

Petra's Getaway



A Petra Morganstern Christmas Story

By G. Norman Lippert

Dedicated to Tom Grey and supportstacie.net

Dear Reader,

This story is a little unusual. It is a side story that takes place during the Christmas holidays of the book called "[James Potter and the Curse of the Gatekeeper](#)", which is sequel to "[James Potter and the Hall of Elders' Crossing](#)". If you have not yet read those books, this tale will contain a rather large and important "spoiler", and furthermore, may not make as much sense as you'd hope. Therefore, may I be so bold as to suggest you take a look at the aforementioned stories before reading any further? If you enjoyed Ms. Rowling's Harry Potter stories (and why would you be here if you had not?) then there is a fair chance you will like these stories as well. Then, do come back and view "Petra's Getaway". It will make a lot more sense, and you'll feel quite proud of yourself for heeding this advice.

If, on the other hand, you have already read the aforementioned stories and know Petra's tale thus far, then I do hope you enjoy this extra glimpse into her life.

Onward...

“It’s not supposed to be a contact sport, Albus,” James said, pushing his brother off of him and onto the floor next to the chair. “You nearly broke my wand, you big oaf.”

“Maybe if you’d made the Quidditch team you’d be a little more comfortable with a rough game,” Albus said sweetly, climbing to his feet. “Besides, if you weren’t so easy to push over, we’d still be playing and I’d have scored a point by now.”

James clambered off the chair and brushed himself off. “You’re just mad because I’m winning. Lily’s right; you *are* a sore loser. She told me she’ll never play Bannisters and Bedknobs with you again because last time she won you threw the game pieces out the window.”

“She’s lying,” Albus grumped. “She’s never beat me at that stupid game. Besides, Mum just used an Accio spell to gather all the pieces back out of the garden.”

James turned in the mostly empty common room, raising his wand. “What’s the score, Rose?”

Rose sighed from her seat by the fire. “Seven to zero,” she said without lowering her book.

“And who’s losing?” James prodded, glancing sideways at Albus.

“I am,” Rose replied. “Be quiet and leave me read. This is important, if you don’t mind.”

“Just raise the Winkle, already,” Albus said, training his wand on the rather bruised apple on a nearby chair. “I’m going to auger this thing so hard that you’ll be scrubbing applesauce off the walls for weeks.”

James grinned and the two boys levitated the apple between them.

From a corner, Petra Morganstern watched silently. The two boys struggled to overcome the others’ spellwork, forcing the apple to roll and bob in the air. Albus sidled between the furniture, biting his lip in concentration and knocking over a small table. The apple jiggled over a sofa and very nearly dropped into Petra’s lap. James darted forward, his wand bobbing wildly in his fist. He stood directly in front of Petra, never breaking his gaze from the wildly bobbing apple. Petra didn’t move. After a moment, the apple spun back over the room, swooping toward the fireplace. James leapt to keep under it, preventing Albus from dropping it onto his target.

After a few moments, Petra stood. Without really knowing where she was going, she walked across the room, passing directly between James and Albus. Neither of the boys looked at her as she passed, even though she moved close enough to James to brush his knee with the tail of her cloak. Petra wasn't surprised. The cloak had come with her father's package, and it was a remarkably powerful cloak indeed. She wasn't hiding, exactly. She'd just gotten used to wearing the garment, partly because it kept her warm, but mostly because it gave her the freedom she needed to... explore.

Invisibility was a great asset to someone with so very many secrets.

Petra strode quietly along the empty corridors, trailing her right hand along the cold stone walls. Most of the lanterns had been put out, but the many windows shined with hard winter light, diffusing the shadows, making the paintings and suits of armor appear flat and dead. In her left hand, obviously, she carried a small object. She never looked down at that hand, and would have been surprised if she had, shocked to see the item clutched there, almost as if her left hand had a life of its own. Instead, Petra merely walked, using only her right hand to open doors and hold onto banisters, leaving her left hand at her side, always at her side, keeping its own dark secrets.

Headmaster Merlin was here, somewhere. Petra didn't know where in the castle he was, but she sensed him, even though he hadn't been seen in several days. He was still looking for something, preoccupied by it. That was good. She had a strong suspicion that, as powerful as her mysterious cloak was, it would likely not hide her from the headmaster if he appeared in the corridor. For now, Petra was happy not to be seen, especially by Merlinus. She walked on quietly, apparently in no hurry.

