

the girl on the dock



A Petra Morganstern Story by
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The Story of the Story

Greetings, dear reader, and welcome to “The Girl on the Dock”. Before you begin the tale, I thought it might be rather helpful for me to tell you the story of the story.

A little over a year ago, I embarked upon a writing project. It was meant to be just for fun, for my own enjoyment and that of a few family and friends. The project was a cathartic exercise, following the story of a certain well known young wizard—not quite as famous as his father (thus forming the nature of this young wizard’s primary problem) but famous nonetheless. To my surprise, this writing project grew into a full length novel. On a lark, I released the novel online. There, amazingly, it achieved a rather shocking worldwide readership. This led, of course, to a sequel.

With the release of the sequel, I discovered a few interesting things: while based in the essential storyline of another famous author (thus forming the nature of some of my own ticklish problems) these stories had come to encompass an awful lot of original concepts and characters. I

realized with some degree of delight that there was an entirely new storyline embedded there, and that it was unique to me.

Thus, I embarked on a new writing project: I broke away from the trunk of the original idea and I transplanted some of my own unique branches into a new story. This, dear reader, is the result of that experiment.

So what does this mean to you? Well, there are two ways you may choose to enjoy this story:

First, since this tale is, in many ways, a logical progression from my first two novels, you may choose to read those first. They can be found free online, beginning with www.elderscrossing.com. There, you will find the back story of the characters contained herein, which will surely allow you to appreciate this tale on a somewhat broader scale.

Second, you may choose to launch into this story as its own entity. It was written to stand alone, even if much of the back story exists elsewhere. The struggles and concepts that form the core of this story, while fantastic and magical (and rather dark) will be familiar to most readers, even if they've never read the names of these characters before. If you choose to read the story on its own, it will be helpful (though not necessary) for you to be aware of a few things: first, our main character, the teenaged Miss Morganstern, is a member of a secret magical society that exists alongside the non-magical world. Second, she has had a rather unusual last year of schooling, during which she was the center of a rather shocking plot by some very bent wizards. The details of that plot will become known as the following story progresses, but the essential result of that plot was this: Miss Morganstern has discovered that she is cursed with the final, fragmented ghost of the most evil wizard of all time. Like a

flame in a lantern, this wicked shred of soul lives inside her own soul, affecting her, influencing her. In this, Petra is not unlike all of us, cursed as we are with the dual nature of our humanity, constantly struggling between the twin polarities of darkness and light, goodness and selfishness.

And that, dear reader is the story of the story. I hope you enjoy this dark little fairy tale. If you do, let me know. There may be more.

Keep an eye on the water. Something is sure to come out of it.



One

Petra awoke with the early sunlight streaming through the tatters of her curtains, painting golden patterns over the bed and the dingy, mostly bare walls. For the moment, the golden sun-patterns transformed the room into something quiet and cheerful. It made Petra just a little sad as she laid in her bed, blinking slowly, her dark hair spread haphazardly over her pillow, because she knew it wasn't a true picture. Still, it was nice in the moment. In the moment, before the unpleasant bustle of the morning began, she tried to enjoy it.

There were quiet footsteps outside her not-quite-closed bedroom door. A shadow moved in the dimness of the hall. Petra smiled very slightly.

"Petra," a girl's voice whispered. "I left Beatrice in your room. Can I come get her?"

Petra sighed and rolled over, raising herself onto her elbow. "Yes, come in. Be quiet, though."

"I know," the girl replied, still whispering. She pushed the door open slowly, trying to prevent it from creaking but creaking it all the more. Petra's sad smile grew a bit wider as she watched. The younger girl

had golden hair and pale features, despite her suntanned cheeks and nose. Slowly, she crept into the room, scanning the floor, her eyes serious. Doll's clothes were scattered on the bare floorboards at the foot of the bed. The girl spied something and her eyes widened. She ducked, disappearing behind the footboard and reappearing a moment later with a small, bedraggled doll clutched to her chest.

"I was worried about her," the girl whispered, glancing down at the doll in her arms. "She doesn't like being by herself at night. She wants to sleep with me. I forgot her after we were done playing last night, but I tried to send her happy thoughts, because I couldn't come back for her after nights out. I told her in my thoughts that she'd be all right and not to be afraid and that I'd come for her in the morning. It worked, too, see? She's still happy." The girl turned the doll around, showing Petra the big stitched smile on the doll's face.

