

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

PROLOGUE

Keynes could sense her coming.

The lights had blinked out while he was on the stairs, causing him to stumble and eliciting a chorus of startled exclamations from his entourage. A second later, when the lights flickered back on, he was alone.

He glanced around quickly, turning on the spot, taking in the painted brick walls and the concrete steps. Gone were the guards that had accompanied him, as well as the official court Obliviator. Keynes barely noticed. What mattered most was the little girl, Isabella Morganstern.

He'd been gripping her by the wrist, squeezing with the full force of his fist, as tight and merciless as a cuff. He knew that he was hurting her, and not just because of her incessant screams. His anger made him vengeful. The thought that he might be bruising the girl's wrist made him squeeze even harder, viciously grinding the fine bones of her forearm. He'd been furious with her for running away from him, but even more, for embarrassing him. This squalling, unmagicked, precocious, British dimwit had dared to defy Albert Keynes, General Arbiter for the Wizarding Court of the United States. She'd actually had the audacity to make him chase her.

Fortunately, even though the rest of his entourage had somehow vanished, the girl was still there, dragging behind his fist, her eyes wide as the lights flickered back on. Her hair swung in sweaty blonde curls around her face as she looked up and down the stairwell, searching. For a moment, Keynes thought she was looking for the missing guards, but then he understood otherwise. She was looking for her sister. Petra Morganstern, the young woman whose name the little brat had been shrieking only seconds earlier, the young woman whom they had just left, sleeping the cursed sleep of guilt, lying on a bare bed in a guarded basement cell.

"Don't be foolish," he said, mocking the little girl's hopeful expression. His words were lost, however, obliterated in a sudden gust of cold wind. It flapped the brim of Keynes'

black hat, threatening to whip it from his bald head like a teasing ghost. The whickering air was so cold that he fancied he could feel flecks of ice in it, stinging his cheeks and eyes.

The blonde girl turned to look at him for the first time since being recaptured. Her mouth was still pressed into a worried frown, but her eyes glittered like emeralds, suddenly expectant, even eager.

He shook his head at her, not quite daring to speak again, and wagged an admonishing finger at her with his free hand. He tugged her forward again so that she stumbled up the steps, dragged by his white-knuckled fist. He didn't know what was going on, but unexpected magic was no surprise in his line of work.

The stairs stopped at the next landing, leading to a single door, thrown open so wide that its handle had cracked the brick hallway wall beyond. Keynes stopped, momentarily confused. They'd been climbing from the basement. There were at least nine more flights of stairs to the top of the building. How could they have reached the top already?

The air was still icy with cold. His breath puffed before his face, chugging with just the faintest tremor of a shiver.

And of course he understood how he'd gotten to where he was after all. His entourage hadn't been vanished away. *He* had. He'd been magically transported up nine flights of stairs in the blink of an eye, during the flash and flicker of the lights. The only reason the girl had come with him was that he'd been holding onto her so tightly.

The girl hadn't performed the magic. But the glimmer in her eyes told him she knew who had.

"You'd better let me go," she said with quiet emphasis.

Keynes tried to imagine fear and petulance in her plea, but he knew there was none. Instead, she almost seemed to be taking reluctant pity on him. As if she was giving him one last chance to avoid something awful.

"You're a little fool," he growled at her, hissing forcefully through his teeth so that spittle flew. His breath puffed pale clouds into the air. "Your sister is guilty. You have no legal magical guardian. The court has spoken, and I intend to carry out its orders. You will be officially obliterated. You're only making matters worse for--"

Another burst of wind, even harder and colder than before, bowled over him, ripping his hat from his head and flapping his robes like a flag. He clutched at the doorframe with his free hand but the wind forced him through, slamming the stairwell door behind him so violently that its tiny window shattered, spraying the hallway floor with crumbles of glass. Keynes scrambled around, grabbed at the door handle and shook it, tugged it so hard that it rattled in its socket. The door was jammed shut, as immovable as stone.

And still his hand remained viced onto the girl's wrist, dragging her with him.

She was coming. The girl's sister. It was impossible, but she had awoken from her cursed sleep. She had been summoned by the blonde brat's incessant screams. That was why the girl had stopped calling for her. That was why she was no longer afraid.

Her fear had transferred itself onto Keynes. Amazingly, this fact infuriated as much as disconcerted him. He was accustomed to being the one instilling the fear. Of course, the fright *he* inspired was righteous and true, the fright all wrongdoers feel when finally confronted with the cold hand of justice. Perhaps he did secretly relish being that cold hand. Perhaps wielding the scales of power and vengeance *did* award him an unforgiving thrill.

But was that such a bad thing? He took pride in his work, that was all. There was no evil in it. At least, nothing that deserved the terror he now felt creeping over him, prickling his skin, swallowing him whole like a snake slowly digesting its prey.

“You stay away from me,” he commanded into the seemingly empty hallway, producing his wand from his robes. To his own ears, his voice sounded small, trembling. The wand in his outstretched hand shook. “You stay away from me! I’m carrying out my duties! In the name of the wizarding court of the United States of--”

“Let her go,” a woman’s voice said. It was low and bloodless, vibrating from the walls all around. Like the blonde girl’s before it, the voice seemed to be offering a reluctant warning. It sounded like a voice that wanted to be disobeyed.

“You stay back!” Keynes cried out, extending his wand full length ahead of him, gripping it fiercely. He waved it back and forth as he edged along the hall, dragging Isabella with him.

The hallway was long and drab, lined with bricks enameled a pale, industrial green. The bare concrete floor radiated cold. Black doors lined both walls, all closed, marching away for what seemed like miles. But that was an illusion, of course. Keynes knew there were stairwells at both ends of the building. If he could make it to the other end, he could take the girl back down. Her sister could not stop him. She was guilty. She was chaos.

Keynes firmed his jaw and straightened his back. He was justice. He was order.

The lights flickered again and buzzed. The bulbs overhead were old, clear glass glowing with bright Goblinwire filaments. They required no Muggle electricity to burn, and yet, one by one, they began to extinguish. Each one popped like a miniature bomb, spraying glass and cold sparks. Darkness marched down the hall toward Keynes, but he forced himself to walk into it, increasing speed and raising his chin to face it.

