



## PROLOGUE

Rain fell in great sheets, hitting the pavement hard enough to send up a blattering, dirty mist. A small man stood on the corner, under the only working streetlight, and studied the street. Abandoned apartment buildings lined one side, dark and hulking, like dead dinosaurs. The other side was dominated by an equally dismal factory behind a chain-link fence. Warning signs on the fence squeaked and rattled in the wind. One car was parked along the street, looking as if it had been there long enough to become part of the local ecosystem. The small man shuffled his feet, his bald head glistening with rain. He glanced back, toward the busier streets he had just come from, and then made a harrumphing noise. He pulled his fist out of the pocket of his overcoat and held it up to the light. When he opened his hand there was a small, sodden bit of parchment inside it. He read the words on the parchment for the tenth time. Blue inked letters spelled the street name and nothing else. The man shook his head, annoyed.

He was about to close the bit of parchment into his fist again when the words bled away in the dripping rain. The little man blinked at the space where they had been. Slowly, more words wrote out on the paper, as if inked by an invisible pen: an address.

The little man frowned at the parchment, and then shoved it back into his pocket. Glancing aside, he located a number over the door of the nearest abandoned apartment. He sighed and walked out of the yellow glow of the streetlight, splashing heedlessly in the flooded gutter.

As most people who knew how to look would know, the little man wasn't a man at all. He was a goblin. His name was Forge and he hated venturing into the human world. Not that anyone had ever noticed his unusual size or strange features. He wore boots with four-inch heels and a *visum-ineptio* charm that caused people to see him as a kindly old man with a severe stoop. He simply didn't like humans. They were dirty, inefficient, and rowdy. Forge liked his world to be like his workshop: neat, organized, and constantly swept of any useless bits. It wasn't so much that Forge wished humans didn't exist; he was simply glad that they had their own special world to live in, and that he rarely had to go there, rather like a zoo.

He'd almost decided not to come out tonight. Something hadn't felt right about this appointment. Considering Forge's unique skills, it was not unusual that he didn't know the name of a client, but he was accustomed to a certain amount of decorum, not just a note and a number. Forge knew what the number meant, however. It was the pay being offered for his services, and it was quite a surprising number indeed. Surprising enough to get Forge out of his workshop, chasing down the mysterious address in this decrepit stretch of human wasteland, even in spite of his trepidation. After all, Forge *was* a goblin.

He stopped walking and stared up at the number of the apartment next to him. He glanced across the street, frowning his brow. The factory fence had ended half a block earlier. In its place was an empty lot, choked with weeds, blowing trash and broken bottles. An abandoned truck leaned drunkenly in the corner, settling into the mud and tall grass. A wooden sign in the center of the lot had half-fallen over; *Future Home of Chimera Condominiums and Recreational Complex* it read in faded letters. Forge took his fist out of his pocket again and opened it. The address was gone from the parchment. Two new words spelled themselves out.

*Turn around.*

Forge dropped his fist to his side. He stared at the vacant lot, chewing his lips. Was he being warned to go back? Part of him hoped so, but he doubted it. Slowly, he turned around on the spot so that he stood in the center of the deserted street, looking up at the dark bulk of the apartment building. A broken window stared down at him like the eye of a skull. The wind gusted, lifting the curtains of the broken window, making them flutter. Forge sighed and looked down at the parchment again.

*Walk. Backwards.*

"Well," Forge muttered to himself, "In for a Knut, in for a Galleon." He began to walk backwards, lifting his boots carefully to avoid tripping over the curb or the piles of rotting trash. He stepped carefully onto the sidewalk and continued, feeling for the muddy weed-bed of the vacant lot. The sidewalk seemed wider than he'd expected. Each step backwards found solid, smooth stone. Forge glanced down. There were worn, carefully laid flagstones beneath his boots instead of the rough cement slabs of the sidewalk. He looked up again and drew in a whistling breath. Two monstrous shapes leered down at him. They were gargoyles, each perched atop a stone pillar. Rain splattered and ran down their horrible faces. Between the pillars was a tall, wrought iron gate. As Forge watched, it swung shut with a rattling, resounding crash, closing him inside. He turned on the spot, his heart pounding, and saw that the wrought iron formed a fence all around the lot. It was six feet tall and spiked with angry points. Nor was the lot any longer filled with trash. It was a lawn, carefully cropped, each blade of grass eerily sharp and exactly the same length as its fellows. The rain beaded on the grass like crystal. Where the abandoned truck had stood was now a long,

