

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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21. DISINTEGRATING PLANS

“Shouldn’t we be meeting atop the Sylvven Tower, sir?” James suggested as he followed Merlin through the entrance hall. Students milled in urgently whispering knots, collecting around the main doors and peering out, some with trepidation, others with nervous excitement. Bright, wide eyes turned to follow the headmaster as he parted the crowd, walking straight toward the open doors and the twilight courtyard beyond.

“As I am quite certain that it would be pointless to send you all to your common rooms,” he declared without breaking his stride, “At least do respect the confidence and gravity of our guests by staying inside and quiet. I need not remind you that centaurs are solemn creatures who do not bear offense lightly.” In a quieter voice, he said to

James, “The Sylvven Tower is indeed the traditional place for meetings such as these, but it was not built with centaurs in mind. The many stairs would be an injustice and an insult.”

The air beyond the open doors was still warm with the dying sunlight, but swirled with capricious night breezes. James stopped on the top step as Merlin progressed down, slowly, moving to greet his guests with stately grace.

The courtyard was filled, nearly wall to wall, with centaurs.

James had never seen so many at once, had never imagined there could be this many gathered in one place. He knew that the eastern congress of the Forest centaurs had to include more than Firenze, Bane, Ronan, and the few others he’d met or glimpsed on rare occasions. And yet the sight before him boggled the mind. Part of his awe was in the sheer weight of the hundreds of stony gazes, all facing toward the doors in ranks and rows, corresponding to some secret hierarchy that James couldn’t fathom. Part of it was the array of weaponry on display—massive bows and staffs, ornately crafted broadswords and daggers—none wielded, but held at the ready or worn in creaking belts and leather scabbards. And part of it was that, for the first time, he was seeing female centaurs. They were clad just as the men, but with slighter bodies and, if anything, even more regal bearings, with tapered up-thrust chins and large, grave eyes.

But most of the fearful reverence the colony inspired, however, was in the rarity of their marching in numbers such as this. The centaurs were elusive and secret creatures, vastly preferring their own society to that of man or wizard, and therefore fiercely defending their lands and culture from curious eyes. Yet here they all were, exuding a sense of aloof, cautious superiority so thick that it seemed to darken the very air.

James looked for Magorian, their aged leader, but couldn’t find him in their ranks.

Someone hurried alongside James, and then past him, clacking down the steps to join Merlin as he neared the leading row of centaurs. It was professor McGonagall, of course, dressed in a surprising quilted

housecoat with a tartan shawl tight around her shoulders, her peaked hat wobbling crookedly. She glanced back at him briefly, her eyes sharp, and nodded him curtly forward. James hurried to join them, coming along on Merlin's left side, while McGonagall stood straight on his right.

In unison, she and the headmaster bowed. It was a stiff movement, bending at the waist, but slow and deliberate. James rushed to mimic their movement, feeling awkward and woefully conspicuous.

"Hail, noble denizens of the Forest, your domain," Merlin announced, straightening. "Is Magorian among you? Or to whom shall I address tribute?"

"Magorian is no more," one of the near centaurs answered stiffly. He was tall even by centaur standards, with grey dappled horse flanks and deep brown man's skin from the waist up. His grey hair was loose and long, hanging about his shoulders in ragged ropes and ribbons. "I am Jakhar, his successor, and leader of this colony. Pay tribute to me, Pendragon Merlinus, and bid us welcome, for we come with a warning, and a promise."

"Master Jakhar, venerable leader of a noble people," Merlin acknowledged with a dip of his chin.

Jakhar's face grew harder and his eyes narrowed. "Noble we may be, but people we are not, insofar as your own leaders are concerned. Call us beasts, for that is the title we prefer, lest we fall under the same category as the other odious creatures upon whom you've bestowed the title of 'beings'."

McGonagall replied, "A history lesson we are all quite familiar with. Clearly you remind us of this distinction for a reason?"

"I do," Jakhar concurred. "The news in your world surely confirms what we have divined from the Dance of the Elders. Your mistake in absorbing the lesser creatures into your society has come to its inevitable consequence. Hags, vampires, Goblins, and other such vermin have rotted your culture to its very foundation. And now they threaten to incur and topple unmagicked human civilization as well."

“An overstatement, perhaps,” Merlin hedged mildly. “But a concern that we are striving to address. The Centauri objection notwithstanding, there are yet many individuals of those species who not only uphold our laws and society, but who repudiate the actions of their wayward brethren. The revered Magorian and myself debated this topic at length, and yet even he, late in his life, understood the error of condemning an entire population for its worst members.”