“Chaos cannot defeat me!” he cried out, calling into the approaching dark. “I am order! Order trumps chaos!” He marched faster, his fist still cinched onto Isabella’s hand, squeezing her wrist hard enough to bruise the very bones, dragging her forcibly along with him.

The bulb directly over Keynes clouded suddenly with frost. Its light dulled, went cold, then flashed brilliantly, exploding. Glass and sparks rained down on him, peppering his bare head.

Petra Morganstern’s voice came from directly ahead of him. “I’m not chaos,” it said, and suddenly she was standing before Keynes, her silhouette slight, but rushing with cold wind, somehow towering. She was like a woman-shaped black hole, full of compressed gravity and seamless dark. “And *you’re* not order. I just want my sister back.”

Keynes halted clumsily and even stumbled back a step, his eyes bulging wide at the shape before him. “Oh, no you don’t!” he said stridently, shrilly. “You think you can simply defy me?!” He shook his head furiously, his rage somehow equaling his terror. “You’re a condemned criminal! You have no legal rights! You... you...!”

Petra’s arm stretched out toward Keynes. He couldn’t tell if she was reaching for the girl in his grip or for his own neck. The blackness of her silhouette seemed to pull him in. He resisted, pressing his lips into an enraged line. Violently, he jerked Isabella forward in front of him, using her like a human shield. He hooked his left elbow under her chin,

forcing her head back against his chest, and raised his right fist, brandishing his wand. In a second, it was jabbed against the blonde girl's temple.

"I'll do it myself!" he shrieked in a fevered rush, his eyes widening with zeal. "I'm not as good as the official court Obliviator, but I know the spell! She may never be capable of forming another memory again. But I can do it! I *will* do it! You'll force me to it! *The court has spoken!*" He screamed the last sentence, hoarsely enunciating each word as if it was a talisman.

"Put down the wand..." Petra said, her voice dropping to an icy monotone. Her form seemed to elongate, to grow in size, looming against the dimness of the walls. The walls themselves bulged away from her. Cracks raced along the bricks, spurting broken mortar like fireworks. Distantly, windows shattered and walls groaned. *"Let. Her. GO!"*

Keynes sucked in a sudden breath, filling his chest and preparing to shout. "OBLIVIA--"

Along the length of the hall, every door blew open like an explosion, erupting with clouds of icy steam. Petra's arm lanced forward like a snake, clamping onto Keynes' throat and propelling him backwards, straight out of his shoes. His hands scrabbled helplessly, first releasing Isabella and his wand, and then groping uselessly at the icy fist wrapped around his throat, locked beneath the shelf of his chin. And still Petra's form drove him backwards along the hall, faster and faster, floating in pursuit, flying, her hair streaming around her like the snakes of a medusa. Her shape was a black nightmare of shadow except for her eyes, which blazed like starlight through sapphires. Keynes' heels stuttered wildly backwards along the hall, scattering broken lightbulb glass.

"I've killed once before!" Petra's voice boomed. The sound was like cracking glaciers, echoing, ringing along the bulging walls like a gong. *"Horror that she was, the woman I killed was still the better of a deluded insect like YOU!"*

"Petra!" a small, unexpected voice interrupted. It was a girl's voice, familiar enough not to shatter Petra's rage, but to surprise and pause it, at least for a second. Pent lightning crackled along the hall from Petra's eyes and free hand, longing to be unleashed, and yet, reluctantly, she halted. Keynes was still thrust forward in her extended fist, his own hands clamped around hers, uselessly struggling, his mouth frozen in a silent, choked gasp, his eyes bulging up at her face.

"Izzy?" Petra said without turning, blinking the cold blue glow from her eyes.

"No," the voice said meekly. "It's me. Lucy."

Petra finally looked back over her shoulder. Her hair hung around her face like black ribbons, revealing only one eye. She blinked again, ignoring the struggling Keynes.

Lucy was standing next to Izzy. As Petra watched, the girls drew a step closer together. Without looking, Lucy reached for Izzy's hand, and Izzy gave it to her, lacing their fingers together. And with that gesture, Petra understood something. While she had been asleep, under the influence of Mother Newt's poison apple, something had happened between Lucy and Izzy that had bonded them. They were friends now. Other than Petra, Izzy had never before had a true friend. Despite everything, the sight of the girls' clasped hands both broke and gladdened Petra's heart.

“Don’t kill him, Petra,” Lucy said. Her dark eyes were calm, neither begging nor demanding. “Not because he deserves to live. I don’t know. He does seem like a pretty awful man. He may deserve to die. But you don’t deserve to kill.”

Petra glanced from Lucy’s dark eyes to Izzy’s green ones. The blonde girl was nodding slowly. “It’s not like with my mother,” she said in a low voice. “She was so miserable and ugly inside that she almost *wanted* to be killed. She nearly begged for it. But this... it’s different.”

Petra’s grip slowly tightened on Keynes’ neck, creaking the joints of his vertebra. His jaw dropped as his mouth gaped like a beached fish. His thin chest hitched silently. Petra ignored him, still staring back over her shoulder at the two girls, at their laced hands.

“But... he almost ruined you, Iz...” she said. There was something like a plea in her voice. “He’s a human wreck. He deserves nothing but to be ended.”

Izzy nodded. Lucy frowned worriedly. “He probably does,” she admitted reasonably. “But you don’t deserve the stain that ending him would leave on you. On your soul.”

Petra heard the words, and knew in her deepest heart, the eye of her rage’s storm, that they were good. Lucy was right. And yet...

And yet another voice spoke up inside her thoughts. A voice that she, Petra, had not heard in almost a year.

KILLING IS NOT A STAIN, the voice exclaimed, screaming the words in the center of Petra’s mind, drowning out every other thought like an impatient observer that can no longer remain silent. *KILLING IS THE POWER OF IMMORTALITY! KILLING IS BEING AS A GOD!*

“Yes,” Petra said to herself, her expression going calm again as she turned back to Keynes. She desperately wanted to agree with the Voice of the Bloodline in her mind. It felt so good to go along. “And he does deserve it...”

