

JAMES POTTER AND THE
CURSE OF THE GATEKEEPER



G. Norman Lippert

Based upon the characters and worlds of J. K. Rowling



18. THE TRIUMVIRATE

Last year, during a rather harrowing adventure in the Forbidden Forest, James had met something called a ‘dryad’, a living spirit of a tree. The dryad had been quite beautiful, in a sort of sad, hypnotic way, and she had warned James that the blood of his father’s greatest enemy beat in a new heart, not one mile hence. The dryad had also said that James should beware: *your father’s battle is over, she’d told him, yours begins.*

James hadn’t known what the dryad meant by that, but he’d had a nagging idea of who the Bloodline of Voldemort was. He’d suspected Tabitha Corsica all along, even though others had told him she was simply a smart, rather devious girl with some nasty delusions about recent history. Now that James knew that Tabitha was, in fact, the Bloodline of which the dryad had warned, he felt increasingly helpless. There was nothing he could do to stop Tabitha’s plan, mostly because he didn’t know what the plan entailed. Scorpius insisted that his grandfather had never told him the specifics of how the Bloodline was to become the Gatekeeper’s host apart from it being a test that would prove Tabitha’s willingness and commitment to the Gatekeeper’s purpose. James would have liked to ask Merlin about it, but his latest interview with the

Headmaster had only increased his worries and fears about the great sorcerer. Similarly, James might have written a letter to his dad explaining everything and asking for his help, but his dad already had his hands full with the sale of the Burrow, providing living arrangements for Grandma Weasley, and heading up the new sub-department for quelling the mysterious Dementor uprisings in London. Besides, in his last letter, James' dad had admitted that they believed the whole Gatekeeper affair was a complicated ruse created by enemies of the Ministry to sow fear and instability. How could James ask his dad for help fending off something that his dad believed was imaginary? More and more, James found himself thinking of the dryad's last words: this wasn't Harry Potter's battle; it was James'.

Scorpius had suggested that the best they could do was to simply watch Tabitha as closely as possible, a task that was increasingly difficult as the end of the term neared. James saw her regularly during rehearsals for *The Triumvirate* since Tabitha was the assistant director and increasingly in charge of the rehearsals while Professor Curry attended to final production planning. Tabitha's malicious critiques of James' performances had not let up. If anything, she was even harder on him, always apologizing for making him repeat his lines in front of the rest of the cast, as if she was trying to assume polite responsibility for his apparently woeful performance. "After all," James had heard Tabitha saying quietly to Professor Curry, "I *did* consent to his receiving the role along with the rest of the casting committee. Nevertheless, hindsight is always clearest, as they say..."

The main task of observing Tabitha fell to Ralph since he shared the same house as her. Apart from the same general moodiness, however, Ralph couldn't report anything unusual about Tabitha's conduct. To James, she seemed either vaguely impatient or even more ingratiatingly polite than ever.

Classes began to wind down as the final performance loomed. Loads of parents and family were travelling to attend the show, including James' mum and sister. His dad, much to his own disappointment, was needed in London for the first crackdown by the Dementor task force and therefore would not be able to attend the show. Ginny, however, had promised to record James' performance on a borrowed set of Omnioculars so that Harry could watch later. In light of the suspected large audience, Professor Curry's intention of conducting an entirely non-magical, Muggle-style production had been overshadowed by her students' increasing determination to put on a wholly sensational show. James had seen evidence of secret magical enhancement in nearly every aspect of the production, from the treadle-powered wind machine running mysteriously without anyone manning the treadles, to unplugged electrical spotlights that still glowed. In fact, since Hogwarts castle had no source of electrical power, several small Muggle generators had been delivered to the school to provide power for the lights. Even Professor Curry, however, had failed to realize that the generators needed a constant refill of petrol to run. In the interest of expediency, Damien had surreptitiously charmed the generators to emit an industrious chugging sound and, just for the look of it, plugged all the electrical cords into them. Professor Curry had wisely stopped asking after the generators and turned to more pressing matters.

Petra's class schedule seemed to consistently conflict with James' so that he rarely had the opportunity to rehearse with her on-stage. This was unfortunate, Professor Curry admitted, but not a great problem since Tabitha Corsica had arranged for an understudy to fill in for Petra whenever she couldn't attend rehearsals with James. Josephina Bartlett's vertigo had abated to the point where she could read through the lines on Petra's behalf, and having originally been awarded the part of Astra before her

unfortunate 'accident', she was the logical choice to serve as Petra's stand-in. She did so with a kind of resigned fervor, caught between her embarrassment at having to serve as understudy and her desire to prove how much better an Astra she would have made. She lurked on the stage, arms folded and barely noticing any of the other actors, until Astra's lines came up. At that point, she would launch into her readings, switching from apathy to full melodrama in the mere blink of an eye, and then switching back to apathy the moment Astra's lines were completed. She barely seemed to notice James on the stage even though many of her lines were meant to be directed toward him. For her own part, Tabitha seemed pleased with Josephina's discomfiture, smiling smugly whenever her lines came up. James was especially annoyed to have to practice the climactic kissing scene with Josephina, especially since he'd never once rehearsed it with Petra herself.

"Don't you dare try to kiss me, you little upstart," Josephina muttered as she leaned in, smiling mistily.

"Wouldn't dream of it," James growled through his own loving smile. "Just try not to fall on me, all right? You're still looking rather tipsy."

He made sure to miss Josephina's lips by a wide mark. A moment later, the lights extinguished and Tabitha called for a ten-minute break while the stage crew refilled the rain machine.

That night, James had the dream one more time, although this time he felt that it was a true dream and not a direct vision into someone else's reality. It began as always with the flash and whicker of blades and the rattle of old wood. The figure in the dream walked toward the rippling pool and looked in. As always, two faces swam up out of the depths, a young man and a young woman. This time, however, they looked different. He recognized them vaguely as his own long dead grandparents, his dad's mum and dad. They didn't seem to be looking at the girl with the long dark hair. Instead, they seemed to be looking directly at James, where he floated in the darkness next to her. Their faces seemed grave and worried, and although they couldn't speak, they communicated with their eyes: *Beware, grandson; watch closely and step lightly. Beware...*

The dark-haired girl turned away from the faces in the pool, and James looked up at her. Even now that he knew she was Tabitha Corsica, her face remained lost in shadow. James tried to speak, to tell her not to hide any more, that there was no point, but his lips felt as if they were sewn shut. He moved along with her as she passed the pool, and as she moved, the dream changed. The mossy, dark walls faded into distance and were replaced by cold wind on a grassy hilltop. A huge full moon burned overhead, yellow and bloated, as if it meant to fall on him. The Tabitha shape continued to walk, and James saw that they were in a graveyard. A leaning wrought-iron fence marched drunkenly on the right, embracing a collection of worn headstones and crypts.

"I've never been here before," a young man's voice said. James looked and could just make out a tall silhouette walking next to the Tabitha shape. Tabitha herself seemed taller as well, and her voice was rather different when she spoke.

"Why would you have come here before?"

"My grandparents are buried here," the young man's voice said somberly. "I've no memory of visiting their graves."

"How sad for you," the Tabitha shape said.

"If you say so."

They came upon a glow in a hollow. It emanated from a lantern hooked onto a post. Near it, a stooped man was scooping earth from a grave. He straightened as they approached, surveying them with a cold, appraising look, as if he'd been expecting them.

"Whose grave is this?" the Tabitha shape asked.

The young man sighed, and suddenly James recognized who it was. "It is mine," Albus answered, turning to the Tabitha shape. James finally got a good look at him in the lantern glow. He looked about seventeen or eighteen, handsome but sallow, gaunt, as if he hadn't eaten in days. "You knew this day was coming," he said, removing his wand from his robes. "All sides have been chosen. He senses you are here; he comes now, flying like the wind. But there is something you must do first."

And Albus handed the Tabitha shape his wand.

