

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

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

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20. WORLD IN COLLAPSE

The ship ride back to Hogwarts was a long and solemn affair, despite the happiness borne of Norberta's unscheduled union with Montague Python. Archibald Hokus had insisted that Norberta, being lamed already with her wounded wing and long accustomed to the ministrations of humans, join their traveling circus as an accompaniment to Montague's act.

"She will revitalize our entire program!" he had proclaimed after corralling both dragons in the safety of Montague's paddock. "We've wanted a second dragon for years! Montague's our star performer, of course. Now, with Norberta his grand love added to the show, we shall truly be a wonder of the wizarding world! I can see it now!" He raised his arms and framed his hands, as if envisioning a tent-sized placard, "Montague & Norberta! The Beast-Wedding of the Century! Of the *Millennium*!"

At Harry's insistence, Hokus had vowed to have Norberta officially registered the very following day, as "a rescued orphan beast of origins unknown" as per Ministry regulations.

In response to this, Hagrid had offered his tearful goodbyes, blowing his nose prodigiously on a hankie provided by Ron from one of his coat pockets.

“Keep it, Hagrid,” Ron had said as the half giant offered it limply back to him. “Think of it as a, er, memento of the night.”

Harry took Heddlebun into custody, magically shackling her with a lanyard charm as they returned to the Gertrude, much more quickly and stealthily now that Norberta was no longer part of their entourage. Thus, less than twenty minutes later, back on board and standing on the gently rocking bow, James’ dad had quietly consulted with Ron and Hermione, explaining why he’d returned with a captive house elf in tow rather than a lovesick dragon, and debating what they should do with her.

“Officially speaking, we’re all home snug in our beds right now,” Ron reminded them. “We can’t just pop over to the Ministry with a magical prisoner all of a sudden. Things like that require explanations.”

“Titus is on duty tonight,” Hermione suggested. “He could bring her in. But can you trust him, Harry?” Things had been better lately between James’ father and his partner, Titus Hardcastle, but everyone still remembered that, for a brief time during James’ fourth year, Titus had sided with his superiors at the Ministry against his boss and friend.

“I can,” Harry answered, “But I won’t. Even if Titus was willing to guard our secrets, this little elf has no such obligation or concern. More importantly, I don’t think the Wizengamot would have the slightest clue what to do with her. There are no laws on the books regarding rogue house elves, simply because there has never been any need. What she represents is an all new dilemma for the wizarding world, and one that no one is prepared to confront. Not with so many other, larger cauldrons to boil at the moment.”

“Well, we can’t just set her free,” Ron said, frowning.

“Allow me to be her charge,” Merlin suggested from the nearby shadows, an ominous note in his voice. “After all, she has apparently

corrupted at least one of the elves in the employ of Hogwarts School. I should very much like to interrogate her about who else might be a part of her secret cabal.”

Harry shook his head. “I’ve considered that, Headmaster. And it’s a tempting idea. But our prisoner has already answered that question, at least as much as I am certain she ever intends to. According to her, *all* house elves are part of her cabal. And I have a sinking suspicion that she is telling the truth. At least, as far as she knows. No, I have another warden in mind for Miss Heddlebung.”

With that, Harry drew his wand from his pocket and flicked it lightly toward the sky. “*Curatio*,” he said quietly, firing a narrow pencil-beam of deep purple sparks high into the sky. The spell emitted an almost sub-audible chime, like anchor chains clattering in bottomless depths.

“You rang, sir,” a gratingly deep voice suddenly said from directly behind James. He knew the voice instantly, but couldn’t help jumping on the spot, startled by the ancient elf’s sudden, noiseless appearance.

“Kreacher,” Hermione said, understanding dawning on her.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Kreacher,” Harry said, “I have a task for you, but it’s up to you whether you want to accept it or not.”

James turned to the tiny old elf and watched as a dozen extremely subtle expressions flitted, almost imperceptibly, across his stony, curmudgeon face. The elf was no more accustomed to the egalitarian attitudes of his master now than he was over two decades ago, when he had first come into Harry Potter’s employ. But he had at least learned that it was pointless to say so.

“Master’s wish is Kreacher’s command,” he said for possibly the millionth time, drawing upon a well of stubborn patience that James thought was likely as inexhaustible, and cold, as space itself.

Harry nodded, “And yet, according to this particular member of your kind,” he gestured toward the shape of Heddlebung, who sat hunched in the shadows, her knees clutched to her chest and her head

lowered atop them. “You are part of a secret universal coalition of elven resistance, led, in part, by she herself.”

Kreacher’s head swiveled so slowly and ponderously that James thought he could hear the tendons of the elf’s neck creak. “Does she say so, Master,” he asked in his deep, monotone voice, although it wasn’t really a question.

“Indeed,” Harry replied, “She says that all members of your kind are part of a new elven uprising. Thus, my request—which is for you to take her back to Marble Arch, guard her, and provide her with some suitable service until a better plan presents itself—may place you in the uncomfortable position of having to decide between loyalties.”

James knew that Kreacher couldn’t possibly be a part of Heddlebun’s Elven Uprising. And yet, as the old house elf regarded his younger, female counterpart, his pinched, inscrutable face as stoic as an anvil, James had to wonder. Perhaps Kreacher *had* heard of the Uprising. Perhaps his loyalties were, if not in question, then at least sympathetic.

Instead of answering directly, Kreacher said, “Master is certain that Mistress will welcome this new development?”

“I am certain of no such thing,” Harry sighed. “But ‘Mistress’ has learned to be extremely resilient over the years. I will speak to her myself. But do, perhaps, try to keep our new guest a secret until morning? Let me break it to Ginny over tea.”

“So to be clear,” Hermione said carefully, turning from Heddlebun back to Kreacher. “Is there any truth to what she says?”