“An opinion that he recanted in his final day,” Jakhar bristled, stamping his forehoof. “The clarity of death brightened his inner eye, and he saw the truth: a spring that is only half poison will yet kill those who drink of it. An apple that is only half-rotten will still spoil the lot. Humanity has failed to guard itself from the poison and rot of lesser creatures. And now human civilization is as a golden statue with clay feet, cracked and ready to collapse.”

“This is an ancient debate,” McGonagall declared smoothly, if a bit wearily, “and one that we shall not satisfy this day. What is your warning, Master Jakhar? And what is your promise?”

Jakhar regarded McGonagall carefully, and then switched his gaze to Merlin, and then James. “Our warning is simple and irrevocable, and it is this: the age of Man is over. Wizardkind may be blind to this truth, but we Centaurs have observed the spiral of mankind for decades. Your unmagicked brothers wage war upon each other with ever more terrible weapons. They grow arrogant on power, drunken on technology, and lazy on diversion. The circle of their age closes more with every cycle, devouring itself with increasing speed. We have observed this and shown forbearance, knowing that such monumental portents require absolute surety before action. But the signs have culminated. The point of certainty is past and the time to act has come. Man can no longer be granted the freedom of self-governance. Thus we, the Centaurs and our allies, will mount a revolution into the citadels of human rule. We will save them from themselves. We will eradicate the rot that has beset them in their ignorance, and grant them the security of wise rule, once and for all, under true and prudent dominion.”

“You’re going to take over human governments?” James blurted, unwilling to believe that he’d heard properly.

“It is the only way to balance the collision of destinies,” Jakhar nodded, peering down at James gravely. “The influence of humanity has grown too powerful not to drag the rest of us into its own destruction.”

McGonagall’s voice was shrill with restrained anger, “Unstable humanity may be, but on the verge of destruction they simply are not. We witches and wizards learned long ago that power does not give one the right to make decisions on behalf of an independent culture and people.”

“In fact, Madame Professor,” another centaur spoke up, this one the female who stood to Jakhar’s left, “It is wizardkind’s *failure* to make decisions on behalf of lesser peoples that has led to this impending catastrophe. We Centaurs will not repeat that mistake.”

“How soon?” It was Merlin who asked, his voice as unfailingly calm and measured as always. “We know that the Centaurs do not act without much planning, proper preparation, and fair warning. We recognize your warning and ask: how soon do you intend to move upon the Muggle world and their governments? Let us prepare them for your strength and manner, that fewer of both sides might be harmed.”

The female centaur blinked at Merlin, and then glanced aside at Jakhar, who shifted on his hooves, his tail flicking restlessly against his flanks.

“You misunderstand, Merlinus,” he said, dropping his voice to a confidential tone. “It is not the Muggle world that we intend to move upon. The warning is not for you to pass onto them, but for wizardkind itself.”

James felt a wave of coldness fall over him as he looked up at the solemn centaur, standing at the head of his ranks and rows of grim warriors.

After a long, breathless pause, Merlin's voice was somber. "I see. You intend to move upon the bastions of wizard rule. Because you believe that we have failed in our duties to humanity as a whole."

The female centaur raised her chin. "Those whom you call Muggles are as your charges. It has always been your duty to shield them from themselves, and from the worst of your own kind. You have done neither. Your mission cannot be said to have failed, for you never took it up. And now, the Centauri have no choice but to accept the mantle of responsibility. We shall establish the rule that you have ignored, and we shall do so first with you and your people. Your Ministry will submit to us. Your leaders will be subject to us. And this school," her eyes sharpened as she challenged Merlin's gaze, "shall be our first stronghold."

Merlin merely nodded, slowly and consideringly. "Your warning is received with respect," he said. "And your promise?"

"That not one hair on a single head shall be harmed so long as we are met with the respect and obeisance that we require."

Merlin nodded again, even more slowly.

"That is *quite* a stringent requirement," McGonagall said, her voice hushed. "Submission to occupying forces is not something that comes naturally to most of us."

"And that is why we offer our warning," Jakhar replied. "For the day of our coming is not today. But it is soon. We abhor violence. We abhor it so strongly that when forced to fight, we do so with the ferocity and viciousness of conviction, that it may be ended as soon as possible. Those who stand up to Centaurs do not stand up again. This is the only way to shorten the time of violence. Do what you must to assure that it does not come to that."

Without waiting for a response, Jakhar and his escorts turned, their hooves clapping on the flagstones, and paced regally back toward the open courtyard gates. The ranks behind them parted smoothly, forming a silent thoroughfare for them to pass through.