Even knowing this was a dream, James tried to cry out, to warn Albus, but his lips wouldn't obey him. He could do nothing but watch. The Tabitha shape raised Albus' wand, pointing it toward the sky. She sniffed, and her shoulders hitched as if she were crying. Then, without warning, there was a burst of green light and an awful hiss. The stooped man with the shovel looked up first, and then so did the Tabitha shape. Albus didn't raise his eyes. Finally, James found he could look up. Spreading overhead was a bright, shimmering shape. It was a huge green skull, its mouth open. Out of the skull's mouth poured a leering snake, its jaw unhinged and menacing. The eerie glow of the Dark Mark lit the entire graveyard. On one of the nearer headstones, James saw his and his sister's names. His blood chilled even though he knew these were the names of his dead grandparents.

There was a loud crack, and another figure appeared, wand already out and pointing.

"Stop!" the figure cried, and James thought the voice sounded oddly familiar. "Both of you! I know what you think you have to do, but it doesn't have to be this way! Albus, don't let it end like this!"

"Do it," Albus said, but James couldn't tell if he was speaking to the newcomer or the Tabitha shape.

"No!" the newcomer cried, and there was an edge of desperation in his voice. "The rest are coming, and they won't waste time on words! We only have a few seconds! Albus, don't be a fool!"

"I'm sorry," Albus said, still looking at the Tabitha shape. He nodded slowly to her. She lowered the wand, aiming it at him.

The newcomer stepped forward, crying the name of the Tabitha shape, appealing to her. "Please don't! This isn't who you really are!"

"You're right, James," the Tabitha shape said quietly, almost sadly. "As of tonight, I will be known by an entirely different name."

There was an ears-splitting cry and a blast of light, obliterating everything. James fell into that light, struggling to maintain the dream, but it broke apart like glass, like a scene glimpsed in a shattering mirror.

James woke up, panting and slick with sweat. He scrambled to a sitting position on his bed, his heart pounding. The phantom scar on his forehead throbbed so hard he thought it must split his skull open. He clapped a hand to it, hissing through his teeth. After a minute, the pain began to recede, but very slowly. When he could bring himself to do it, James turned to sit on the side of his bed. He opened his satchel in the darkness and rooted inside, searching for his quill and a bit of parchment. Finally, just as the sweat on his body began to cool in the midnight air of the dormitory, he leaned over his bedside table and scribbled three words. He stared at his own handwriting in the moonlight. It didn't make any sense. Probably it was

meaningless. It had only been a dream, and not at all like the other dreams his phantom scar had induced. But it had been wrong in some fundamental, very worrying way. For reasons he couldn't bring himself to admit, he felt that it was important to remember it.

Finally, now shivering, James folded himself back into his covers. He had no idea what time it was. Tomorrow was the official performance of *The Triumvirate*, and after that, the last week of school. Somewhere out there, perhaps not far away, the Gatekeeper was lurking, waiting for its human host. And here, inside the very same walls, *was* that host, preparing herself for the task that would make her worthy. And somehow, in some way, James was meant to stop it all from happening. *Your father's battle is over*, the dryad had said, *yours begins*. They were not comforting words, but they were the words that rang over and over in his head, following him as he descended, slowly, into a fitful, dreamless sleep.

Nearby, Scorpius Malfoy lay awake, watching, not speaking or moving. When he was certain that James had finally drifted back into sleep, he slid out of his own bed. Tiptoeing, he crossed the room, passing before the window and casting his shadow over James. Scorpius leaned over carefully, squinting. He didn't have his glasses, but the moonlight was very bright and Scorpius could just make out James' handwritten words. He scowled at them for a long time, unmoving in the moonlight. Finally, Scorpius made his way back to his own bed.

Unlike James, Scorpius did not sleep for the rest of the night.



"Today's the big day!" Noah proclaimed, plopping into a seat next to James at the breakfast table. "Eat up, 'Treas'. Can't have you fainting onstage, can we? After all, *you* don't have an understudy."

James groaned. The tables seemed unusually crowded this morning since some of the families planning to attend the performance had arrived the evening before. Ralph's dad, Denniston Dolohov, sat with him at the Slytherin table, smiling uncertainly at the noisome throng. Noah's own parents sat at the head of the Gryffindor table with Steven, his brother.

“Shouldn’t you be sitting with your family?” James asked grumpily.

“Bad luck, mate,” Noah said wisely, tapping the side of his nose. “None of the family are supposed to see you before the performance. S’t tradition, isn’t it?”

Sabrina shook her head, wobbling the quill that was stuck in her red hair. “You’re thinking of weddings, you prat. Grooms and brides aren’t supposed to see each other.”

“Well, where do you think they got the idea?” Noah asked around a mouthful of toast. “After all, what’s a wedding but a big real-life performance?”

“You’re not nervous, are you, James?” Sabrina asked, ignoring Noah.

“I might be, a little,” James admitted. “I mean, I never expected we’d be packing out the amphitheater. A lot more people are coming than I thought. Seems like everybody’s family is going to be here, doesn’t it?”

“My mum’s coming,” Sabrina said, nodding. “And my Uncle Hastur. He went to Hogwarts himself about a hundred years ago and this will be his first time back.”

Graham piped up, “Both my parents are coming even though I’m just a page boy. I only have one line, but they act like I’m the star of the whole show.”

“I wish you *were* the star of the whole show,” James said, slumping onto his folded arms.

“Does somebody have a spot of stage fright?” Rose asked brightly, settling into a seat opposite James.

“He’s got it bad,” Noah said, nudging James with his elbow. “At this rate, he’ll be useless by the time the curtains go up. I might have to play both parts! Fortunately, I’m up to it.”

“Treas and Donovan’s swordfight might be a bit of a challenge,” Graham suggested, squinting thoughtfully.

In an effort to change the subject, James asked, “Where’s Petra this morning? Are her parents coming?”

“I saw her in the common room this morning,” Noah answered. “Looked like she was working on her lines still. She was studying something pretty hard. I didn’t interrupt her. I assume her family is coming, but she hasn’t talked much about it.”

“I asked her yesterday if her parents were coming,” Sabrina nodded. “She said she’d be seeing them both tonight. It’ll be cool to meet everybody’s families, don’t you think? The only other time we see them is on platform nine and three-quarters, and that’s always so rushed.”

“Yeah,” Graham said, rolling his eyes. “Nothing I like more than getting my cheeks pinched by everybody *else’s* grandma.”

“If only your cheeks weren’t so ruddy cute,” Noah said, reaching across the table. Graham batted him away, scowling.

James found it difficult to concentrate on any of his classes. In fact, with so many parents and family members arriving throughout the day, few professors seemed to expect much from their classes at any rate. Regardless, James was glad of the distractions. He tried very hard to take notes during Divination despite the fact that Professor Trelawney seemed to frown on anything other than practical demonstrations.

“Divination is an *instinct*, not a *study*, Mr. Potter,” she trilled, stopping next to his desk and tapping his parchment with one long, purple fingernail. “Your work is to hone the latent ability inside the gifted

witch and wizard, not merely to repeat techniques and theories. Let go of your boundaries and allow yourself to truly *see*, my boy. What fate do you divine for yourself in the octocards?"

James blinked up at Trelawney, then glanced down at the strew of octagonal cards on the table in front of him. "Oh, er, I see this one, which has a star on it," he said, pulling a card out at random. "Stars represent pain, and, er... Christmas. It means that I'm going to be run down by a lorry next holiday, but that I won't be killed, just really, really hurt," he looked up at Trelawney again, judging her response. "I'll probably die weeks later, in the hospital... er... right?"

Trelawney's face changed to a bemused smile and she ruffled his hair indulgently. "You are trying too hard, dear boy. You chose a star because that's what *you* shall be this night." Trelawney sighed mistily and drifted toward the front of the room. "Few people know it, but I was a rather gifted performer myself in my younger years. There are those today who still speak of my singing performance in the Hogsmeade Players production of *The Amazing Abazrial's Show of Shows*. Alas, I submitted instead to the burdensome calling of Seer and teacher, thus curtailing my own storied career on the stage. I am fully assured, however, that your performance tonight, Mr. Potter, will be a delight both sublime and breathtaking. I have already foreseen it." She smiled back at James, her eyes magnified ridiculously in her enormous spectacles.