Petra nodded, amused. "She's happy because her mama loves her so much. What's she have to worry about? Better get her back to your room before your mother hears you, though. If she knows we're up already..."

"I can be real quiet," the girl stated gravely. "Watch."

With exaggerated care, the girl began to creep back out of the room, raising her feet as if she were stepping over landmines. Petra couldn't help grinning at her. At the door, the girl stopped and turned back. "Tonight again, Petra? Before nights out? You be Astra this time and Mr. Bobkins can be Treus. I'll be the Marsh Hag, 'kay?"

Petra shook her head, more in amusement than negation. "Don't you ever get tired of that story, Iz?"

The girl shook her own head vigorously. "Before nights out," she said again, making Petra promise. A moment later she was gone, and she was, indeed, remarkably quiet as she crept back to her bedroom. From below, Petra could hear clankings and mutterings from the kitchen. It wouldn't be long before Phyllis would call up for Petra and Izzy, hollering the beginning of the day. If that happened, things would start badly.

Phyllis liked her schedule adhered to, and if she had to call the two girls downstairs, it was a sign that they had already fallen behind for the day. Phyllis hated lollygagging, as she called it. She hated scampering, which is what she called it whenever Izzy played or explored. Phyllis wasn't Petra's mother, or even her grandmother, who had died years ago. Phyllis wasn't even a witch. She was, however, Petra's grandfather's wife, and she was, despite all appearances, Izzy's mother.

Sighing, Petra swung her legs out of bed and crossed the floor to her wardrobe, enjoying the last few minutes of quiet and the bright coins of sunlight that sprayed cheerfully through the tattered curtains, as if falling on a happy home and a happy girl. Petra was not a very happy girl. Even as she picked out her clothes, the night's dream circled her head, dark and buzzing, like a cloud of flies. She had the dream almost every night now, to the point that she'd almost gotten used to it. It wasn't even a dream, really, but a memory playing over and over, like a taunt. In it, Petra saw her own mother, her birth mother, whom she had never known. The dream mother smiled, and it was the same sad smile Petra so often smiled herself when she looked at her step-sister Izzy. In the dream, Petra heard her own voice cry out, "I'm sorry, Mum!" and every time, the dreaming-Petra tried to drown out the memory-Petra, to cut off that declaration, to overrule it. Always, she couldn't, and as the memory-Petra's voice rang out, the figure of her mother would disintegrate. She would collapse like a water sculpture, splashing in on herself and running over the floor, coursing into a greenly flickering pool from which Petra knew she would never reappear. The dreaming-Petra tried to shout in anguish and despair, but she could make no sound. In the dream, out of the darkness, another voice spoke instead. It was wheedling and maddening. Petra tried not to listen to it. It was a dead voice. But it was getting harder not to hear. Sometimes, in fact, Petra even heard it when she was awake. She heard it in the back rooms of her own mind, as if it was a part of her. Petra was afraid of the things the dark voice said. Not because she didn't agree with

them, but because part of her—a secret, buried, deep-down part of her—did.

Petra sighed, gathered her clothes and crept down the hall to the bathroom.



“We’ve a very busy day before us, girls,” Phyllis said brusquely as Petra and Izzy entered the kitchen. “Five more minutes’ lollygagging up there and you’d not have had time for breakfast. You are aware that I do not approve of slothfulness.”

“Sorry Mother,” Izzy said dutifully, climbing onto a chair at the table. Petra sat next to her and eyed her plate; one piece of dry toast, cut in half, and a dollop of plain yogurt. Phyllis was a staunch believer in healthy foods. Her own sticklike frame was a testament to it, and she was fiercely proud of her fitness. Silently, Petra pined for the breakfasts in the Great Hall, the sausages and pancakes and fresh kippers. She reminded herself that those days were officially over. Graduation had been a week past. Neither Phyllis nor Izzy had attended, of course, but Petra’s grandfather had been there, wearing his one good brown suit, which had probably been fashionable sometime in the middle of the previous century. It was hard to say if he’d been proud of Petra as she accepted her

diploma from headmaster Merlinus, but he'd at least been there, his bushy eyebrows knitted into something resembling a dutiful scowl of approval.