McGonagall turned to Merlin, her eyes sharp, but said nothing. Merlin merely stood and watched the departing Centaurs. They filed

out row by row, front to back, funneling through the gate and into the deepening dusk. When the last of them exited, four abreast, their tails flicking restlessly and their heads raised, Merlin finally spoke.

“We should have a word with our Mermish friends. I will explain to them that our watchtower was not intended for them, but that we shall relocate it out of respect for their concerns.”

“Headmaster,” McGonagall whispered harshly, her gaze still sharp. “What are we to do? The Centaurs mean to take the school! Is it possible that they could indeed breach our boundaries if they came in force?”

“Centaurs do not threaten, Professor,” Merlin answered. “If they state an intention, it behooves us to trust that they have the means to accomplish it.” He stepped down onto the cobbles and strode for the gate, apparently heading toward the lake to converse with the Merpeople. James and McGonagall followed.

“Surely, we must inform the Ministry immediately,” McGonagall said, her voice low and serious. “This is a terrible matter indeed.”

“As a matter of fact, Professor,” Merlin said as he passed through the gate and turned toward the lake below, where it glimmered with coppery sunset light, “I believe we may count our lucky stars.”

James glanced up at the big man, frowning. “*Lucky?* How in the world is being invaded by Centaurs lucky?”

“Two reasons. First, because Centaurs measure time in years, not minutes. It may be that will attack tomorrow, or in a decades’ time. Likely, there is ample time to prepare. And second, because they might indeed have chosen to invade Muggle governments first. With the earth balanced as precariously as it is, that surely would have tipped the scales of fate into irreversible collapse. As it is, there is a shred of hope.”

“I daresay I fail to see it,” McGonagall breathed, and shook her head.

Merlin glanced aside at her, and then at James. Something glinted in his eye, a grim, puckish twinkle, cracking his façade of stony

calm. Quietly, he said, “That is because you fail to remember the single most important difference between the non-magical world and our own. Unlike our Muggle friends, when faced with a magical enemy, *we* are able to fight *back*.”



There was no point in James telling Rose, Ralph, Scorpius, or anyone else about the Centaur summit, since the entire school had been watching breathlessly from the open front doors and every surrounding window. Merlin made an announcement within mere minutes of his meeting with the Merpeople, broadcasting his voice throughout the school as everyone trickled to their common rooms, hushed and abuzz with worrisome chatter.

“Attention students and faculty of Hogwarts,” his voice echoed from every wall, resonated from each flat surface, as if the entire school had been converted into a magical sounding board, which it probably

had. “As you are now aware, the Merpeople have been mollified, while our Centaur friends of the Forbidden Forest have expressed their deep concern about the welfare of the human world, both its magical and Muggle counterparts. You may have heard that they believe it will soon be their responsibility to govern us all, and that they will come in force to impose that governing, starting here, with this school. You did not misunderstand. But I assure you: diplomacy will rule the day first. Centaurs are eminently thoughtful creatures, unruled by emotion. Ministry ambassadors will surely be dispatched this very night to negotiate with the Centaurs, and those negotiations shall surely, partly by design, and partly by their very nature, take a very long time. The day may indeed come when diplomacy fails and the centaurs invade Hogwarts. But I expect two things when and if that day comes: you will no longer be here, and we will be equipped to resist them. Fear not, students. Attend to your studies. The fate of the world may not rest on you completing your homework, but the fate of your future does. Let that be your primary focus.”

His voice died away as the students, frozen in place with wide eyes and alert, listening expressions, all began to move again, turning to each other, resuming their whispered, nervous conversations, albeit with a new note of relief in the air. Merlin was the most powerful wizard (and the only living sorcerer) in the entire magical world. If he was not concerned, then perhaps the world was not, in fact, about to fall apart around everyone’s ears.

But as James made his own way up the crowded stairs to the Gryffindor common room, shouldering past slower moving knots of urgently chattering students, watched by the unsettled gazes of dozens of paintings, he thought of Merlin’s comment back during James’ first year. The last tenth of magic, he had said, was pure and unadulterated bluster.

Merlin couldn’t know how long the centaurs might take to mount their forces against the school. He couldn’t know if they would even engage in diplomacy with any Ministry ambassadors. Based on what James had just heard in the courtyard, he thought it extremely

unlikely, in fact. Diplomacy had stopped the moment that Jakhar and his advisors had turned tail and stalked away, leading their troops back to the Forest, leaving their warning and promise ringing in the air behind them.