At the top of a staircase, Petra turned right. She moved silently into a darker hall, heading away from the large window over the landing. It was much colder in this part of the castle, and it would be colder still where she was going, but she didn't mind. She barely felt it.

She knew there was something wrong with what she was doing, and yet, somehow, matters of right and wrong were less important to her now than they had been a few months earlier. So many things were confusing now. So many things were so hard to think about, like her mother and father, and the box from the Ministry, and even the cloak she was currently wearing. There was something fundamentally wrong with her understandings of these things, and yet she couldn't bring herself to face it. It hurt too much. Petra's curse was that she was smart, thus she couldn't continue to fool herself forever. The voice in the chamber told her that, soon enough, it would all change. Her hopes would soon be fulfilled, balance would be achieved, and then it would all be over. None of this would matter anymore. The confusions would burn away in the blinding light of an entirely new reality. Until then, Petra just had to manage the struggle in her own heart and mind. She thought she could do it. She hoped she could do it.

She stood in front of the door to the girl's bathroom. Inside was the secret stairway that led down to the chamber, and then to the strangely flickering pool. She was vaguely aware that she had become obsessed with the pool and its tantalizing, teasing secrets. But at the same time, she knew that there was nothing new for her there. Not yet, at least. She so longed to go down into the darkness and see the faces of those she loved, but she knew it would mostly just upset and frustrate her. The time was not yet come. Until it did, all she could do was look and hope. And fear.

Unseen, her left hand squeezed the object it was holding. It was a small, bedraggled doll with button eyes and unruly black yarn hair. Its forehead had been decorated with a jagged lightning bolt, scribbled on with dark green ink.

(In the Gryffindor common room, James suddenly held a hand to his forehead as a small jolt of pain burned through it. The pain passed almost immediately, but it distracted him long enough for Albus to score his first auger. Albus crowed in delight while James shook his head, mystified and worried. Rose looked up, her brow knitted, meeting James' eyes. The book in her hands was burgundy clothbound, ancient and frayed. On the spine, embossed in faded gold, were the words *The Book of Parallel Histories, Volume III.*)

In the hall before the girls' bathroom, Petra stood perfectly motionless, her right hand held out, not quite touching the heavy wooden door. Finally, she blinked. She turned away from the door. Perhaps she'd been down to the chamber enough lately. Perhaps it was time for a break. Slowly, fighting some imperative in her own heart, Petra turned back and retraced her steps. It didn't make her feel any better, but it made her feel a bit more in control.

Lately, that was a rare feeling.

The snow-covered hillside was nearly blinding in the cold afternoon light. Petra squinted as she walked away from the castle, listening to the crunch of her boots on the icy path. She didn't really have a plan or a destination, but soon enough the roofs of Hogsmeade appeared over the hills. Tendrils of white chimney smoke drew lines into the sky, implying happy hearths and warm bakeries. Distantly, Petra could hear the echo of singing carols. She smiled a bit to herself and angled towards the sound.

As she entered the village, Petra was enamoured by the gaily dressed and bundled crowd that moved about the streets, chattering and laughing. She smiled as she walked, and having stopped in her dorm long enough to put away her father's cloak (and the mysterious doll), many of the faces in the crowd smiled back at her. A tiny, wizened wizard bowed to her, doffing his huge woolen cap to reveal a spotlessly bald cranium.

"Happy Christmas, young beauty," he proclaimed happily. "And may the New Year bring you great joy."

Petra smiled at the man a bit cryptically and walked on.

A large, unruly crowd stood outside Weazley's Wizard Wheezes, clamoring to get in for what the signs outside proclaimed to be a "Once in a Lifetime Five Hour Moonlight Madness George's Gone Completely Nutters Holiday Sale-To-End-All-Sales Sale!" Petra looked but couldn't see anyone she knew in the amiably shoving throng. She passed by on the other side of the street, skirting around the two-story newsstand and heading down a side street toward the Three Broomsticks.

It was very warm inside, packed with jostling witches and wizards. They crammed around the small tables, drinking hot butterbeers and peppermint-spiked firewhiskeys, their mingled voices clanging off the

walls like a chorus of birdsong. Petra elbowed up to the bar and slid onto the one empty seat between two huge shoulders.

