

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

LOVINGLY BASED UPON THE WORLDS AND
CHARACTERS OF J. K. ROWLING

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19. BACK TO LONDON

“You told your *dad!*?” Millie hissed, her eyes bulging in the shadows outside the Hufflepuff common room door.

“I didn’t say any *names*,” James whispered defensively, glancing around to assure they weren’t overheard. The stacks of barrels along the corridor offered a nominal hiding place, and the low ceiling eliminated echoes. Dimly, a little wistfully, James remembered kissing Millie in almost this exact spot only a few weeks earlier. “I just said I knew *somebody* who knows architecture. And I can’t tell you what we need a person like that for. Not until you agree to come. And I really hope you will, because, well, we really do need you and your architectural expertise.”

Millie rolled her eyes impatiently. She was dressed in loose grey sweatpants and a yellow Hufflepuff Quidditch tee shirt. The hand-lettered legend across the front read *WE’LL HUFFlePUFF and BLOW YOUR HOUSE DOWN!*

“James,” Millie said, covering her eyes with one hand. “I’ve got exactly one book on the subject, and I’ve barely had a chance to crack it so far. What sort of ‘expertise’ do you need, exactly?”

James hedged a little, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “Well. We need somebody who can recognize building styles that might look at home in... a different country.”

Millie peeked over her hand at him, and then dropped it, cocking her head. “What country?”

“Norway,” James answered, deciding to go for broke.

“I don’t know anything about Norwegian architecture,” Millie said, bracing her hands on her hips. “Not any more than the average person does.”

“*I’m* the average person,” James said helplessly, “and up until ten minutes ago I didn’t know Norwegian architecture was even a thing!”

“Look, I wouldn’t be any help,” Millie insisted, becoming annoyed. “Whatever you told your dad, I doubt I can live up to it. When it comes to Norway, I can barely tell a redwood stave from a Romanesque.”

“See?” James brightened, boggling at her in the dark. “You *do* know what you’re talking about!”

“Those are just words I picked up while skimming books,” Millie exclaimed in annoyance. “The sentence barely even makes sense. If you really want someone who knows their stuff, why don’t you go talk to Blake? Poor bloke’s probably still groping around for his invisible car.” She turned away, reaching for the door.

“Millie,” James whispered, stopping her with a hand on her shoulder. She halted, but didn’t turn back to him. Still whispering, he said, “I’m sorry for the way I acted that night. I’m not sorry for *Blake*—I still think he’s an obnoxious, scheming pikey. But I’m sorry

to *you* that I was a jealous, suspicious duffer. And later on the train, it was stupid of me to tell Ralph what I did. I didn't want you to find out from him. I acted like a coward."

Millie considered this, one hand still on the latch of the common room door. "I could've taken it," she said quietly. "If you'd just come and told me yourself."

"I was on my way to do that," James sighed. "But I kept finding reasons to put it off. I didn't want to hurt you."

"Well," she nodded, still staring back at the closed door, "you did hurt me. But I'm a big girl. I can handle it. And I'm mostly over it. Mostly."

James lowered his hand. "I'm glad. I do really like you, Millie. I just don't..."

He stopped, knowing he couldn't go any further without explaining his connection to Petra, and the hopeless love he felt for her.

Fortunately, he didn't need to say anymore. Millie glanced back at him over her shoulder, and the look on her face told him she was content to leave it at that.

"This doesn't make me know any more about Norwegian architecture," she said, meeting his gaze.

He shrugged and sighed.

Millie turned back to him fully. "But it *does* make me slightly more willing to help you. If not for your sake, then at least for your dad. I've been hearing about *him* since I was in nappies. Let me change and get my coat. It's about time *my* name appeared in one of Revalvier's books."



Merlin came along as well.

James didn't discover this until they were already on the ship, barreling along the subterranean tunnels en route back to London. As he and Millie clambered down the steps into the narrow hold, they encountered the headmaster seated on a crate reading a small but immensely thick book, a pair of glinting spectacles perched low on his nose.

James stumbled to a halt so quickly that Millie clambered into him from behind.

The ship rocked precipitously and groaned all around, occasionally juddering as the hull ground against the rushing tunnel beyond. Merlin seemed completely oblivious to these things, but he did clap his book shut and look up at the students, his face merely pleasantly curious.

"I doubt you two have developed your sea legs yet," he announced, and patted a bench bolted to the sloping hull next to him. "Do come sit down before you do yourselves harm."

James hesitated, his mind racing with a mixture of speechless surprise and cold fear. Why was the headmaster here? What did he know? Was he a portent of official trouble to come?

After a moment, Millie pushed James aside and half walked, half stumbled to the bench. Strategically, she sat at the end of the bench furthest from the headmaster, leaving James the space right to him. With a silent sigh and a gulp, he lurched to the bench and fell to a seat upon it.

Merlin opened his tiny book again, adjusted his spectacles, and casually said, "I trust your father, aunt, and uncle are assisting Mr. Hagrid in piloting the ship to our destination?"

James nodded uncertainly. He knew that there wasn't much piloting to be done once the ship was caught in the throat of the rushing tunnels, but felt there was no point in explaining it.

Instead, he asked in a low voice, "I guess we're all going to be in trouble when we get back?"

"Trouble?" the headmaster repeated the word as if he'd never heard it before. "Whatever for?"

James blinked aside at him. "You know why we're going to London, right? You're not just along for the ride?"

Merlin shrugged his huge shoulders. "I know that magical safeguards in the cities have deteriorated to the point that a dragon has penetrated Muggle spaces, causing some distress to hapless witnesses. And I know that you and your friends were ultimately responsible for it." He tilted an eye at James, as if he could see the wave of guilt that washed over him, making him shrink against the hull wall. Lowering his voice to a low rumble, the headmaster said, "Your error was not in attempting to rescue the dragon from her own persistent instincts, Mr. Potter. Until recent years, normal magical protections would have rendered the city impenetrable to creatures such as she. Nor did you err in not telling me of your plans. I am, personally, quite content when citizens willingly delegate these tasks to themselves. It frees those such as myself to their own unique devices."

"So..." James said, frowning a little. "We're *not* in trouble?"

"Your error," Merlin said, raising a finger, "*and* the error of your companions, was to trust an elf whose motives were proven to be suspect."

James sat up in surprise. "How did you know about her? We didn't mention her to my dad or anyone else!"

Merlin drew a deep sigh and blew it out thoughtfully. "I'd *prefer* to allow you to believe that I divined this information via my own mysterious and terrible machinations. But I find that trust is a more valuable commodity than awe when it comes to you, Mr. Potter. Therefore I will admit: I spoke to Hagrid, and he wisely regaled me with the whole story. We conversed on the deck of this very ship as we

awaited you and your family. He told me of the house elf, and her sabotage of your otherwise courageous, if rather foolhardy, arrangement with his giantish kin.”

James slumped in mingled relief and humiliation. “I *tried* to tell them that Heddlebun couldn’t be trusted. I saw what she did back at the Vandergriff’s house.”

“*You* saw it,” Merlin clarified, “But *Hagrid* did not. Nor your cousin, or Mr. Walker, or Mr. Dolohov.”

James glanced aside at him again. “Exactly. So?”

