’t work that way!” Ralph said with sudden strength, turning to glance first at one James, and then the other. He shook his head with harried annoyance. “Just shut it for a minute. The two of you are giving me a headache.”

He disappeared through the door again. When he came back into view a moment later with Edgcombe’s chunky body heaved over his shoulder, he paused, looking along the corridor. He backed up a step as Professor Odin-Vann approached the door with Rose close behind.

“You,” the professor said, frowning uncertainly and pointing at the stunned boy slung over Ralph’s shoulder like a lumpy bag of sand. “You didn’t...?” He glanced back at Rose for a moment, and then shook his head. “Never mind. First things first.”

He ushered Ralph into the room ahead of him, and then entered himself, stopping in the doorway and gripping the frame with both hands, as if for support.

“*Son of a banshee,*” he swore under his breath, his eyes wide, flicking back and forth between James’ doubled forms.

“We were practicing Disapparation,” the Jameses said.

“Failing spectacularly at it, more like,” Odin-Vann said, and gave a low whistle. “I’ve never *seen* a contrasection this complete. Do you... still think with a complete brain?”



“I don’t think he’s *ever* thought with a complete brain,” Rose sighed, approaching the Jameses with a shake of her head. She looked back and forth between them. “What can you do, Professor?”

Odin-Vann stood next to her, a studious frown creasing his face. “Normally this would take a team of healers from the misapplied magic wing of St. Mungos,” he admitted thoughtfully. “But I see you have your wand with you, James. Did you, perhaps, use it to assist your Disapparation?”

“Rose said it was like training wheels!” James exclaimed defensively, his twinned voice louder than expected. “Ralph did it and only left a trail of pink exhaust across the room. I thought it was harmless!”

“It *is* harmless,” Odin-Vann nodded, his own voice almost eerily calm. “But if you used your wand to fuel your Apparation, I may know a way to undo it.”

The young professor glanced from James to James. James made eye contact with both glances.

“Which one’s the original?” Odin-Vann asked, and then turned to the James still standing in front of the windows. “That one,” he said, pointing. “Your wand made it across the room, to James number two. That’s good.”

As the Jameses watched, Odin-Vann raised his own wand and pointed it at the James standing in front of the chalkboard, his wand fisted in his single hand. Odin-Vann paused for a moment as a look of doubt crossed his face, and then he cleared his eyes. When he spoke, the word sounded more like a command than a spell.

*“Piori invortu!”*

A bolt of white lightning connected Odin-Vann’s wand to James’, snaking and arcing for several long seconds. James felt the wand vibrating in his hand, but held on tight, unsure if the spell would work if he dropped it. The vibration built to a thrum that nearly numbed his fingers. Then, with a sound like a whip-crack, the second James flipped back through itself and merged back into the first, who

stumbled backwards three steps, struck the window hard enough to rattle the panes, and collapsed to the floor in a clumsy heap.

Rose rushed to James's side and grabbed his face in her hands, turning his head this way and that.

"Get off," he moaned impatiently. "I'm fine. Lemme be."

Rose ignored his protests and continued to inspect him. Behind her, Odin-Vann turned his attention from the re-incorporated figure of James to the wand in his hand. He studied it with apparent satisfaction.

"Do your eyebrows always look like that?" Rose said, squeezing James' cheeks between her palms and forcing his head up toward the moonlight. "All scrunched together and unruly in the middle?"

"I'm fine!" James insisted, finally batting her hands away. "Geroff me!" He began to struggle uncertainly to his feet, but his knees felt like rubber and his head suddenly spun with dizziness. He dropped back to the floor.

"It was their fault," Ralph said, moving alongside Odin-Vann and pointing at the three younger students, who were just beginning to stir. "Edgecombe threw a firecracker at James just as he was beginning his Disapparation!"

Edgecombe moaned loudly, rolled, and fell off the desk where Ralph had tossed him. He hit the floor with a muffled thump and his moan turned into an affronted grunt. Polly Heathrow sat up blearily, her pigtails flopping. Quincy Ogden gave a sudden, snorting snore.

"So you stunned them?" Odin-Vann said, still calm, glancing from Ralph to Rose.

"Only when they started to run away," she answered shrilly. "Believe me, they had it coming. And loads more!"

Edgecombe spoke up then, his voice mushy. "They were practicing illegal magic, Professor. They broke into the classroom!"

"Yeah," Heathrow added, cupping a hand gingerly to her forehead. "And then they cursed us! They cursed us just because we saw them!"