James glanced aside at Ralph, whose face was as pale and worried as James felt. Considering Professor Trelawney's track record with predictions, her assurances about tonight's performance were anything but comforting.

For the rest of the afternoon, James couldn't help reciting his lines over and over in his head. He was terrified that he would step onto the stage and completely forget every word. It didn't help that everyone seemed to think he should be enjoying the excitement. As he moved through the halls, even older students grinned and clapped him on the shoulder, wishing him good luck and telling him to 'break a wand'.

He saw his mum and sister fleetingly after dinner on his way to the amphitheater. They'd just arrived at the castle, having taken the train from London. Lily was wide-eyed, so enamored by the castle and the bustle of the students that she barely noticed her older brother. His mum, on the other hand, seemed almost impossibly proud of James.

"Oh, you've just become such a man," she said, brushing his shoulders and straightening his tie. "You'll be simply wonderful, James. You aren't nervous, are you?"

"Between people telling me how great I'm going to be and asking me if I'm nervous," James said, sighing, "I'm wondering why I ever signed up for this part to begin with."

Ginny clucked her tongue. "You signed up because you knew you could do it, and obviously, everyone agrees. Now just try to relax. You won't do yourself any favors by worrying about it."

"Easy for you to say," James grumped.

"It is, actually," Ginny agreed, smiling at her son. "Because unlike the rest of the people here, I know *exactly* what you are capable of, James. Relax, you'll remember this night for the rest of your life. Try to enjoy the moment."

James nodded. "Did you bring the Omnioculars?"

"Your Uncle Ron has them," Ginny replied, rolling her eyes. "He insists on recording the play himself. I told him he could do it so long as he let Hermione help. They stopped over in Hogsmeade to

meet up with George, Angelina, and Ted. They should be here in half an hour or so, and they're bringing a little surprise for you."

James had forgotten how many of his own family and friends were going to be in attendance. He felt another pang of nervous fear but quelled it. Truthfully, now that the moment was nearly upon him, he felt a little better about the performance. One way or another, it would be over soon. After the production, Professor Curry had arranged for something called a 'wrap party' in the Great Hall, complete with punch and an array of sweets. All the cast and crew would be there along with their families. It was a great relief to know that in less than three hours, James would be there as well, eating cake and congratulating Petra, Noah, and the rest on their completed performance. Thinking that, James left his mum and sister, telling them he'd see them afterwards. Ginny smiled and nodded, shooing him on.

The ushers outside the amphitheater's main entry saw James coming. Hugo Paulson, resplendent in his red coat and pillbox cap, opened a door for him. "Curry was looking for you," he said as James passed. "They want to get you into your beard right away. Gennifer insists she could charm you to grow a real one for the night, but Curry isn't going for it. Looks like it's glue and goat hair for you after all."

James nodded, hardly hearing Hugo. As he came into the amphitheater he stopped and looked down at the stage. It bustled with activity as the crew manhandled the castle backdrop into place and Professor Curry marched around, testing spotlights and calling for last-minute adjustments. On the stage, Petra glanced up and saw James. She smiled and waved him down. James smiled back, and for the first time he felt a thrill of delight untainted by fear at being part of such an elaborate production. He ran down the main aisle, taking the stairs two at a time.

"There's our Treus," Curry acknowledged as James climbed onto the stage. "Your costume is in the dressing room. Get into it and then get down to make-up, Mr. Potter. Your beard awaits."

James looked around, but there was no sign of Tabitha Corsica. She was probably backstage overseeing the costuming and make-up. He hoped he wouldn't see her as he ducked behind the castle backdrop, heading for the makeshift changing rooms.

The boys' dressing room was crowded with bustling characters struggling into tight-fitting coats, leotards, and baggy pantaloons. Cameron Creevey stopped James as he passed.

"Is this hat on right?" he asked, turning the strange headwear this way and that. "It's a five-corner hat, right? But what corner goes in front? Does it matter?"

"You'll have to ask Gennifer, Cam. I don't have the foggiest notion. Looks fine to me like it is."

"Gennifer's busy in the girls' changing room," Cameron fretted. "I just don't want to look like an idiot in front of everybody!"

Noah called over from the three-way mirror, "Honestly, I think you have it upside down, Cameron. Try flipping it over."

James stopped Cameron as the boy scrambled to invert his hat. "He's winding you up, Cam. Leave it alone."

"And you've got your cummerbund on all wrong," Noah added. "You're supposed to wear it over your bum like a diaper. See how Graham's wearing his?"

James rolled his eyes and took advantage of the overall confusion to slip past Cameron. Sure enough,

he found his costume hung on a hook next to his locker. His name had been pinned to the front on a piece of parchment. The curtain wasn't scheduled to go up for nearly an hour, but James couldn't help feeling that he needed to hurry. He was buttoning the last of the many buttons of his vest when a voice spoke directly behind him, startling him badly.

"Hiya, James!" Zane chirped. "Can you give me a quick boost here?"

James turned, exasperated and bemused. "Zane! You have to stop popping up like that!" Impatiently, James produced his wand and shot a quick Stinging Hex at the blonde boy, who yelped in pain and dropped the huge bouquet of flowers he'd been holding.

"Yow!" Zane cried, clutching his bottom. "That really smarts! What was that for?"

"Zane?" James said, reaching out to touch his friend. "It's *really* you? I thought you were another mad Doppelganger message! What are you doing here?"

"Well, I *was* trying to reach that vase on the shelf there," Zane said, rolling his eyes. "But now I'm thinking I'll just leave this good luck bouquet right there on the floor, what do you say?"

"It really *is* you!" James said, struggling not to laugh. "I'm really sorry, mate! I thought you needed a magical boost like the other times. I really didn't mean to Sting you in the... but how'd you get here?"

Zane shrugged and grinned. "I got out of school day before yesterday. When I talked to your mum over the holidays, she asked if I'd like to ride along with them to see your big performance. How could I turn it down? My parents agreed and I rode the Floo Network over to your place in London first thing this morning. How 'bout them apples?"

"That's excellent!" James exclaimed. "How long are you here for?"

"Rest of the week, if it's all right with old Merlin Magicpants. You two still on the outs?"

James opened his mouth to explain, then shook his head. "I don't know. It's complicated. Ask me after the show, all right?"

"You got it," Zane nodded. "I better get back out front. Your mum is saving me a place, but it's going to be standing room only, and some of those parents can get pretty cutthroat about seats. By the way, it's probably best if you don't get too close to the red flowers with the yellow tips. Those came from George, and he was grinning an awful lot about 'em."

James nodded seriously, glancing down at the bouquet on the floor. "Understood, thanks."

Damien Damascus pressed toward the boys, a prop sheep under one arm.

"James, come on!" he called. "Gennifer's going to have twin hinkypunks if you aren't wearing a goatee in five minutes. Hey, Zane, need a zap?"

"Nope, I'm good for the night," Zane said, patting his backside. "See you at the party, you guys!"

James scrambled after Damien, struggling to button the last of his buttons and already hot in his tights and waistcoat. After a moment, he stopped, ran back, and grabbed the enormous prop sword and scabbard. Clanking, he trotted to make-up, his stage fright mostly forgotten in the rush of simply getting ready and his happiness at seeing his friend.

Gennifer was holding James' goatee in her hands as he ran up and plopped into a chair.

"Honestly," she said, swabbing the beard with a foul-smelling, yellowish glue, "for the amount of

trouble Muggles have to go through to put on a show like this, I'm surprised they do it at all."

"Maybe that's why they watch so much telly," Victoire commented from a nearby chair. "My mum says Muggle children spend more time in front of the telly than they do asleep."

Damien was still standing nearby. He sniffed, "But not as much time as Victoire spends in front of the mirror every day, so that's all right, then."