“So the truth was clear for you to see, but cloudy for them. It was your responsibility to *make* it clear, by whatever means necessary. Thus, the responsibility for the error rests heavier on your shoulders than theirs.”

This wasn’t the first time that James had encountered the headmaster’s strict, unforgiving interpretation of responsibility, but it still nettled him to no end. He crossed his arms, clutching his shoulders against the chill of the hold. “So it’s all my fault, then. Is that what you want me to hear?”

Merlin shrugged again. “If there is one thing that constantly dismays me about this age, it is the speed and ease with which good people give up. Grant me a stubborn donkey over a weak-willed saint. At least the donkey’s kick can be aimed at the proper doors.”

“So,” James said, rolling his eyes to himself, “just to be clear, *are* we in trouble or not?”

“That is what we are on this journey to discover,” Merlin answered, returning his gaze to the small book in his hands. To James’ eye, the book looked completely blank, but he knew that this was surely an illusion to prevent its being read by the likes of him. “For you, Mr. Potter, the days of trouble being meted out in house points and lines are over. Make no mistake: from here onward, trouble shall be measured in laws, years, and blood.”

James chose to view this as a good thing, in the sense that it didn’t seem to indicate that the headmaster intended to give him, Ralph, or Rose any official punishment.

Soon enough, the ship tilted upwards and seemed to accelerate. The momentum pushed James against Millie, almost driving her off her end of the short bench. Merlin, however, remained completely planted, as if his feet were rooted to the floor. He continued to read his tiny, fat book, peering down through his spectacles, even as the ship rocked upright, seemed to hover in suspension for a long, sickening moment, and then keeled slowly forward, falling flat again onto a thudding, sloshing surface.

“Londontown, I presume,” Merlin said, finally tucking his book into his robes and standing as much as the low overhead would allow. Footsteps sounded from above, moving quickly. Merlin climbed the stairs to the deck with James and Millie following close behind.

Cold air coursed over the deck above and whistled eerily through the rigging. By the look of the city all around, the Gertrude appeared to have surfaced in exactly the same place as last time. Fortunate, of course, since the ice of the Thames had not frozen over the original hole yet.

The adults congregated on the stern of the ship and, without a word, apparated to the shore, materializing on a long boardwalk in the shadow of a dark wharf, where they were nothing more than shadows on a darker background. Millie side-along apparated with Hermione and Ron, while Harry remained last to take James.

“That was wily of you to arrange to come along the way that you did,” he said with a wry smile. “I hope your friend Millie knows enough to make it worth it.”

James shrugged a little. “She hopes so, too.”

He took his father’s hand when he offered it. A moment later, the world vanished into a whip-crack and a whirl of cold darkness. Within a sliver of a second, James’ feet smacked down onto the leaning planks of the boardwalk.

When he looked up, Merlin had his staff in his hand, having produced it out of thin air, as he always did when he desired it. He

held it aloft over the edge of the boardwalk, pointing it toward the dark ship where it bobbed in its circle of broken ice.

“*Cuddiasid*,” he said, reverting to the guttural language of his ancient origins. A wave of purple light swept upwards through the runes of his staff, culminating in the tip with a brief but blinding flash. When James’ eyes cleared, the Gertrude was gone. Shards of broken ice choked the broken hole where it had rocked only a second before. The ship was still there, James knew, but rendered utterly hidden and invisible through whatever prehistoric enchantment the sorcerer had cast over it.

“That’s pretty handy,” Millie commented, awed. “I see why you came along.”

“My usefulness has only begun to reveal itself,” Merlin said, clacking his staff to the wooden plank next to his feet. “Assuming that *your* usefulness serves as well as Mr. Potter hopes.”

Millie looked uncomfortably from Merlin to James.

Hagrid spoke up, pointing to the brightly glowing shape of Tower Bridge in the near distance. “Norberta went that way. Down into th’ city, southwest from th’ south tower.”

Harry struck out, inviting the others to follow. “Then let us get into the proper vicinity. Perhaps we will get lucky and stumble upon the unmistakable stench of dragon manure.”

Ron shrugged gamely. “That’s the only time *that* smell’s been called ‘lucky’, I wager.”

“Wellnow,” Hagrid suggested, shrugging his coat more tightly about his shoulders, “I’ve always found dragon scat t’ ‘ave a not unpleasant odor, as a matter o’ fact. Now hippogriff guano, *gor...*” He shook his head violently, “noble creatures they may be, but *there’s* a stink to peel the varnish off yer broomstick.”

Following along behind, Hermione sniffed, “I expect there *are* better topics of conversation we might explore.”

From there, the troupe walked in silence as they approached the lights and sounds of the city, climbing a switchback of concrete stairs to a thoroughfare lit with brilliant orange-ish streetlamps on tall,

industrial-looking posts. The street was surprisingly busy for the hour, filled with gleaming black taxis, lorries belching smoke, red double-decker buses, and endless automobiles. Dozens of traffic lights hung over cross-roads, blinking their red, amber, and green eyes at the lines of vehicles below. In one direction, Tower Bridge loomed over low rooftops. In the other, a massive roundabout spun with vehicles, lit like a flying saucer, like a larger-than-life version of the Wocket from James' first year.

Merlin stepped out to cross the crowded thoroughfare, completely ignoring the rushing vehicles that bore down on him, their headlamps glaring and painting his robes with brightness.

"Wait!" James called, alarmed, but it was too late. Vehicles swooped past and around the huge man at full speed, neither swerving nor sounding their horns. Neither did Merlin pay the vehicles any attention. He merely strode across the many lanes, his staff clacking the pavement at his side. Halfway across, he paused to look back at the people watching, dumbfounded, from the curb behind.

"A little trick I learned navigating herds of stampeding Erumpents during my travels in darkest Africa," he called in his deep, resonating voice. "Follow close behind. We have a schedule to keep."

"Oh, bloody hell," Ron muttered in a high voice. "He's not serious, is he?"

Hermione said, "I think *I'll* take the cross-walk, if you don't mind." She struck off at a trot toward the nearest traffic light some fifty yards away.

"I'm with her," Ron nodded firmly. "We'll catch up to 'Mr. Red Cross-code Man' on the other side, and schedule be damned."

Hagrid wrung his huge hands in miserable indecision, glancing back and forth between the headmaster's retreating back and the hurrying Weasleys. "I'll jus'..." He hooked a thumb over his shoulder, beginning to back away, "keep an eye on 'em, then. Erm." Turning, he hastened to join Ron and Hermione, his long coat flapping behind him.

“I’m going to try it,” Millie said, watching the headmaster with a twinkle in her eye.

“What!?” James began, “Millie, we can’t just—” but she had already stepped off the curb. Walking purposefully, without a glance back, she began to stride across the first lane. Headlamps painted her side with increasing luminance as vehicles bore down on her.

“Millie!” he called, and took one step down from the curb. A bus swept past her, buffeting her hair with the zooming blast of its passage. She didn’t even glance at it.

“Dad!” James exclaimed, turning aside to his father, but his father wasn’t there anymore, either. The elder Potter was also striding out onto the busy street, neither hurrying nor hesitating, keeping his gaze straight ahead as vehicles blurred past in both directions, whipping at his pant-legs and unruly hair.

James hovered a moment longer, completely stymied with uncertainty. And then, with a gulp and a steeling of his already frayed nerve, he stepped out onto the pavement of the thoroughfare himself.