“They *cursed* you,” Odin-Vann said, his voice as calm and pedantic as if he’d been standing in his own classroom in broad daylight, “because you startled them with a contraband incendiary device. You attacked *them*. They responded on instinct. You might consider yourselves fortunate that they merely stunned you.”

“But...!” Edgcombe spluttered, his eyes bulging as he glared at James, then Ralph and Rose. “But they were performing illegal magic!”

“Mr. Deedle and Mr. Potter were practicing a prescribed class exercise. This is the only classroom they can do it in. I gave them permission to unlock the door. You, however, were skulking around the halls looking to cause trouble. Do you perhaps have any more Weasley Wizard Wheezes contraband merchandise in your pockets?”

Edgcombe’s face clamped shut tight, clearly understanding that the odds had turned against him. Polly Heathrow slid her feet to the floor and gave Ogden a sharp jab with her elbow. He groaned and stirred.

“We were only having a little fun,” she said sulkily, throwing James a black glare.

“Ah,” Odin-Vann nodded sadly, “the myriad gleeful horrors that have been committed in the name of ‘a little fun’. I suggest you three go directly back to your dormitory before I determine to investigate the matter any further. And if I so much as *sniff* that you’ve mentioned a word of James’ misfortune to anyone-- a misfortune I would be careful to point out was entirely your fault-- I shall see that you receive every ounce of the consequences that you are due. Am I quite clear?”

Edgcombe got to his feet, his cheeks burning red and his eyes sullen. He deigned not to reply, but the angry submission in his eyes was answer enough. Head down, he stalked out of the room, followed closely by Polly Heathrow. Quincy Ogden, still swaying on his feet, bumped the doorframe with his shoulder as he ambled along after.

Odin-Vann hunkered down in front of James, pocketing his wand. “Feeling a bit more put together, are you?”

“A bit,” James admitted. “Thanks for handling those three for us.”

“Hush,” Odin-Vann said, glancing back toward the door. “Nary a word. They had it coming, meddling in a first-time Disapparation. Things might have turned out much worse. Don’t let it rattle you.”

“What was that spell you used, Professor?” Rose asked, sighing and plopping to the floor next to James. “I’ve never heard of a *Priori Invertu* incantation.”

Odin-Vann glanced at her, then down at his own wand again. “It’s a... proprietary spell of my own devising,” he answered vaguely. “It simply reads another wand’s most recent spell and automatically performs a counter-spell, if one exists.”

Ralph leaned against the nearby desks and frowned. “So since first-time Apparators usually use their wands to help make the magic happen, your wand was able to undo James’ attempt using a... what?”

Odin-Vann shrugged and pushed his wand into a pocket of his robes. “Couldn’t tell you, precisely. Not because I don’t know, but because the process is purely automatic. I’ve been programming counter-spells and anti-jinxes into my wand for months now, but tonight, I admit, was my first chance to really test it out. If I had to guess, I’d say it probably used a modified lanyard charm to retrieve James’ doubled form and undo his interrupted Apparation.” He seemed both quietly proud of this, and carefully evasive, as if he deeply wanted to talk more about it, but felt the need to protect his methods. Perhaps he didn’t want to reveal too much until the process was perfected.

“I’m just glad it worked,” James said, giving his head a firm shake, as if to clear his mind.

“One of you should probably follow our new friends,” Odin-Vann said, glancing aside at Rose and Ralph. “Just to assure that they abide by my command and return directly to their dormitory. An evening with their thoughts should suffice in convincing them to keep

their mouths shut, but if they should meet anyone in the halls tonight, their anger may still get the better of them.”

Ralph nodded, pushing away from the desk. “I’ll do it. They have to listen to me, at least.” He tapped the badge on his chest and shrugged. “See you lot tomorrow. And let’s *not* do this again sometime.”

As Ralph left, James thought he could sense just the slightest spring in the big boy’s step. Now that the disaster of James’ botched Apparation was over and the trio of little prats had been put in their place, Ralph could at least enjoy the fact that *he* had succeeded at his own first Apparition, unlike James.

“You’ll be fine at it, next time,” Odin-Vann said, as if reading James’ thoughts. He seated himself on the floor and held up a hand. “Don’t try to get up just yet. Your body needs a few minutes to get reacquainted with itself. Tell me, James,” he peered at him with a slightly cocked head. “What was it like?”