“What can I get for you, dearie?” Madam Rosemerta bawled over the cacophony of voices, stepping in front of Petra, obviously happy with the booming holiday business.

“Perhaps just a room for a night or two?” Petra answered, placing a Galleon onto the polished bartop.

Rosemerta glanced down at the Galleon quickly, expertly. She was getting rather old, but she still had the gorgeous doe eyes and bawdy curves that had made her a fixture in Hogsmeade for decades. “Having a bit of a girl’s getaway?” she said, leaning toward Petra. “Are we sure that’s a good idea, my dear? It may be a jolly old time out there right now, but when the sun goes down things can get a wee bit interesting.”

“I can take care of myself,” Petra said, smiling, and something in her smile made Rosemerta’s eyes widen slightly. She studied Petra for a moment, and then made the Galleon disappear.

“Heaven knows, the world favors a woman who knows what she wants,” she replied, frowning approvingly. “Thrimple here will help you with your bags, if you have any. We don’t serve breakfast, but our lunches more than make up for it. Take your pick of the last two rooms, dearie, and you’ll let us know if you need anything, right?”

Petra nodded, smiling at the older woman.

“And just so I know I’ve said it,” Rosemerta said, leaning over the bar again and speaking directly into Petra’s ear, “Keep your wand handy once the sun goes down. Wolves have been seen around here of late, if you know what I mean. Can’t hurt to be too careful.”

Petra nodded again. This time, she didn’t smile.

Among Petra’s father’s earthly goods had been a meager change of clothes, a hat, a pair of boots made of leather so worn that they barely stood up, a very cheap wand, a straight razor, and seven Galleons, two Sickles, and a small jar of Knuts that Petra had not bothered to count. It wasn’t much, but it apparently represented his entire bank at the time of his arrest. Petra hadn’t known what to do with the money, but as she stood in her rented room above the Three Broomsticks, looking out the window over the length of Guddymutter Avenue as evening gathered it into purple shadow, she decided that a “girl’s getaway”, as Madam Rosemerta had called it, was the perfect choice. Her father would probably have approved.

There had been one more thing in the bottom of the box from the Ministry. Wrapped in a handkerchief, Petra had found a small opal brooch in a setting of delicate golden scrollwork. There was no way she could have known it, but as she’d held the brooch in her hand, looking down at it with two solitary tears drawing lines on her cheeks, she’d known it was to have been a Christmas gift for her mother, bought by her father mere days before his arrest. He’d never had the opportunity to give it to her. Even Petra could tell that the brooch was not particularly expensive, but it had an understated grace and beauty that surprised her. Modest as it might have been, it had still probably cost her father more than a few months’ salary. Looking into the pale, pearly face of the stone, Petra could all too clearly imagine her father standing in the gem

shop (somehow, she knew it had been Ichabod's Heirlooms and Rarities, at the corner of Diagon and Knockturn Alleys), wearing his best shirt and tie, tugging at his collar, trying to look like he knew what he was doing while the proprietor, Mr. Ichabod himself, sighed and smiled icily. She saw her father's eye light upon the opal brooch in a display case, saw him move close to it, entranced by its mundane beauty, his face lighting up. The price inked onto the little card next to the brooch was rather more than he'd been prepared to pay, but he'd decided then and there that it was going to be his, nonetheless. It had taken Petra's father another month to work and save the money, during which time Mr. Ichabod had refused to hold the brooch, refused to dicker over the price, since he (as Petra could clearly see in her mind's eye) simply did not believe the simple man in the ill-fitting coat and worker's derby was ever going to be able to pay for the brooch. In the end, however, he had produced the money, and Mr. Ichabod had happily boxed the brooch and printed a receipt in his fussy jeweler's handwriting. And her father had left, carrying the box in his pocket, smiling the smile of someone who knew he'd just done something wonderful for someone he dearly loved.

Petra stared out of the window at the snow covered street, unseeing, holding the brooch in her hand. Perhaps it was an entirely made-up story, about Mr. Ichabod and her father and the brooch in the display case, but she didn't think so. The memory was encased in the opal, stored there like a tiny treasure. And now that Petra knew what her father looked like, having seen his face in the mysterious green reflection of the Chamber pool, the memory was even clearer. It was a tragic vision, because her father had never gotten to give the brooch to the woman he'd bought it for, but it was also a sweet vision, because in it her father was happy. He didn't know what was about to happen to him. His future was rather simple and plain, but as far as he was concerned, it was bright.