The key, it appeared, was not to watch, not to pay the slightest attention to the rushing lanes of vehicles on either side. He kept his eyes firmly on his father’s back as he trod ahead of him, even as his father seemed to watch Millie ahead of *him*. Merlin had reached the other side now, having crossed no less than six lanes of busy nighttime traffic.

Without warning, a load of vehicles blared past in both directions, flickering between James and his father, momentarily obscuring his view. His eyes strained, reflexively trying to follow the flashing metal and glass of the vehicles, to look both ways to assure that his next step wouldn’t place him into the path of a speeding lorry. And yet, just barely, James resisted, keeping his gaze locked dead ahead. And each step, amazingly, carried him forward between roaring cars and taxis, buses and vans, threading through them in a sort of suicidal dance. The passing drivers, for their part, seemed completely oblivious to the line of magical pedestrians crossing between them. James could feel the hot blat of exhausts on his face, the sooty grit of road grime

peppering his cheeks and hair. And yet, almost before he thought it possible, he found himself stepping up onto the curb of the other side of the boulevard, leaving the deafening drone of traffic behind him.

“That was brilliant!” Millie exclaimed, grabbing James’ hands and pulling him forward, into a narrow alley. “Wasn’t it a complete blast?”

“How could you *do* that?” James gasped, his heart still slamming in his throat. “Either of you?!”

Harry shrugged with one shoulder, glancing into the mouth of the alley, where Merlin was still striding away, a mere silhouette against the security lights beyond. “If Merlin said it was safe, I’ve come to trust him,” he said. “But don’t you dare ever try that on your own. Either of you.”

“No worries there!” James said, still struggling to catch his breath over the thunder of his heart. He glanced around the street outside the alley. “Where’s Aunt Hermione and Uncle Ron?”

“They’ll catch up to us,” his father answered, “come on. It would seem that the Headmaster is in the teeth of the hunt.”

James found himself running along behind his father into the shadows and stink of the alley. Darkness choked the space, interrupted only by glaring security lights that didn’t seem to illuminate anything other than slushy puddles and hulking trash bins.

The alley ended in a narrow cobbled road bordered by a long chain-link fence. Beyond the fence was a dark open space, crowded with low weeds and bushes, that James vaguely recognized as a railway switchyard.

Merlin had stopped before the fence, the runes of his staff pulsing a pale blue. “In there,” he said, nodding his bearded chin. He stepped forward and the chain-link rattled and rang before him as if buffeted by a sudden, silent gale. The mesh of metal unfurled and unraveled, spiraling out from a centre point and forming a gaping opening just as the headmaster stepped through it, not even bowing his head. James and Millie clambered to follow him through, now with

James' father in the rear, his wand held at the ready, his eyes alert behind his spectacles.

"What about the others?" Millie said, her voice unconsciously hushed beneath the steady thrum of the city all around.

"Coming," Hermione's voice called, approaching from behind. James turned to see his aunt run lightly out of the darkness, her bushy hair bouncing about her face. "I'm right here. And Ron is..." She turned to look back. "Well. On his way, it would seem."

"Save yourselves!" a man's voice wheezed from the vicinity of the chain-link fence. "I'll just lie down here and die."

"Come on, Ron," Harry called back. "Think of it as exercise."

Ron approached at a shamble, breathing hard. "You mean she's not the only one who does this running thing just for *fun*? That's a masochist streak, you ask me."

Millie asked, "What about Hagrid?"

"I thought it might be a good idea to have him ask around at some of the wizarding establishments near Diagon Alley," Hermione said. "There are loads of pubs and pawn shops and the like, secretly run by witches and wizards for Muggle patronage. Some of them might have seen or heard something about where Norberta has holed up."

"He didn't want to go," Ron said, glancing aside at Harry. "But we thought... er... he might be more *useful* in that capacity."

Harry nodded once, meaningfully. Tonight's plan relied largely on subtlety and finesse, James knew, and neither of those things exactly sprang to mind when one thought of Hagrid.

The troupe began move into the darkness of the switchyard again. Harry nodded toward Merlin and explained, "The old man seems to have caught a hint of a trail or something."

"Not a trail as such," Merlin said as he walked. "There may not be much wild left in the City, but what there is of it, the weed-grasses and brush, the beetles and rats, they remember the scent of a powerful beast near here, too vague to pinpoint exactly."

Moving swiftly, James followed his dad and the others into the darkness. Soon, they were stepping up over humps of railroad tracks, their footsteps grinding on gravel.

“Miss Vandergriff,” Merlin announced from the lead, “what shall we be looking for from this point? I understand that you are our resident expert on the sorts of Norwegian structures that might attract a particular dragonish heritage.”

“I’m nobody’s expert,” Millie said, “I told James, I barely know anything—”

Merlin stopped and turned, more suddenly and gracefully than seemed possible for a man of his size. In the darkness, he was like a faceless totem rising out of the rail-beds.

“Miss Vandergriff,” he said, his voice soft and deep, yet strangely penetrating. “While humility is widely considered a virtue, it is not one that I myself prize under even normal circumstances. I believe that you do indeed have the requisite knowledge to accomplish our mission this night. Therefore, pray, do not allow your own understandable insecurities to be an impediment. Call upon what your interests have cultivated. What are we seeking? More accurately, what may have attracted a creature of some limited intellect seeking a reminder of her ancestral Norwegian homeland?”

Millie opened her mouth to object, paused, and then, after a thoughtful moment, closed it again. James recognized Merlin’s subtle powers at work. The ancient sorcerer did not control people magically, exactly. But he did exert a sort of calming, focusing influence on them at certain important times.

James turned to look more closely at Millie. Her eyes were open wide, not in shock, but in thought. Her pupils flicked rhythmically back and forth, as if she was scanning a file cabinet in her own mind.

“There was no such thing as architecture in Norway for centuries,” she said in a musing voice, blinking rapidly. “They built huts and houses out of whatever was at hand, with no thought to design. Except for the churches. Those they built with things called

staves, tall posts that allowed them to build very tall and narrow, with sharp, sloping roofs. The magical varieties were built with Redwood staves, allowing them to be massively tall. Most of them were built with a sort of vertical diminishing redundancy.”

“Vertical...? Now she’s just not making any sense,” James muttered aside to his uncle Ron, who shrugged and shook his head.

Millie glanced at James. “I’m standing right here, you know,” she said. “I can hear everything you say.”

James gave a shrug, half apologetic, half impatient.

Hermione urged gently, “Go on, Millie, you’re doing well.”

Millie narrowed her eyes again in thought. “Vertical diminishing redundancy just means that the church structure is repeated atop itself in smaller and smaller versions, up and up, sort of like a Chinese pagoda.”

“Oh,” James nodded and shrugged. “*Now* I understand.”

Millie ignored him. “Norway is famous for their stave churches. It’s their most defining building style. At least, it was for hundreds of years.”

“Then that is the sort of structure we shall be searching for,” Merlin agreed, turning and stalking onward again.

Glancing around the switchyard, Harry said, “I doubt there are many stave churches in London.”

“It doesn’t have to be an actual stave church,” Hermione suggested. “Norberta’s no architectural expert. She’ll just look for something that sort of reminds her of such a place.”