Kreacher arched one heavy brow at Hermione, apparently weighing whether he was required to answer her or not. Then, as if submitting to Harry’s unspoken urging, he raised his chin stiffly and said, “Kreacher’s allegiance is always and forever to Harry Potter and the house of Black.”

“Blimey, Harry,” Ron muttered, shaking his head, “you collect stray house elves the way Rose used to collect dogerpillars in the back garden.”

Without a word, Kreacher took custody of Heddlebun and vanished away with her, their departure marked only by a faint, airy pop.

Quietly, Hermione asked, "What will you do with her?"

Harry shrugged. "Keep her busy, if nothing else. Especially for elves, it would seem that idle hands really are the devil's playthings."

Hagrid tugged up the Gertrude's anchor and shortly they were back underway, returning via the mysterious subterranean rivers that had brought them there.

Millie fell asleep on the bench next to James as the ship swooped and rocked its way back. He realized that part of the magic of the journey lie in the fact that whatever time you conserved on the way there, you earned back on the return trip, making the final trek seem tiresomely long and exhausting. He looked aside at Millie where she lay curled on the bench, rocking obliviously with the motion of the hull, her blonde hair partially obscuring her face. He was jealous of her fitful sleep, even if it was rooted in a sort of numb shock. Even now, her brow was creased faintly, her lips downturned in a worried frown.

"I was wrong," she'd said to him after boarding the Gertrude again. "Wrong about all your adventures. They're only fun in books. Rose can have them from now on."

James didn't argue with her. He'd known she was wrong from the beginning. And yet the bland finality of her words still gave him a faint pang. He wanted to say he never asked for deadly and scary adventures, they just seemed to seek him out. But he knew there was no point. There was nothing to salvage with Millie. And she was better off away from him. Whatever it took.

Back at the moonpool, James said goodnight to Hagrid, his dad, aunt, and uncle, and then walked Millie through the eerily dark and silent corridors of the school until their paths parted.

She turned to him but didn't look up at him. "Well. Goodnight, James."

"Goodbye, Millie," he sighed.

She gave a sigh of her own and nodded.

A moment later, she was merely a shadow trudging tiredly away from him. A moment after that, she was gone around a corner.

James stood and stared at the empty corner for a minute. He had kissed Millie, and made her giggle, and held her hand, and shared long, intense gazes with her across classrooms and the library. But in the end, she couldn't look him in the eye as they said goodbye. And that, James thought, too exhausted to feel particularly sad, was probably the story of most of life's loves: brief moments of blazing romance, followed by two people standing over the spitting, cooling coals of their spent passion until one of them got uncomfortable enough to walk away.

Until the love that mattered. The one to end them all, the one whose coals would never cool or lose their spark.

This thought offered James no consolation, however. He had found his one perfect love, the one whose fire would forever burn. And further, he now knew that she loved him back. Yet even that golden, pristine love would end with one of them walking away forever, never looking back.

He sighed, long and hard, and the sigh was half shudder.

He didn't remember walking back to the Gryffindor tower and falling into his bed. He barely even remembered saying goodbye to Millie. All he remembered was the feeling of emptiness, of having been, if not loved, then really, really liked, and then losing that affection forever, with nothing to replace it with.

It wasn't a nice feeling. But, as James went into the last, breathless, portentous weeks of his Hogwarts career, he had an idea that it was possibly the most grown-up feeling he had ever yet known.



Spring settled over Hogwarts with languid extravagance, freshening the air, melting the snow, unlocking the lake from its pall of ice, and breathing green buds throughout the Forest and grounds. This was greeted with renewed excitement and energy by most students, though not by James himself, who felt the mingled weight of Petra's impending departure, and the uncertainty of her dark plan, along with the more general worries about the continued erosion of the Vow of Secrecy and the magical world in general.

Part of the reason that Norberta's appearance in London hadn't made greater news, James now knew, was that stories of the breakdown of wizarding boundaries were becoming increasingly commonplace. Thousand-year-old safeguards and protections were gradually discovered to be weakening or broken entirely. This was met with dismay by the Ministry, with increasingly feverish articles by the wizarding press, and with secret, dark glee by certain unsavoury denizens of the magical world.

Every morning's post brought more worrying news:

Werewolves were prowling small Muggle communities with growing boldness, testing ancient boundary hexes and finding them threadbare or entirely gone. Mainstream Muggle news outlets mostly

ignored such fantastical stories (for the time being), but tabloid papers and local news programs picked up the slack, giving breathless, incredulous reports of attacks by “unusually large and vicious wolves”. Some eyewitnesses swore that the beasts walked on hind legs like men, and even used fragments of human speech. Other eyewitnesses, horribly, never lived to tell their tale. Murders were few and scattered, but horribly violent, striking terror in rural communities unlike anything they’d known in modern times.

The news from Romania was possibly even more unsettling. After hundreds of years of quiet reformation, small communities of vampires were reportedly renouncing their Pact of Blood Temperance, refusing long-established blood depositories and returning instead to ancient midnight hunting practices. A team of Harriers had been assembled to confront the leader of one such community, a certain Count Domn Orpheus, only to be ambushed themselves by the Count and his guard. Three harriers had been bitten, bled, and then carried by their retreating mates to the nearest hospital some seventy miles away. There, the three died only to reawaken the next morning under the veil of the undead, hissing, befanged, and starved for blood.

Via the Shard, Zane informed James that his old mate from Bigfoot House, Wentworth Paddington, who was part vampire himself (though none would ever guess it), had been taken out of school by his parents in preparation for moving back to Romania. This was not because they intended to abandon their own Blood Temperance, but to get out of America before the rumours of “extranatural interment camps” came true.