Without thinking, Petra pinned the brooch to her cape. Having done so, she peered at her reflection in the window. The brooch glowed in the dimming evening light, capturing it and turning it magical. Petra sighed.

A moment later, she left the room, closing the door gently behind her. She was going for a walk.

The High Street was emptying as the sun went down in a blaze of shocking orange and purple. Cold pushed in from the east, blowing skirls of snow down the street like sand. Petra stopped at the shop windows along the street, peering idly in at the goods on display: decorative Goblin swords and chalices at Wravenbrick Metalworks, fancy leather portfolios and quills at Scrivenshafts, colorful dress robes and gowns at Gladrags. Eventually, Petra wandered off the High Street and passed in front of the old Shrieking Shack, its fences abandoned and fallen into disrepair ever since the Shack had stopped its shrieking. She pulled her cape around her as the chill seeped in. By the time she decided to go back to the Three Broomsticks and possibly get a little something to eat from Madam Rosemerta, she wasn't entirely sure where in Hogsmeade she was. Clusters of cottages, most in various stages of disrepair, crowded the narrow street. Over the low roofs, however, Petra could still see the comforting yellow glow of the lamps along the High

Street. Not liking some of the characters she was seeing skulking along the footpath, she turned into an alley, meaning to cut across to a more populated street.

The alley was very narrow and choked with snow. Petra pushed through the drifts, holding onto nearby railings and posts for support. It was a crooked alley, snagging through a rather seedy district of the village. Petra had not known such places existed in Hogsmeade. Threadbare clothing hung nearly frozen on lines stretched between the buildings. Trash cans and leaning porches crowded into the alley, nearly blocking it. Shadows gathered thickly in the corners as darkness settled, as if the night never fully abandoned the alley, but simply retreated a bit during the brightest part of the day.

There was a flickering glow around the next angle of the alley. Petra turned the corner, stumbling out of a particularly heavy drift, and found herself in the midst of a group of skinny, bedraggled figures. They were so covered in layers of ratty clothing that it took her a moment to recognize them as Goblins. The small creatures sat clustered around a magical Goblin fire that burned brightly in the bowl of a broken cauldron. The flames of the fire leapt and danced wildly, fed, apparently, by nothing. The Goblins looked up at Petra, their beady black eyes unreadable.

“Sorry,” Petra said, her breath puffing in the frigid air. “I’m just trying to make my way back to the High Street. Could you, perhaps, point me in the right direction?”

The Goblins merely stared at her, their faces hard, their large, knuckly hands curled over their knees. Petra wondered for a moment if they were homeless, and then decided against it. Goblins were singularly resourceful and self-reliant. A quick glance around the alley showed her the truth: nearby was the service entrance to Wravenbrick Metalworks, thus these were probably the Goblin metalworkers, resting after the day’s toil. It would have seemed quaint but for the unsettling hard looks in their little eyes as they stared at her.

“Nevermind then,” she said, beginning to skirt around the gathering. “I see that I’m quite near the street. I’ll find my own way.”

It was a moment before Petra realized one of the Goblins was speaking. Its voice was deep and quiet, menacing but strangely polite. “Is it possible, partners, that the fair young witch does not know she is trespassing on Goblin property?”

Petra stopped at the sound, her blood chilling.

Another Goblin spoke, not taking its eyes from her. “It would appear to be so, aye. And she does so brazenly, with no regard for custom or duty. Shall we enlighten her?”

“I’m sorry,” Petra said, keeping her voice even. “I thought this was a public alley. I didn’t mean to trespass.”

“Disregarded the sign,” the third Goblin said mildly, still not speaking directly to Petra despite its icy stare. “Ignorant of the law. Expecting leniency, no doubt. Isn’t that just like a witch?”

Petra was hemmed in by the three, her back to the cold brick wall. She thought quickly, remembering her wand in the pocket of her robes. She decided not to pull it out, fearing it might only escalate the encounter. The Goblins began to get to their feet, moving to surround her.

“What is, er, the law?” she asked, her teeth beginning to chatter in the cold. “I don’t expect leniency. I just didn’t know. I’ll be happy to, er...”

“She must pay a tribute,” the first Goblin said, its black eyes sparkling meanly in the magical firelight.