Keynes saw the resolve forming in Petra’s eyes and tried to shake his head. His eyes bulged from their sockets, even as his face drained of all color, turned as pale as wax.

He deserves to die... The Voice agreed, now dropping to a greedy whisper. *They ALL deserve to diiiiie!!*

“We all deserve to die,” Lucy agreed from behind Petra, almost as if she could also hear the vicious Voice in Petra’s mind. Her words were like a lilt of sanity in the frozen air, unavoidable and persistent. “We all deserve to die, Petra, the moment someone with power decides they have the right to kill.”

Petra blinked again.

She paused.

Lucy was right. Of course she was. Petra wanted desperately to refuse it. The Voice that haunted her thoughts railed against it, cursed against it, would have turned and killed Lucy herself just to silence her if it could. But the Voice didn’t control Petra anymore. Despite its strength, and despite the occasional dark persuasion of its logic, the Voice of the Bloodline was no longer a curse. It was just a part of her, and she was a part of it.

Grudgingly, hating herself for doing it, she let go of Keynes.

He dropped to the floor and crumpled like a doll made of loose sticks.

Petra stared down at him, unmoving and unmoved. She yearned to kill him still. Her fingertips arced and crackled with icy power at the thought. But somehow she resisted.

Warmth approached her from behind. The two girls took Petra's hands, one each, warming them and stifling the killing power that wanted to lance out, that yearned for expression.

You can hold it in for a time, the Voice seethed petulantly, diminishing once again into the background noise of Petra's mind. *But you can't control it forever. And when you finally unleash it, it won't care who is standing in your way...*

"Is he still alive?" Lucy asked, looking down with morbid fascination at the crumpled form of the Arbiter.

"He's alive," Petra admitted reluctantly.

Lucy nodded. "I'm glad, Petra," she said, and then glanced up at her, her dark eyes somber and sincere. "I'm glad you didn't kill him. Because some things can't be undone. Some lost things can't be unlost. No matter how much you might want them to be."

Later, barely an hour from that moment in the hallway with the three girls standing hand-in-hand, Petra would remember Lucy's words. They would come to her in a flash of light and a moment's horror-- a moment that would turn into an endless ringing note, growing louder rather than softer with every passing day and month and year. Petra would know all too painfully well how much one might wish for a lost thing to become unlost.

But were Lucy's words true? Were lost things ever *really* lost forever?

Petra had been teased with such bargains before, but they were always false bargain, empty hopes, mere capricious tricks intended to manipulate.

But what if she, Petra, could conjure the answer herself? What if, purely by the strength of her own immense power and prosaic intelligence, she could write her *own* bargain?

Was there any price worth paying, no matter how high, to find out?

She wondered. Over the course of the following years, Petra wondered that more and more.



1. THE INTERVIEW

“Looks just like the first time we rode it,” Ralph commented jovially, making his way along the corridor of the Hogwarts Express to the raucous noise of boarding students and the nearby hiss and chuff of the crimson engine. Rafters of steam, brilliant white in the morning sun, drifted past the windows. “It’s easy to forget the whole world’s about to drop straight off a cliff, isn’t it?”

Rose hefted her bag past a gaggle of nervous-looking first years. “I really wish you’d stop saying that. You’re just repeating what your father says.”

“Well,” James bobbed his head, “Denniston Dolohov *is* chief Muggle advisor to the Minister of Magic. It’s his job to know all the ways the magical world is breaking out into the Muggle, and the other way around. He’d know better than anyone. Here.”

He pointed toward an empty compartment near the end of the corridor. Noisily, they shunted open the door and filed in, unloading their knapsacks and duffles and hoisting them up onto the luggage racks. James leaned to peer out the window before sitting down. The usual crowd milled on the platform-- knots of families saying goodbye, students hurrying with carts of trunks, tall porters in red coats directing people and tweeting their whistles-- but the collection of wizarding news people were still evident in the foreground, holding court near the engine. The *Daily Prophet* photographer’s flash poofed over the

crowd as he snapped more pictures. Next to him was Myron Madrigal from wizarding wireless news, who appeared to be conversing with Cameron Creevey, broadcasting live with his wand held between them. James grimaced, knowing that the boy's infectious enthusiasm would probably fill ten breathless minutes of air-time, whether Madrigal wished it or not, and nine of those minutes would probably be about James Sirius Potter.

"She doesn't seem to be down there anymore," Rose commented, cramming in next to James and blocking his view with her bushy reddish hair.

"Probably already on board," Albus suggested, joining them in the compartment and tugging the door shut with a bang. "Getting all set up for her big interview, I imagine. Your public awaits, James."

"Just shut it, will you?" James shook his head in embarrassed annoyance. "She'll probably be interviewing loads of us, not just me. Besides, it sure wasn't my idea."

Rose sniffed. "But you didn't say no, did you?" Suddenly she raised a hand and waved energetically. "Bye mum! Dad! Love you! See you at Christmas!"

The train shunted and clattered as it began to roll forward. The chuff of the engine rose both in pitch and rhythm, becoming a steady, noisy beat in the air. The faces on the platform began to drift sideways, receding away. James shouldered his cousin aside as much as possible and spied his own parents watching, smiling in the sunlight. His mum saw him and waved. He waved back tentatively, nervously, thinking of the upcoming interview.

"She's changed, I expect," his dad had said the day before, when the official request had come by owl from the offices of the *Daily Prophet*. "I don't think there's anything to worry about, James. The world has bigger cauldrons to boil these days. What possible harm could she do anymore?"

Aunt Hermione had been far less magnanimous when she'd heard about it only moments before, on Platform Nine and Three Quarters. "You just remind her whose nephew you are," she'd whispered into his ear, unsmiling. "I doubt she's forgotten me, *or* a certain glass jar."

A sharp rap came from the window of the compartment door. James glanced back to see a man on the other side, peering through with a cane raised in his fist, prepared to knock again. He was a small man with large hands, clean-shaven beneath a bland bowler hat, wearing tiny wire-framed spectacles and a tweed vest. His eyes flicked over the occupants of the compartment and landed on James.