“What, you mean being nearly split into two copies?” James asked, a wave of embarrassment washing over him again. “It felt like being a massive failure, that’s what. But it also felt...” He paused and narrowed his eyes, “a little like being strung out between two cliffs, with nothing but empty space between them. Part of me was stuck there, floating in the nothing. I could feel it, and see into it a little.”

Odin-Vann was nodding. “The *Transitus Nihilo*. The void outside of matter. Intriguing.”

“But it wasn’t a *complete* void,” James sighed and slumped. “I could see the cord that connects me to Petra. It crosses the border of Apparation with me. I could see it trailing off into the darkness.”

“Your connection,” Odin-Vann said thoughtfully. “The means by which you travel to her when you’re asleep.”

“Whenever she lets me,” James agreed, slumping back against the wall beneath the window.

Odin-Vann relaxed as well and went on in a different tone of voice. “You know, I’ve been curious about that connection of yours,

James. We have a few minutes whilst you collect yourself. I wonder if you'd mind telling me about it?"

Rose interjected suddenly, a bit too loudly. "Oh, James has been besotted with Petra ever since his first years at Hogwarts. He's just a magical romantic and a poet. Not a very good poet, of course, but he's a Potter, so what can you expect?"

"No, Rose," James said, glancing back and forth between his cousin and the professor. "Look, if we're going to trust each other enough to steal back the crimson thread together and try to send Petra to be Morgan in some other dimension, then we have to be willing to trust each other with everything." He focused on Odin-Vann again, who seemed merely to be patiently waiting. "It happened right before my third year, when we were on our way across the ocean to America and Alma Aleron..."

As briefly as he could, James recounted the story of how Petra had climbed to the stern of the Gwyndemere just as a freakish storm descended on the ship, threatening to capsize it amidst mountainous waves. He described how Petra had been in a sort of confused funk, facing the storm almost as if she meant to let it take her. Thus, when lightning struck the ship, cleaving a mast and knocking her overboard so that she dangled perilously from the rigging, she had considered letting the broken mast drag her down into the depths. James had rushed to grasp her hand, but she had resisted, asking him to let her fall.

"But I couldn't," he said, losing himself in the retelling, staring down at the dark classroom floor, "I couldn't let her die, no matter what she said. There was nothing I could do, though. She started to slip from my outstretched hand, and I realized she was letting go. She was loosening her grip, ready to drop into the waves below the ship and sink. She fell, and it felt like my own heart was falling away with her. And that's when it happened."

"The cord appeared," Odin-Vann half-whispered.

“It caught Petra, connected my right hand to hers, glowing like an acromantula web in the dark, vibrating like a harp string. It caught her and I was able to pull her back up.”

Rose seemed to have accepted the fact that James was going to share the entire story with Odin-Vann. She herself was now caught up in the retelling. “Lucy wrote me about that night when she was in the States. She was always a great one for writing letters. I remember it almost word for word. They were all below decks, in the Captain’s quarters, watching from the stern windows: Lucy, Merlin, Izzy, Uncle Harry and Aunt Ginny, everyone. They saw Petra fall from the back of the ship and dangle in the rigging. But then Merlin clouded the windows so they couldn’t see what happened next. Uncle Harry was unhappy about it. He said they should do something, but Merlin said no. Lucy quoted him exactly. He said something like...” She squinted and thought for a moment. “He said that the storm would claim its own, but the rest of them had nothing to fear. And in the end, it turned out that he was right. James saved Petra by borrowing from her own powers.” She glanced up at Odin-Vann, suddenly unsure if she’d said too much, but he only nodded.

“I know of Petra’s strange and seemingly unlimited powers, as I’ve already said. She hasn’t told me as much as I wish to know about them—I don’t suppose she ever could—but I do have some idea of what she is capable of.” He shook his head thoughtfully and turned his attention back to James, his eyes sharpening. “Petra was willing to die, you say? To fall to her death from the back of the ship? But why, do you think?”

“She was confused,” James shook his head, probing his memory. “She’d just lost her grandfather and was under suspicion in the disappearance of her stepmother. She was homeless and lost and being chased by a... a...” He stopped himself from mentioning Judith, the Lady of the Lake, who had been conjured by the death of Petra’s stepmother through a sort of poisoned bargain. Trusting Odin-Vann was one thing, but James didn’t wish to complicate the matter any further—or implicate Petra any more deeply. He went on a little

lame, “Well, she was being chased by her own guilt, in a way.” Another memory struck him and he sat up. “But she had the brooch. It was sort of an opal thing with silver scrolly stuff all around it. She’d said it was a gift from her father. It must have come in the box of things that the Ministry sent her after he died in Azkaban. She was wearing the brooch on the night of the storm. When she fell off, it dropped into the waves, and she screamed. It seemed to represent a lot to her—the family she’d lost. The life she never had. I think that’s what finally broke her, losing that one thing that connected her to her dead parents.”

