

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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11. BLACKBRIER QUOIT

No word came from Hagrid before the Christmas holidays, leaving James free to attend to his packing and planning and general trepidation about his trip with Millie. He remembered to bring his dress robes and secretly dreaded having to wear them. He thought about being alone with Millie outside of school and felt both nervous and feverishly excited about the prospect. Would they be unsupervised a lot of the time? Or even more supervised than they were at school? What would her parents and family be like? Millie had attempted to describe them and warn him of certain eccentricities, but he hadn't absorbed much of it. The only thing he understood for certain, based on her descriptions, was that the Vandergriffs had a much different

lifestyle than any James had ever encountered. Scorpius had summed it up when he had described them as "old magic", although James had only the vaguest idea of what that meant.

The train ride back to London was typically raucous, the compartments filled with happy students, the corridors decorated with pine boughs, colourful enchanted light globes, and foot-long candy canes. The cart lady's wares consisted entirely of holiday cookies, miniature mincemeat pies, sugar snowballs, cocoa cockroaches, and pepper-imp snaps. Millie bought several of everything and distributed them to the crowded compartment they shared. James accepted a palm-sized mince pie with a sheepish smile. He barely knew any of the people crammed into the compartment, most of them being Millie's friends, her fellow Hufflepuffs, although a few were at least familiar faces from Night Quidditch. For their part, they seemed to accept James as one of their own, based solely on his connection to Millie.

She sat next to him, hip to hip, holding hands, bouncing excitedly with the conversation. Outside the window, the winter sun descended over pristine white fields, snow-decked forests, and mountains dim and hazy with distance. The light turned dusky and purple and the shadows grew long. Eventually, the lanterns of the Hogwarts Express lit themselves with soft popping sounds, bathing the entire train in golden light, and James knew that the journey was very nearly over.

A pang of trepidation came over him as he remembered that, with their arrival at Platform Nine and Three Quarters, the familiar part of the holiday would be over. Suddenly, he missed the comfortable banality of the Burrow, the gingerbread smell of his mother's frantic baking and the warmth of Grandma Weasley's hugs, the homely live spruce Christmas tree decorated with beloved family ornaments and the bullfrog croaking voice of Kreacher.

Kreacher, at least, he didn't have to miss very much. He had just seen the ancient house elf only the morning before, awaking to his patiently grave stare and drooping watery eyes as the elf stood on the foot of his bed, a stack of wrapped presents at his feet.

James had decided that he couldn't open the presents yet, despite Kreachter's monotone holiday benediction.

"It's not Christmas yet," James had said, yawning and stretching, his hair still prickling from the shock of waking under the elf's unblinking glare. "I'll open them when I get back. It'll give me something to look forward to."

The elf had accepted this with stoic grimness, vanishing shortly thereafter with a snap of his bony fingers, leaving a scent of pine needles and peppermint in his wake.

Now, as the train steamed slower and slower, the chug of the engine dropping from a staccato rhythm to a descending bass drum-beat, with the dark brick walls and chimneys of the city sweeping past the windows, James cursed himself for agreeing to go with Millie for the holiday. He knew now that he had mostly done it just to spite Albus and Lily. But now he felt that he was only punishing himself, and digging himself into a deeper hole with Millie, with whom he still intended to break up just as soon as the moment was right.

If the moment was *ever* right.

He scanned the crowd of waiting parents and families as the train slowed, hissed, and shimmy-rattled to a halt. He knew he wouldn't see his own parents there. It had become tradition for he, Albus, Lily, Rose, and the rest to travel via Portkey directly to the Burrow. The enchanted Christmas sweater Portkey had arrived only a few days earlier, addressed to Albus and Lilly. James had seen it and acted disinterested—had even made a snide comment about how much fun *he'd* be having in the city instead. Albus hadn't cared, but Lily had looked sincerely jealous, and James felt nastily gratified by that.

The platform milled with people in coats and hats, scarves and boots, festively dusted with snow and watching bright-eyed as the travelers began to disembark. James saw Scorpius' parents, Draco and Astoria, standing in long dark coats near the edge of the crowd, looking just as severe and haughty as always. Other vaguely familiar faces shone like moons in the lantern light. As James climbed down onto the cold

footpath, he scanned the crowd for anyone who might be part of Millie's family.

For her own part, Millie made a huge show of saying goodbye to her friends, hugging them one by one, clasping their hands earnestly, as if she wouldn't be seeing them again for months or years, rather than mere days. James tried not to feel impatient and forgotten.

"So which one's your mum or dad?" he finally asked when she joined him again.

"Oh, mummy and daddy don't meet us at the platform," she said breezily, smoothing her hair and tugging her yellow gloves onto her hands.

"Ah," James frowned. "So... your grandma Eunace then?"