The four tramped onward, climbing over humps of railroad tracks, moving into a warren of parallel switches dotted with lines of dark passenger carriages and tankers, looming like sleeping dinosaurs in the darkness. Trailing behind Merlin, who seemed to be following a sort of communal instinct all his own, they wended into the lines of railroad cars, cutting across wherever they could, climbing over iron connector knuckles wherever they couldn’t. Between the tracks, forests of dark gantries jutted up, each topped with boxes containing colored signal lights, currently all dark. A dizzying array of overhead wires

connected the signals, stretching in every direction. James wondered how Norberta could possibly have navigated through those wires and gantries, had she attempted to land in this area.

Finally, the troupe came out beyond the lines of switches to a row of complicated brick buildings lined with ranks of windows, festooned with smokestacks and conveyor ramps covered in corrugated steel, each more industrial and looming than the last.

“Now where?” Ron asked, turning on the spot. “*Any* of these old places look large enough for Norberta to hide in.”

“That one,” Harry pointed.

James turned to look where his father was pointing. Sure enough, rising over the furthest roof, a tall structure hulked upwards against the clouds. It was a sort of silo tower with levels of steeply sloping roofs, all rusted to the color of Redwood. Running along the lowest roof were gigantic faded letters, barely legible: CROSTICK COAL.

Millie shrugged a little uncertainly. “Vertical diminishing redundancy. In a manner of speaking.”

Silently, with Merlin in the lead and Harry bringing up the rear again, the group picked their way along the edge of the dark brick buildings. Dead weeds and brush poked through sullen snowdrifts, diminishing to slushy bogs between the structures. Enormous smokestacks and mountainous piles of coal blotted out the breeze and noise and distant city lights, creating a sort of watchful gloom. Finally, the group picked their way across a pocked gravel parking lot toward the base of the Crostick Coal building. Signs posted to the chain-link fences rattled in the breeze. James turned to read one as they passed: CONDEMNED PROPERTY! KEEP OUT.

He worried briefly that Hagrid was not there with them. Then, he shivered and worried more acutely that he and the rest of them *were*.

The shadows surrounding the ancient coal work were dense and silent, leaving a distinct sense of unseen eyes peering from every broken window. And yet Merlin, for his part, seemed completely unfazed by the eeriness of the scene. Perhaps, James mused, the old sorcerer liked

it here. After all, this was a section of the city that was slowly, irrevocably, being reclaimed by nature. The environmental predators of civilization—rust, weeds, and entropy—were hard at work here, reasserting the feral inevitability of nature. And the green wilds of nature, of course, were Merlin’s element.

James couldn’t be certain, but he almost thought the headmaster was humming cheerfully in the deepening gloom.

A not-unpleasant fact occurred to him: it was hard to be especially frightened in the presence of a happily humming Merlin.

The six travelers followed a set of weedy railroad tracks into a sort of courtyard surrounded by huge, empty doorways, each large enough to drive a lorry through and as black as pitch. Hulking over the tracks was a monstrosity of metal hoppers and closed hatches, blotting out the clouds above.

And there was a smell. It was not dragon dung, as James’ father had hoped. It was a high chemical smell, like the potions closet on a steamy day. James recognized it immediately.

“It’s her breath!” he whispered, raising his nose to the still air. “That’s what it smells like when she flames! She must be here somewhere!”

Merlin angled toward one of the huge open doors. As he did, a brief gust of warm air blew out of it, rippling his robes. A chuff of yellow firelight illuminated a scaly snout, a curl of tail, and a pair of gold-foil eyes peering out of the darkness.

Merlin didn’t hesitate, didn’t even slow his step. But he did begin to speak. James recognized the sound of the sorcerer’s old Welsh, only low and muttered, like words sung to a half-sleeping baby.

The dragon’s huge eyes were only visible where they reflected the distant city lights. They seemed to open wide and elevate, watchful and wary as Merlin approached.

Merlin raised a hand, as if to offer a benediction to the dragon. Then, amazingly, he lowered it to the dragon’s hard, scaly snout. Norberta lowered her head again and her eyes seemed to slit shut in the

darkness. Low and rumbling, Merlin spoke to her, his tone lilting and hypnotic.

Almost to himself, James said, “Looks like Heddlebun isn’t the only beast whisperer in town.”

His father looked at him. “Who?”

James glanced up and then shook his head. “This elf that Hagrid brought along when we first came to collect Norberta. She could talk to beasts, soothe them, like. But she used her powers to set Norberta off when we got out onto the river. She wanted to make a point about elf rights or something.”

Millie frowned. “By setting a dragon loose in London?”

Hermione gave a brisk little sigh. “People will resort to whatever gets attention when they feel that every other option’s been taken away.”

The earth thumped faintly as Merlin backed away from the dark doorway, leading Norberta out into the faint nightglow. Her head emerged first on its long, serpentine neck, sweeping low over the ground. Then her shoulders hove into view, carrying the muscular bulk of her chest. Finally, her rear legs and tail appeared. Her claws clattered on the frozen gravel and her footsteps made faint tremors, but otherwise she was completely silent, her golden eyes half-lidded, contentedly following Merlin and his gently glowing staff.

A little awed, Ron said, “Back to the ship, then?”

“Indeed,” Merlin answered. “But not the way we came. Our dragon friend will never fit through the alleyway. Nor could she cross the thoroughfare that we traversed. We shall have to forge an alternate route through the city proper.”

“That’s, like, an actual dragon...!” Millie said, her eyes bulging at the enormous creature. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen one this up close and personal!”

“A privilege we would like to reserve for as few people as possible,” Hermione commented, a little worriedly.

Merlin nodded. “Which means we shall have to tread very carefully. Our dragon friend is quite docile at the moment, but make

no mistake: beneath her current calm lies a hungry and terrified and deeply driven dragon, responding to the most fundamental and undeniable instincts of all creatures. Her male counterpart, the redoubtable Montague, is nearer than ever. We must increase the distance between them while she is still, nominally, under our influence.”

Harry gave the old wizard a sidelong grin. “I assume that you have some suitably cunning subterfuge in mind, Headmaster?”

“You speak well, Mr. Potter,” Merlin nodded, meeting Harry’s smile with a small one of his own. “I sometimes wonder if perhaps there is some trace of sorcerer in your lineage.”

Harry bobbed his head and shrugged. “Medieval Muggle royalty, I once was told. But sadly, no sorcery.”

Merlin narrowed his eyes at this, unsurprised, and then turned his attention back to the dragon who stood nearby, her head hovering just over his shoulder.

“I beg your pardon, Madame Norberta,” he said in a low voice, and patted her again on the snout. “Do try not to be *too* offended...”

Ten minutes later and three blocks away, a huge metal gate shuddered slightly, shaken by a golden flash. The padlock securing the gate snicked open, releasing its loops of chain, which unwound and slithered to the ground with a ringing chime of metal. The gates eased inward, opening onto the unmistakable depths of the railroad switchyard beyond.

James stepped out into the buzzing streetlight, his eyes wide, his hair buffeting in a sudden gust of wind. He looked around, up and down the narrow street. Cars lined the far curb, parked bumper to bumper, but no one was currently in sight.

“All clear,” he called back, cupping his hands to his mouth.