"James Potter?" he called through the glass.

James nodded, and the tension in his chest cinched a few notches tighter.

"I'm Mr. Bullova from the *Daily Prophet*," he said, still raising his voice to speak through the glass window. "We spoke yesterday via floo? We're ready for you if you are." He stepped back, not waiting for an answer.

James heaved a sigh and moved reluctantly to the door. "That sure was fast."

"Don't forget us little people when you're all famous," Albus clapped him on the shoulder as he went.

"Good to meet you, Mr. Potter," Bullova shook his hand briefly but vigorously as James joined him in the corridor. "We're just a few carriages up. If you'll follow me." He gestured and led the way, moving with a sort of mousy economy, not looking back.

James felt terribly self-conscious following the man through the carriages, knowing that he was being seen by loads of his friends and schoolmates, who by now had some idea of what was going on. Despite what he'd said to Albus, he suspected that none of *them* were being interviewed for the *Daily Prophet* about 'the changing magical world and its impact on the younger generation' (as Mr. Bullova had blithely put it in his invitation). But then again, as Uncle Ron had commented on the platform, none of them were the firstborn son of Harry Potter.

They passed through three connectors, finally entering a much more sumptuous carriage near the front of the train. Red carpets and brass fixtures adorned the corridor and the smell of pipe tobacco seemed to have worked its way into the very grain of the polished wood paneling. Here, teachers rather than students occupied the compartments. As James passed by, he recognized Kendrick Debellows, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, his crew-cut head nodding in conversation with Potions Mistress Lucia Heretofore. Across from them was a surprisingly young man with black hair and sharp features. The man glanced up as James passed the compartment, his expression merely idly curious. James had never seen him before and wondered fleetingly if he was some new teacher's assistant. He was clearly too young to be a professor.

"And here we are," Bullova announced crisply, stopping at the last compartment and shutting open the door. "Just have a seat, if you would."

Bullova stepped aside and gestured with the cane in his large left fist, ushering James inside. As James entered, Bullova shunted the door closed from the outside. James turned to look back through the compartment window, but the small man was already retreating down the corridor, a gold pocket watch open in his free hand.

James turned back to the compartment, which was much different than any of the others he had ridden in. It was larger, with four red upholstered chairs instead of benches. Between them was a small but heavy table, polished to a mirror-like shine. A small notebook, bound in buff leather, sat on the table. Atop this lay a vividly green quill. James recognized the instrument from his father's descriptions. It was a Quick-Quotes Quill, charmed to record whatever it heard, albeit with questionable embellishments.

James decided to sit while he waited. He chose the chair nearest the outside window and plopped into it, thankful for the moment of quiet, but restless to get the interview over with.

The outskirts of London streamed past the window, resplendent in the morning sun. James watched the city blur along for a moment, and then turned his attention back to the Quill.

Experimentally, he cleared his throat.

The Quick-Quotes Quill jumped to attention, flicking into the air as the notebook snapped open, riffling to a blank page. With a tiny pecking sound, the Quill tapped down onto the page and vibrated bolt upright, as if waiting.

Fascinated but a little leary, James leaned closer to the table. "My name," he said slowly, experimentally, "is James Sirius Potter."

The Quill began to scratch busily across the page, stopping after only a few seconds. James leaned closer still, craning his head to read the upside-down writing.

The young Potter introduces himself with a degree of palpable pride, clearly content with the pedigree of his famed lineage.

“The pedigree of his...” James read, furrowing his brow. “I didn’t...! What do you mean ‘palpable pride?’”

The Quill began to scribble again. James made to grab for it, but the Quill leapt and fainted easily around his reaching hand, pecking back to the notebook without the slightest pause and continuing mid-sentence.

James jumped to his feet, meaning to grab the notebook away from the Quill, but a sudden buzzing noise startled him. Something small flitted around his head, and then droned toward the window, where it landed with a faint bump on the windowsill. James saw that it was a beetle. He almost dismissed it and resumed his mission to tear away the offending notebook page (upon which the Quill was still writing furiously) when a sudden suspicion—nearly a certainty—fell over him like a leaden wave. He looked closer at the beetle, which seemed to be regarding him from its perch on the sill. Its antenna waved faintly.

James’ shoulders slumped. With a sigh, he sat back down in the chair. Before him, the Quill finally finished its paragraph and jerked upright again, waiting.

The beetle unfurled its delicate wings, buzzed them, and lofted from the windowsill, casting its tiny shadow onto the table, where it landed near the notebook and Quill. It trundled toward the edge nearest James, glinting iridescent green in the flickering sunbeams, and then stopped, seeming to eye him again with its tiny, unblinking orbs. After only a moment, the beetle burst into a greenish rainbow of dense, swirling smoke, which condensed into the unmistakable shape of a woman. She was seated coquettishly on the edge of the table in a natty green jacket and skirt, peering at James through tortoiseshell spectacles, her red lips formed into a sardonic little smile.

“I hope you’ll forgive me, Mr. Potter,” she offered, dropping her eyes slightly. “Old habits die hard. But I do find that what a subject does in the thoughtful moments before an interview can be highly illuminating. I’m Rita Skeeter.”

She extended her hand, which was very thin and pale, palm down. Almost reflexively, James shook it, but briefly. Her fingers were cool but strong, despite the looseness of her grip. James guessed that she was in her late fifties, but had clearly invested much effort and money to appear much younger. Her probably falsely blonde hair was done in flouncy waves that framed her narrow, immaculate face.

She brightened and turned toward the notebook. “I also apologize for this...” Without reading it, she tore the topmost page out and balled it in her hands, throwing James a conspiratorial little wink. “The Quill is still set to Tabloid mode. Embarrassing, but a necessary evil when one also freelances for publications like *Witch Weekly* and the *Crafty Conjuror*. Just one moment...”

She withdrew a sleek wand from her sleeve and daintily tapped the Quill, which lofted briefly into the air, pirouetted, and then tapped back down onto a new blank page in the notebook, apparently reset to a less sensational recording mode, although James knew he couldn’t be sure.