black carriage, immaculately shiny and covered with gothic scrollwork. There were no yokes for horses on the carriage. Forge shuddered, and then looked up toward the center of the lot.

In the place of the leaning sign was a house. It was not huge, but it was almost unnaturally tall. Its shuttered windows looked twenty feet high and the mansard roof that topped it almost seemed to rake outward, like a vulture brooding. Pillars framed the front door, which was painted black and had a giant brass doorknocker in the center. Forge swallowed, drew himself up, and approached the door.

As he climbed the steps, Forge wasn't surprised to see that the brass door knocker had been crafted to resemble a coiled snake with glittering emerald eyes. Nor was he surprised to see it stir to life at his approach. The head rose from its brass coils and flicked a golden tongue.

"You bear the parchment," the snake hissed.

"You best believe I do. Open the door before I catch my death in this rain."

"Sssshow ussss."

"I didn't come all this way to argue with a bit of enchanted metallurgy. Open the blasted door and tell your master I'm arrived."

The snake's head rose very slightly so that it looked down at Forge's head. The eyes glowed green and the tongue flickered. "Sssshow ussss the parchment."

Forge looked up at the snake's head. It weaved slightly, flicking the air with its tongue. Forge had grown up with a metalsmith father and knew how enchanted ornaments were made. Even so, there was something about the weaving brass head and the flickering golden tongue that worried him. He stuffed his hand into the pocket of his coat and retrieved the parchment.

"Here. See?" he said, trying to keep the tremor out of his voice. "Now open the door."

The snake stretched out toward the parchment in Forge's hand. It reared, and then spat a bolt of green flame. Forge yanked his hand away, yelping as the flame consumed the parchment in midair. The snake's eyes glowed brighter and it uncoiled even further from the door, leaning out toward Forge's face. Forge wouldn't have thought it was possible, but the sculpture seemed to grin at him.

"Prossssccceeed," it said. The door unlocked and swung ponderously open.

Forge entered slowly, peering around. He found himself in a long hallway, laid with rich, if rather threadbare red carpet. There were thick doors on either side, lacquered to a mirror-black shine. All of them were closed except for the one at the very end. Voices came from beyond, echoing so that Forge couldn't quite understand them. He opened his mouth to announce himself when the door suddenly slammed shut behind him, startling him. He glanced back at it, his eyes wide, and then listened again. The voices were still speaking. The masters of the house must have heard the slam of the door, therefore they must know he'd arrived. Water dripped steadily from the tail of Forge's overcoat as he walked quietly down the hall, toward the open door and the voices.

Beyond the door was another dark room. There was a bench along one side and a long, ornately framed mirror on the other. Another open door showed a corner of a third room. Forge thought it looked like a library. Firelight flickered on the walls and shadows moved. The voices had become more distinct.

"It is very dark," said a woman's raspy voice. "We are rather far away, my lord. It is impossible to be certain."

“Pray do not say that,” a man’s voice replied. “Impossible’ is such a very... *final* word. Perhaps you would care to be a bit more nuanced, madam.”

“Yes,” the woman said quickly. “My error, my lord. Let me look again.”

There was a stirring, as of someone moving in a large chair, and a different man’s voice spoke impatiently, “Just tell us what you see, woman. We will decide what it is.”

The woman moaned, either in fear or concentration. “There are three figures... small. They are... no, they are not small. They are young. One is larger, another is fair haired. They are... there is commotion. Fighting.”