Victoire scoffed, ignoring the laughter that followed.

Five minutes later, James stood offstage alongside Petra, who looked beautiful, if a bit overstuffed, in her huge pink dress and curls. James peered carefully around the edge of the curtain. The amphitheater was indeed almost full, with loads more people still filing in, seeking seats, and babbling enthusiastically. James scanned the crowd, finally finding his mum in the middle section, ten rows back. Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron sat on her right, apparently arguing over who was going to handle the Omnioculars. Ted Lupin sat next to Ron. He'd shortened his hair again, although it was still longer than it had been when he'd been in school last year. He looked much better than the last time James had seen him, although still slightly bedraggled. On Ginny's left, Lily sat up straight in her good yellow dress. She spied James and grinned, waving excitedly. James smiled back at her and waved surreptitiously, trying not to attract anyone else's attention. He placed a finger to his lips in a shushing gesture, and she nodded, pretending to zip her lips. As James watched, Zane sidled past a group of annoyed parents, heading toward the empty seat between George and Lily. Satisfied, James turned back to Petra and the assembling actors. Nearby, Scorpius was dressed in a soldier's outfit similar to James'. He didn't seem to be enjoying it.

"Nervous?" Petra asked quietly.

"Yeah," James nodded, "but excited, too. You?"

Petra turned to look out at the dark stage behind the curtain. She shook her head slowly. "Not any more. It'll all be over tonight, no matter what."

Jason Smith trotted out of the backstage darkness, his wand lit. "Anybody seen Corsica?" he whispered harshly, looking from face to face.

James shook his head. "She's not out front? She's supposed to be managing the ushers."

"None of you?" Jason asked, dismissing James. "Bloody hell."

As he stalked away again, muttering under his breath, Henrietta Littleby shrugged. "I saw her an hour ago, but that was before any of us were supposed to be here. I guess that doesn't count, does it?"

"Where was she?" James asked, turning to Henrietta.

"She was in the second-floor girls' bathroom," Henrietta replied. "I didn't hang around in there when I saw her. She gives me the heebies, she does."

James frowned, thinking.

Henrietta, whose reputation as a gossip was well-known, went on, "Strange thing was she wasn't really *using* the bathroom. At least not the way one normally uses it. She was just standing there looking at herself in one of the mirrors, talking. The first thing I thought was that she was practicing her lines, but then I remembered she doesn't *have* any lines, does she? She's the assistant director." Henrietta giggled.

"She was talking to herself?" James asked curiously. "What was she saying?"

Henrietta blinked at him. "How should I know? I didn't hang about long enough to notice. But it

sounded kind of foreign now that I think about it. How weird is that? Pretty weird, if you ask me.”

“Yeah,” James nodded thoughtfully. “Weird.”

Standing nearby, Scorpius narrowed his eyes.

“Places, everyone!” Curry suddenly rasped, approaching the gaggle of costumed students and making shooing motions. “Behind the curtain! Come now, it’s almost time!”

James followed Petra as she ducked behind the curtain, moving to her opening mark. James found the little taped ‘X’ on the floor, marking his position for the beginning of act one. His heart was pounding, but he was no longer nervous. Somehow, he’d left his stage fright backstage. Now that he was standing up front, waiting for the curtain to rise, he simply felt excitement. It thrummed in his arms and legs like magic, and in that moment, he thought he understood why even Muggles went to all the trouble to put on productions like this. One could come to love this feeling if they weren’t careful. He gulped and looked aside. Petra saw him and smiled a crooked smile, nodding once. Across the stage, Noah and the rest of the actors shuffled nervously into place, lost in semi-darkness behind the huge, thick curtain. Through it, James could still hear the babble of hundreds of voices. Then, finally, there was the clack of Professor Curry’s heels crossing the stage on the other side of the curtain. A spotlight clicked on, framing her; James could see her shadow on the backside of the curtains, caged in the center of a perfect circle of light. The crowd fell silent and a round of polite applause wafted into the air. It sounded eerily close. Curry held up her hands and nodded.

“Thank you, ladies and gentlemen,” she said loudly and clearly, not using her wand to amplify her voice, “and thank you as well for being here tonight. I know that many of you have come from quite far away, and on behalf of the students who’ve worked so hard to prepare tonight’s production, many thanks indeed. My name is Tina Grenadine Curry, and as many of you know, I am Hogwarts’ Professor of Muggle Studies. I believe tonight’s presentation will be particularly interesting, not only because this is such a classic tale of the wizarding world, but because, as a term-long exercise for my Muggle Studies class, this production shall be presented in an entirely non-magical fashion. As such, prepare to be amazed, amused, and delighted, my friends, by the extremely creative and unconventional methods we’ve implemented to portray this beloved story. And now, ladies and gentlemen, without further ado, may I present your sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and family, as they depict for you this Hogwarts Muggle Studies rendition of... *The Triumvirate!*”

Applause rang out again, deafeningly this time, as Damien Damascus and Ralph began to hoist the curtains. Jerkily, the red velvet rose, and as it did, the applause grew louder. Spotlights came on, picking out the revealed stage elements. One of them glared on James, blinding him temporarily and hiding the audience. He struggled not to squint, remaining perfectly still until the curtain was entirely raised. And then, finally, as the applause diminished into silence, the scene on the stage launched into motion. Everyone moved at once, bustling and passing one another, forming a passable representation of a busy medieval square. And then, exactly as planned, Noah’s voice cried out, articulating his lines with meticulous care and volume.

“Tis fine a day t’ appraise the troops, my king,” he blared, stalking across the stage next to Tom

Squallus, who had a pillow stuffed into his vest, creating a fat belly over his skinny legs.

“Indeed,” Squallus bellowed, turning and jamming his hands onto his hips. “And more the better time to ease my daughter’s wonderment for the peasant life. But look, my Astra comes!”

And Petra moved into view, stepping out from behind a painted wooden rampart and into the light of a gold-tinted spotlight. James didn’t have to act as if he was astonished at how beautiful she looked. She smiled fleetingly at the fat king, and then turned to James, allowing her smile to grow more genuine. The crowd tittered and began to applaud again. Many of them knew this scene well, and knew its significance; this was the moment that the princess first spied the army captain with whom she’d soon fall in love. James, on his cue, stepped out of the line of soldiers and bowed over one outstretched leg, doffing his cap grandly. The applause was delighted and amused, and James suddenly decided that acting was a lot easier than he had expected.

Act one proceeded with nearly effortless speed and ease. James found his lines coming easily to his tongue, and he pronounced them loudly and carefully, always being aware to face the audience and keep his chin up. During Donovan’s famous address to the troops, James allowed his eye to wander out over the crowd. He could barely see through the glare of the spotlights, but he could just make out the delighted smile and straight posture of his mum, the grim concentration of Lily as she tried to follow the story, and the crooked half-frown of Zane.

During the scene change for act two, James was hastily stripped of his waistcoat and given a sailor’s kerchief. As he moved onstage, preparing to give his rousing—and very well-known—rallying speech, he saw Graham and Jason Smith manning the treadles of the wind machine. He launched into the speech, trying to summon the same anger and determination he’d felt when auditioning for the part early in the term.

“Wizards and men, forth draw ye wands and wits,” he cried, unbuckling his scabbard and letting it fall to the floor. He produced the oversized prop wand and raised it. “To fight the violent seas this night, that by the morn we’ll hold our win, or lie in beds of ocean sand: our beaten glory’s shrine!”

Just offstage, Graham and Jason treadled furiously as the crowd burst into applause and even a few hoots and whistles. The prop sail flapped in the increasing mechanical wind as if in the teeth of an oncoming storm, and the enormous painted backdrop trundled aside, revealing an angry cloudscape painted with blues and purples.