"Grandmother Eunace!" Millie laughed and shook her head. "Don't be silly! Grab your bag and come on."

She slung her own bag onto her back and shouldered into the throng, leaving James to catch up. After a moment, she reached back with one yellow-gloved hand, found his, and pulled him eagerly onward, threading through the crowd and eventually out through the brick wall portal into the Muggle reality of King's Cross station. Still she did not look back but wended this way and that along the broad concourse, her boot heels clacking over the sound of recorded Christmas carols and toneless announcements of arrivals and departures. Muggle travelers milled all around, some happy and festive, meeting relatives and friends, others frowning and harried, checking their watches or pocket telephones, flowing in all directions.

Finally, Millie led James to the lofty, echoing expanse of the main terminal, flooded with light and seemingly as huge and crowded as a football stadium. There, she stopped momentarily, looking this way and that.

James, however, saw the man a moment before her.

"Um," he said, squeezing Millie's hand to get her attention and pointing with the other. "I assume he's for us?"

Millie followed James' pointing finger, and then smiled and nodded excitedly. She began to tug him forward again.

The man James had seen held a large sign at chest height, clutched in black-gloved hands. The sign read **VANDERGRIFF AND GUEST** in neat copperplate letters. It was not the sign, however, that made the man stand out. It was the fact that he was at least ten feet tall, with a head so huge and blocky that it might have been hewn at Stonehenge. His thinness was almost freakish, emphasized by a double-breasted black uniform so snug that it appeared to have been sewn directly onto his body. The double row of brass buttons on his chest glinted in the overhead fluorescents, as did the patent-leather brim of his chauffer's cap.

None of the other travelers seemed to notice the mantis-like man who towered over them like a telephone pole, his grey eyes unmoving and patient in the shadow of his cap. But even that was less amazing than what sat behind the chauffer, completely unnoticed amidst the flowing, busy, hectic throng.

It was a car, but not like any James had ever seen. It was very old, immensely long and low, its fenders sweeping back like smooth metal waves over fat white-walled tires. Chrome gleamed from the spoked hubcaps, the gigantic round headlamps, and the tombstone-like frame of its grill. The passenger compartment was so long and regal that it looked as if it might contain a ballroom. Jutting from the moon-grey slope of the hood was a silver figure, a robed woman leaning forward as if into a gust of delicious wind, her chin raised, her arms thrown back so that her sleeves trailed like wings.

The throng of travelers flowed around the car like water around a rock, giving it not so much as a sidelong glance.

"Good evening, Mistress Millicent and Master Potter," the chauffer said as Millie approached. His voice was deep but surprisingly melodic. He touched two fingers to the brim of his cap and offered them a stately little smile.

"Hi Balor, happy Christmas!" Millie called up to the giant man, and then surprised James by throwing her arms wide, as if in expectation of a hug. Balor lowered the sign and hunkered to one knee, allowing Millie to throw her arms around him, although not

exactly returning the embrace himself. When she disengaged, he straightened again, rising so tall as to blot out the overhead lights, and ran a platter-sized hand over his uniform, straightening nonexistent wrinkles.

With a faint clunk, the boot of the car swung open. Balor deftly collected James' and Millie's bags and loaded them into the car, then opened the rear passenger door. Millie clambered inside. More tentatively, James stepped in after her—the interior was so large that he barely had to duck his head—and joined her on a sumptuous burgundy leather sofa that served as the rear seat. Speechless, he looked about, taking in the paneled walnut furnishings, the silver fixtures, the gently curving side seats and thick plush carpeting. A miniature crystal chandelier hung from the gentle dome of the ceiling. There was no ballroom, in fact, but the front of the passenger compartment was divided from the driver's seat by a polished wooden bar decked with crystal decanters, wine and cordial bottles, and rows of glasses hung upside down in neat racks.

"That's Balor," Millie said, fitting her hand into James' again and giving it a squeeze. "He's been in the family for, oh, centuries probably."

"What," James asked, watching over the bar as the enormous man folded himself behind the driver's seat, wrapping his black-gloved hands around the ring of the burlled wooden steering wheel, "what is he?"

Millie blinked up toward Balor as if she'd never really considered the question. "A cyclops, I think," she answered with a shrug.

The engine of the car started with a subtle, throttling thrum, almost like a butler clearing his throat.

None of the Muggles looked at the car, and yet they moved aside before it, clearing a channel for the car to travel through. It began to roll with understated grace, the prow of its engine preceding it like a red carpet. The chandelier barely swung, merely turned its crystal pendants gently, adding prisms to its distinguished glow.

James had ridden in the Knight Bus through this very terminal once. But that ride had been wild, frantic, like dancing with a banshee. By comparison, this was like riding on the shoulders of a giant black panther as it calmly stalked the jungle.