The news from within the Giant communities was spotty, but equally worrisome. Many tribes had retreated from their ancestral communities, but clumsily, leaving behind copious evidence of their habitation. Muggle explorers were discovering giant footprints, tribal cave drawings, and even burial mounds. International magical response teams were dispatched to the sites to scrub as much evidence as possible, and obliviators did what they could to erase memories and alter reports. Still, some leaks of giant-related material had proved

impossible to contain. One Muggle explorer had actually dug up a giant skull from its burial mound and was displaying the ghastly object (purported to be five feet in diameter with a weight of nearly five stone) to any and all photographers and television news cameras. For now, as with the werewolf sightings, these reports were mainly met with skepticism from major media. But those in the magical world knew that such fortune couldn't possibly last forever.

Perhaps most disheartening of all, wizarding thieves had begun targeting Muggle homes and institutions. Where magical safeguards had once made it impossible for adult witches and wizards to deliberately use their powers against Muggle establishments, now petty magical criminals easily thieved banks, vaults, and wealthy manors, and with increasing confidence, knowing that the magical community was too occupied to stop them, and Muggle locks and alarms were no match for their wands.

One particularly audacious heist of the United States gold reserve at Fort Knox was only thwarted because the American Magical Integration Bureau had shown the foresight to erect foe-glasses in their secret offices in that and similarly sensitive locations. The organized gang of witches and wizards, led, sadly enough, by a certain Luckinbill Fletcher of Herbertshire, was only temporarily captured. They eluded authorities en route to Fort Bedlam prison, vowing that next time no "hand-me-down magical trinkets" would stop them.

As a result, the Ministry of Magic had determined that the Magical Integration Bureau's use of physical guards was worthy of consideration. Thus, as a "temporary safety measure" (or "desperate last resort" according to Scorpius), thirty particularly essential magical locations around Europe had been deemed Code Red High-Risk and fortified with twenty-four hour watchmen.

Hogwarts was one of those thirty.

"We have been kindly asked," Merlin stated at the official announcement one Thursday evening at dinner, "that we not refer to our new watch as 'guards', since that term is feared to imply a certain," he peered down his nose at a parchment in his hand, "antagonistic

and/or fear-based response, rather than a mere benevolent vigilance for the welfare of all, both magical and otherwise.”

Next to Merlin, albeit a step back, a blocky man in dark brown coat and beret nodded approvingly. He was the captain of the watch, apparently, a Mr. Hawtrey. James guessed that he, like many of the watch themselves, were retired wizards who had volunteered for this service, and showed, more than anything, the sort of dutiful zealotry that comes mostly from age and boredom.

A watchtower was quickly and economically erected along the shore of the lake and rounds were established throughout every hour of the day. The men of the watch were mostly amiable duffers often distracted from their duties by the temptation to tell tales, to anyone who would listen, of their own long-ago days at Hogwarts.

“Back in my time,” one of them regaled James one day between classes, tapping him in the chest, “If we spoke out of turn, it was the tongue-screw we got!” He chuffed wheezing laughter at this. “We had real discipline back then! Not this namby-pamby drivel they coddle you lot with now.”

The man’s partner, much taller than him, with thin hair slicked black with pomade, nodded and narrowed one eye. “Argus Filch was a resident apprentice here in those days. Head-in-the-clouds Filch we called him. Always writing poetry and painting pictures, he was.”

“All he *could* do, since a wand was no good in the poor sod’s hand.”

“Hush! I don’t think we’re s’posed to talk about that,” the taller man chastised. “Filch may be a hopeless dreamer, but he’s got to command respect *somehow*...!”

James tried to back away without the men noticing. Ralph tugged his elbow as the two seemed to fall into a small squabble.

A few of the watchmen, however, were unrelenting in their grim attention. They stalked the corridors and grounds with eyes of flint, apparently feeling empowered to enforce student rules, and even invent new ones in the name of security. One of these men, a gangly Welshman of about forty with the constipated face and rigid posture of

a born rule-follower, ordered students back from a late spring wade in the lake, chastising them for crossing the boundary of the school. The same man, whose name James learned was Royston Brimble, insisted loudly that Hogsmeade weekends must be curtailed until further notice (a suggestion that Merlin, fortunately, did not so much as honour with a reply). Later, he called for the abandonment and “removal or demolition” of Hagrid’s hut on the grounds that it was “an eyesore and a superfluous extra domicile, needlessly complicating the scope of watch duties.”

At this recommendation, Hagrid simply smiled with all of his teeth, clapped the man on the shoulder hard enough to buckle his knees, and said, “Good luck with that, Mr. Brimble.”

A short time later, fortunately, Brimble was seen beneath the watchtower being spoken to very carefully by Mr. Hawtrey in his natty brown beret. Brimble abandoned the matters of Hogsmeade weekends and Hagrid’s hut, but continued to order and reprimand students at every possible opportunity, always with blazing eyes and specks of white spittle in the corners of his mouth.

A sign-up sheet for student volunteers to the watch was posted in the entrance hall. *STAY UP LATE FOR A GOOD CAUSE!* the heading ran. After a week, there were only three names on the parchment. James was annoyed yet unsurprised to see that the names were Edgar Edgecombe, Polly Heathrow, and Quincy Ogden.

When he saw the three again, they sported small silver badges on their robes, carefully polished and prominently displayed. The badges were tiny shields with the letters J.W. stamped onto them.

“Junior Watch,” Edgecombe said, tapping his badge importantly as he waited outside a classroom watching others walk past, his eyes narrowed. “Counts as credit for Muggle studies, it does. Gets me out of Grenadine’s stupid class.”

“Curious, that,” Sanjay Yadev commented from nearby, “I’ve found Miss Grenadine’s class to be a lot less stupid without you three in it.”

Several others laughed (including James, passing on his way to Transfiguration) but Polly Heathrow glared at Sanjay, pushing up to her full height.

“We’ve been instructed to report any of a whole list of suspicious behaviours,” she said in her high, nasal voice. “Disrespecting authority is number twelve. You just might want to tread careful before you end up on any official watch lists.”