Returning her wand to her sleeve, Skeeter turned back to James, relaxed comfortably on her perch on the desk, and narrowed her eyes at him. For what felt like half a minute she merely studied him, her gaze ticking slightly over his face, as if reading his mind, or at least giving a very practiced suggestion of it. James blinked at her, and then around the room, growing exquisitely uncomfortable in the stuffy quiet. He could see the door over the woman's left shoulder and heartily wished he was already on the other side of it.

"You'll have heard about me," she finally stated, her voice quietly musing. "From your family." She nodded, as if resigned and slightly penitent. "I understand, of course. But I want you to know that I am not the journalist I was then. I'm not the Rita Skeeter your Aunt and uncle and father met those many years ago, James. May I call you James?"

James gave a small shrug and nodded.

"I was young then, James," she went on with a wistful sigh. "Young, and eager, and perhaps a *bit* too ambitious. But I'm different now. I need you to know that before we start. You can *trust* me." She leaned even closer, waiting for him to make eye contact with her. Her gaze was huge and somber behind her stylish glasses. "*I'm on your side*, James."

Slightly nonplussed, James shrugged and bobbed his head again, not knowing if he actually believed her. The intensity of her stare was like being probed with purple-eye-shadowed spotlights.

But then Skeeter relaxed again. She blew out a sigh and nodded to herself. "That's a relief, James. Because for the sake of my readers, I need to know the real you. The *unguarded* you. Shall we begin?"

James merely nodded a third time. He pushed himself back into the upholstery of the chair, trying to extract himself from Skeeter's perfumed aura.

"This is your seventh year at Hogwarts, then, yes?" She asked lightly. "And despite the turmoil elsewhere in the world, your last two years have been remarkably uneventful. Something that was never true for your famous father." She smiled at him observantly, looking for a response. James couldn't tell if there was congratulation or reproach in her gaze. When he offered no comment she went on briskly. "So, are you looking forward to graduation?"

James drew a deep breath, relieved to finally confront a question he could answer. "I guess I am. I haven't really decided what I'm going to do with myself afterward. I was thinking of becoming an Auror. Like my dad. But my grades are..." He shrugged and bobbed his head noncommittally.

Behind Skeeter, the Quill commenced writing again, scratching busily over the notebook. It was minutely distracting.

"Ah, yes. Harry Potter, the Auror," Skeeter nodded lightly, and then turned serious. "But these are difficult times in which to be an Auror, are they not? Three years since the Night of the Unveiling. The Vow of Secrecy erodes more every day. It must be extremely frustrating, even hopeless work, trying to patch together the wall that divides the magical world from its Muggle counterpart, while still chasing down the occasional flying carpet smuggler and dabbler in dark magic. Wouldn't you agree?"

James did agree, having heard his father say virtually the exact same thing over the past few years, but he felt uncomfortable saying so. He merely shrugged.

Beneath the steady shimmy and clatter of the train, the Quill scritch and capered.

“You were there on the night that it happened, weren’t you?” Skeeter asked quietly, cocking her head. “The Night of the Unveiling? You were right there in the middle of it all, isn’t that correct, James? What do you remember of it?”

James pressed his lips together, thinking furiously. What could he say? There was no way to answer the question easily, or even safely. The Lady of the Lake, the mastermind behind the whole nefarious affair, was virtually unknown, considered a myth by most of the people who had heard of her, and this despite her potentially disastrous appearance at the so-called Hogwarts “Quidditch Summit” two years earlier. Petra had battled and ultimately defeated her there, with some unlikely help from an Alma Aleron student named Nastasia Hendricks. And yet it was Petra who had borne the blame for the plot of the Morrigan Web, adding to the guilt already heaped upon her for the Night of the Unveiling, when she had indeed deliberately fractured the veil of secrecy between the Muggle and magical worlds.

“I was there,” James foundered uneasily, “It was all kind of a blur. I don’t remember a lot.”

“But you remember your friend, Petra Morganstern?” Skeeter probed, raising her eyebrows. “She *was* your *friend*, yes?”

James nodded faintly, thinking back to that night. He could still see Petra in his memory, walking down the center of the broad New York avenue, hand in hand with her young sister Izzy, lofting parade floats into the air with the sheer power of her mind. He could still hear the toll of her voice as she called out to the Statue, the guardian of the magical city of New Amsterdam, caster of the greatest secrecy spell ever conjured, asking her to lower her torch, to break the spell.

James nodded soberly. “Yes, Petra is my friend.”

“You speak in the present tense, James,” Skeeter clarified, as if she thought she might have misheard him. “Surely you don’t mean to suggest that you are still friends with Ms. Morganstern. She is, after all, the most notorious witch in our lifetimes, perhaps in all lifetimes. The only female Undesirable Number One in history. The mastermind behind at least two murderous and chaotic plots to undermine the very foundation of our world. Of course, at the time, she had been living under the protection of your family, isn’t that right? And she had spent the previous summer in the Potter household, after the mysterious tragedy of her grandparents’ farm, where both of them ended up dead.” She paused, allowing her words to sink in, studying James’ face. “What do you say to the people who claim that this represents a serious lapse in judgment for a head Auror? Who claim that he should not only be dismissed from the position, but brought before the Wizengamot for negligence and conspiracy?”

Skeeter was clearly trying to provoke James, and had been since the interview began. It was beginning to work. James glared at her, calm but heating with anger. “I’d say none of them were there when Petra showed up and told her story.”

“Perhaps you can tell it to us yourself,” Skeeter suggested.

James had grown both bolder and slightly more jaded over the past two years. He did not rise to her bait. “No one would believe it,” he sighed, glancing at the door behind Skeeter. “And it’s not my story to tell.”

“*Are* you still friends with her, James? Are you in contact with Petra Morganstern?”

James was not surprised by the question. He'd even prepared himself for its eventuality. He shook his head. "No. How could I be? She's been in hiding for years now. She may not even be alive anymore, for all we know."

Without thinking about it, he closed his right hand into a loose fist, enclosing the thread of coldness he sometimes still felt there.