"But..." James said faintly, "I thought Cyclopes only had one eye?"

Millie shrugged again. "We haven't read that section in *Magical Beasts and Where to Find Them* yet."

The car, Millie told James almost off-handedly, was a Rolls Royce Wraith, though admittedly equipped with distinctly magical options. The engine required no petrol, for instance, running instead on liquid Goblinfire, and the hood ornament statue projected its own unplottability field everywhere it went. Even more impressive, James thought, was the car's ability to bend space around it wherever it rolled, allowing it to fit through small openings, such as one of the revolving door entrances of King's Cross station. The car didn't do anything so undignified as shrink itself. Instead, it seemed to press reality aside as if the world itself were made of plastic, or the metal and glass doors were mere curtains, drawn back by hidden cords.

The Wraith merged into the dense holiday traffic, but wasn't in the least affected by it. Ranks of taxis, cars, lorries, and vans crowded the slushy boulevard at a near standstill, lurching forward one by one like impatient animals at a feeding trough, but the Wraith merely slipped between them, riding the centre line like a rail, bulging the space so that the narrow aisle became a grand, empty thoroughfare. Balor did stop the car at traffic lights, but James noticed that the Rolls was always the first in line, its engine throttling patiently, until the light on the falling feathery flakes switched from red to green, whereupon the vehicle would ease forward again, preceding the traffic all around like a general leading troops on parade.

The drive to Canterbury took some time, and James was reminded once again of how immensely large London really was. They passed through shopping districts crowded with travelers on foot, most loaded with bags and boxes. They skirted industrial areas dominated

by brick walls and filthy windows, tall smokestacks and metal garage doors. Finally, they came to a neighborhood of large homes set far back behind carefully pristine gardens. Trees lined the double boulevard, most decorated with understated white Christmas lights. No cars were parked on the streets here, and the snow was no longer tramped down by endless intersecting vehicle and pedestrian tracks. Instead, the boulevard was striped with two neat black tire marks, repeated carefully by the few cars that drove here. The Rolls Royce followed the tracks discreetly while James peered from the huge side windows, wondering which of the large, impressive-looking homes might be their destination.

“We’re not there quite yet,” Millie said with a smile in her voice.

James waited, his chest tight with a blend of anticipation and trepidation that was becoming all too familiar. The only other vehicle on the road, he noticed, was another large luxury car, though of much newer vintage, following the Wraith at a respectful distance, its headlights bright as diamonds on jeweler’s velvet.

As they neared the end of the boulevard, James realized that there was something unusual about the houses lining the left side. The spaces between and behind them were seamlessly dark, stretching off into foggy flatness. With a jolt of mild surprise, James realized that the flatness was the sea, mostly frozen over, so that the blue-white edges blended into smooth black over the depths. The rear yards of the homes sloped down to stony beaches, some dominated by the blocky silhouettes of boathouses, all dark and shut tight for the winter.

A line of trees obscured the shore view as the Wraith reached the end of the boulevard, which angled toward the sea and terminated at a neat round cul-de-sac with a curving metal guardrail. Trees lined the rail, crowding directly up to it, blotting out the sea view and the night sky beyond. The streetlamps ended at the last house, leaving the cul-de-sac thick with shadow, like a giant paved period at the end of a formal sentence.

The Wraith stopped in the centre of the period.

“Are we,” James asked, leaning forward on the seat to peer through the windscreen far ahead, “like, here yet?”

Beyond the windscreen, the dark line of trees began to shift. The trunks moved as if in the teeth of a stiff wind, and yet James could tell by the falling snow that the air was perfectly still. Faint creaks and pops emanated from the wood as the trees shuffled aside, crawling on their roots to reveal a dark opening. The opening did not reveal the sea, however, but a long wooded passage, shadowy and mysterious.

With a screech and creak of metal, the guardrail shimmied, shuddered, and rose up into the air, its posts growing like tentacles. The rail transformed as it stretched upwards, changing from a rust-spotted barrier to a wrought-iron archway, complete with more copperplate letters arranged over complicated iron scrollwork:

BLACKBRIER QUIT

The Wraith rolled forward again, passing beneath the sign the moment it rose to its full height.

Speechlessly, James watched, leaning close to the window on his side. Millie still held his hand between them, herself paying almost no attention at all.

The car should have rolled past the tree line and down onto stony beach, if James’ understanding of the local geography made any sense at all, and yet it proceeded instead onto a long, perfectly straight drive lined and roofed with birch trees, their branches knit overhead like revelers holding hands over a dance. Beyond the trees, on either side of the drive, James could just make out flat, grey ice, as if the drive occupied a very narrow peninsula stretching out into the sea.