A moment later, Millie crept out into the light, hurrying to join James, her face a mask of mingled excitement and trepidation. Ron and Hermione came next, followed by Harry Potter and Merlin, the former glancing around alertly, his wand just visible in his sleeve, the

latter walking with calm, even strides, moving straight out into the empty street, leaving no footprints on the sheen of melting slush.

Following Merlin at a low, grumbling idle, was what looked like, for all intents and purposes, the largest, dirtiest, most conspicuous refuse truck that James had ever seen. The truck's tyres bumped down over the curb, thumped in icy puddles, and angled out onto the road to join Merlin as he chose a direction, seemingly at random, and began to walk.

The refuse truck followed him, its engine throbbing throatily, rolling along at his very heels. Behind the filthy glass of its windscreen, the steering wheel pivoted by itself, with no driver. This, however, was perhaps less strange than the fact that the truck was driving *backwards*, leading with its open rear compactor, currently empty but looking hungry enough to swallow a small car whole. James wasn't sure if this detail was due to Merlin's unfamiliarity with the operation of municipal fleet vehicles, or if the wily magician simply preferred a challenge.

The drone and honk of far busier streets could be heard from very nearby. The troupe would be avoiding those streets however possible, sticking to less populous, albeit narrower side streets and avenues. This did mean, however, that their route to the river would be much longer and more circuitous than preferred.

"Hermione, Ron," Harry said, turning to his friends, "why don't you two head back to the Gertrude and pilot her to London Bridge City Pier? That will be a more convenient place to embark from our new route."

Ron nodded his agreement, but Hermione looked concerned. "Should we separate, though?"

"It's probably for the best at this point," Harry said. "We'll be less conspicuous this way."

"And what could possibly go wrong?" Ron grinned, throwing an arm around Hermione's shoulders.

Hermione grudgingly agreed. "But perhaps we should take Millie and James with us, then. They've done their part."

“No way!” Millie exclaimed, and then composed herself. “I mean, I’d much rather stay and watch. If you don’t mind, Madame.”

“Ugh,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “*Don’t call me Madame.*”

“I’m with Millie,” James said, “And Uncle Ron’s right. What could go wrong? We’ve got the great Merlinus Ambrosius with us!”

Harry nudged his son and muttered, “I think ‘the great Merlinus Ambrosius’ is fairly immune to flattery.”

“You would think wrongly,” Merlin observed idly from some distance away, not turning around.

“So be it,” Hermione said, raising both hands. “But just remember, without me or your friend Ralph here, it’s up to Millie to be the voice of reason.” She glanced at James, then his father and Merlin. “Because I know none of *you* three will be.”

“Come, love,” Ron said, offering Hermione his arm. “Allow me whisk you away on a winter’s moonlit boat ride down the romantic and pristine Thames River.”

Hermione smiled at his roguish grin and took his arm. Together they turned and hurried away, returning the way they had come.

James and Millie watched them go.

“They’re so cute,” she sighed.

James shrugged. “Cute is relative, I suppose.”

“We should keep moving,” Harry said briskly, turning and resuming their walk along the footpath. Merlin strode onward down the centre of the road, and the magically disguised Norberta budged forward to follow, her engine throttling, her air brakes hissing and squeaking their release.

“Patience will be our ally,” Merlin reminded them. “We have nothing to fear so long as we all keep our heads about us and our feet on the ground.”

“Or our wheels on the road,” Millie added, skipping forward with what James considered far too much glibness.

“As you say, Miss Vandergriff,” Merlin answered calmly.

With painstaking deliberation, the group walked along the street, turned left, away from the brighter lights and thrum of nearby traffic, and maintained a steady, sedate pace into an area of multi-level parking structures, closed office buildings, occasional pubs (open and thumping with music), and corner groceries (closed and barricaded for the night).

As they meandered from street to street, Merlin walked down the centre line with Norberta the refuse truck prowling along right behind him, backwards and grumbling deep in her engine, with the remainder of her entourage walking beside her on nearby footpaths. Occasional cars passed them, usually hurrying to get around the slow-moving truck, their drivers barely sparing a second glance at the strange assembly. As they neared crossings or small roundabouts, Merlin would first consult quietly with Harry Potter, who seemed to know these streets extremely well, and then turn to speak calming, indecipherable words to the refuse truck at his heel, which thrummed its engine, shuddered on its dirty tyres, and hissed from its air-brakes.

The truck still smelled of the fiery brimstone guts of Norberta, now exhaling from the huge open rear compactor of the truck.

At one angle in the narrow street, a pair of young men, one skinny and one fat, emerged from the neon glow of a questionable-looking basement pub, each carrying nearly empty bottles of ale and swaying slightly on their feet. They stumbled out into the path of Merlin and the gently throttling truck, both of which came to a halt under the red glare of a traffic light.

“Blimey,” the skinny man said, pushing his long ginger hair out of his face. “This bloke is huge.” He stopped in the street and pointed up at Merlin with the hand still holding a brown ale bottle. “Are you seeing this bloke? He’s bloody hyooge!”

“I don’t think *either* of you are seeing anyone,” Merlin suggested, arching an eyebrow for subtle emphasis. “Huge or otherwise. Merely a common city vehicle about an honest night’s work.”

“Yeah,” the fatter man said, frowning and squinting. “I don’t see nothing but a bleedin’ refuse truck. Come on, yeh piker.” He tugged his ginger mate on the elbow, nearly pulling him off his feet.

The ginger man recovered, shrugged, and then tossed his bottle into the open rear compactor of the refuse truck. With a hiss of hydraulics and a shimmy-clatter that shook the entire truck, the compactor closed on the bottle, chewed it up into tinkling bits, and then let out a strangely brimstone-smelling belch.

The traffic light overhead clicked green. The troupe walked forward again, angling into an alley lined with parked cars glinting under streetlamps.

“Dad,” James said quietly, “I heard something over the holiday that I wanted to ask you about.”

Harry ambled easily, scuffing his boots on the footpath. “What’s that, son?”

James turned and glanced back at Millie who was walking behind them, watching the gently rolling Norberta-truck. “I spoke to Millie’s grandmother. Or, she spoke to me, actually. She told me some stuff about Grimmauld Place.”

“You met the Countess?” Harry smiled aside at his son. “She’s quite an impressive Lady, I’m told.”

James nodded and shrugged. “She says that when you inherited the Black mansion, you inherited a sort of... er... *title* with it.”

“Did she say so,” Harry commented. There was no curiosity in his voice, and James wondered if perhaps his dad *did* know more about the Black estate than he’d ever admitted. “A title. Well, blimey.”

“She said it’s more than just a title, though,” James went on, frowning as he thought back. “She says that it’s a responsibility. A sort of ancient guardianship over some huge, elemental human force. They’re lots of them, she says, and they’re all colours. Red was the Barony of Love, Green was for ambition and greed, that sort of thing. Except that a lot of the titles have died off or something, leaving their forces unguarded, just running all out of control in the world.”

“Sounds serious,” Harry nodded, pursing his lips.

“Grandmother Eunice is a little, er, eccentric,” Millie commented, approaching from behind and falling in beside James. “She believes all sorts of crazy old things. She’s never read *the Quibbler*, but she’s got loads in common with it.”

“Sure didn’t sound like *the Quibbler* to me,” James muttered.

“Grandmother can be very convincing,” Millie said, her tone turning lofty. “After all, one doesn’t usually expect a Countess to be a bit of a wee barmot. But there’s a reason she no longer brings up such things with my parents, or Bent and Mattie.”