Forge listened, unsure what he was supposed to do. He looked around the darker antechamber of the library and saw a coat rack standing next to the door. He shrugged off his overcoat and hung it there. Water pattered from it to the wooden floor. Apparently he was meant to wait until this current interview was over. He approached the bench but did not sit on it. In the mirror across from the bench, forge could see a reflection of the library beyond the doorway. Three large chairs were turned to face the fireplace. Forge could only see their backs.

“There is another figure,” the woman’s voice rasped. “Thin and tall. A wraith, if I know my psychic signatures. The boys are fighting her. I see... I see a cloud of embers descending. I fear I am losing the vision...”

“Let me look,” the impatient voice demanded.

“Be still, Gregor. Divination isn’t your strong suit,” the first voice said silkily. “Let the woman exercise her talents.”

In the mirror, Forge saw a hand moving on the arm of one of the chairs. It was very white and had a large black ring on it. The shadow of the woman moved on the wall of the library. Forge recognized the stoop and hat of a hag. She was bent over her crystal.

“No...” the hag breathed, now lost in her work. “This is not the fog of distance or any sort of confusion hex. This is something else. Something is descending on the place. Something is... forming.”

There was a tense silence. Forge felt it, and knew the two men were listening very intently.

“The fight is done...” the hag said in a sing-song voice, now completely immersed in her divination. “There is a ghost now as well... it is assisting the wraith... or perhaps it is the other way around. There is much conflict in the ether. But the fog has descended. It is forming... it is making a... a...”

The hag suddenly gasped. Forge saw her shadow lurch backwards, clapping her hands to her head. There was clatter and a crash as something fell.

“Keep looking!” the impatient voice, Gregor, shouted. “Look and tell, or so help me...!”

“Stop,” the other man’s voice said, almost playfully. There was a smile in it. “Gregor, leave the poor woman alone. Obviously she has seen something that has upset her a great deal.”

The hag was panting, and then, strangely, horribly, another voice spoke. It was very thin, high, cold, but nonsensical. Forge couldn’t hear its actual words, but it seemed gleeful, somehow. The few remaining hairs at the base of Forge’s neck stuck straight up.

“What did you see?” Gregor demanded, ignoring the thin, muttering voice. “What was it?”

“Let us not overtax the poor woman,” the first voice said. “She has performed her services quite well. We shall see that she receives payment as agreed. Thank you, madam.”

“It was a man,” the hag panted, her voice trembling. “But then...”

“Yes, thank you,” the man’s voice said soothingly. “I believe we’ve heard enough. Gregor, perhaps you’d be so kind as to show our guest-“

“Horrible,” she keened, and then sobbed hugely. Forge watched the hag’s shadow dip, and then another shape, a fat man, jumped up, supporting her.

“Yes,” the first voice said, dismissing her. “He was horrible, this man. Thank you,“

“No!” the hag shouted. Forge saw her shadow lunge, pulling away from the shadow of Gregor. “*Not* the man! He was awful enough, but *then...*”

There was a pause as the hag seemed to crumple again. The white hand on the arm of the chair rose slightly. The black ring twinkled in the firelight. “And then?”

The hag shuddered. “Something else. Something... *came through...* it was...”

She didn’t seem able to continue. The white hand on the arm of the chair remained still, poised in a gesture that looked almost like a benediction. Firelight flickered and snapped. The horrible, otherworldly voice buzzed and gibbered quietly to itself.

“Smoke,” the hag finally said. Her voice had gone high, nearly falsetto. She sounded like a child. “Black fire. Ash and... and... eyes... and nothing. *Living nothing.*”

There was a pause, and then the white hand closed into a loose fist. “Well,” the first man’s voice said casually, “that changes things a bit. Perhaps you should like to be paid here and now, madam. Tonight. Lemuel, please escort our guest... er... someplace else, won’t you? You’ll find a proper place to pay her, I’m certain.”