The Quill scribbled on, capturing his words.

"Now James," Skeeter chided mildly. "You know as well as I that Ms. Morganstern is still alive. Reports of her sightings, along with her Muggle sister Isabella, show up regularly in the press. Surely your father, and therefore you, hear about even more sightings than the rest of us. And yet she somehow continues to elude capture. Just last month, in fact, there were reports that she had appeared in the International Armory of Forbidden Books and Artifacts. What do you believe she was looking for?"

James didn't have to lie this time. He shook his head. "I don't have any idea. I wish I knew."

"Many believe she is up to something far worse than the Morrigan Web. You and your family hosted her and considered her a friend. Do you have any insight into what her plan might be?"

James sighed deeply. He wanted to say that Petra wasn't the real enemy, that it was all a diversion created by a terrible watery demoness, an agent of chaos summoned by a broken magical bargain. He wanted to say that Petra had cracked the Vow of Secrecy in order to save his father and prevent further bloodshed. More than anything, he wanted to say that Petra was beautiful and innocent and the very reason that the Morrigan Web had been defeated. But the last few years had shown him that it would do no good. There was an inertia to these things. The world had decided that Petra was the focus of all villainy—the "*She-Voldemort*", as some had begun to call her—and James now knew that there was no way to reverse such a tide without getting buried and drowned beneath it.

And after all, in a sense, public opinion was correct about Petra, albeit in a way that very few could guess: she *did* carry the last shred of Voldemort inside her. She was the Bloodline, cursed to bear the last flicker of the villain's soul inside her own, even if she *had* tamed it and forced it into submission, as she claimed, and James fervently believed.

"I thought this interview was going to be about how young people like me were adjusting to some new perilous world?" He asked, looking up into Skeeter's eyes where she still sat on the edge of the desk.

He expected her to be perturbed but she gave no sign to that effect. Her smile, in fact, perked a little wider. Behind her, the Quill scratched and wrote.

"Tell our readers about Headmaster Merlinus Ambrosius," Skeeter said smoothly. "There is great curiosity about him. A figure of lore and legend, he is. Would you say that he lives up to the mythology?"

James nodded, feeling that he was on slightly firmer ground discussing the headmaster, who was more than capable of handling himself, regardless of what the press said about him. "He does. He can be a bit scary sometimes, but never in a bad way. He always comes down on the right side, and he knows how to keep order, that's for sure. And he does it without just piling on reams of rules."

“You Potters never did much care for rules,” Skeeter smiled. “Isn’t that right, James?”

James shrugged, feeling slightly bold. “Like the rules about registering as an Animagus?”

Skeeter’s smile snapped shut like a jewelry box. She glared at him, her green eyes nearly sparking. Of course, she *was* registered nowadays. But if it hadn’t been for James’ Aunt Hermione, Skeeter would likely still be secretly using her abilities to illicitly eavesdrop and report on delicate conversations. She glanced back at her Quill and notebook, then briskly produced her wand and tapped the Quill. It stopped, backed up, and scribbled out a long line. Then, with a practiced force of will, she turned back and smoothed her features. She seemed content to change the subject.

“As we said earlier, James, we live in a world where the Vow of Secrecy crumbles more every day. You were there two years ago when Hogwarts hosted its first Muggle exchange students, the very spearhead of the Ministry’s plan to soften the blow to Muggle society, should the veil between our worlds finally fall. While that program was not considered a smashing success, more such programs are attempted elsewhere each day. Do you and your friends support such measures?”

James began to grasp Skeeter’s real reason for the interview. She had an agenda in mind, as she always did, and she meant to either pressure him into agreeing with it, or outing himself as its small-minded detractor.

“You said it yourself,” he said, glancing at the window to hide the mixture of unease and growing anger on his face. “The Hogwarts Muggle exchange wasn’t tried again after the whole disaster in the Great Hall when everyone, students and world leaders alike, were almost killed by the Morrigan Web. That doesn’t give me a load of faith in any other programs like it. But if you want to know what my ‘friends’ think, there are loads of them right here on the train. Feel free to ask.”

“I may do that,” Skeeter replied smoothly. “But even without deliberate programs to manage the revelation, many wizarding spaces are less secure than ever, despite the Ministry’s efforts to shore them up. Muggles stumble into formerly unplottable and hidden wizarding spaces with increasing frequency, requiring the response of ever-more-harried squads of Obliviators. Elsewhere, there is serious concern that the confines around sanctuaries for magical beasts have weakened and frayed. There is legitimate fear that someday the residents of London may awaken to an Acromantula terrorizing their streets or a sea serpent prowling the Thames. The Centaurs, it is rumoured, have sensed the degenerating boundaries of their forests and plan a deliberate incursion into the Muggle world, whether to serve as ambassadors or claim dominion no one knows for sure. And yet, many young witches or wizards like yourself consider all of this a good thing, a sign of progress. Where others see a loss of political power and potential chaos, *they* see open doors for cultural exchange, careers, and commerce in a newly integrated world. Do you agree with them, James?”

James drew a sharp breath to respond, not sure exactly what he was about to say except that it would be terse and angry and probably exactly the sort of emotional outburst Skeeter was hoping for, when a shape arose beyond the window of the door behind the blonde woman, momentarily distracting him. James recognized the small figure as it

ascended slowly into view, hand-made and ridiculous by design, its cloth head flopping like a doll's and its stubby arms waving clumsily in the shifting sunlight.

It was a hand puppet. The Hufflepuffs had been making them ever since James' first year, putting on silly shows with them, sometimes in the great hall at official functions, more often spontaneously from behind tables in the library or the backs of sofas in common study areas. The Hufflepuppet Pals, as they called their little troupe, had developed quite a popular following, even among some of the staff and teachers.

The puppet beyond the glass of the door was the Voldemort figure, with stitched orange and red eyes, a rather pointed, bald head, and a small, ridiculous smile. It flopped back and forth as if it was dancing to its own secret song, a stick of a wand glued to one limp hand.

"James?" Skeeter prompted quizzically. She read the direction of his gaze, and then glanced back over her shoulder.