The presentation marched on with its own strange inertia, bowling over the myriad little bumbles, forgotten lines, and missed cues that Professor Curry had promised would happen—and assured them the audience would barely notice. Graham appeared onstage for his scene, his face beet red and his eyes as round as plates. He’d been so worried about missing the cue for his only line that he interrupted the line before it, answering the question that hadn’t even been asked yet. Tom Squallus sputtered, trying to make sense of his own scripted response, as Graham grinned in relief, looking out at the audience and struggling not to wave at his parents. A bit later, Ashley Doone performed such an enthusiastic presentation of the Marsh Hag that James heard children crying in the audience. And then, during the magical sword fight between Treus and Donovan, which was performed in midair while suspended from a complicated system of ropes and pulleys, James’ sword was accidentally knocked from his hand during a particularly enthusiastic parry. It clanked to

the floor and both James and Noah stared down at it dumbly for a moment. Then James, in a fit of inspiration, furiously unbuckled his scabbard and waved it triumphantly over his head. Noah grinned and they finished the swordfight clanging sword to scabbard as the crowd laughed and cheered.

Finally, the climactic finale of act three was upon them. The king was dead, Donovan was defeated, and Treus, mortally wounded but clinging to life, had rescued Astra from the vengeful sleeping potion of the Marsh Hag. The castle had been struck by lightning and was crumbling into flames as a magical storm beat upon it, and James felt pretty sure that he knew now why this story was known as a tragedy. He limped across the stage, leading Petra toward the huge prop gate. The gate shook back and forth as Ralph and Sabrina stood behind it, rocking it with all their strength. Jason and Graham had once again manned the wind machine, billowing the castle's banners with a good imitation of a magical gale; swinging orange spotlights mimed the effect of raging flames and lightning. James stumbled dramatically as he led his beloved Astra toward the gate.

"Advance! We're nearly free," Petra cried, dropping to one knee next to James, as if imploring him. "The castle's doomed, but hope prevails! O Treus, curse it not!"

James was sweating under his costume, and it gave his face a fittingly dramatic sheen in the flashing lights. He smiled weakly at Petra and reached for her face. "I curse not hope," he said, and then coughed. "I've braved the tempest's watery wrath and fell that sorcerer's might. I've cursed them all to gaze upon your loving face, but hope? What life I've left, I live in barricades of hope. Though God Himself may shake this world to fall upon itself, my love and hope remain. Depart my dear and leave me now: I walk to death in peace!"

"Pray no, beloved!" Petra cried, and even James was impressed by the mixture of anger and desperation she put into those three words. "For months and years I've longed for thee alone: my dreams, the home of thy desperate love! I'll not depart my place at body's side, lest unrequited dreams shall crush my soul!"

"Then give me now a testament to love," James said firmly, struggling to his feet and pulling Petra with him. "A kiss to cure the pains of death, this one to stand for all!"

Petra hesitated, her eyes shining with emotion, and James was impressed with her acting. For a fleeting moment, he was quite glad that they had never rehearsed this scene together, for he felt sure that the spontaneous chemistry of this moment could only happen once. Petra leaned toward him, still holding his right hand. She closed her eyes as the lights began to dim and the wind machine cranked up to full power, streaming through her long hair. And then, as James closed his eyes, not even remembering to miss Petra's lips, a bolt of blinding pain sank into his forehead. It burned through his phantom scar worse than anything he'd felt so far, and he stumbled, yanking his hand from Petra's to clap it to his forehead. The lights blinked off and the stage fell into pitch darkness.

The wind machine hadn't stopped however. In fact, it seemed to be far stronger than James had ever felt it. It pushed him as he reeled, and he fell to the floor in the darkness, his right hand still clamped to his forehead. There was a long, ominous creak and then a resounding crash. Dimly, James understood that the wind machine had blown over the gate prop and that it had just missed him.

"Petra!" he shouted, struggling to get up. There was movement all over the stage, and even now, the

wind machine hadn't stopped running. Something was very wrong. Wands were lit on the stage, and James had a sense of stage-hands rushing about, struggling to keep the rest of the set from blowing over. He scrambled to his knees, trying to make sense of what was happening.

"Shut it down!" someone rasped desperately.

"I can't! It's running by itself!"

"It's shaking apart! Look out!"

Suddenly, spotlights illuminated the stage again, blinding James. At that same moment, the wind machine produced a loud screech and rattle. One of the fan blades wrenched free and spun through the air, slamming into the turret backdrop. Off balance, the machine shook violently and tilted over. Stage-hands scattered as it loomed slowly and crashed to the stage floor where it finally clanked to a halt.

Amazingly, no one seemed to have been hurt. James spun on the spot, looking for Petra. As he'd suspected, the enormous prop gate had fallen at his feet. For a moment, James was sure that Petra was beneath it. He dropped to his knees but could find no sign of her. She must have fallen safely on the other side.

The house lights came up as Professor Curry rushed out on stage. The audience was babbling with alarm. Many people had stood, peering anxiously at the stage and calling the names of their children and relatives.

"Please, calm down," Professor Curry called, but her voice was lost in the rising chaos. "No one is hurt! Do return to your seats, everything is under control—"

A woman's scream pierced the amphitheater, and James gasped. The crowd fell silent as everyone looked to the source of the scream. James, from his vantage point on the stage, was among the first to see, and his blood chilled.

Ginny looked down at the empty seat next to her, her eyes wild and stunned. "She's gone!" she cried desperately, trying not to panic. "Lily's gone! Where'd she go! She was here just a moment ago! Where's my daughter?!"

Zane stared down at the empty seat between him and Ginny. He glanced up at James, making eye contact, and then ducked down. He reappeared a second later holding a pair of small yellow shoes. His eyes were deadly serious as he held them up. Something had taken Lily, taken her right out of the amphitheater in that moment of dark chaos. Ginny took the shoes from Zane and looked around, her eyes pleading.

"*Lilyyyy!*" she suddenly shrieked, her voice cracking. As if on cue, the audience exploded into frantic motion, scrambling for the exits, rushing the stage, calling names and babbling raucously.

James darted offstage, stripping his costume coat off as he went. In the confusing backstage darkness, he could just see the doorway that led out to the seating area. He had to get to his mum and find out what had happened. He angled toward the door, but something moved out of the darkness, blocking him. James looked up, scrambling to a halt, almost running into the large, dark shape.

"Come with me, boy," a voice rumbled, and a very strong hand clamped onto James' shoulder. Instinctively, James pulled away, but the hand held him firm.

"Let me go!" James exclaimed, anger and panic mingled in his voice.

"You must come with me," Merlin answered, his voice low and calm. "The Gatekeeper is afoot,

James Potter, and it seeks you.”

“No!” James cried, and pulled away with all his might. He wrenched loose from Merlin’s grip and struggled to produce his wand. Merlin stepped after him, and James saw that he had his staff with him. There was no fighting the Headmaster. Without thinking, he ducked and leapt under Merlin’s arm.

“James!” Merlin roared after him, but James refused to listen. He threw himself through the doorway and fell into the crowd, bowling several people over.

“Mum!” he called, climbing onto a seat and scanning the crowd. “*Mum!*”

A hand tugged at James’ sleeve and he lunged away, toppling off the seat and landing on a large figure, who grunted.

“Ow! You’re heavier than you look!” the figure bawled, struggling out from beneath him.

“Ralph!” James cried, getting up. “What’s happening?”

Zane appeared next to Ralph, helping them both to their feet. “We have to get out of here,” he said over the noise of the crowd. “This place is a mess, and we know Lily isn’t here. Rose is waiting for us just inside the castle. Come on!”

“Where’s Mum?” James called as the three threaded through the crowd.

“Your Uncle Ron and Aunt Hermione took her inside as well,” Zane answered. “George and Ted are already planning to search the castle. Since it’s impossible to Disapparate from the school grounds, Lily must still be here somewhere.”

Ralph’s face was tense with anger. “Who did this? Do you think this is what Corsica’s been planning? Does it have to do with the Gatekeeper?”

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” James replied as the three ran through the archway leading into the castle. Rose had been watching for them. She jumped forward to join them, her face pale and scared. Panting, James took a moment to tell them of his encounter with Merlin.