And of course, James was one of the few people to know that while Merlin may indeed be the only living *sorcerer* in the world, there was a living *sorceress* out there as well. And who knew what she might do in the wake of this news. Or even if it was somehow a part of her plan.

The next day was Tuesday, and both of James' first two classes, Potions and Muggle Studies, were canceled, replaced with study periods in the suddenly very crowded library. The rasp of whispers and shuffle of gossiping students from table to table was nominally overseen by the librarian and, inexplicably, Professor Revalvier.

"The rest of the teachers are in a sort of war-room meeting, I hear," Rose whispered to James, peering low over an open textbook. "The Ministry is in a complete uproar ever since the news last night. They're sending new watchmen, including a few retired Harriers and Aurors. The teachers hate it, but they're worried, too. All of them are in a mandatory emergency response training class with Headmaster Merlinus today."

Ralph glanced back over his shoulder toward the reference desk. "So if it's mandatory, why's Professor Revalvier sitting it out?"

Rose lowered her voice further. "She's a pacifist, they say. Won't raise a wand against another person or creature if it's in the name of war. She may lose her post over it, but she says it's worth it to set an example to the students."

James shook his head in dismay, and then turned back to Rose. "How do you know all of this stuff?"

"I ask the right people," Rose shrugged. "It pays off being teacher's pet to half a dozen professors. I magic the blackboards clean and shelve their books and they talk to me. It's like being a barkeeper."

By the end of the week, with the Centaurs still biding their time mysteriously in the Forest, life had returned to what currently

passed for normal. The watchtower had been rebuilt a safe distance from the lake and the expanded watch now patrolled two at a time throughout all hours of the day and night. The final Hogsmeade weekend came and went as spring finally broke its clammy hold over the grounds, granting the first truly sunny days and leaving flowers and lush grass across the grounds. Study sessions in the library resumed as N.E.W.T. examinations grew imminent. The first occurred early, as Mr. Twycross, the Ministry disappearance expert, concluded his class and prepared to disembark. When James' examination time came, he successfully apparated across the classroom, leaving not even the faintest trace of magical exhaust.

"Excellent form, Mr. Potter," Twycross nodded curtly, clearly impressed. "One might well think you had been apparating for years."

James grinned a little guiltily, thinking of his midnight experience in Diagon Alley weeks earlier. That night, necessity had been a very good teacher. By comparison, zapping across the classroom felt about as difficult as hovering on a broom.

Night Quidditch picked up as the weather improved, with Gryffindor just barely leading in the standings against team Hufflepuff, led by the irrepressible Julien Jackson. Jackson, who had initially been reluctant to allow game magic into the matches, was now equal to James in her ability to cast gravity wells and bonefuse hexes. Further, she had taken to studying obscure Clutchcudgel magazines from the United States in order to learn all new spells, including a nasty version of the Knuckler that caused a person's fingers to flex backwards (making it impossible to hold the clutch or a beater bat) and a ghosting hex that created random duplicates of the player who cast it, with no way to tell which was the original. She taught the spells to her teammates, but guarded them vigilantly from being discovered by any other teams. James was annoyed at her devotion, mostly because he felt too distracted to make such efforts himself.

For his own part, Ralph continued to chafe at the existence of Night Quidditch, vowing that if he ever found out when a match was going to occur, it would be his duty "as Head Boy and a magical

citizen” to shut it down. James rolled his eyes at these proclamations, choosing to believe that Ralph made them mostly out of duty, not determination. Indeed, with the watch patrolling the premises twenty-four hours a day, the night Quidditch teams had been forced to resort to their own guards, warning of incoming patrols so that the teams could rush away to hiding places in the grandstands every half hour or so, peering over railings as the watchmen passed obliviously below.

James thought often of his recent meeting with Merlin, during which he had almost told the headmaster everything he knew—had only been prevented from telling, in fact, by the incredible intrusion of both the Merpeople and the Centaurs. The timing of those events, James mused, seemed simply too coincidental to be random. And yet he couldn’t imagine how they could be anything else. No one else knew what he and the headmaster had been discussing, and even if they had, who could have orchestrated such a conspiracy with two societies as independent and irascible as the Merpeople and the Centaurs?

Still, he wondered if it had been a blessing or a curse that he had been interrupted before telling Merlin the secret of Albus’ and Odin-Vann’s involvement with Petra—the Ransom and the Architect, according to him. Sometimes he considered seeking the headmaster out and telling him after all. Other times, he tried to stay as inconspicuous as possible, hoping that Merlin would forget about the whole thing.