The Voldemort puppet (commonly known as Voldy to the other Hufflepuppet Pals) dipped quickly from view before Skeeter could see it. She frowned at the empty glass, and then turned back to James.

"I, uh..." James stammered slightly, trying to recollect his thoughts. "I don't expect the threats are quite as bad as the newspapers make them out to be. We're a long way off from seeing any dragons breaking free into the Muggle world. Although I suppose it would make a pretty good news story, wouldn't it?"

Skeeter tried to hide her disappointment. "No one wants chaos and mayhem just for the sake of 'a good news story', James," she clucked her tongue. "But even if the threats of incursions by magical beasts or centaurs are overblown, what do you think of the prospect of mingling the magical and Muggle worlds once and for all? Do you agree that it would be a good thing?"

James let out a breath, his anger diminishing to a sort of bland impatience. "It wouldn't be the first time our worlds had been mixed, would it? And if I know my history, there was a good reason why we decided to split them up."

Behind her spectacles, Skeeter's eyes brightened. "Is that so, James? What have you been taught about that, then?"

"I've been taught the same as everyone else," James bristled. "A thousand years ago, the good witches and wizards realized that it was almost impossible to keep the bad witches and wizards from trying to take over the Muggle world by force. The temptation was just too great for the magical people who wanted nothing more than power. And even a lot of Muggle kings and emperors and villains were willing to hire magical mercenaries to bully their enemies, to make their armies invincible, to curse anyone who opposed them. The balance between the magical and Muggle worlds was too skewed to maintain. So we went into hiding, used our powers to live in secret among the Muggles, unseen by them. The laws of secrecy protected the Muggles from the worst of us, and from the worst of themselves, the ones who would throw the door open for power at any cost."

"You've learned all of this from Headmaster Merlin, I assume?" Skeeter asked, cocking her head slightly.

“I learned it from my history books,” James said, raising his eyebrows challengingly. “From Professor Binns’ classes, ever since my first year. We all take those lessons. I assume you did, too, at some point.”

Skeeter laughed lightly. “It’s been a long time since my schooling, I’m afraid,” she waved a hand dismissively. “And yet I do remember enough to know that Headmaster Merlin features prominently in many of those ancient stories you reference. A thousand years ago, he himself was the sort of mercenary wizard who hired himself out to Muggle kings, willing to curse whomever they wished, willing to feed their sometimes fanatical desire for power, no matter how it might poison their societies.”

“Yeah,” James admitted, unfazed. He had had the exact same discussion with Rose on a few occasions. “But he’s different now. Everyone can see that. Otherwise he’d never have been given the job of headmaster of Hogwarts. He’s changed since the person he was back then.”

Skeeter was nodding even as James finished his response. “So you believe that Merlinus Ambrosius can change over a span of a thousand years,” she suggested, bowing her head to look at him over her spectacles. “But humanity and wizardkind cannot?”

James sat up in his seat, exasperated, opening his mouth to say that it was one thing for a single person to change and quite another for the entirety of human nature, when the Voldy puppet arose slowly into view again just past Skeeter’s shoulder, again knocking all the words right out of James’ head.

The Voldy puppet wasn’t alone this time. Next to it appeared the old headmaster puppet, Dumbledore, complete with tiny spectacles, a snowy white beard and pointed purple hat. On Voldy’s other side, another puppet leapt into view, this one with lank black hair and bored hand-drawn eyes: the Severus Snape figure (inexplicably known to the others as “Snape-a-doodle”). Both the Dumbledore and Snape figures clutched blunt miniature clubs between their stubby arms. They began to pummel the Voldy figure with classic *Punch and Judy* vigour.

James tried desperately not to smile, which of course only made the inexplicable puppet antics immeasurably funnier. A laugh boiled up in his chest, even as he struggled to hold it in, compressing his lips into a grim, trembling line.

Skeeter glared at James, her curiosity turning to suspicion, and then whirled around again.

The Hufflepuppet Pals dropped instantly from view.

“Something interesting in the corridor, James?” Skeeter asked, still looking back over her shoulder.

“No, ma’am,” James answered perhaps a bit too quickly, unable to completely hide the laughter in his voice.

She slid an eye slowly back at him, her head still turned toward the door. Impatient now, she slipped off her perch and stalked to the compartment door, shutting it noisily open. She glanced along the corridor in one direction, and then the other. James watched, waiting for her to capture whoever it was that was putting on the private performance. Instead, she merely glanced back at him from the doorway, her eyes narrowed, as if she expected him of goading her somehow. Clearly, whoever James’ secret entertainers were, they were no longer present in the carriage. Again, Skeeter composed her features, closed the

door much more gently than she'd opened it, and returned to the table, now merely leaning on it.

"A lot of wizarding families," she said, ignoring the interruption, "struggle with accepting the idea that their children might choose to pursue vocations in the Muggle world. One doesn't need to be of strictly pureblood heritage to see that many would view this as a step down, a denial of one's magical traditions. Do you agree with those of your generation who believe that such attitudes are outdated and prejudiced? An outmoded view based on obsolete stereotypes?"

"Look, if you just want me to repeat a bunch of handbill slogans and Progressive Element posters, I can find one and just read it to you," James said, his annoyance finally overriding his sense of propriety. "There are usually three or four of them on the notice boards, next to the Wanted Witch posters for Petra Morganstern. You don't need to talk to me to find the stuff you want to hear."

Skeeter's expression of smug victory was just barely hidden beneath a mask of wounded shock. "Why James, I've no idea what you are getting at. I'm merely asking you to respond to the concerns of the day, the concerns that you and your classmates are most affected by--"

"The concerns you most want to pump up to make people as angry and afraid as possible," James interrupted, rolling his eyes. "Sure. Fine. So maybe a bunch of centaurs and giants and beasts will break out of their weakened boundaries and run through the Muggle streets. Maybe the old wizarding families are chock full of stuffy, backwards elitists who think the Muggles are all lower class rabble unworthy of their marvelous magical kids. And maybe none of it matters because Undesirable Number One, Petra Morganstern, will soon wipe us all out with some all new... doomsday... thingie..." He threw his hands up, growing flustered, but not losing his head of steam. "What are *you* doing about any of it? Getting people all in a lather? Selling fear and worry and suspicion like candy? Even if all that stuff is true, all you're doing is making it worse. People like my dad and Merlin and Denniston Dolohov are working to make it better. But you're just adding to the problems. You're piling rubbish on the people trying to make a difference. And you," he shook his head, suddenly realizing that he'd said far more than intended, not quite wishing he hadn't, but knowing he probably soon would. He drew a deep breath and blew it out, deflating slightly. "You have the gall to stand there and look all superior about it."