Petra patted her pockets. "I don't have much. Half a dozen Galleons, I think."

"Not *wizard* money, my fair daughter," the second Goblin purred in its low voice. "This is not Gringotts. Your currency is worthless to us."

One of the Goblins raised its bushy eyebrows, moving close. "She wears Goblin property upon her robes, partners," it said, becoming animated for the first time. "Moon's tear and fine gold scroll. There, below her shoulder."

The first Goblin looked and nodded slowly. "That will do, aye. If the fair witch will be so kind..." The Goblin held out its callused hand toward Petra.

"No," Petra said, as evenly as she could. "This isn't mine to give away. It belonged to my father. I can't—"

"It is not yours at all, my fair daughter," the Goblin said calmly, moving closer. "It belongs to Goblankind. You daresn't suggest that it is not our handiwork."

"No," Petra stammered. "I'm not saying that. It's just..."

"She insults us, partners," the third Goblin said, its eyes brightening horribly. "She intends to disrespect us and withhold our tribute, *and* with our own property, to boot."

Petra pressed back against the wall. "No. It's just... there must be something else!"

"We are not making a request, fair daughter," the first Goblin replied, raising its voice. "Hand over the tribute, lest we take it by force. Witch magic is no match for Goblin law. Or would you prefer to learn that truth the hard way?"

The Goblin reached, its horny hands casting their shadow over the brooch on Petra's cape. She cringed, pressing herself against the cold bricks behind her, but there was nowhere to go. Quickly, almost delicately, the Goblin plucked the brooch from her cape. Immediately, it turned away, dismissing her and studying the brooch by the light of the fire. Petra slumped against the wall.

"What will you do with it?" she asked hollowly.

"She is still here," one of the Goblins said.

"She will leave soon enough, partners," another replied, returning to the magical fire.

Petra gathered herself, standing up straight and raising her voice a bit. "I said, what will you do with the brooch?"

"It is not your business, witch," the first Goblin stated without turning. "This is Goblin property. Your clumsy hands have held it long enough. It was never yours to begin with."

"My father worked very hard to pay for that brooch," Petra said, growing bolder. "He bought it honestly. Don't you dare suggest he stole it."

The first Goblin looked back at her over its humped shoulder, clearly annoyed. "You humans and your cheat of 'payment'. If indeed your worthless father possessed this object, then he is a thief and a liar. It never belonged to him, and it will likely take a year's purging to cleanse it of his filthy touch. Now begone before you make us angry, witch, and rejoice that your miss-steps this night have returned this object to its *rightful* owners."

"That brooch belonged to my father," Petra stated, producing her wand.

The Goblin turned once more, slowly, studying Petra with one beady black eye. "May I take it from that statement that your father, fair witch, is dead?"

A lump swelled in Petra's throat. She swallowed past it, her eyes suddenly glistening with tears. She couldn't speak. Instead, haltingly, she nodded.

The goblin studied her a moment longer, its gaze unreadable. Finally, it turned away again. "This is good news, partners," it said, dismissing Petra. "The filthy thief is dead. His breath is cold. It will only take half as long to purge the piece of his dirty touch."

Petra raised her wand, looking down its length through a blur of tears. With a thought, the magical Goblin fire snuffed out. Darkness fell into the alley like a shroud.

"That was a mistake, fair daughter," the first Goblin growled from the sudden shadow.

"I'm not your daughter," Petra stated, her voice dead and cold.

There was noise. In the impenetrable darkness there were shrieks, cut off by horrible, crunching thumps. The sounds mingled with the roar of a sudden, icy wind that rushed through the alley, lifting the snow and howling in the drainpipes. It lasted less than fifteen seconds.

Near the mouth of the alley, where it emptied out onto the High Street, a young man stopped. He listened, hearing the echoing cries and bone-rattling thumps, his eyes widening. He gripped his wand and darted into the alley, his heart leaping up into his throat.

"Petra!" he called, stopping in the darkness. "Petra is that you? I've been trying to find you! Are you all right?"

A shape appeared in the dark recesses of the alley, walking slowly through the drifting snow. The man watched, raising his wand slowly as the figure approached. Something seemed to glow out of the darkness, a sort of shifting, pearlescent glint shining on the figure's cape.

"Petra?" the man said, puzzled and worried.