Phyllis interrupted Petra's thoughts with her strident, buzz-saw voice. "Your grandfather has asked for you to accompany him to the south field this morning, Petra, do not make him wait. Izabella, you know what today is, I assume."

Izzy glanced up at Petra, her eyes wide. Petra mouthed the word 'goats'.

"Goats," Izzy answered, slumping. "Not the goats. Please."

"We've been through this, Izabella," Phyllis sang condescendingly. "If we don't trim their horns, the beasts will harm themselves. It's for their own good, as you well know. I'll not have another word about it."

Izzy was afraid of her mother, but she roused herself. "But they *bleed* when I do it. I don't want to hurt them! Let Petra do it. She can always do it without hurting them."

Phyllis bristled and glared at Petra for a moment. "That's because Petra is an insolent practitioner of unnaturalness. We'll have none of that infernal witchery in this house, as you well know. Whatever your sister chose to do at that awful school is her business entirely, but those days are over, and none too soon. It's high time your sister found something *useful* to do with her life. I'll allow none of that sort of thing under *my* roof, and her grandfather is in complete agreement with me."

"But Mother," Izzy said, pushing her plate away. "I'm *scared* of the goats,"

"That is because you are simple, Izabella," her mother said matter-of-factly. "And it is my duty to force you to overcome that defect. It's bad enough that you were born this way. I'll not coddle you even further into your natural stupidity. I've had a hard enough time finding a place in life for you. How would you like it if the Percival Sunnynton Work Farm refused you because you were too soft-headed to be able to handle a saw?"

Izzy didn't respond. She stared down at her chest, her lip pooched out. Finally, she shook her head.

"It's entirely possible," Phyllis said breezily, whisking Izzy's barely touched breakfast away and clattering the plate into the sink. "Just *think* what a disappointment you'd be to me and your stepfather. After all we've done for you. Mr. Sunnynon won't pay you much, but it's the best we can hope for, and it certainly isn't as if we can't use the income. And as you well know, it really is your only chance in life. After all, what else is a dim little thing like you good for?"

Petra seethed but didn't say anything. She knew from experience that defending Izzy only made matters worse. Instead, she caught Izzy's eye when Phyllis turned her back. She allowed a smile to curl the corner of her lips and raised her wrist slightly. Izzy looked up at Petra, her lip still pooched out, and then saw the small wooden shaft protruding ever-so-slightly from the sleeve of Petra's work dress. Izzy immediately grinned and covered her mouth with her hands. She shook her head from side to side, warning Petra, but her eyes sparkled encouragingly. Surreptitiously, Petra raised her arm, pretending to stretch. Across the kitchen, Phyllis reached for the faucet of the sink, meaning to start the morning dishes. Suddenly, the base of the faucet spurted a jet of water, as if it had sprung a leak. Phyllis spluttered and scrambled backwards as the water struck her squarely in the face. Izzy smothered laughter into her hands as Petra lowered her arm, slipping her wand back up her sleeve. From the doorway behind them came the noise of someone clearing his throat. Both Petra and Izzy jumped guiltily and turned.

"Work's awaiting," Petra's grandfather said from the hall entrance, eyeing her closely, unsmiling. He was dressed in his old, scuffed trousers and a heavy shirt. His mostly bald head was red from the sun.

"Warren," Phyllis spat angrily. "This sink is acting up again. How am I supposed to function with such defective tools? As if Izabella wasn't bad enough. I thought you fixed this leak!"

“Seems some leaks are worse than others,” Petra’s grandfather said, his eyes still on Petra. “One thing at a time, woman. I’ll address it upon my return. Come, Petra.”

As Petra stood up from the table, she palmed a piece of leftover toast from her plate. She skirted the table, passing the toast to Izzy. The younger girl took it and grinned, biting off a corner.



“I’m glad you thought to bring your stick with you,” Petra’s grandfather said pointedly as the wagon bounced over the rutted path, pulled by the farm’s single, geriatric horse. In the back of the wagon, farm tools and bags of fertilizer bounced and creaked.

“It’s not a stick, grandfather,” Petra said tiredly. “It’s a wand. Call it what it is.”