James turned when he heard this, but Rose caught his elbow even as he did. “Leave her be,” she muttered. “You don’t have time to start anything. And besides, Sanjay is quick enough to fight his own battles.”

Indeed, behind them, Sanjay spoke up, “Does the list include being three proper little twits? If so, I may need to do some reporting of my own.”

Ogden moved to confront Sanjay, but at that moment James’ line of sight was obscured by passing students. Somewhat regrettably, he turned back and hurried on to his own class. Rose was right that Sanjay was clearly capable of handling himself. And at least the trio of little bullies had turned their attention to someone other than him.

As classes progressed, James confronted for the first time, and with great unwillingness, the reality that final N.E.W.T. examinations were, in fact, going to happen, no matter how hard he pretended otherwise. With the enthusiasm of a man going to the gallows, he began to devote himself to studying and preparation, thankful for the spontaneous study groups that began to gather in the library most evenings. Graham, Deirdre, Ralph, Fiera Hutchins, Fiona Fourcompass, and Trenton Bloch were almost always there. Often, they would be joined by other seventh years, including Nolan Beetlebrick, Julian Jackson, Ashley Doone, Patrick McCoy, Millie, and George Muldoon, creating a large and occasionally boisterous gathering that often, James noticed with some degree of relief, bordered on the edge of becoming a football scrum (when they argued vigorously about a debatable technique) or a kitchen raiding party (when the argument was over and everyone was feeling restless and peckish). The

evening librarian eventually gave up trying to contain and quiet the group. Long-accustomed to the ebbs and flows of school life, she simply herded the students into a large bay-window area far from the main floor. Here, window seats were covered in cushions and pillows, high curtains and shelves baffled extra noise, and the rugs probably still bore the biscuit crumbs and soda stains of decades-past study sessions.

One Monday morning, with the late spring sun blazing down from the rafters of the Great Hall, James finally found the time and determination to confront Albus about his interactions with Petra, if for no other reason than to prove to his brother that he now knew about her plans, too. His intention was sidetracked, however, when he arrived in the Great Hall and learned that Albus' relationship with Chance Jackson had been ended that weekend, and by her choice.

Chance sat in her normal place at the near end of the Gryffindor table, solemn but surrounded by her doting entourage of friends. They cooed over her and leaned to offer commiserating touches, clearly enjoying the delicious ecstasy of her drama. Albus, on the other hand, sat alone in the darkest corner of the Slytherin table, on the opposite side of the Hall, not eating breakfast, nor talking, not doing anything much besides glowering at everything and nothing, his head low between his hunched shoulders.

James decided to approach him anyway, but Albus saw him coming and hurled himself to his feet, dragging his knapsack with him and slinging it angrily over one shoulder, stalking toward the door.

"He's really upset," Fiera Hutchins observed to Nolan Beetlebrick, who leaned back to watch as Albus shoved through the double doors.

"That's what comes of dating outside one's house," Beetlebrick agreed sagely, cocking one eye aside at James. "Nothing but betrayal and heartbreak."

James pretended not to hear. Clearly, for reasons that were entirely his own, Albus had allowed himself to become hopelessly enmeshed with Chance Jackson, and was sincerely, if angrily, bereft about the ending of their relationship. James couldn't bring himself to

understand it in the least. Chance was cute and all, he supposed, but she was hardly worth jumping off a cliff over. Come to think of it, though, neither was Albus.

Returning to his seat at the Gryffindor table, James decided that he could wait just a little longer to learn what Albus knew about Petra's plan, and whatever part he, Albus, was meant to play in it.

It was fully three weeks after their midnight trip to London on Hagrid's blockade runner that James was summoned to Merlin's office on what appeared to be disciplinary charges. He got the message from a smugly gleeful Filch during breakfast on a Thursday morning, just as he was taking his first bite of sausage.

"The headmaster requires your presence at half-past six this evening in his office," the old caretaker growled from behind him, leaning close in a parody of confidentiality. "Half past six, sharp. And I must say, he didn't seem especially pleased about it. Dear me, no." He sucked his teeth thoughtfully and shook his head.

Coldness fell over James as he glanced back at Filch, absorbing this sudden news. Then he turned toward the head table, looking for Merlin himself. Only he wasn't there. His high chair in the centre of the table was empty, his place cleared.

"What'll *that* be about, eh?" Ralph asked quietly as they made their way out of the castle toward Care of Magical Creatures. "Have you been up to something I don't know about?"

"Haven't the faintest idea," James answered worriedly.

"It's probably that stupid Night Quidditch," Ralph nodded soberly to himself. "You know he's bound to put a stop to it. He has to, sooner or later. All the prefects are on the lookout for you lot. Me, too, come to think of it. I don't want to do it, but responsibilities is responsibilities."

"It's not about Night Quidditch," James snapped irritably. "And I really wish you'd lay off about it. It's just a game. It doesn't harm anybody."

"It's breaking curfew, for starters," Ralph replied. "And it's threatening our security nowadays, it is. All of you out there with your

glowing Bludgers and Quaffles and such. And now I'm told you're using loads of those ridiculous sport magic spells you picked up last year at Clutchcudgel. Gravity wells and knucklers and other dotty stuff that's in no self-respecting textbook. What if some Muggle campers happen to see all that magic and those flying glowing balls from across the lake?"

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," James hissed, rolling his eyes. He was quite proud of the addition of sport magic to Night Quidditch, and still considered himself one of its best practitioners, though Julian Jackson would be a close second. "Nobody's going to see us, no matter what spells we use. Would you come off it, already?"

"I'm Head Boy, James—"

"As if you'd let me forget *that* for more than thirty seconds."

"And I've got a future to think about. As a Dolohov, I could have a solid career at the Ministry, or even in the States. But I've got to start living up to it now. And sometimes that means putting duty before friendship."