For his own part, Merlin seemed busier than he ever had been before. He was constantly in meetings, or bustling from place to place with members of the watch in tow, or traveling far and wide consulting with magical administrations and security forces all over Europe. And yet, somehow, the old sorcerer seemed more engaged and animated than James had ever known him. It had been a thousand years since Merlin had been part of a magical war. Perhaps, as dismaying as it might seem, he had sort of missed it. He was a tactician at heart, after all, a man of action with deep battle instincts. He may not welcome the coming confrontations, whenever or however they happened, but

he would know how to handle them. Until then, content with his duties and the competence of his skills, he was preparing.

Odin-Vann went missing for a solid week. James didn't know about it until the young professor's classes were cancelled one day, and then led the following few days by Professor Votary as substitute.

"Sick, I am told," Votary sniffed with a note of disapproval. "And contagious as well, quarantined in his quarters with no visitors allowed. Myself, I expect the young man suffers from mere seasonal scumblewort allergies. 'Tis the season. But far be it from me to judge another professor's ability to function while impaired." He plunked his carpetbag onto the desk for emphasis.

Graham leaned aside and whispered, "I hear he's got dragon pox. Sneezing his guts out through his ears and every other orifice."

"You're disgusting," Kendra Corner rolled her eyes.

Later that evening, James and Rose stole through the corridors to Odin-Vann's door. Sure enough, they could hear the unmistakable sound of gut-wrenching sneezes from within, the force of them visibly shaking the old door. Tentatively, Rose knocked.

"Can we get you anything, Professor?"

They waited, but Odin-Vann didn't respond. A few moments later, another gusting sneeze rocked the door in its frame. Rose looked up at James, her face etched with suspicion.

James understood, and a feeling of deep dismay chilled him. Something was indeed sneezing in Odin-Vann's quarters, but it wasn't the professor. Perhaps it was a recording of some kind, or even an Augurey trained to repeat the same violent noise randomly. Either way, the professor was not there. And James had a terrible feeling that he knew where he was.

Odin-Vann was in America, with Petra. They were finally completing her task, breaking into the Alma Aleron Hall of Archives and descending to the Vault of Destinies, where the halted Loom waited for them. They would restore the symbolic crimson thread, using whatever complicated magic was necessary for the task, and reset the Loom. Then Petra, the living, breathing Crimson Thread, would

be torn from the world and sent to whatever darker dimension Morgan, the other Petra, had come from.

“Perhaps it’s already happened?” Rose asked in a whisper.

James shook his head. “We would have sensed it. Wouldn’t we? The whole point is for this ruddy destiny to be undone and replaced with our original history. But nothing’s changed. Or, would we even know if it had?”

Rose merely shrugged. Like him, she was worried. But James was also conflicted. *He* wanted to be the one helping Petra during her final moments in this world, not Odin-Vann. *He* wanted to look her in the eyes when she departed her home dimension, and him, forever. He wanted, more than anything, simply to say goodbye.

But that was not meant to happen, it seemed. When Odin-Vann returned, one way or another, the deed would be done.

As they hurried back through the darkening corridors, Rose asked, “But what about Albus? He’s supposed to have some task to perform as well, isn’t he? Only he’s still here. We saw him an hour ago at dinner, moping at the end of the Slytherin table, just as tragic and morose as ever.”

James shook his head and shrugged. “Maybe he was just a failsafe. Maybe she didn’t really need him. Or maybe he can play his part from here. Who knows?”

James wanted desperately to ask his brother directly, but Albus’ mood had indeed spiraled darker and more reclusive since his breakup with Chance Jackson. When he did show up at mealtimes, he sat alone, his brow lowered, his eyes staring sullenly into space. When James approached him, Albus stalked away, either angry or elusive. Perhaps he knew what James meant to ask, and had no intention of answering. James could have pursued his brother, of course, demanding to speak to him. And yet some buried part of him, quiet but persistent, held him back, whispering that the longer he didn’t know, the longer the inevitable could be delayed.

The truth came home to James on a Friday, as he hurried along the corridor toward Divination, his final class of the day. Something

small and hard bounced off the back of his head, startling him so that he nearly dropped the crystal ball in his hand. He stopped and turned, clapping his free hand to the back of his head.

On the floor behind him, a small badge lay glinting in the sun. It was shaped like a shield and engraved with the letters J.W. As he watched, the badge skittered on the floor, spun around, then shot backwards into the air. It socked into the waiting hand of Edgar Edgecombe, who stood along the far wall, his wand in his hand. The boy grinned at James, his eyes squinting meanly. To his right, Polly Heathrow sniggered into the back of her hand. Quincy Ogden scowled at James from Edgecombe's left, his chin raised challengingly.