“You shouldn’t pique the woman of the house,” Grandfather muttered. “It doesn’t make things any easier for anyone.”

Petra sighed. They’d had this conversation many times before. “What about you? You’re the one who asks me to come with you so I can magic the rocks out of the field and knit the fences back together. What if she finds out about that?”

“She won’t,” grandfather answered calmly. “I won’t tell because I appreciate your help too much, and you won’t tell because it gives you the only outlet for your abilities.”

“My abilities?” Petra said, glancing at him. “What about you? Have you completely forgotten who you are?”

“Just because you’re my granddaughter is no excuse for insolence,” the older man said impassively, snapping the reins. Petra knew enough of her grandfather’s past to know that he was stubbornly opposed to even discussing it. Unlike other couples of mixed magical stock, Phyllis had discovered Warren Morganstern’s true magical identity early on, and had disapproved vigorously, so much so that as an agreement for marriage, Phyllis had insisted that her wizard fiancé denounce his magic and break his own wand.

“I’ve made my choices,” Petra’s grandfather went on after a few moments’ silence. “You may not understand them, but you don’t need to. Soon enough you’ll be gone and need not think of Phyllis or me ever again. In fact, considering everything, I’m surprised you came back here at all, now that your schooling’s done and you’re of age.”

Petra didn’t respond to that. The truth was, she didn’t know why she had come back. She’d always assumed that, once she came of age, she’d never again set foot in the house she’d grown up in, and good riddance. And yet, once her graduation had come and gone, almost without realizing it, Petra had found herself back in the narrow bed in the cold, barren room she’d known her entire life. She wanted to leave, wanted to break away and find a new life, and yet, for reasons she didn’t at all understand, each day found her still here. Perhaps it was Izzy. Petra had always looked out for her as well as she could. The girl was indeed simple, as Phyllis reminded her every day, but she wasn’t stupid. Her childlikeness was secretly delightful to Petra, who took every rare opportunity to play with the girl, fleetingly and unbeknownst to Phyllis, before what Izzy called “nights out” each evening. Izzy was the only

person who Petra could talk to about magic, although they had to keep it a sworn secret. Izzy loved Petra's stories about the magical school, with classes of levitation, and broom flying, and changing things into other things. She'd delighted in Petra's accounts of the wizarding play, the Triumvirate, in which Petra had played a part during her final year of school. During their fleeting moments of free time, Petra and Izzy would walk around the small lake at the edge of the property. There, hidden from the house by a stand of woods, Petra would do small magic for Izzy, levitating her dolls and making them dance, or transfiguring pebbles into tiny butterflies as Izzy threw them into the air. Once, Petra and Izzy had sat on the edge of the tiny dock, swinging their legs and watching the dragonflies stitch patterns over the rippling waves, and there they had talked about Petra's mysterious magical heritage.

"Where did you come from, Petra?" Izzy asked, looking up at her and squinting in the afternoon sun.

"I don't know, really," Petra had answered. "Your stepfather... doesn't like to talk about it."

"Is Papa Warren a wizard?"

Petra shrugged lightly and looked out over the water.

"I wish I was a witch, like you," Izzy said, leaning back on her pudgy little hands. "But I'm not, am I?"

Petra turned and smiled at her stepsister. "I wouldn't be too sure, Iz. The way you can send thoughts to your dollies. That's kind of witchy, don't you think?"

Izzy screwed up her face thoughtfully. Finally, she said, "It's a *little* witchy, but not really. But I'm not really a Muddle either."

Petra had long since stopped correcting Izzy about magical terminology. She shook her head. "No, you're not really a Muddle, either, Iz."

"I'm right in the middle," Izzy said firmly, sitting up again. "Stuck between being a witch and a Muddle. That's not so bad, is it?"

“I guess that makes you a Wuddle, then, doesn’t it?” Petra said, smiling crookedly.

“I’m a Wuddle,” Izzy agreed. “A widdle Wuddle.”

Petra shook her head, laughing, and pushed Izzy, as if to throw her into the lake. Together, the two girls wrestled and giggled playfully as the sun lowered over the lake, burnishing its surface, turning it slowly into gold.



This has been a sneak preview of “The Girl on the Dock”. For more information, visit www.girlonthedock.com