"Look, Ralph," James declared, stopping on the grass and turning on his friend. "If this is more of this 'finding the true Ralph' stuff, I get it. I really do. But you are dangerously close to crossing a line I don't think you really mean to cross. It was one thing when Zane was here to help reign you in—"

"*Reign me in!*"

"But I'm just one person and you're full steam ahead into... *whatever* it is you're on about. I don't even know. I want to support you, Ralph. We've been mates since forever. But if you think your duty to that stupid badge is more important than your friends, well, all I can say is I guess you've finally proved yourself a Slytherin."

"*Whoa*," Graham Warton said, impressed, as he passed the two of them. "The fangs are out now, aren't they?"

"Give 'em hell, James!" Ashley Doone called from some distance away, walking backwards to watch. Next to her, Patrick McCoy sniggered.

James rolled his eyes and took a step back.

Ralph stood like a statue for a long moment, his cheeks brick red, his eyes both hurt and defiant. He opened his mouth to reply, but before he could a girl stepped between them, placing a hand on each one's chest.

"Shake hands and say sorry," she said. It was Rose. She glanced aside at James, and then at Ralph. Neither boy moved.

"Do it," she said in the same tone of voice. "You both know you want to. Tensions are high right now and everybody's at their frayed edge. But you need each other. And I can't muster the energy to get between you both if you go to war. So shake hands and say sorry."

James drew a long breath through his nose. Rose was right. And yet a fiercely stubborn urge held him back.

"Sorry," Ralph said, his eyes lowered but his hand held out. "Really. You're right. I'm sorry."

James blew out the breath he'd been holding and reached to shake Ralph's hand, briefly but firmly.

"I'm sorry, too, Ralph. I'm just... you know."

"You're worried about Merlin's summons," Ralph nodded. "And... everything else. I know."

To Rose, James muttered, "Since when did you turn into our mum?"

Rose rolled her eyes, bemused and relieved. "Since you both proved you need one."

The rest of the day went by in a fugue of slowly increasing tension. James had no idea what the summons from Merlin was about. What he did know was that it was just like the headmaster to make the request first thing in the morning so James had ten long hours to stew over it. His final class of the day, Transfiguration with Professor McGonagall, seemed to stretch into nearly infinite lethargy, each minute taking approximately a year as he struggled, halfheartedly, to change a China teapot into a half dozen teacups. McGonagall herself showed off the technique with frustrating ease, tipping her steaming

pot and transforming the spout into a line of six dainty cups, catching each one deftly as it appeared and setting them on the desk, even as the teapot emptied both its water and itself into the final receptacle.

James hissed and yanked his hand away, burning his fingers with hot water for what felt like the thousandth time, but producing no teacups from the pot in his hand.

“It’s a matter of confidence, students,” McGonagall instructed, scrutinizing them over her spectacles. “Pour as if you fully expect the cup to appear. Any hesitation at all will spoil that magic.”

James shook his head and lifted the teapot again, even as it bubbled and steamed, magically refilling itself. He sucked his red fingers, then held out his hand once more, preparing to catch the teacup as it formed from the tilting spout, and knowing that it would never happen. This, he mused, was the tricky thing about confidence. The more you tried to force it to happen, the more elusive it was.

Finally, dinnertime came and went. James barely noticed it, being far too focused on the appointment afterward. But then, somehow, time seemed to catch up to him, snapping forward with cruel elasticity, and he found himself walking toward the rising spiral stairs of the headmaster’s office, caught once again on the miserable knife edge between wanting to get it over with as soon as possible and running away as fast as he could.

“Potter,” the Gargoyle guard said in its gravel voice, nodding him onward toward the stairs.

James paused. “Aren’t you going to ask for the password?”

“Do you *know* the password?” the gargoyle asked, raising a suspicious marble eyebrow.

“Um,” James admitted reluctantly, “No, I don’t.”

The gargoyle nodded again, as if satisfied. “But *I* know *you*, and that’s what counts. Passwords can be forgotten or stolen. New times call for new measures. Now, go on up. He’s expecting you.”

James swallowed hard and turned to the gently rising steps. Effortlessly, they lifted him and carried him up, around, into darkness, and then into the mellower, golden light of the headmaster’s

antechamber. The large office door stood open, casting a bar of firelight out onto the waiting bench and the wall of miscellaneous portraits, paintings, and plaques.

James approached the door, feeling twice as heavy as normal.

It's just Merlin, he told himself. I'm most of the reason he even exists in this time and place and isn't still floating around in the Void of disappearance. I'm part of the reason he was given the post of headmaster. He helped me rid the school of that loony Muggle reporter, and I helped him rid the world of the Gatekeeper. We go back together. We're friends...

And yet James knew that what Merlin called friendship and what *he* called friendship were likely two extremely different things. As different as the two worlds, a thousand years apart, that formed them both.

As always, the headmaster's office was crowded to the point of claustrophobia, filled with trunks and crates, bookshelves and tables, tools, talismans, and enormous oddities of every imagining, including (but hardly limited to) the gigantic stuffed alligator that hung from the ceiling, its glassy black eyes staring down and its hundreds of teeth bared in an uncomfortably jolly grin.

"Come in, James," Merlin said easily, not looking up from his desk, where he seemed to be writing something with one hand, consulting a large book with the other. "It seems to be a customary expectation of the age that I offer you a seat. But frankly *I* prefer for you to remain standing. Thus, I shall leave the option to your good judgment."

James moved cautiously to a space equidistant from the hearth on his left and the desk in front. The stone floor was warm. The air of the office was heavy with the sleepy scent of candle wax, old leather, and, unexpectedly, cocoa. James glanced down. A silver tray sat perched on the edge of Merlin's desk, nearly pushed off by a haphazard pile of books. On the tray, a large stoneware mug of hot chocolate steamed gently. As James watched, Merlin reached without looking,

scooped the mug into his hand, and sipped a deep draught, finally leaning back in his chair as he did so.