Shadows moved. A heretofore unseen figure arose and led the hag away from the firelight. Forge felt a sudden panic that they would come through the antechamber and find him, and then he remembered he was supposed to be here. They were expecting him. He wondered fleetingly if it was too late to sneak back out. Price or no price, this was looking to be a very bad group to get involved with. To Forge’s relief, Lemuel led the hag out through another door at the back of the library. Lemuel moved like a trained servant, though rather older than Forge had expected. The hag lolled as she walked, her eyes gray and blank. Neither of them paid Forge any attention.

“Then it is done,” Gregor said as the rear door of the library closed. “Merlinus is returned. Your plan is complete.”

“The plan is far from complete, but yes, up to this point everything has proceeded as expected. The Delacroix woman will be disposed of. The Potter boy will be mortified to know he was the tool to bring about our ends. And Merlinus Ambrosius is loosed upon the world yet again. But, Gregor, you should be careful calling this *my* plan. You know whose design this is. I’ll not take credit for the work of the Dark Lord.”

Gregor ignored the rebuke. “How can we be certain that Merlin will be one of us?”

“We cannot. Merlin’s loyalties never belonged to anyone but himself. This is why the Dark Lord was never interested in such an alliance while he was living. Merlin himself was never the prize, as you know.”

Forge heard Gregor shift again in his seat. “Not everyone believes these tales,” he said quietly.

“Only fools doubt the existence of the Otherworlds. Even the Muggles believe in heaven and hell. All that concerns us is that the Dark Lord believed in it. If he had not fallen, we would never have resorted to it. But even he saw the value of a failsafe.”

“Yes,” Gregor replied. “The failsafe. The Bloodline.”

“No,” the first voice said quietly. “The Bloodline is not yet perfect. It knows not who it is. Its power is undiscovered, divided and dim. The Bloodline has not yet been sharpened by the gauntlet of death, as was the Dark Lord, its creator. It must be... refined.”

“And this is the work of the Otherworlder?”

“Among other things.”

Gregor sighed theatrically. “Even so, the faithful are scattered. Many are in Azkaban. More are dead. The dog, Fletcher, is in the custody of the Ministry. The Langlock curse silences him, and his identity is still undiscovered, but if your conspiracy crumbles, connections will be made. Potter will recognize him from his days with the Order. They will find a way to communicate with him. Sacarhina and Recreant will be incriminated first, but you will be next. After all, you were there with them in the cave of the Throne. You yourself performed the curse upon them. Fletcher will betray you.”

“Fletcher has nothing that the Ministry can use against us,” the silky voice soothed. “Like all weak governments, they are far too enamoured with their ideals of justice to be effective against a truly wily enemy. Potter will watch us, when and where he can, but that is all. Let him. He believes the battle is over. He saw the Dark Lord cut down at his own thieving hand. And shall I shock you, my friend? Perhaps that was for the best. After all, the seed must die for the flower to blossom. Perhaps it was best that our Lord was cut down by the coward Harry Potter. He and his allies have been lured these many years into a false sense of security. They believe that we, like them, are cowards, that we will not rise up again with vengeance in our hearts, stronger than ever. And let us not forget the legend, Gregor. We may indeed be the tools in the hand of our greatest forefather. It may well be our mission to close the circle of ancient revenge; a circle that was begun over a thousand years ago. My friend, I dare to suggest that the plan that was put into motion by the death of the Dark Lord may be even greater than his original intention. Given what we have discovered, I am certain that he would agree with me.”

Gregor’s shadow leaned forward. “*Are* you certain, my friend?”

“Call it an educated guess. After all, I was among his closest and most loyal servants. You know as well as I the... difficulties we face. For now.”

There was a clink as Gregor reached for a wine glass. “Perhaps we shouldn’t say any more in front of our guest.”

“Ah, yes,” the silky voice replied. “How insufferably rude of me to speak as if he were not here. Mr. Forge, do join us, won’t you?”

Forge jumped. He’d become so transfixed by the conversation that he’d forgotten they were waiting for him. He peeked around the door into the library. Firelight flashed along the edges of the leather chairs.

“Yes, thank you, Mr. Forge,” the silky voice said airily. The white hand beckoned. As it did, two of the three chairs began to turn. They revolved silently, as if on bearings, and Forge saw that they floated very slightly off the floor. “Tell me, my goblin friend: have you ever heard of the *Transitus Nihilum*?”