"You little—" James began, his face heating with rage. "*What* is your problem!?" The words came out much more loudly and forcefully than he intended, causing students nearby to stop in their tracks, eyes suddenly keen.

"We didn't do a thing," Heathrow said, her nasal voice high and smug. "You've got nargles in the brain, that's all. They was knocking to get out."

Laughing, Edgecombe pinned his badge back onto his robes. "Walk on, Potter. Before we get annoyed and report the whole lot of your stupid night Quidditch league to the authorities. See if we don't."

James knew the boy was trying to pique him, and knew equally well that he shouldn't let him. But he was angry, and fed up, and already feeling helpless about so many other things. He felt the weight of his wand in his robes and longed to pull it out, to brandish it at the horrible little git and his two bratty friends.

"What's night Quidditch mean to *him*?" Ogden sneered. "He's *used* to making other people pay for his stupid ideas. Sometimes he even lets other people *die* for them."

James felt a rod of ice jam down his spine at Ogden's words. He stood stock still for a moment as every watching eye turned to him. He opened his mouth to respond, but Heathrow spoke first, raising her shrill voice in a parody of woe.

“Oh, boo-*hoo*, my cousin’s dead,” she cried nastily, cocking her head and drawing a hand up to her thin chest. “Everybody feel sorry for me because I got my cousin killed off meddling in stuff I had no right to! I’m a tragic hero, don’t you know! Who else wants to die to prove it?”

James’ hands moved of their own accord. He heard the brittle crack of the crystal ball as it dropped to the floor and shattered, saw the lunge of his own wand as he pointed it at Heathrow, then Edgecombe as the boy burst into braying laughter, blind to James’ furious approach. Only Ogden saw and responded, whipping his own wand forward and pointing it at James’ face.

They both fired at the same time—James, a blasting curse; Ogden, a total body bind—and both spells spat across the space between them, lighting the walls and faces of the surprised observers with brilliant red and electric purple.

And at that exact moment, a quake shook the floor, sharp and sudden. The windows rattled in their frames. The grasses beyond shuddered, undulating across the grounds. Leaves shivered from the trees in the Forbidden Forest and birds startled in clouds from their nests.

And neither boy’s spells struck their marks.

As James watched, the curses ground to a halt in mid-air, hovering and crackling with energy, as if suddenly suspended in jelly.

There was perfect silence apart from the throbbing hum of the frozen spells. No one had ever seen or felt such a thing before. James had a moment to wonder if Merlin was involved. He even glanced around, looking to see if the sorcerer was standing nearby, his staff in his hand, exerting some sort of deadening force over the boys’ rash curses, causing the dreadful tremor that had just shaken the world.

The headmaster was nowhere in sight.

Cautiously, gingerly, Sanjey Yadev shouldered through the crowd of stunned observers, approaching the crackling spells where they hung in space. He raised his wand to them, less like a magical instrument, and more like a tree branch with which to poke a spider to

see if it's dead. As the tip of his wand neared James' thrumming *Confringo* spell, it collapsed upon itself, disintegrating into glowing dust and falling uselessly away.

A split second later, Ogden's spell did the same.

The silence that followed was breathless with confusion.

And then, distantly, the silence was interrupted by a chorus of distant yells and howls of surprise.

As a single mass, the crowd of students hurried to the windows along the corridor wall, peering out into the sunlight. James saw nothing at first. Then, with a jolt, he spied something falling toward the Quidditch pitch. It was a person on a broom, tumbling end over end, followed by two more and a couple of Bludgers, dropping like stones. They dropped past a fringe of trees, sparing everyone the sight of them crashing to the pitch below.

"Their brooms gave out," Graham Warton said in a high, disbelieving voice. "They were practicing for tomorrow's match, the Slytherins were! And their brooms gave out! Did you see it?"

James still had his wand in his hand. He held it up suddenly.

"Lumos," he commanded in a dry voice.

Nothing happened. His wand protruded pointlessly from his hand, as dead as a stick.

He looked up from it, dread suddenly filling his chest, and his gaze met Rose's as she pushed through the crowd, coming alongside him.

"Look!" Nolan Beetlebrick said suddenly, pointing to the window again. "Do you see it?"

James pressed his face to the glass again as Rose crowded in next to him.

It was the greenhouses this time. They were shaking as if in the teeth of a windstorm, throttlng so that their glass panes vibrated and cracked. Some began to shatter in places, their shards bashed aside by unfurling leafy tentacles and thorny vines. Whatever plants were capable of locomotion, they were beating at the glass, straining for

release, breaking through and boiling upward in writhing, twining masses.