“Ahh,” he said, half-closing his eyes. “You know, James, I’ve gone in and out, to and fro in this new world. I’ve seen, smelled, and tasted its million strange discoveries. And I don’t care what the politicians, priests, and poets say: hot chocolate is the pinnacle of your era. Perhaps any era.” He breathed the mug’s steam, sipped again at its contents, and then, reluctantly, set the cocoa aside on its tray.

Returning his gaze to James, a speculative look in his eyes, he said, “You’re probably wondering why I’ve summoned you here.”

“Well,” James said, his voice dry, “Yeah. I mean, yes sir. I assumed...” He stopped and cleared his throat nervously. “I assumed that I was in trouble, like.”

“Oh, but you are, Mr. Potter,” the headmaster nodded somberly, and drew a little sigh. “As headmaster of this school, I would be bereft in my duties if I did not correct aberrant behaviour by the accepted means. I know it’s been a month, but do forgive me. I’m a busy man.”

“But,” James blinked, sincerely baffled, “but you said on the boat that there wouldn’t *be* any punishment for the whole dragon-in-London thing!”

“Oh, I truly doubt I said anything that direct. I prize nuance, Mr. Potter. But you are, in essence, correct. There is no discipline to be meted out for your failure to control the events of that night. Your lesson, one might hope, has been learned.”

Behind James, somebody gave a light, peremptory cough. He turned quickly, in time to see the portrait of Albus Dumbledore, unusually awake and alert. Dumbledore folded his hands on his lap and looked past James, staring politely into the middle distance.

“Yes,” Merlin said, drawing attention back to himself. “And yet there is the small matter of your being out of bed past the accepted time. For that, I’m afraid I must deduct, let me think... perhaps five house points.

At the headmaster's words, James fancied he could hear the tiny clink and clatter of rubies emptying from the Gryffindor vial, far below. He knew he was imagining it.

"Um," he said after a long, hopeful pause, "is that all, sir?"

"No, James," Merlin said, and his façade of unassailable authority seemed to evaporate, as if it was a robe the huge man put on and took off whenever it suited him. "It is not. And yet, for the life of me, I find myself so often at a very unaccustomed loss for how to proceed with you." He picked up his cocoa again but did not drink it, merely regarded James through ribbons of rising, fragrant steam.

James' previous nervousness rushed back, and doubled. He gulped. "Should I be, er, sorry, sir?"

"Where do you think she keeps it?" the huge man asked, his voice so calm and quiet that it was almost a lion's purr. "Has she told you? Has she, perhaps, shown you?"

A thrill of exquisite fear coursed from the crown of James' head to the soles of his feet, shaking him where he stood. And he knew: Merlin was reading him like a book. Merlin knew everything. Merlin couldn't be fooled.

He heard his own voice ask, almost automatically, "Where she keeps what, sir?"

"Her Horcrux," Merlin answered, and then shrugged vaguely. "Or the thread itself. Both are equally important to her. Though not quite as important, I am willing to wager, as this."

He took one hand away from his mug and held it up. Sparkling between his thumb and forefinger was Petra's brooch, the one she had lost from the stern of the Gwyndemere, and the one that she had refound in the World Between the Worlds, brought over by her alternate self from another, darker dimension. James' eyes widened at the sight of it.

Merlin turned his gaze from James to the brooch in his hand, tilting his head back to examine its silver and moonstone through his spectacles. "It was a gift from her father, while she was yet in her

mother's womb. He was never able to give it to her, sadly. He died in prison."

"He didn't die there," James said before he could stop himself, his own voice an octave lower than normal. "He was *killed* there. Murdered by his guards for secrets they believed he was keeping."

Merlin nodded, still examining the brooch, turning it this way and that by the firelight. "The gears of justice are too large not to occasionally grind up the innocent. Or at least, in this case, the only marginally guilty."

James opened his mouth to retort, but stopped himself. He narrowed his eyes as an idea—a near certainty—came into his mind. He remembered something that Merlin had said to him back during his first year: *nine-tenths of magic happens in the mind. The last tenth is pure and unadulterated bluster.*

Merlin was pulling the same trick that his father had so often used on him. The same trick that had only recently worked so well on Rose, getting her to confess nearly everything about their first disastrous trip to London. The headmaster was pretending to know far more than he did, in order to lure James into telling him all the rest. Only Merlin, being Merlin, was infinitely better at it.

"I don't know where she keeps anything," James said, reverting to the headmaster's initial question. It wasn't a lie, exactly. It just wasn't all of the truth.

"You are very nearly of age now, James," Merlin said, lowering his hand and gazing at him again. "Indeed, in the world I once knew, you would be considered old enough to go off to war, to marry, to own and tend your own properties. You are no longer as a child, but a man. And this is not flattery, for it is a terrible responsibility to be a man or a woman, grown and thrust out from beneath the wing of your parents and teachers. Thus, be sure that when I ask you about Petra Morganstern—or Morgan, as she now reluctantly prefers to be called—I do not ask as a guardian to a charge, but as one man to another, with nothing less in the balance than the fate of worlds."

His eyes were stern as he spoke, but his voice remained calm, low. “I believe that you are keeping your own secret counsel for noble reasons. Perhaps you mean to assist Morgan or dissuade her using your own unique influence over her. Perhaps you fear for the lives of those you love if you draw them into a potentially hopeless confrontation with her. In short, I trust your motives, if not always your judgment.”

Here, Merlin stood up behind his desk, leaving the mug steaming on its corner. James watched him, resisting the urge to speak up, to answer Merlin’s comments. He desperately wanted to explain everything. There was nothing so tempting in the moment as to share the burden of responsibility with Merlin, to be welcomed into his powerful camaraderie and share his confidence.