From the centre of the narrow street, Merlin said, “I knew the Viscount Blacke in my time. A thoroughly vicious and duplicitous man, capable of deeds legendary in their capriciousness and vanity. We were friends, in a sense.”

“Is that so?” Harry asked, still in an oddly banal voice, as if he was only marginally interested. “The Black family is a thousand years old?”

“The line of Blacke is far older than that, I would wager,” Merlin said. “And I would not be so quick to dismiss the legends of their charge. The guardianship of the polarities of human nature was once an established magical institution, inviolate and deeply respected, forming the very pillars of humanity, without which civilised culture would be impossible. It is a curiosity of this new age that because one finds an idea intellectually offensive, one assumes it cannot be true.”

Millie bristled slightly. “I didn’t say I find the idea *offensive*. Just a little barmy.”

James moved to the curb, catching up to Merlin. “So, you think there may be something to what Millie’s grandmother says? About the Black title being responsible for some huge elemental... something?”

Merlin shrugged. “I merely say that the idea has ancient precedent. One cannot immediately dismiss it.”

“Did the Viscount Blacke that you knew have powers like that? Was he in charge of some element of human nature?”

“The Viscount Blacke was famously reticent regarding details about himself or his holdings. Meeting him in an inn, he would lament that he had barely two coppers to rub together. And yet the opulence of his robes and carriage made it clear that his wealth was incalculable. I never wasted the breath to ask him about the rumours of his title.”

“But there *were* rumours?” James prodded, looking up at the headmaster.

“There are *always* rumours.” Merlin nodded.

“So...?” James pressed again, glancing back at his father, annoyed at the lack of interest he saw there. “What do you think the Black title is in charge of?”

“I haven’t the faintest notion,” Merlin replied simply. “And that is the truth. But I expect the name itself provides some minor hint.”

“Black?” James frowned.

“It is as you say, Mr. Potter. All the titles are colours. And yet what do we know of the colour black?”

James shrugged. He didn’t always appreciate the headmaster’s baroque conversational style. “I don’t know. It’s dark?”

Millie suggested, “It’s not truly a colour, is it? It’s the *absence* of all colour.”

Merlin cocked his head slightly. “It depends upon how you look at it. Black may not be a colour unto itself. But it *absorbs* every other hue. It is, in fact, every colour combined.”

James’ eyes widened slightly at the thought. In a quieter voice, he asked, “So... what does that mean for the elemental guardianship of the Black title?”

Merlin turned to look aside at him again as he walked. “Haven’t the foggiest notion, Mr. Potter.”

“It *means*,” Harry said from behind, “That if there *is* some enormous dangerous potential inherent in our title, then like all such things, it is best left buried, untouched, and safely forgotten. After all,

we Potters don't have the greatest record with handling huge, earth-shaking responsibilities."

"*That* is a topic of possible debate," Merlin countered with a wry look.

James was about to reply when a sudden noise startled him. Some small but heavy object clanged off the side of Norberta's truckish shape. It struck the footpath and fumbled to a halt against a fire hydrant. James looked and saw that it was a chunk of old brick.

"What the—" Millie started, when another brick struck Norberta, bouncing off her high bonnet. She groaned and hissed her hydraulics, shuddering on her huge tyres.

"Over there," Harry said, pointing with his wand to a narrow alley on their left. "Someone in there is having a bit of sport."

Another brick sailed through the air, missed the refuse truck, and broke into pieces on the road at Merlin's feet. He looked up from it calmly, but with a grim twinkle in his eye, following the trajectory back to the dark alley.

"Muggle vandals?" Harry asked, stepping alongside Merlin.

"I think not," Merlin answered quietly. "I smell something else entirely. Guard our charge for a moment."

And with that, he stalked away, his robes swaying in the cold air, his feet silent on the slushy road. James watched as the huge wizard strode into the shadows, putting out his hand as he did so, producing his staff out of thin air. A moment later he was gone, vanished into the depths of the alley.

Harry watched. James stood next to him, eyes wide. Millie peered from just behind his shoulder, silent. The three barely breathed. Behind them, Norberta the refuse truck chugged idly, revving her engine with rhythmic impatience.

No more bricks lobbed out of the alley.

Suddenly, a flash of blue light flickered from the throat of its depths. The glare illuminated trash bins and doorways in a bright stutter, and then darkness fell again, as seamless as a well.

"What's he doing?" Millie whispered.

“Why isn’t he coming back?” James added.

Harry merely watched, his wand in his fist, pointed at the pavement next to his feet.

Another flash came, more dimly this time, as if from a distance. Barely heard over the constant drum of nearby traffic, a deep bellow sounded. Merlin’s voice, shouting something. Harry tensed but remained in place.

And then, half a minute later, a shadow stumbled out of the alley. It wasn’t Merlin. James could see that right away. It was very small, very thin, with huge, limp ears. The shadow stumbled to its knees, caught itself with its arms, and then raised its large head, as if to look up at them.

Harry finally broke away and ran to the figure, wand out, but not pointing at it. James hurried to join him.

It was a house elf dressed in a knotted tea towel. James recognized the huge head and sad, anxious eyes. It was Piggen, the elf he had last seen stoking the fire in Gryffindor tower weeks earlier.

Harry dropped to crouch next to the elf, concern and wariness etched onto his face.

“Why are you here?” he asked, “Are you all right? Have you been injured?”

Still hunkered on all fours over the curb, the elf peered up at Harry with his huge, glistening eyes. Then, he turned his gaze to James.

“Piggen is sorry, Master Potter,” he said with heartbreaking sincerity. “Piggen is a bad, bad elf.”

Behind James and Harry, Millie screamed.

James spun around clumsily, still half-kneeling behind his father. Harry was quicker, however, launching back to his feet and sweeping his wand around in a blurred arc.

“Lumos!” he barked, and his wand flared to blinding light, illuminating the street like daylight, casting leaping black shadows behind every object.

The refuse truck was rearing onto its front wheels, bulging and creaking, tilting its gaping compactor toward the sky. With a convulsive lunge, a ball of orange flame erupted from its metal guts. James realized that Norberta the refuse truck was quickly transforming back into Norberta the dragon. The rubber tyres stretched and burst into sinewy legs. The mouth of the compactor gnashed, grew long fangs and elongated onto an accordion neck, rising up between the buildings. The rumble of the engine grew to a sustained roar, and fire once again burst into the sky, streaming from the dragon's unhinged jaws.

Another elf was riding on the back of Norberta's neck, clinging tight with long, agile fingers, its mouth moving quickly as it spoke to the dragon, provoking it.

It was Heddlebun.

A lance of red light struck Norberta's flank, exploding into sparks. Dimly, James realized that his father was firing at her, trying to Stun her. He fumbled his own wand out and aimed wildly, but before he could utter a single spell, Norberta reared, unfurled her wings, and clapped them down again, sending a wave of gritty wind washing over the street, rocking the parked cars on their springs. The dragon leapt upwards, scratched and clawed her way up a nearby parking structure, tearing loose great chunks of concrete as she went, and clambered onto its roof with a flick of her long tail.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" James' father called, stabbing out his wand again and arresting a huge chunk of concrete an instant before it could bash itself to bits on the street below. Hunched in the hovering concrete's shadow, Millie lifted her head from beneath her clasped arms. Eyes bulging, she looked up at the slowly revolving hunk of building, and then scrambled sideways, out of its range.