Professor Longbottom burst through the door of the centre greenhouse, his robes torn, green vines twisted about his arms and legs. He swatted at them, pulled them off and threw them to the ground, stamping on the writhing bits and producing his wand. He pointed it back at the greenhouse, seemed to call a spell, and then raised his wand, examining it in silent surprise as nothing happened.

Little did James know, at that moment, the extent of the event as its various effects befell the entire world.

In nearby Hogsmeade, a group of three Muggle hikers stumbled into the High Street, having suddenly encountered an entire mysterious village where only dense trees and brush had been moments before. They wandered into the unlocked door of The Three Broomsticks, wide-eyed and gape-jawed, as Madame Rosemerta called helplessly, "Who are you? You shouldn't be here, now! You shouldn't *be* here!"

In London, the recently repaired brick wall separating Diagon Alley from the Muggle city proper cracked, bowed, and then collapsed in a rain of dust, dry bricks, and fresh mortar. The proprietor of the Leaky Cauldron, an old wizard with a nose the size and texture of a blood orange, peered out the rear of his establishment, took one look at the demolished wall, and then hurried out the front, jamming an old fisherman's cap onto his head and leaving a sign swinging on the locked front door: CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE, OR THE END OF THE UNIVERSE, WHICHEVER COMES FIRST.

In recently reopened and repopulated New York City, thousands of Muggle denizens looked up from the brief earthquake that had only just subsided, blinking at the sight of innumerable strange signs and establishments as they materialized all over and atop the Muggle city, along with suspended thoroughfares of flying buses and broom-riders, many now struggling to stay aloft as the world's magical field flickered disastrously. One such Muggle, an old cabbie of Pakistani descent with a tweed cap pressed down over his thick greying

hair, sighed and shook his head wearily. “Not again,” he muttered to himself, as screams of awe and terror began to rise from the streets all around.

In Philadelphia, where the quake had been worst of all, streets bulged and windows shattered for blocks in every direction as a tiny, empty lot surrounded by an old stone wall suddenly expanded, blasting outward to a size of several square blocks, shoving space and time aside like an erupting crowd onto a bus. Vehicles screeched to a halt or rammed into each other as streets rearranged themselves, entire blocks resituated, street signs spun, reoriented, and grew entirely new names.

And centred above it all, a sudden storm threw waves of boiling clouds out over the city, swirling and spiraling down over a single dark point, forming a sort of metaphysical compass pointing not at true north, but at the hub upon which the wheel of time and destiny turned—a strange and ancient device buried deep beneath the stone dome of the Alma Aleron Hall of Archives.

In the darkness beneath that dome, two hundred feet down, surrounded by raining grit and groaning stone as terraces and iron stairways tilted, crumbled, and began to crash in on themselves, two voices called to each other in shocked alarm.

“*Destroyed!?*” Petra Morganstern shrieked, her hair grey with dust, her eyes wild with horror and surprise. “How can the Loom be *destroyed!?*”

“Sabotage,” Donofrio Odin-Vann gasped, his face bleeding from a wide cut across his forehead. He limped to her from the ruin of the Vault where its brass and crystal leaves lay warped in on themselves, or broken, or melted to glowing sludge by the force of the magical blast which had just shaken the entire earth. “Someone, somehow... they knew we were coming. They set up a technomantic chain reaction. It was triggered the moment that we approached with the thread and began the spell of replacing it...”

Behind him, and all around, the walls shook violently. A dull roar echoed from high above as levels began to collapse down onto each

other like dominoes, disintegrating and crushing thousands of ancient, priceless relics and their stored memories.

Petra's eyes sparked with furious, desperate light. "But how is that even possible! Who could have known! *Why* would they have risked the balance of the *entire world* just to *stop* me!?"

Odin-Vann grabbed her arm, began to pull her away from the destroyed Loom. A snarl of frayed threads and torn tapestry smoked from the ruin. The Loom itself was nothing more than a smouldering frame of char. "It doesn't matter! Not now! We must go before the entire place comes down on our heads!"

"No!" Petra cried in fury, immobile as stone, her eyes steaming like dry ice. "It *can't* be finished! *I cannot be stopped!*"

"There is *another way!*" Odin-Vann shouted, shaking her and making her look at his face. "It will cost much, but there is one final option that I never told you about! A last, ultimate resort! But only if we leave now!"

Petra glared at him, seemed to tower over him, her eyes glowing orbs of rage. And then, with a shaking exhale, the blinding glare fell away and she was just a young woman again, shaking and dirty and bleeding from a half dozen ragged scratches. Trembling, she asked, "There's still one other way?"