“No, sir,” Forge said instantly, relieved that his voice didn’t betray his nervousness. “I’m just a simple trade goblin. I don’t know about any of these things. In fact, I’d be willing to wager that I’ll forget every word you’ve said by the time I’m fifty feet from this house.”

The chairs stopped turning and Forge saw the men sitting there. The one on the left had long, white-blond hair framing a handsome, rather aged face. He was smiling disarmingly, as if inviting Forge to share a joke. The one on the right, Gregor, was fatter and red cheeked, with the expression of long indulgence that belied a life of pureblood leisure.

“Fear not, my friend,” the pale man said, “We crave your services rather more than your blood. Allow me to enlighten you. The *Transitus Nihilum* is the crossing place. It is the Void between our world and the next. Tell me, you believe in the next world, don’t you?”

“I’ll believe in whatever you ask me to believe if it gets me back out your door in less than two pieces, my lord.”

The man laughed. “That’s what I love about goblins, Gregor. They are as candid as the day is long.” He turned back to Forge. “I’ll give you something else you might choose to believe in, my new friend. Our ancient forefathers believed that there was more to our world than that which we see and feel with our senses. They believed there were unseen entities, beings greater than us, more powerful, immortal and inhuman. They exist not only in the beyond, but in the nothingness in between. They had words for them. I won’t bother you with the names, for there were hundreds of them. But there was one being in particular that drew the interest of ambitious men. It is sometimes called the Gatekeeper, or the Being of Smoke and Ash. It does not break into our world, for it knows us not. It is made of the Void; it is our exact opposite, therefore it neither suspects our existence, nor the existence of anything else. It is bound by its own perfect ignorance of us. And this, you think, is a good thing, yes, Mr. Forge?”

The goblin stood stiffly, staring into the man’s bright eyes. He nodded.

“Yes, of course you do. Because a creature of such unadulterated inhumanity, such thoughtless power, if it were descended upon us, would be nothing less than the Destroyer, wouldn’t it? Thus, it is a good thing that it is out there... and we are down here. Little children go to sleep each night understanding the truth of this: there are bad things lurking in the world, yes; but not the *worst* of things. It knows us not. And yet...” The man looked away for a moment, his eyes narrowed. “What if something *made* it aware of us? After all, we move in and out of the crossing place all the time, do we not? When we die, yes, we pass through. But when we perform certain kinds of magic, when we disappear, do we not also dip fleetingly into the Void? Fortunately, the Gatekeeper lives outside of time, so it does not notice our tiny, timebound existences. But what if one of us bent the rules just a bit? What if one of us, a particularly powerful one, stepped *out* of time and into the Void? What if one of us stayed there long enough for the Gatekeeper to *take notice*?”

The goblin hadn’t been paying much attention, being rather preoccupied with doing whatever he needed to do to get out of the house alive, but suddenly he remembered the words of the hag: *Black fire. Ash... eyes... and nothing. Living nothing.*

“What have you done?” Forge asked quietly.

“Me?” the pale man replied, raising his eyebrows. “Not a thing. I’m just passing the time. Gregor here tends to believe in fantastic stories like this. It amuses him.”

Gregor grunted and rolled his eyes. The horrible, mewling voice came again. It seemed to be coming from the chair that still faced the fire. Forge felt the skin of his scalp tighten. The voice was insane. It chilled him.

“But let us get down to business, as it were,” the pale man continued. “Mr. Forge, we require your services. We understand that you are a bit of an expert on, er, *restoration*. Would that be accurate?”

Forge shifted. “I am just a simple trade goblin, sir—”

“You are a *master forger*,” the pale man said suddenly, his voice as cold as an ice pick. “Tell me you are. I’d hate to think I’ve summoned you here in vain.”

“Y- yes, sir,” Forge answered quickly, trying not to tremble.