With a grunt of released effort, James' dad lowered his wand. The concrete completed its fall, shattering liked a dropped plate.

James looked up at his dad, shocked and speechless, but his father was already turning back to the alley, dropping his eyes to the small figure of Piggen.

But Piggen wasn't there.

Footsteps rang from the depths of the alley, not retreating but approaching. Merlin reappeared, his staff held before him, its runes glowing with fierce red light.

Breathing hard, the sorcerer looked from James to Harry. "Which way did she go?"

Harry nodded to the scarred façade of the parking structure. "Diagon Alley. Has to be."

"Then let us not spare a moment!" Merlin commanded, already moving forward. He broke into a run, reached to grasp Millie's hand where she stood dumbfounded in the street, and then vanished with her in tow, leaving the crack of their disappearance echoing down the canyon of the street.

"Well, James," his father announced, reaching out with his left hand, raising his wand in his right. "You said you wanted to be a Junior Auror-in-training, yes? Here's your chance."

With a gulp, James raised his own wand and grasped his father's hand.

The world whip-cracked away, spinning into a blur of oblivion. An instant later, it sprang back into place, leaping up to smack James' heels as he landed next to his father. He looked around, pointing his wand frantically. They were in another street now, this one wider but even less illuminated. Before him was an old pub with mullioned windows and a heavy wooden door beneath a swinging sign: The Leaky Cauldron.

Harry stepped swiftly into the dark street and raised his eyes, looking out over the nearby rooftops.

Merlin burst through the front door of the Leaky Cauldron, his staff leading, still pulsing with red light.

"There!" he announced, pointing to James' right.

James spun to look, even as he heard the grating roar of the dragon's approach.

A decrepit apartment building, four floors high, stood on a wedge of footpath between two angled streets. James craned to look up

at its roofline. There, an old wooden water tower stood on posts. Startlingly, the water tower exploded, disintegrating into flying planks, flinging metal braces, and a torrent of unleashed water. Norberta's head plunged through the water and bashed aside the remains of the tower. Her wings pumped and she leapt from the building's roof, sailed over empty space, kicked off a lamp-post, and grappled up the face of a soot-stained factory, shattering rows of windows as she went.

A blare of horns sounded from the connecting streets. Voices began to shout in alarm.

"Damn and drat!" Harry breathed urgently, lifting his wand to fire Stunning bolts at the scrabbling dragon. It was no use.

Merlin called magical spells in his guttural tongue, and lances of vivid purple light spat over the street. Even these merely bounced off Norberta's scaly skin. Using her wings for leverage, she clawed and tore her way to the roof of the factory, and then loped along its top. James watched, horrified, as the great dragon lowered her head and plowed between a pair of brick smokestacks, pulverizing their bases. Ponderously, the smokestacks leaned toward each other, kissed their surfaces with a sustained crunch, and then began to collapse, disintegrating into themselves.

"Damn and drat!" Harry said again, this time in a half-shout. He raised his wand nearly straight up, waiting for Norberta to appear between the factory and the block above the Leaky Cauldron.

A bell clattered nearby and the door of the pub swung open. James glanced aside to see a grizzled old wizard with a nose the size and color of a blood orange peer out at them.

"Whassall this, then?" he said, his black eyes glimmering in the dark. "Whassall the noise?"

Harry fired several shots in quick succession, even as Merlin leapt backwards into the street, pointing his staff at the roof above, unleashing a torrent of crackling energy.

The building shook. Grit and chunks of masonry broke from above, raining down and clattering to the street all around.

The grizzled wizard jerked his head back into the door, which slammed shut.

“She’s beyond the roof!” Harry called, lowering his wand and lunging toward the door of the pub.

It was locked tight, rattling with bolts and chains. Without so much as a backward glance, Harry simply stepped aside and gestured briefly with his wand. *After you*, the motion seemed to say.

Merlin dipped his staff. Its runes flashed green and the door of the Leaky Cauldron blew open, taking the remains of an iron deadbolt and chains with it. The bell overhead gave an alarmed clatter and broke loose. Harry led the way with Merlin immediately behind. James scrambled to follow, passing the grizzled wizard with the blood orange nose who stood huddled in the corner, fuming speechlessly at his demolished door.

James had been inside the Leaky Cauldron on many occasions and assumed that it never technically closed. Indeed, even at this late hour, the pub was crowded with patrons of all shapes and sizes, most gathered around a long bar cluttered with glasses, steins, and bottles. Eyes turned to follow Merlin, Harry, and James as they rushed past, pounding toward the rear exit, wands and staff raised. Millie stood away from the bar, her eyes wide and terrified. She moved to follow James, hunching her shoulders and ducking low in his wake.

Darkness filled the pub’s back hall and the staircase leading up to rental rooms. A moment later, bluish light bloomed as the rear door blasted open. The four poured out into a tiny courtyard, turning immediately to the enchanted brick wall that separated Muggle London from Diagon Alley.

But the wall was barely still there. Bricks pattered down from an enormous, ragged, dragon-sized hole. Beyond this, the dragon herself loped and careened down the winding wizarding thoroughfare of Diagon Alley, her wings tearing at eaves, her tail bashing aside signs and awnings. Witches and wizards leapt into doorways as she thundered past.

Merlin disappeared again, vanishing into a pinpoint of light, this time leaving Millie behind.

“The circus!” Harry announced, pointing. Beneath the dark sky, James could just see the peaks of coloured tents and fluttering banners over a line of nearby gabled roofs. “Stay here!” his father commanded, shooting him a steely glance. A moment later, he vanished with a ringing crack.

“Like bloody hell I’m staying here,” James said, turning to Millie. He reached for her hand.

She recoiled from it in surprise, her eyes glassy in the dimness. “What are you doing!?”

“I’m apparating to the circus!” he said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Come on!”

“But I don’t *want* to go to the circus!” she cried, nearly hysterical with fear and confusion. “And you don’t know how to apparate yet! I’m... I’m being the voice of reason!”

“I’ve apparated once before!” he insisted, pushing his hand toward her again. “Er, sort of.”

“I’m not going!” she said firmly, and stamped her foot. “You’re all crazy! Do you know that!? Crossing streets is one thing! But this is just... just...!”

James slumped helplessly, and then gave up on her. He glanced up again to the fluttering banners and illuminated peaks of the circus tents. They were barely a quarter mile away. He tried to pinpoint where exactly they were, calling up a mental map of Wizarding London. He decided, somewhat haphazardly, that the circus was erected in the square where Diagon Alley and Sartori Alley intersected. With this picture firmly established in his mind, he stepped away from Millie, fisted his hands, squeezed his eyes shut, and flexed the mental muscle that he had last used when trying to cross a Hogwarts classroom.

There was no Edgar Edgecomb to toss a firecracker at him this time. He felt the world twang away, unreeling in a blur. Then, just as it had with his father a minute before, it reasserted itself around him.

His feet struck down on hard stone and he swayed only slightly, sticking out his arms for balance.