“He said the Gatekeeper was looking for you?” Rose asked. “What’s that mean? Why?”

James shook his head. “Who knows? The point is, he knows something big is going down tonight. He wanted me out of the way!”

“Nobody has seen Tabitha all night,” Ralph interjected. “She never showed up for the play. Curry was right mad about it. She *must* be behind Lily’s disappearance!”

“She’s involved, no doubt,” a new voice answered. James turned to see Scorpius approaching, his face tight and anxious. He shook his head. “Look, this isn’t how Grandfather said it’d happen... it’s all wrong. I came to help, if I could.”

Rose spoke up, “*You* said your grandfather never *told* you how Tabitha was supposed to become the host of the Gatekeeper!”

“Yeah,” Scorpius said quickly, meeting Rose’s eye. “Well, I know a little more than I let on, all right? I can explain now or we can start looking for James’ sister. What do you think, Weasley?”

“What else haven’t you told us?” James demanded, advancing on Scorpius.

Scorpius averted his eyes impatiently. “Look, all I know is that this isn’t how the plan was explained to me. I don’t know the details, but I *do* know this is all wrong. The longer we stand here arguing, the more danger your sister is in. Do you understand?”

James narrowed his eyes.

“You must be Scorpius,” Zane interjected, sticking out his hand. “I’ve heard loads about you. I’m Zane. I may have to curse you later, so I thought it’d be best to get introductions out of the way now.”

Ralph rolled his eyes impatiently. “Come on! Let’s just go to the Great Hall! That’s where your mum went with everyone else. We can help with the search party.”

“No,” James said, still looking at Scorpius. “There’s only one place we need to look, isn’t there? Second-floor girls’ bathroom, where Henrietta last saw Tabitha.”

Rose frowned. “Why would she be there?”

“I wondered the same thing when Henrietta said that,” James replied, already leading the way down the corridor. “But then I remembered: that’s where Moaning Myrtle lives.”

“Moaning Myrtle?” Zane repeated. “Who’s she?”

“Oh, she’s a resident ghost,” Rose replied. “Lives in the bathroom because that’s where she was killed decades ago.”

Zane screwed up his face as he walked. “She died in the potty? That seems pretty unlikely, doesn’t it?”

“It’s complicated,” Rose answered wearily. “It wasn’t just a bathroom. It was also a portal to... to...” Rose gasped. “James, that’s it!”

James glanced back over his shoulder, nodding. “Henrietta said Tabitha was up there talking to herself in the mirror, using some sort of foreign language.”

Rose’s eyes were wide. “Of *course!* The Bloodline would be a Parselmouth, just like Voldemort! She’d be able to open the Chamber of Secrets even though it’s been closed and sealed all these years! That must be where she took Lily!”

“I’ve been seeing it in my dreams all along,” James said. “If only I’d have recognized it before!”

“Hey!” a voice suddenly called, halting the five in their tracks. James spun, expecting Merlin to come striding out of the shadows, his staff at the ready. Instead, two figures ran out of the darkness, one small and skinny and the other tall and bedraggled.

“Albus!” Rose cried. “Ted! Is it you?”

“Yeah,” Ted panted. “Your mum sent me, James. She’s worried sick about the lot of you.”

“And I came mainly because I sneaked away when Mum wasn’t looking,” Albus proclaimed. “I couldn’t bear just sitting around and doing nothing.”

“Ted, how’d you find us?” Zane asked, frowning.

Ted blew out a deep sigh. “I have skills...” He tapped his nose. “Werewolf skills, if you must know. Between Rose’s soap and the peppermints in Ralph’s pocket, you lot are easier to sniff out than a dead Grindylow.”

“Tell Mum we’re going to find Lily,” James said, straightening. “We know where she is and who has her.”

“Do you now?” Ted replied seriously. “That’s pretty amazing considering your aunt and uncles are currently scouring the entire castle for her. What gives?”

"It's too much to explain," Rose said. "Just pass on the message. We're going to go get her back."

"Nothing doing," Albus said, shaking his head. "She's my sister too. If you know where she is, I'm coming along."

"Albus, it's *Corsica* who has her!" James exclaimed.

"Tabitha Corsica took Lily?" Ted interjected. "Why would she do that? Are you sure?"

"We're sure," Ralph answered, nodding. "And we don't have much time."

"What are we waiting for, then?" Albus said grimly. "I don't care *who* has her. We'll figure out the details after we get her back, all right? Come on!"

The group tramped along the corridor, now running full out. As they filed up the stairs, James heard Ted behind him, speaking in short bursts.

"I'm sorry, Ralph... about the whole trying-to-rip-your-arm-off thing..."

"S'okay," Ralph panted. "Don't mention it..."

"I was angry..." Ted went on, "Petra and me... when we talked that day... it just brought everything back... since she was going through so much of the same... kind of thing..."

James interrupted. "What do you mean, Ted? I thought you two were talking about why you broke up with her?"

They reached the top of the stairs and Rose turned a corner, leading them toward the bathroom.

"Me?" Ted said. "Who told you that? *She* broke it off with *me* months ago. I thought everybody knew that."

"No," James said, "we all thought she'd gone into Hogsmeade that day to try to get back together with you!"

"You think *that's* what we were talking about?" Ted chuckled drily. "Hardly. We were talking about her parents. I thought you lot knew all about it. You saw the package she got from the Ministry, didn't you?"

James was about to answer when Rose turned, pushing open the heavy door to the second-floor girls' bathroom. She barreled in, followed by Ralph and Scorpius. A red flash suddenly glared through the doorway and there was a scream. James yanked Zane down as he ducked. Another flash jetted through the air overhead. Ted lunged through the doorway, rolled, and landed on one knee, his wand out and pointing.

"Stop!" he shouted.

James was still crouched in the open bathroom doorway. He raised his head and saw Ralph splayed unconscious on the tile floor. Tabitha Corsica was standing over him in the middle of the room, grinning humorlessly. Her hair was askew and her eyes were wild. She had one arm crooked around Rose's neck, yanking the smaller girl nearly off the floor. With her other hand, she poked her wand at Rose's temple.

"Well!" Tabitha exclaimed glassily. "Isn't this quite the party? I hadn't expected so many of you, nor quite this soon, but it wasn't as if I wasn't prepared, was it?"

"Tabitha!" Scorpius said, stepping forward, his own wand out. "What are you doing?"

"As if you didn't know, Scorpius Malfoy," she cried, giggling a little. "I might ask you the same thing! When I saw that you were accompanying this little entourage, I admit I wondered at your own intent."

“This isn’t the way it’s supposed to happen,” Scorpius said, taking another step forward. “I never agreed to a kidnapping.”

“Your grandfather *knew* you wouldn’t have the stomach for what this night truly required, Scorpius!” Tabitha declared triumphantly. “But you were never really necessary anyway! Ever since the little *service* you performed last summer, you’ve been merely a *pawn*. Your grandfather told me so himself!”

“*What* service?” James demanded, getting to his feet and producing his own wand. “What’s she talking about, Scorpius?”

“James, get *down!*” Ted exclaimed, not taking his eyes off Tabitha. “All of you, get back while you can!”

“James,” Rose murmured, trying to twist away from Tabitha’s wand, “just go!”

“Tell them, Scorpius!” Tabitha commanded, renewing her grip on Rose’s neck. “Tell them just how much of a ‘trustworthy friend’ you are! Tell them how you’ve played them all for fools!”

Scorpius’ wand trembled in his hand as he pointed it at her. He glanced aside at James, his eyes bright and scared.

Tabitha laughed again. “You might do yourself a favor, James Potter, by wondering how I knew so many of you were coming, and exactly when. Ask yourself how I came to be so well-prepared for your arrival. Can you guess? I think even *you* can!”

It was Albus who answered, calling over James’ shoulder. “*You* have the Marauder’s Map!” he said, both shocked and disappointed. “But Tabitha, why?”