Behind Skeeter, the Snape, Dumbledore, and Voldy Hufflepuppets applauded, flailing their limp hands wildly but silently, seeming to leap up and down behind the glass window. James saw them and felt his cheeks redden in mingled anger and embarrassment. He'd had an audience for his final outburst. This reminded him, of course, that soon enough that audience would encompass most of the magical world.

"Thank you, James," Skeeter smiled indulgently at him as the Quick-Quotes Quill finally finished recording his diatribe on the notebook behind her. "I think we're done here. Good day."

When James exited the compartment feeling prickly and disgruntled and yet somehow perversely satisfied, leaving Skeeter to pack up her Quill and notebook, he was bemused to see no sign of the Hufflepuppet Pals or their puppeteers. There was, however, a folded note lying on the floor of the corridor, flashing in the flickering sunbeams as the train

passed through dense forest. His name was printed on the front in small, flowing script. He stooped to grab it, thankful that Skeeter hadn't decided to accompany him back to his compartment, although even he knew how unlikely that was.

As he walked, nearly fleeing the staff carriage en route to his own, he unfolded the parchment and read the short note.

Good on you, James! You put that obnoxious twit in her place. Thank us later for the well-timed distractions.

*Your friend,
Millie and the HufflePuppet Pals*

James frowned at the note, blinking. He knew who Millie was. Millicent Vandergriff was a Hufflepuff seventh-year with whom he'd had a few passing interactions over the last few years. Blonde and willowy with a surprisingly silly, quick wit, she had dated Graham Warton briefly late last term, breaking up with him after only a few weeks and leaving him in a morosely dejected mood for days. James knew almost nothing more about her.

Shrugging, curious about Millie but dreading the article that would likely appear in the next few days in the *Daily Prophet*, James refolded the note and stuffed it into his robe pocket.

Considering how everything could have gone if puppet Voldy and Dumbledore and Snape-a-doodle hadn't shown up when they did, he decided that he did probably owe Millie and her friends his thanks the next time he saw them.



When James returned to his compartment, Albus and Ralph were tensely focused over Ralph's traveling chess set, upon which Albus' few remaining red pieces were dejectedly mounting a hopeless but stubborn defense against Ralph's ivory army. Lily had left to find her friends elsewhere on the train, and Rose was buried in a thick new book. James plopped onto his seat, thankful that no one was immediately asking about his interview with Rita Skeeter. For a minute, he watched the trees and fields sweep past outside the train.

It occurred to him that he would never again ride the Hogwarts Express as a student, and a momentary malaise descended over him. He thought back to his first, nervous ride to Hogwarts, filled with nearly crippling anxiety about living up to his father's legendary reputation. A wan smile came over his face as he recalled his first meeting with Zane, the unexpected American with his precocious wit and roguish irreverence, and Ralph, the apparent Muggle-born, filled with apprehension, equipped with the ridiculously oversized, green-tipped wand.

He replayed his other most memorable moments on the train: his and Albus' first confrontation with Scorpius Malfoy, back when Scorpius had still been full of vim and vigour about becoming a Slytherin, before any of them knew that it was Albus who would go to the green and silver whilst Scorpius, amazingly, ended up a Gryffindor; the chasing of the strange shadow creature, the Borley, and the subsequent encounter with the swarm of Dementors around the crimson engine. The meeting with the otherworldly entity known as the Gatekeeper and the nearly disastrous train ride after, when Headmaster Merlin had miraculously saved the train from barreling to its doom in Sparrowhawk gorge.

He mused on the many games of Winkles and Augers he had played with his friends as they travelled back to school, each year more confident, excited, and eager to face whatever awaited them.

He remembered the giddy anticipation of new school subjects and experiences, of connecting with old friends and rivalries, of seeing teachers both beloved and abhorred.

This, he thought again, cautiously probing the concept, was the last time any of those things would ever happen. James could scarcely appreciate each passing moment for the sense of sudden melancholy that it evoked in him. Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry had transformed from a frighteningly mysterious challenge during his first year to a deeply familiar old friend as he began his seventh. It had never been quite real to him that those days would one day end. Now he knew: there would be only one last train ride, eventually one final night slept in his bed in Gryffindor tower, one last meal in the Great Hall with his friends and all the teachers lining the head table on the dais, one last ceremonial school event in the form of his own graduation.

And then after that, the real world awaited. Much larger and more exciting and infinitely more challenging than Hogwarts had ever been.

It was a giddy, troubling realization, underlined by the steady rumble-clack of the train, carrying James inexorably forward into his future, whether he was ready for it or not.

He turned to Rose and asked what she was reading, not so much because he was interested, but just to break the tension of his thoughts.

"The second of those Cormelian Blitz detective stories," Rose answered eagerly, not taking her eyes from the open pages. "You know, the female giantess who solves mysteries in

old timey Diagon Alley. Written by professor Revalvier, although under a different name. Much different from her other stories, I have to say. A little on the violent side. Mum's hair would probably stand straight up if she knew I was reading it." She licked a finger and turned a page, flicking her gaze over it.

James nodded, already bored with the topic. He let Rose fall back into her book and decided to get up and wander the train again, ostensibly in search of the cart lady, but hoping more for distraction than a licorice wand or a packet of Cockroach Clusters.

TOMORROW:

THE ARRIVAL AT HOGWARTS!

RALPH MAKES A SHOCKING ANNOUNCEMENT.

AND WE SEE SOME VERY UNEXPECTED GUESTS.