"Ted," the figure said, finally stepping into the yellow light of the nearest streetlamp. "Your timing, as always, is impeccable."

"Petra," Ted breathed, relieved, moving to put his arm around the girl. "Are you all right? I saw you pass by the shop a little while ago. I came out to find you as soon as I could. What were you doing in the alley?"

Petra shook her head slightly, and her eyes were strangely blank. "Just walking."

"That's hardly a good place to walk, Petra," Ted replied, leading her out of the alley. "Especially after dark. Did you meet anyone in there?"

"Let's go back, Ted. I'm cold," Petra said, ignoring his question. She walked next to him, letting him hold his arm around her, but barely feeling it. "So cold, Ted. So cold I'm nearly frozen."

"I can't tell you all of it right now," Petra said, staring disconsolately into the fire. "Perhaps soon I will, but right now, it's just too big. For now, it's enough to tell you about the box from the Ministry. My Father's things."

She and Ted sat in matching high-back chairs by the fireplace in the back corner of the Three Broomsticks. Nearby, a skinny Christmas tree flickered with live candles, their flames glowing gaily in every conceivable color. It was late, and the bar was nearly deserted. The elf, Thrimple, moved between the tables magically operating a large broom and dustpan with deft flicks of his fingers.

“You’ve told Noah about it, have you?” Ted said, looking at the fire through his mostly-empty butterbeer glass.

“Please don’t be jealous right now, Ted,” Petra sighed, smiling a little. “Noah and I are just friends, at least for the moment. Besides, you have Victoire. From what everyone says, you two are quite the couple.”

Ted nodded enigmatically, pressing his lips together. “So you *haven’t* told Noah about the rest of it yet, right?”

“I haven’t told anyone. It isn’t that kind of a secret.”

“But it’s got you worried,” Ted prodded. “Frightened, even.”

Petra shook her head slightly. “I never knew either of my parents, Ted. They’ve been gone all of my life. Why now? Why should I care so much? How can you miss someone you’ve never even known?”

Ted didn’t answer. For a minute, the two of them simply sat and stared into the crackling fire as it burned low into the hearth. Finally, Ted said, “I don’t think you need to have lived with your parents to know them. I think you know them just as well by the hole their absence leaves inside you. You know them by the shape of the emptiness where they should have been. At least, that’s how it is for me.”

Petra nodded. “All I know is that I need them. I need them to tell me what to do. I’m so confused.”

“Do you think they would have known what to do?” Ted asked.

Petra thought for a moment, and then shrugged.

“The older I get,” Ted went on, “the more I begin to realize how little anyone really knows. I grew up thinking my grandmother knew absolutely everything. And then, a few years ago, I realized that she gets almost all of her information and worldviews from *The Quibbler*. I mean, I’ve got nothing against *The Quibbler*, mind you, as far as it goes, but a wellspring of solid thinking and factual reporting it is *not*. I love my grandmother, but that was when I realized that, shocking as it is, she’s just muddling along through life, making it up more or less as she goes, just like the rest of us. Figuring that out was a bit frightening, but on the other hand, it was also a bit reassuring. It means that I’m just as capable of making my way in life as she is.”

Petra looked aside at Ted. “So what does your grandmother mean to you now?”

Ted grinned. “She means the same thing she’s always meant to me. She means there’s always someone there to tell me that she loves me and that everything is going to be just fine. That’s what the people who love us are really there for, I think. They may not know what they’re talking about, and they may be dead wrong, but it doesn’t mean we don’t need to hear it more often than not.”

“That’s not very reassuring,” Petra stated flatly, turning back to the fire.

“That’s just because you’re looking at it all crooked,” Ted said confidently. “You’re thinking about it too much. Your problem is that you’re too smart, Petra. You over-think.”

“Better that than the other way around.”

“Au contraire,” Ted smiled. “Sometimes we’re so sure of what we *expect* that we fool ourselves into seeing it, even if it isn’t true, even if it’s pure rubbish. You don’t miss your parents because you need a map

through life, Petra. You miss your parents because you need someone to sit next to you and tell you that no matter where the map takes you, it'll all be a grand adventure because they'll be there with you, and they'll love you every step of the way."

Petra looked sideways at Ted, unsmiling. "What makes you such an expert, anyway?"