“Excellent,” the pale man replied breezily, leaning comfortably back in his chair. “And I have come to understand that this expertise of yours extends to restoring portraits. Would that also be correct? Don’t lie to me, Mr. Forge. I’ll know.”

Forge gulped and glanced at Gregor. The man seemed to be paying no attention. He stared idly at the wine in his glass as he swirled it.

“I... yes,” Forge said. “It takes more time, of course. It isn’t merely a matter of replacing the paint. The correct potions must be determined for each color... unimportant bits have to be scraped and reused to get the proper compositions... it’s very delicate, but I have achieved a level of success.”

“That’s very fascinating,” the pale man said, his blue eyes boring into the goblin. *He’s insane*, Forge thought. *Completely mad. I wonder if the other one knows it. I wonder if they are both mad, but in different ways?*

The pale man stood. “We have a job for you, Mr. Forge. It will be rather difficult, I am afraid, but I suspect a goblin of your obvious skills will find it a worthy challenge indeed. It is a priceless family heirloom, you see. For the longest time we believed it was lost. Funny, isn’t it, how things tend to turn up when you need them most? It’s been rather dreadfully damaged by, er, vandals. But if there was anything you thought you could do to help, we’d be most eternally... grateful.”

The thin voice was gibbering again as the pale man began to turn the middle chair. Suddenly, Forge absolutely did not want to see what was there. He wanted to run, or at least avert his eyes. He knew if he did, they would probably kill him. He watched and listened, and as the chair turned, the voice finally became intelligible.

“*Show meee himmm!*” it rasped in its awful, tiny, broken voice. “Show him *meee!*” And it began to laugh, high and crackling, a thoroughly mad, fragmented, twisted laugh.

The portrait was not large. It was almost entirely destroyed. Only a few shreds and scraps remained: the corner of the mouth; two fingers of a thin, pale hand; a single glittering red eye. It had been slashed. The back of the frame showed dozens of deep gouges and punctures.

“*Make him repairrr meeee...!*” the portrait screamed in its thin, insectile voice. “*Do it, Luciusssss!* Make him *repairrr meeeee...!*”

“It will be his pleasure, my Lord,” the pale man smiled, looking up at Forge, his eyes wet, glistening.

“M-my lord?” Gregor said, as if shocked to hear the decimated portrait speak so clearly. “You remain! But we thought...!”

*"It matterssss not!"* the portrait of Voldemort cried. *"The Gatekeeper isss come! The work of our forefather is at hand! Vennngeance!"*

Gregor seemed hopelessly at a loss by this sudden change of events. "But... but how will we find it, my Lord?"

"Weeee will *not*..." the portrait hissed. The sound of its broken voice flapped a shred of the canvas. Forge dreaded the sight of the horrible thing, dreaded what they were going to make him do to it. But he dreaded most what he knew it was going to say next.

The painting sighed deeply and said, on the exhale, "It will find *ussss*..."

Dear Reader,

This has been a teaser preview of the prologue of the upcoming novel, *James Potter and the Curse of the Gatekeeper*. It is unedited, which means the final version might be slightly different, but *only* slightly. If this little tidbit intrigues you, I look forward to meeting you at [gatekeeperscurse.com](http://gatekeeperscurse.com) on September 1, 2008 for the launch of the full story.

If you are new to the James Potter stories, which are a continuation of J. K. Rowlings' delightful Harry Potter novels, you may be interested in reading *James Potter and the Hall of Elders' Crossing*, ([elderscrossing.com](http://elderscrossing.com)) which is the first in this series. It was launched in December of 2007, and has since been viewed by over a million readers worldwide.

James Potter and the Curse of the Gatekeeper (the "Work") is Harry Potter series ("Series") cover fiction and was not created by Series author J.K. Rowling nor under her auspices. To the extent that trademarks of the Series (the "Proprietary Rights") are used in the Work, such use is incidental and not for purposes of source indication. Any such trademarks are and remain property of Ms. Rowling and her assigns. The author hereby disclaims any interest in said Proprietary Rights. The Work is © 2008 G. Norman Lippert.