Odin-Vann wasn’t looking at James now. His gaze had drifted to the black window behind James’ head, at which he nodded slowly, thoughtfully. There was a strange glint in his eye. “But *you* were there,” he mused, half to himself. “And you saved her. You saved her from herself.”

James sank back against the wall again. “I guess so. I spoke to my dad afterward. He said that it was more than Petra’s magic that connected us and kept her from falling. He said that it was like when he was a baby and his mum was willing to die for him. Her death called on an older, deeper magic, and it made a sort of unbreakable protection, saving my dad from Voldemort’s curse. Dad said that because I was willing to die for Petra when she fell, we made the same sort of bargain with the deep magic. That’s what really saved her.”

Odin-Vann glanced back at James, his face clouding slightly. “Really?” he said, and blinked. “Your dad, Harry Potter, told you that?”

James nodded. “He said he recognized the feeling of it.”

“But,” Odin-Vann said, as if reluctantly clarifying some small but important point, “Your dad’s mum *died* to summon that deep magic. It was her death that created the bond of protection, or so the story goes. You...” he cleared his throat a little awkwardly. “You... *didn’t* die for Petra.” He shook his head and shrugged a little in confusion.



James sighed again, deeply. “That’s what I told my dad. He didn’t have any answers for me. Just said that because I was *willing* to trade places with her... that must have been enough. The deep magic caused the cord of her powers to appear, connecting us, letting me pull her back up. I didn’t die. But somehow... being willing to was enough.” Suddenly, to James’ own ears, it sounded weak and unsatisfying. But clearly it had happened, hadn’t it? The Deep Magic had saved Petra, had permanently connected them, just like his dad and Voldemort, even if James hadn’t needed to die to make it happen.

At least... *not yet*.

The thought chilled him suddenly, deeply, all the way to the bone.

Odin-Vann seemed to dismiss the topic with another shrug. “Well, I imagine you’ve convalesced enough to stand now, James. I would expect no more trouble from our three young friends, Edgecombe, Heathrow, and Ogden. At least, not about this. I have known young people like them in my life, though, and they do always find new ways to spread their particular brand of viciousness.”

Rose began to climb to her feet and shot a glance at the door, clearly remembering the trio of poisonous first-years. “I almost *hope* they cross my path again. I owe them more than a stunning. I can’t begin to imagine what their gripe is.”

“Ah,” Odin-Vann said, rising and tugging James to his feet, “Therein lies your mistake, Miss Weasley. You assume people like Edgecombe have a specific gripe. Clearly it has not occurred to you that some people like to harm others simply for the pure, unadulterated power and pleasure of it. They may invent excuses to satisfy the diminished shreds of their consciences, but they are merely that: excuses. My advice is: don’t engage them any further. You will only frustrate yourself trying to appeal to some buried sense of common decency. Some poisoned apples are poison all the way to the core.”

There was a coolness in the way that Odin-Vann spoke of Edgecombe and his cronies. James wondered if the man had had his own encounters with petty bullies, and then realized that the answer

was obvious. It was in the way the Professor seemed unable to perform magic when under stress, despite his impressive skills and knowledge. He was a man who had once been a boy, a boy who had likely been teased mercilessly about his impotence under pressure, which would only have made matters exponentially worse.

As the professor bid them goodnight and relocked the classroom door, James didn't know if he felt sorrier for the boy Odin-Vann had once been, or angrier at the bullies people like Edgecombe always were. Mostly, he was just weak with relief that the evening was over, the disaster had been undone and averted, and thankful that Rose, for once, didn't seem to feel the need to discuss any of it with him as they walked and wended their way back along the dark corridors toward Gryffindor tower. She merely nursed a thoughtful frown, mulling her own thoughts, and James was glad.

Together, they clambered wearily through the portrait hole. Five minutes later, James was on his bed, barely half undressed, sleeping the sleep of complete exhaustion, not even aware that he was wearing two pairs of magically identical underpants, and that both of his socks were inside out.



## ***NEXT CHAPTER:***

**JAMES MEETS A NEW HOUSE ELF!  
A QUIDDITCH MATCH DIVIDES THE FAMILY!  
NEW HOLIDAY PLANS!**