But Merlin couldn’t dissuade or stop Petra. He would die trying. As much as it pained and saddened James, he remained stubbornly silent, afraid almost to look the huge sorcerer in the eye, lest he reveal the truth with his mere gaze.

“I shall do you the service of telling you everything I know, James,” Merlin said, slowly rounding his desk and approaching the fire. “For via my diverse arts I have learned much, however frustratingly incomplete. Petra has identified herself with her dark mirror, the other version of herself, now murdered and bound to this earth. She believes that only by assuming Morgan’s place in her original dimension can she reset the crumbling destinies of our twin worlds. In this, James,” Merlin reached the fire and turned his gaze sidelong to face him, “Petra is both absolutely correct, and terribly, fatally mistaken. For there are other forces in play, powerful forces both terrible and corrupt. They assist Petra, drive her, and yet they do not share her benevolent motives. I see them not, but I sense their movement, like shapes underwater, tracing deep ripples on the surface of causality, undermining all that is true and good.”

“Judith,” James said involuntarily. A chill traced down his spine, shaking him where he stood.

“And another,” Merlin nodded slowly. They both knew who he meant, but neither would say it. And this sent another, harder

shiver all the way to James' heels. For many long years—over two decades—no one had been afraid to say the name of Voldemort. Why should they? The Dark Lord had been beaten and killed by his young nemesis, Harry Potter.

But now, the greatest wizard alive, Merlinus Ambrosius himself, stood with his back to the fire in his own office leaving that old name unspoken in the air between them. Voldemort was once again He Who Must Not Be Named. He lived again, if only as a fractured shred in Petra's mind, but stronger today than yesterday, and growing ever stronger by the minute.

Because Petra no longer resisted the perverse whisper of Voldemort's influence. She was cultivating it. She was using it, drawing conviction, and power, and direction from it.

Every child knew the stories of how the Dark Lord's black magic worked, back when he was fully alive in power and malevolence: speaking the villain's name summoned him.

Now, it was true once again. If either James or Merlin spoke the name, she would know.

And perhaps she would come.

"There is only one thing that matters in all of this, James," Merlin said, turning to face him fully now, regarding him levelly. "Petra's—Morgan's—mission cannot be what it appears as long as the worst villains in this, or any, earth are driving her to accomplish it. She may believe that she can harness the power of the bloodline within her while not succumbing to it. But she grows blinded in exactly the same pace as she grows powerful. And soon, James, she will not care if she is blinded or not. He whose soul curses her will turn her completely."

James shook his head slowly, thoughtfully, now looking up at Merlin. "No, she won't. She can't be. Petra is good. She can resist."

"She *has* resisted," Merlin agreed carefully. "But she stopped doing so the moment that she made her Horcrux. Now, she has partnered with her curse. Soon, inevitably, it will consume her."

James shook his head again and dropped his gaze. He backed up a step and sank into a nearby chair. "I think... she believes that

she'll be gone before the voice in her mind can get that sort of control over her. She'll be vanished away into Morgan's original dimension. It won't matter anymore."

"You miss the point, James," Merlin stated, a note of impatience, even frustration, edging into his voice. "This is no longer a decision that can be left up to her. She is deluded beyond reason. The Petra you once knew is gone already. In her place is the Bloodline. The Crimson Thread. Morgan. She is corrupted. And as such, she is unable to see that her plan is rooted in lies. There is no other interpretation. If the Lady of the Lake and He Who Must Not Be Named are scheming for the success of her plan, then only terror and misery can come of it. Never hope. Never salvation."

James was becoming agitated with frustration. "But it makes *sense*, though!" He glared down at his open hands, and then snapped them into fists. "As much as I hate what it means—that she will leave us forever—it makes sense! The world is falling apart more every day, all because of the imbalance caused by the stolen Crimson Thread. Morgan was her twin, so that means Petra is the only one who can replace her and set things back to rights again."

"The world is not so simple," Merlin stated firmly. "I wish that it were, but it is not, and you are grown enough to know that. The young lady who was once your friend has embraced an illusion. Her guilt has partnered with her power to make her vulnerable to the worst sort of lie. She has become a pawn for powers that would seek not just our slow degradation, but our outright destruction."

James realized, with some dismay, that his frustration was edging into anger now. He looked up at the headmaster again, boldly. "Everyone thinks Petra is evil. That she's the worst witch that ever lived. The world's first female undesirable number one. And now you think that, too."

"Evil, no," Merlin countered, lifting his chin. "But deluded by evil, yes."

“You’re all wrong,” James said, firming his jaw. “I know her better than any of you. I know she’s stronger than any of you know. Not just in her powers, but in her heart.”

“Are you willing to stake the balance of the world, and all worlds, on that confidence?”

James faltered. He glared up at the headmaster still. But he had no more strong words.

When Merlin spoke again, his voice was very low, deadly serious. “She makes her attempt soon, James. She and those who have chosen to assist her. But she will not leave without this.” He held up the moonstone brooch again. “You were there when I captured it. You already suspect what I know: that it is her heart and soul, because it means everything that she has lost. Before she leaves this realm, if indeed that is possible, she will come for it. I will confront her. And then, what will happen, will happen. Unless you, James, decide to assist me.”

James was still gazing up into the headmaster’s probing eyes. He felt wary, and torn, and deeply worried. His voice a near whisper, he asked, “How could I help you?”

“By telling me who it is that she has called to her side. There are two that I can sense via my arts, the Ransom and the Architect, but I cannot name them. Besides the villains who drive and protect her, who are these two who mean to assist Petra in her misguided, disastrous plan? Tell me so that I may reason with them. For the time is coming, and it may indeed be here, when there will be nothing left but fight, blood, and death. Tell me before it must come to that, James. Only you can do so.”

James’ thoughts reeled. Could Merlin be referring to Odin-Vann and Albus? Or were there possibly others? What did the mysterious roles mean, the Ransom and the Architect? And if it was Odin-Vann and Albus, which one was which?