“Oh, my dear Albus, the important question is not ‘why’, it is ‘how’,” Tabitha replied. “You see, Lucius Malfoy has a rather good thief in his service. *Doesn’t* he, Scorpius?”

Scorpius shook his head angrily, interrupting her. “All right! Just shut up, Corsica! If you insist, I *will* tell them. It was *I* who took the map and the Cloak! Are you happy?” He lowered his wand and turned to James, his face tortured. “Look, I lied. It was me. I rode along with my parents the day they went to your grandfather’s funeral. I told them I’d wait in the car, but... that’s not exactly what I did. While they were gone, I sneaked out of the car and crept into the house. I found your parents’ room and searched it as quickly as I could. *I* stole the Marauder’s Map and the Invisibility Cloak, all under my grandfather’s orders. You have to understand, James, I was confused! I wanted to impress my grandfather, and prove myself as a Malfoy and a Slytherin! I wanted to show him I was better than my own turncoat father. But I didn’t expect it would lead to this! I swear it!”

James was completely stunned. Breathlessly, he asked, “And the doll?”

Scorpius couldn’t meet James’ gaze any longer. He dropped his eyes and nodded. “That hadn’t even been part of the plan. Grandfather hadn’t known of it. I saw it on the bedside table and thought it might be helpful. I thought it’d impress my grandfather. And it *did*, oh yes. He had *grand* plans for that doll, although they didn’t work out quite like he’d wanted.”

“I *knew* you were a rat!” Albus cried, pushing forward. “I smelled you a mile away!”

James held his brother back, and amazingly, Albus relented. “But why did you tell us about

Tabitha?” James asked. “Why did you show us the memories in the Pensieve?”

“*Don’t* answer that, Scorpius!” Tabitha said. “Enough talk. It’s time for the real work of this night to begin. All of you, *away!* Or Weasley dies. If you think I’m bluffing, you’ll know better when she lies dead on the floor and I’ve descended to the Chamber. Now *go!*”

“Tabitha, you’re as deluded as my grandfather!” Scorpius cried angrily. “Let her go! What do you think you’re doing?”

“*I’m doing the work I was created for!*” Tabitha shrieked, jabbing her wand into Rose’s temple. “One thousand years’ planning has come to this! I am the edge of the blade of revenge! *I am the hand of balance! I am the Bloodline of Lord Voldemort!*”

“You?” Scorpius scoffed, stepping forward boldly, not even raising his wand. “If you believe that, then you’re as deceived as I’ve been! We both should have known my grandfather wouldn’t tell anyone the whole of his plan. Put down your wand and let her go!”

“Nooo!” Tabitha wailed, and she seemed to crumple. Her eyes were wild, darting. “*I am the Bloodline!* It is my duty to descend to the Chamber of my forefather! I am the host of the Gatekeeper!”

“You *aren’t*,” Scorpius declared firmly. “If you *were*, you would’ve been able to open the Chamber on your own. But you couldn’t, could you? No matter how hard you tried. Because *you aren’t a Parselmouth!* You’re nothing more than a convenient *distraction!* That was why my grandfather wanted me to show them the memories and make them believe the Bloodline was you: to distract them from the *real Bloodline!*”

“*NOOO!*” Tabitha shrieked again, closing her eyes and crumpling. Her wand wavered and her grip loosened on Rose. Suddenly, impulsively, she pointed her wand at Scorpius.

“*Avada Kedavra!*” she screamed, her face twisting in rage. Green light erupted from her wand.

Scorpius lunged, instinctively turning sideways, just as they’d practiced in Defence Club. The jet of green light missed him by inches, striking the wall behind him and exploding in a burst of sparks. Scorpius’ maneuver knocked him off balance, however, and he struck his head hard on the edge of the sink as he fell. At that moment, James saw Rose’s mouth tighten and she kicked backwards, connecting with Tabitha’s shin. The taller girl’s wail of anger turned into a cry of pain and she stumbled. Rose ducked from beneath Tabitha’s arm and Ted leapt forward. He captured Tabitha as she collapsed, but the fight had completely gone from her. Tabitha dropped her wand and sank to the floor, slipping through Ted’s arms.

“Is he all right?” Rose called, jumping to Scorpius’ side.

“If he isn’t dead,” Albus announced, striding into the room and pointing his wand, “I’ll kill him.”

James gently steered his brother away from the bleeding boy on the floor. “Back off, Al. You can deal with him later. I think he’ll be all right.”

There was a groan as Ralph sat up, rubbing his head. “What happened?” he moaned. “Am I dead?”

“Tabitha Stunned you,” Zane answered, helping Ralph to his feet. “Be glad that’s all it was. She stopped at crazy a few blocks back.”

“*I am the Bloodline,*” Tabitha sobbed. “I’ve *felt* the guiding hand of the Dark Lord! I was promised! My parents would be avenged! No one else meets the requirements! I am the only orphan left within these walls! It *must* be me!”

Ted glanced sharply down at Tabitha. “*What* did you say?”

“I am the only orphan left, Ted Lupin!” she cried, raising her eyes angrily to him. “Now that *you’ve* gone from these halls, it *had* to be me! The prophecies say that a child of tragedy would be the host of the Gatekeeper. *My* parents are *gone*, dead these many years! And Lucius Malfoy has confirmed it! He *told* me how the Ministry killed my father, and how my mother died when I was born!”

Ted was shaking his head slowly. “That’s not true,” he said. He glanced back at James, his face grave. “Then none of you know, do you? I assumed she’d told you, just like she told me.”

James shook his head. “Who? Told us what?”

“That day at Hogsmeade,” Ted answered. “She needed to talk to me because she’d just found out about her parents. She wanted to talk to someone who’d gone through the same kind of loss. She never knew until the package came. It was too much for her to bear... to find out so much, so fast...”

“Petra?” James said, stepping forward. “You mean the package from her father?”

Ted frowned and shook his head. “James, it wasn’t *from* her father. The *Ministry* sent it. It was all of her father’s *belongings*. He’d willed them to her when he died in Azkaban years ago. When she turned seventeen, the Ministry released them to her. She never even knew he’d been incarcerated. Amongst the old shirts and shoes, there was a note. It was addressed to the baby daughter he’d never met. He told her he believed that the guards would soon kill him, but that he couldn’t do anything to stop it. They thought he was protecting his former Death Eater employers, but he really wasn’t. He didn’t know anything about them; they’d never told him their names or even showed him their faces. He wanted Petra to know that he would have turned his bosses in if he could’ve, and that... well, that he loved her, and that he was sorry he’d never be there for her.”

“It was Petra?” James whispered, barely allowing himself to consider it. “That can’t be!”

Ted nodded seriously. “She doubted it herself. She went to Merlin about it, and showed him the letter. He offered to show her the truth in that Magic Mirror of his, but he warned her that she might not truly wish to know. She looked anyway, and she saw it all, exactly as it’d happened. They threw her father into the Dementor pit. It was... it was awful. She was completely devastated.”

Rose glanced from James to Ted, her eyes wide. “But she never told anyone she was an orphan, did she? We all assumed she had a mum and dad like the rest of us!”

“Petra was raised by her grandparents, but she never told us that,” Ted replied. “The Gremlins and I, whenever we saw them at the station, we just assumed they were her parents and that they’d had her late in life. She never talked about them, and we always sort of guessed that she didn’t have a very happy home life. They’d only ever told her that her mother had died in childbirth. They never spoke of her father at all, and Petra learned not even to ask.”

“I should’ve known,” James said, touching his forehead. “I saw her in my dreams over and over. I believed it was Tabitha because I couldn’t see her face, but it all fits now. The dark shape in the corner... it talked about restoring the people she’d lost. It told her she would be allowed to avenge them, and even get them back. I even saw them... her parents, reflecting in a sort of glowing green pool! Petra believes the Ministry killed her father, and her mother died as a result, and now she’s going to do what she thinks she has to do to get them back! The dark shape in my dreams, it said there was only one way to do it—blood for blood!”

“Lily!” Rose gasped, covering her mouth.