Ted shrugged. "Age, experience, and four butterbeers. Add a firewhiskey and I graduate all the way to bloody genius."

Petra couldn't help smiling a little.

"See?" Ted said, nudging her shoulder. "I made you laugh. That's what the people who love you are good for. We can make you laugh no matter how bleak things look."

Petra nodded and sighed. "I like your hair long, by the way."

"Yeah, I've been trying out different styles lately," Ted replied breezily. "I tried buzz-cut short," as he spoke, his hair suddenly shrank away to a military crew cut, looking remarkably like that sported by Petra's Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Kendrick Debellows. "And I tried rock star long," Ted went on, and now his hair sprang back out of his head and draped over his shoulders in lank black sheets. "And I even tried the George Weasley special," he finished, and his hair suddenly coiffed into a wild strew and turned blazing red. Petra clapped her hands to her mouth and shrieked with laughter.

"Your face changed a little bit, too," she gasped. "You *looked* like George for a second there."

"It's a bit hard to control," Ted admitted, climbing to his feet. "It's been years since I used my metamorphmagus abilities. I'm still remembering how to do it properly."

Petra settled back in her chair, watching Ted take his coat from the hook by the fire. "You're leaving."

"I'm leaving," he nodded. "George has me scheduled to open the shop in the morning. That man has absolutely no regard for the fact that I'm not a morning person."

Petra was still smiling a bit as Ted shrugged into his coat. "Thanks, Ted. It was good to talk."

"Talking's what I'm best at," Ted replied. "Sorry I didn't get you anything for Christmas."

"I won't hold it against you this time."

Ted turned toward the door, and then stopped. Half smiling, he turned back to Petra and leaned toward her. "It's going to be all right," he whispered conspiratorially. "It's all a grand adventure. And the people who love you—people like me—will be along for the ride, every step of the way."

Petra smiled, and it was a genuine smile. Ted beamed down at her. There was a long, nearly awkward moment as they shared that gaze, and then, finally, Ted glanced down.

"Goodnight, Petra," he said. "Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas, Ted," she answered.

He crossed to the door, threading between the tables and stepping over Thrimple's floating dustpan. There was a gust of cold air and the whistle of wintry wind, and then he was gone.

Petra looked into the fire.

After a minute, she leaned over, took her cape onto her lap, and found the opal brooch pinned there. She slipped it carefully from the cape and held it in her hands.

"Oh, Papa," she whispered. "Tell me it'll be all right. Tell me you love me and that you'll be with me along the way."

As before, holding the opal in her hand conjured the image of her father in her mind. She saw him buying the brooch from the somewhat odious Mr. Ichabod, watched him carry it from the shop and out into the street, where a light snow was falling. He was happy. He had done something wonderful for someone he loved.

Petra suddenly stopped, her breath catching in her chest. Her fingers curled slowly around the opal brooch, enclosing it. Had she been mistaken? Was it possible? *Sometimes we're so sure of what we expect*, Ted had said only moments ago, *that we fool ourselves into seeing it, even if it isn't true...*

In the vision of her mind, her father walked happily along the snow-dusted cobbles, moving through the throng of shoppers, humming happily. And then, softly, slightly off-key, he began to sing:

*"Oh, I've got a girl, a beautiful girl, the sweetest girl ever could be
And for that sweet girl, with raven-dark curls, I'll buy her a diamond and tea,
Then we'll dance, we two, in a big curlicue, by the light of the strawberry moon,
And happy we'll be, my Princess and me, like the dish that run off with the spoon,
Like the dish that run off with the spoon..."*

Petra blinked, listening with the ears of her mind. Her father had not, in fact, bought the brooch for his wife. He'd bought it for the baby daughter that was only then growing in his wife's belly. Of course, he couldn't have known that their baby was going to be a girl, but he'd known it nonetheless, or hoped for it so strongly that, for him, it was as good as knowing. He'd wanted to buy his daughter an heirloom, an inheritance. He'd loved her even then, before she was even born, before he'd ever known her. He'd known her just by the shape of the hope that was in his heart.

Happy Christmas, Petra darling, my Princess... Happy Christmas...

Petra sat in the empty bar and cried for her lost father. But she smiled as well, even through her tears. And she held the brooch, her Christmas present. She held it tightly, rocking in the light of the fire, as if she were a baby being held in strong, soothing arms, rocking... rocking...

The End