"A terrible way," Odin-Vann admitted reluctantly, palming blood from his face. "An *unspeakable* way. A path to ripping open dimensions that no one has ever attempted before because it is only one way, and the cost will be great. But if we leave this plane now, Petra... perhaps we can perform it."

In a smaller, eerily girlish voice, she asked, "Can we capture back my father's brooch before we do?"

Odin-Vann cringed as more of the edifice began to cave in behind him. "We will do what must," he rasped urgently. "But we have to leave this very second. Your Horcrux may save you. But this place is about to kill me permanently."

The Archive began to sink all around them. Every surface blurred and tilted, shattered and screeched out of true. The death

throe of the subterranean edifice was a sustained roar, growing, shaking the very air.

Petra took Odin-Vann's hand. Behind her, space tore open in a blinding fracture, forming a rough doorway into a calmer place, a sunny gazebo with the flicker of water behind it. She turned to the rift, knowing it would be there, and stepped through, taking the young man with her.

Far above, the Archive's dome gave way. Its surrounding pillars tilted inward, falling ponderously into the massive pit below even as a volcano of dust and grit exploded up out of it, reaching to the boil of bruised clouds high above.

And with that, the deed that had begun four years earlier finally completed itself: the wheel of destiny finally, ultimately, ground to a complete and fatal halt.

In the Alma Aleron medical college, an old Cajun woman sat up in the chair next to her bed. For the first time in years, Madame Delacroix's mind came back into malignant focus, as sharp and wicked as ever. She turned her blind gaze toward the tiny, barred window and the boil of clouds above, and a slow, helpless grin spread over her face, showing all of her crooked yellow teeth.

In the room directly above hers, Nastasia Hendricks—or what remained of her, still wasting away in the years since her lighter half was killed—bolted upright in her bed, her mad eyes blazing with alertness. She unhinged her jaw and belted a scream of laughter, clawed at her face, even as her eyes filled with tears and rolled, both gleeful and horrified in equal measures.

As the destruction of the Archive subsided, Alma Aleron's timelock tremored back into being and reasserted itself. The lot and its stone wall sprang back to its original tiny shape, sucking the city of Philadelphia in around it, shattering more windows, unbuckling the unruly streets, and leaving stunned Philadelphians dizzy, blinking, and dumbfounded.

The magical city of New Amsterdam vanished away again, swallowed back up by its reinforced new secrecy field. The old

Pakistani cabbie stood inside the open door of his yellow taxi, looking around as stunned observers frowned, speechlessly asking each other if all those strange sights had really been there, or if they had been merely another mass delusion.

The cab rocked as a man dropped into the back seat, slamming the door behind him. The Pakistani cabbie leaned and glanced into the rear of his car. There, a thin man in a trench coat and an old fedora hat met his gaze, his face tense but composed.

"I'll pay you a hundred simoleans to get us out of the city as fast as this boat can roll," he said, holding up a thin sheaf of bills.

"Which direction?" the cabbie asked, a little breathlessly.

"*Any* direction," Marshall Parris answered. "And if you're smart, my friend, you won't come back afterward."

An ocean away, behind the Leaky Cauldron, the pile of broken bricks shuddered, vibrated, and with some difficulty, began to reassemble itself into a wall, once again, for the last time, closing off Diagon Alley from prying Muggle eyes.

Hogsmeade shimmered and vanished away into unplottability again, leaving the three hikers dazzled and confused, having only moments before been arguing loudly with Madame Rosemerta about the use of her apparently nonexistent telephone. Now, they stood cramped in a thicket so dense that it seemed to physically force them back, stumbling, scratched with nasty thorns and briars.

And in the Hogwarts greenhouses, the maddened plants began to settle, withdrawing slowly, retracting their vines in sheepish curls.

Dangling in James' stunned hand, his wand suddenly and silently burst alight, shining with the Lumos spell he had called only moments before. Stunned and deeply worried, he raised his wand and looked at it.

Rose raised her eyes from the wand in his hands to his face. "*What... was that?*" she asked in a bare whisper, nearly mouthing the words.

James weakly shook his head. He had no idea, although he would know the truth soon enough. For now, he simply had a deeply

sinking sense that, whatever it was that had just happened, it was the beginning of the ultimate end.

And in that, of course, he was sadly correct.



NEXT CHAPTER:

**THE STATE OF THE MAGICAL WORLD IN FLUX!
AN URGENT AND MYSTERIOUS MISSION!
THE THREE WORDS!**