He drew a deep breath, balanced perfectly on the razor’s edge of indecision. And then, with a sort of internal collapse of relief, he knew what he had to do.

It was Merlin, after all.

He met the headmaster's gaze and said, "It's—"

Several things happened at once, interrupting him. A voice, harsh and startling, spoke up from the hearth. A fist pounded on the door, urgently. And most disconcerting of all, a horn sounded outside the headmaster's open window. The noise was low and throbbing, like a note blown on a ram's horn, only one of massive size, giving the tone deep, bass resonance.

"Headmaster Merlinus," the woman's voice from the floo declared. "This is Deputy Partridge from the Department of Magical Integrity and Security calling. Are you there?" Her face, wide and stern with hair pulled into a merciless bun, shifted in the coals, looking for him.

"I am here, Madame," Merlin answered quickly, even as he moved to the door and swept it open. Mr. Brimble, the evening watchman, stood outside, his eyes wide, his face the colour of putty. He stepped into the doorframe and glanced around hectically. His eyes alit on James and then dismissed him, flicking back to the headmaster.

From the floo, the woman from the Ministry said, "There have been several breaches in temporary magical boundaries this night. We have incoming reports of unnamed magical species venturing into protected areas. Hogwarts School is one of them. Initiate Ministry regulation lockdown protocols until further notice."

"I shall take whatever precaution the situation dictates, Madame Partridge," Merlin replied smoothly. "Just as soon as we ascertain which magical species has decided to visit us."

Brimble bounced impatiently on his toes, nearly bursting with impatience. Merlin turned to him, his brow raised inquisitively.

"They pulled down the watchtower, sir!" he said breathlessly. "Hawtrey and Rheem barely got out before they toppled the whole thing over into the lake using their ropes and hooks! They're right furious, although none of us can understand a word they say! Seems like they think we were using the tower to spy on them or something!"

"Who, pray tell?" Merlin asked.

“Merpeople, sir!” Brimble said, his eyes bulging further. They’re gathered all along the shore, shouting nonsense and brandishing those mad, three-pronged sticks at us!”

“I believe the word you are groping for is ‘trident’, Mr. Brimble.” Merlin suggested.

The horn sounded from beyond the window again, low and throaty. The noise chilled James and prickled his hair.

“That is not the horn of merpeople,” the headmaster said, turning back to Brimble. “That is blown from a golden Graphorn, the traditional rallying horn of—”

“Centaur, headmaster,” Partridge concurred from the floor. “We’ve just received word from remote viewers. The entire eastern congress of centaurs is on the move. Hogwarts School is either their destination, or in their path. Evacuation may be imminent.”

“Perhaps let us not leap to extremes,” Merlin suggested with almost impish calm. As a man accustomed to action, even war, it appeared that these were precisely the moments he lived for. “Have we any idea what our guests are seeking?”

“They’re threatening the lot of us with their pointy, er, tridents, sir!” Brimble exclaimed, his voice climbing nearly falsetto. “I think it’s bloody well obvious what they want!”

“The centaurs, I mean,” Merlin said, holding up a hand to Brimble. “The merpeople are waterbound, thus of some lesser concern at the moment. The centaurs are not a people to attack without warrant and reason. Has anyone inquired what they are seeking?”

“This is not the time for diplomacy, Mr. Ambrosius,” Partridge said from the floor. “Initiate lockdown, as protocol demands. Hundreds of students are in danger.”

“Not unless any of them attack our guests,” Merlin countered. “And even then, I expect the centaur sword would be used to spank rather than gut. These are a patient people. We shall meet with them as comrades.”

More footsteps echoed heavily up the spiral stairs beyond the door. A figure plowed into the office, pushing Brimble aside

unceremoniously. It was Hawtrey this time, his face red and clammy with sweat, his chest heaving from the exertion of having run some distance. His brown beret was pushed back, revealing his high, balding brow.

“Centaur, sir,” he wheezed between gasps. “In the courtyard... Demand palaver with the Pendragon, whatever that is...” He swallowed and fell against the doorframe, raising one hand to cover his heart. “And two counselors... of his choosing.”

“Please sit and recover yourself, Mr. Hawtrey,” Merlin instructed, and then turned to Brimble. “Go and summon Professor McGonagall. She will surely be found in her quarters at this hour. Have her meet me in the courtyard within five minutes. We should not keep our guests waiting. James?” He turned and looked down at James where he still sat, now perched forward on the edge of his chair.

“Yes sir?”

“You will accompany me as my second counselor.” This did not seem to be a suggestion.

“*Me*, sir?”

“I can think of no one else I would prefer. You may consider it credit toward your, ahem, Junior Auror-in-Training credits. I shall inform Professor Debellows.”

“Headmaster,” Partridge interrupted impatiently, “we have instituted protocols for a reason. I insist that—”

“Rest assured, Madame,” Merlin said, turning back to the face in the coals. “If the outcome of this evening’s palaver requires it, I shall follow Department regulations to the very jot and tittle.”

“Mr. Ambrosius!” Partridge called stridently, but Merlin was already stepping toward his open door, passing Hawtrey where he sat gasping and wheezing on the antechamber bench.

James jumped up from his chair and ran to catch up, leaving the face in the hearth fuming, both literally and figuratively.

He had a sinking sensation that somewhere, somehow, a final corner had been turned. There was a sense of destinies shifting on the

huge, crushing axes of fate, like a minute hand on a sort of galactic clock ticking one notch closer to absolute midnight.

It was a deeply unsettling feeling, and yet he was barely aware of it. He was too caught up in the inertia of things to come. A momentum that he feared would not let up from that day forward, until the final, ultimate end.



NEXT CHAPTER:
THE CONGRESS OF CENTAURS!
THE PLAN MUST CHANGE!
A SECRET MISSION?