“She wouldn’t!” Albus said, shaking his head. “Petra would never hurt Lily. Would she?”

“Morganstern!?” Tabitha half sobbed. “Impossible!”

“Not really,” a different voice answered mournfully. “If you think about it, I mean.”

Everyone turned to a ghostly figure seated on the windowsill in the corner.

“Myrtle!” Rose cried. “How long have you been there?”

“*That’s* Moaning Myrtle?” Zane asked, arching an eyebrow. “I expected something a little more... er...”

“It’s *rude* to speak of people as if they aren’t there,” Myrtle chided sadly. “Even if, technically speaking... they aren’t. But don’t worry, I’m... *used* to it.” She sighed hugely.

James spoke up. “Sorry, Myrtle, but this is really important. What do you know about this?”

“Oh, *now* everyone runs to Myrtle, don’t they? ‘What have you seen, Myrtle?’ ‘Tell us everything you know, Myrtle.’ But I know how it goes: the moment I tell you, you’ll forget about poor, pathetic Moaning Myrtle. It was the same with your father, James Potter. Your brother looks a lot more like him, even though he’s not got that silly fake scar on his forehead.”

“What’s she talking about, James?” Albus asked out of the corner of his mouth.

James shook his head. “I’m sorry, Myrtle, but this is really serious. Our sister is in trouble. You have to help us!”

“I know,” Myrtle cooed. “Poor little Lily. Perhaps she’ll keep me company here in the toilet.”

“Myrtle!” James cried, exasperated, but Rose placed a hand on his chest, stopping him. She turned to the ghostly figure, a thoughtful look on her face.

“You know, Myrtle, if you help us, I bet Lily’s father would be really grateful. I bet he’d even come to visit you, to tell you how much he appreciates all your help.”

Myrtle looked petulantly at Rose. “Harry? He wouldn’t. Would he? He probably doesn’t even remember me.”

“I’m certain that he does,” Rose said confidently. “I’ve heard him speak of you. He’d probably be very pleased to, er... catch up with you.”

Myrtle seemed to brighten a bit. “Do you really think so? Oh, it’s been so long, but I knew he’d come back someday. I’ve always had a special place for him.”

“Yes,” Rose nodded. “But first, do tell us. What have you seen? What do you know about Petra?”

“Oh yes,” Myrtle replied morosely. “Poor thing. She never once spoke to me, you know, all the times she was here. She probably believed I couldn’t see her under that Invisibility Cloak, but those only work on the living.”

Zane stepped forward. “*Petra* has the Cloak! When was she here, Myrtle? What did she do?”

Myrtle flitted down next to Zane and placed a ghostly arm around his shoulders. “Oh, *often*. She spent the most time down there over the holidays, when few other people were in the school. But she’s been down there at least once a week lately. I don’t know what she does down there, of course. I, er... don’t follow her. But then, not twenty minutes ago, she came through with little Lily. Just before Tabitha came back again with that silly map.”

“Where did Petra take Lily, Myrtle?” Ted asked impatiently. “Did they go into the Chamber of Secrets?”

“Well, of course, you silly boy,” Myrtle said, tilting her head coquettishly. “Where else?”

Albus shook his head, exasperated. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

Myrtle peered at him mistily. “Because no one ever asked,” she answered simply.

James turned, stalking back into the center of the room. “How do we get down there?” he demanded. “Where’s the door?”

“Hah!” Tabitha exclaimed, still crumpled on the floor under the watchful eye of Ted Lupin. “You’ll never get through! If *I* couldn’t open it, *no* one can! Only the true Bloodline can speak the incantation to open the Chamber of Secrets!”

“Is that true, Myrtle?” Rose asked, turning back to the ghost.

“Oh no,” Myrtle replied, shaking her head slowly. “No, no, no. Loads of people have opened the Chamber. That horrible Ron Weasley opened it years ago, just by imitating the sounds Harry Potter had made. If *he* could do it, *anyone* could.”

“You worthless little—” Tabitha cried, straightening. “All that time you watched me trying... You let me make a fool of myself!”

“You didn’t need *my* help,” Myrtle sniffed.

“Myrtle,” James said seriously, stepping carefully toward the ghost. “We don’t have much time. Can you tell us the incantation?”

“Don’t you *dare!*” Tabitha exclaimed, her voice splintering.

“That’s enough out of you, Corsica,” Ted warned, raising his wand. “Shut up or I’ll Stun you. It’s the least you deserve.”

“It’s an *awful* sound,” Myrtle said, ignoring Tabitha. “It gives me shivers to hear it, and *I’m dead*. I always jumped down into my U-bend before Petra said the incantation.”

“Please, Myrtle,” Rose begged. “How does it go? *We have* to get down there.”

Myrtle looked sideways at Rose, raising one eyebrow. “You really think Harry will come and see me? You promise?”

“I promise,” Rose nodded. “Please tell us.”

Myrtle sighed and flitted slowly to the center of the room. Carefully, she opened her mouth and produced a horrible, hissing noise. It was guttural, almost gurgling. It made James’ hair stand up.

When she was finished, Zane looked around and asked, “So who’s going to do it? I know I can’t make a sound like that.”

Ralph took a deep breath. “I’ll try it,” he announced, sighing with resignation. “After all, I’m a Slytherin.”

Nobody argued. Ralph opened his mouth and imitated the noise as well as he could. James thought he did a remarkably good job since the same sounds in Ralph’s mouth still sent chills down his spine. As soon as he finished, a grating rumble shook the bathroom. The sink directly behind Ralph began to lower, receding into the floor. Tabitha gasped and moved aside, her pale face a mask of awe and jealousy.

“Come on,” Ted said grimly. “We have to hurry.”

“You can’t go, Ted,” Rose said, touching Ted’s arm. “Unless you plan on taking Tabitha along, too. She’s a seventh year. I *might* be able to guard her, but I’d feel a lot better if you did it.”

Ted grimaced in frustration, looking away and fingering his wand. Finally, he turned back. “You go,” he said reluctantly. “I’ll guard Corsica, but we won’t leave until you come back, understood? Besides, it’s just Petra down there, right? You’ll be able to talk sense into her. She’d never hurt anyone.”

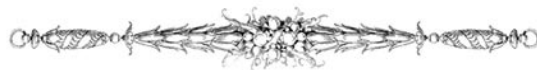
James nodded, but he wasn’t at all sure that Ted was right. Ted hadn’t had the dreams. “Right. Let’s go.” He took a deep breath and turned toward the ancient stairway.

“And James,” Ted called, “tell Petra the same thing she told me! This isn’t the way! Tell her I said that, all right?”

James nodded, and then plunged down the stone steps, his friends following closely.

ONLY TWO MORE CHAPTERS TO GO!

The last chapter of *James Potter and the Curse of the Gatekeeper* will be released Saturday, September 20th at noon, CST. If you have not yet visited the [Grotto Keep Forum](#), do stop in then for the official JPCG Wrap Party! We’re aiming for record users on that day to commemorate the completion of the story. The author will be on hand to answer questions and offer his own thoughts on the tale and the future of the James Potter world. Stop in as a visitor and view the discussion, or register and join in the conversation! Either way, we hope to meet you in the [Grotto](#) this Saturday from noon until whenever. See you there!



TOMORROW'S CHAPTER
WILL BE RELEASED BY
NOON, CENTRAL
STANDARD TIME
BUT IF YOU CAN'T WAIT THAT
LONG, YOU CAN READ MORE
OF THE AUTHOR'S WORK
[RIGHT NOW.](#)

INTERESTED IN SUPPORTING FUTURE
JAMES POTTER STORIES?
TAKE A STROLL THROUGH THE
JP UNDERGROUND:
[ELDERS' CROSSING](#)
[GATEKEEPER'S CURSE](#)

YOU'VE READ THE CHAPTER
NOW GO TALK ABOUT IT:
[THE GROTTTO](#)
[KEEP FORUM](#)
SPECULATIONS,
COGITATIONS, AND
RUMINATIONS