He opened his eyes and looked around. He was standing in the dead center of the square formed by the intersection of Sartori and Diagon Alleys. He'd apparated into a fountain, in fact, though one fortunately drained for the winter. On both sides, enormous tents, striped orange, blue, and white, stretched up into darkness, their canvas sides fluttering in the cold wind.

The noise of Norberta's approach was behind him. The ground trembled with her pounding footsteps. The air rang with her feverish roar.

James turned on the spot and clambered over the ledge of the empty fountain, running out of the space between the tents, his wand in his outstretched hand. At the nearest corner, Gringotts bank loomed, its pillars reaching high to the marble cornices of its roof. As James looked, a corner gargoyle broke loose, tumbled end over end, and smashed to bits on the cobbles below. Norberta barreled around the corner, stepped and slid on the remains of the gargoyle, then dug in her claws and thundered straight toward James, her eyes blazing, her jaws open to show her rows of dagger teeth.

Heddelebung was still clinging to her neck, speaking to her, exploiting her dragonish nature and driving her to frenzy.

James skidded to a halt as the dragon's shadow loomed over him. Scrambling, nearly falling backwards, he began to retreat.

Bolts of red and purple light erupted from the alley behind Norberta. Merlin and James' dad, it seemed, were still giving chase, aiming to stop Norberta's rampage. Soon, they would have to resort to killing curses. *Avada Kedavra* might not be enough to destroy a dragon, James thought hectically, but Merlin surely knew a spell that would.

Remembering his own wand, James struggled to aim it. He tripped, fell to the cold cobbles, and felt the stampede of Norberta's claws closing in on him. He threw himself onto his back, aimed his wand into the air, and shouted, "Expeliarmus!"

It was a purely instinctive reaction, culled from his many dueling sessions in Professor Debellows' classroom. Norberta had no weapon to be expelled, of course. And yet, suddenly, her feet dug into the pavement, grinding over the cobbles as she skidded and slewed to a halt, plowing a cloud of dust before her.

The great dragon came to rest a dozen feet from James, and something fell to the square between them. It was small and bony, with flapping ears and large hands.

It was Heddlebung the elf. She lay where she had fallen, unmoving.

And suddenly James understood: the elf herself had been the weapon. James' dueling shot had expelled her from the hapless dragon, who now hunkered in distressed confusion, huffing the air, looking around to see where she was.

Merlin and James's father appeared from the mouth of the alley, rounding Gringotts bank at a run, wand and staff raised. They paused when they saw the halted dragon, with James climbing to his feet before it.

"Beware, James!" his father called, wasting no time on chastising him for his disobedience. "If Norberta smells the male dragon before Merlin can mesmerize her again...!"

James glanced up. Norberta's nostrils flared before him. Her gold-foil eyes widened. Her head began to rise on the serpentine length of her neck, into the light of the circus tents beyond.

Merlin approached from behind the dragon, his staff held high, its runes glowing with soft golden light. He began to speak to her, his voice low, the syllables indecipherable yet strangely haunting.

Norberta blinked. Slowly, her head swept to the side, arcing back to peer at the headmaster in the darkness. The glow of his staff pulsed hypnotically.

It was working. Norberta was very nearly under Merlin's prodigious spell again, undoing the maddening trance that Heddlebung had spun in her mind.

But then, much to James' surprise, the ground shook again. He glanced down, alarmed and confused: Norberta's claws were still firmly planted on the cobbles. And yet the ground shook once more, forming an undeniable, low beat. Something else was moving in the square, something large enough to make the ground shudder and the marble fountain behind James rattle like a cupboard of crockery.

A chuff of hot air, redolent of brimstone, blew over James from behind, fluttering his hair.

He turned slowly, eyes wide.

A second dragon hove out of the shadows between the circus tents, swaying back and forth like a cobra, its eyes glowing amethyst purple.

James stumbled backward in fear, and then clambered aside, hurrying to get out from between the two dragons.

Norberta swung her head back, now forgetting Merlin and his glowing staff. Her eyes locked onto the second dragon and her nostrils flared. Slowly, she arose from her hunkered crouch. Her tail swayed back and forth, sweeping low over the cobbles.

The second dragon, clearly the very circus dragon, Montague Python, that Norberta had been sensing for months, approached her cautiously, flicking a snakelike tongue from its long, black snout. His body was rather smaller than hers, sleek and long, but with much larger diaphanous wings that glinted with oily pearlescence. A sinuous black tail curled up and then stamped down on the ground, clapping its steely barbed tip to the cobbles with a ringing clang.

A commotion of movement came from the circus tent as its entrance flaps were wrestled from inside. A figure clambered out, stumbling nearly between Montague's fore legs. It was a large man with an impressively round belly, clad in an ivory vest and huge shirtsleeves gathered in tight cuffs with gold buttons. He wore black riding trousers with suspenders hanging and flopping about his knees.

"Oh bloody Nora," he said in a high, breathless voice, looking up at the two dragons as they sniffed each other cautiously, drawing

nearer and nearer, beginning to twine their long necks. “It’s love at first sight, it is!”

Montague raised his tail and clapped it down again, ringing its barbed tip to the cobbles in what was clearly a sort of mating dance.

James felt his father and Merlin join him at his side. Merlin lowered his staff to the pavement with a resigned clack. Harry put a hand on his son’s shoulder, heavily. James sensed in the gesture both cautious pride and weary rebuke.

The ringmaster—for that’s clearly what he was, Mr. Archibald Hokus himself—lowered his gaze from the twining dragons and looked over at James, Harry, and Merlin, his cheeks red and his eyes glistening. “It’s just a beautiful thing, isn’t it?” he sniffed.

A pound of footsteps and distant voices approached from the mouth of the nearby alley. James glanced back to see Hagrid loping heavily into the shadow of the circus camp, where he slowed to a stunned, clumsy halt, his hands falling limp to his sides, dropping his pink umbrella. His black eyes stared up at the two dragons and his mouth opened in a gape of perfect, speechless delight.

“Oh, Norberta!” he said, his voice suddenly choked with happy tears.

James drew a helpless, exhausted sigh and turned his attention back to the dragons. They circled each other slowly, sniffing each other, Montague flicking his purple tongue, Norberta flaring her scaly nostrils. They growled to each other, making low, purring gurgles deep in their throats.

James glanced down. Heddlebun still lay where she had fallen, one limp ear flattened over her face. Cautiously, he approached her, pocketing his wand as he went. He wondered if she was dead, but then he saw the hitching rise and fall of her chest.

He felt his father coming alongside as he lowered to one knee over the elf.

She was sobbing. James sensed that she was lying there not because she was injured, but because her plan—a last resort borne of

abject desperation—had come to ruin and failure. Hopeless to begin with, now she was hopeless *and* without any recourse.

Quietly but firmly, Harry asked, “There were others of your kind in the alley. How many are in your little elven uprising?”

Heddlebun’s sobbing paused. She lifted one large hand weakly and pushed her ear away from her face. James expected her to look up with remorse and defeat, or even fear. Instead, when she lifted her huge eyes to them, though still thick with tears, her gaze was hard. Her mouth turned down in a trembling scowl of bitter resentment.

“*All* of us,” she said in a low, emphatic voice. “The Elven Uprising is every... single... *one*.”



NEXT CHAPTER:

THE AFTERMATH!

CRUMBLING VOW AROUND THE WORLD!

JAMES AND RALPH HAVE A ROW!