Gaslights began to glow along the drive, flickering to life atop tall iron poles, illuminating the birch branches and creating golden pools on the snowy path. After a minute, the drive widened, still bordered by trees, and opened onto a broad park-like expanse, blanketed with snow and decorated with winding, illuminated pathways, stands of trees on small hills, meticulous hedges, and regal

statuary. Situated on the rear quarter of the park was a stone house so broad and square, so lined with windows and pillars, ranks of steps and corner towers, that it was more castle than mansion.

“Home sweet home,” Millie sighed, not quite affectionately.

James barely heard her. He was just now noticing that, despite the size of the park and its gardens, the trees that surrounded it still somehow met overhead, lacing their branches together into an unbroken dome a hundred feet high, effectively shrouding the house and the entirety of its grounds from outside view.

The Wraith swept into a curving drive and angled toward the glow of the house, coming to a gentle halt before its grand front doors. The doors opened as James watched and a line of three men in formal black tailcoats and white shirts came out, descending dutifully into the cold to take up positions on the steps, where they stood at attention.

Balor opened the passenger door and Millie prodded James to get out. He did, stepping speechlessly into the cold, his feet crunching on gravel beneath a frosting of snow.

“Good evening Mistress and Master,” the nearest of the formal-clad men announced, bowing his double chin with jovial good humour. He was rotund but sturdy, with black hair pasted severely over his scalp. “I trust your journey was pleasant and without event.”

Millie climbed out after James and nodded to the man. “It was fine, er...?”

“Topham, M’Lady,” the man provided his name with no hesitation, and then indicated the others with a sweep of his hand. “And this is Hedley and Blake.” Hedley was middle-aged with a pleasant, clean-shaven face, while Blake was only a little older than James and Millie, dark haired with sharp, handsome features. He smiled at Millie and then James in a perfunctory manner. James noticed that the man’s smile did not at all affect his eyes.

Millie nodded and opened her mouth to say something, but the arrival of a second car interrupted her. James turned, surprised to see the luxury automobile that had been following them earlier draw to a

halt behind the Wraith. The driver's door swung open as Hedley and Blake descended the steps to retrieve the luggage from both vehicles.

"Millie!" the driver of the second car called cheerily as he hopped out, his teeth showing as he grinned toward the steps. He was thin and sandy haired, dressed in a grey tweed suit and gold tie.

"Bent!" Millie called back, dropping James' hand and running to greet the newcomer. They embraced, laughing, before Millie drug the man back by the hand. He allowed himself to be pulled along, smiling gamely in James' direction.

"Bent, this is James Potter, from school. James, this is my big brother, Benton Ford."

The thin man stripped off his driving gloves before reaching to give James' hand a firm shake. "A Potter at Blackbrier," he proclaimed cheerily. "Will wonders never cease! A delight to meet you, James."

"And you, too," James grinned, helpless not to return the man's happy enthusiasm.

"Mattie," the man called back over his shoulder, still gripping James' hand, "Come meet Millie's new friend, James Potter."

James glanced back toward Benton's car as a woman ascended from the passenger's seat. She was dressed in a pale coat and a slim golden gown that did not exactly bless her bony body. She had large, protuberant eyes and a chin sharp enough to open letters. Her red hair was drawn up into a complicated arrangement of waves beneath a furry ivory hat. She peered at James with cool, professional courtesy.

Millie nodded toward the woman in gold. "And this is my sister, Mathilda Constance."

"Welcome to Blackbrier Quoit, Mr. Potter," Mathilda said, gazing at him down the length of her blade-like nose before turning her attention to Topham. "And who shall it be this time, dare I ask?"

"Miss Jillian, M'Lady," Topham answered immediately. "I believe she served you during your most recent visit. I hope her efforts were satisfactory."

"It isn't her fault," Mathilda sniffed, ascending the steps past the butler. "No outsider can compare to a *true* house servant."

“As you say, M’Lady,” Topham nodded, averting his eyes tactfully.

“Come,” Benton said, deliberately ignoring his older sister and smiling again. “Let’s go inside and show James here around the old place. It looks impressive until you realize that it’s really just a stuffy old museum that *some* people insist on living in. Right, Millie?”

Millie agreed and followed her brother up the steps toward the open double doors. The interior of the house was brilliant with golden light, revealing a long corridor of vaulted ceilings, chandeliers, and darkly gleaming wood.

“Speaking of museums,” Benton announced with a laugh in his voice, “here we find the best exhibits of all! Mr. and Mrs. Vandergriff themselves!”

“Oh, do stop, Benton, you embarrass yourself,” his mother said, but she was smiling, her white-gloved hands outstretched to him. He embraced her while Mr. Vandergriff turned his attention to James and Millie.

“Welcome home, darling,” he said, smiling as Millie trotted up the steps to hug him in the doorway.

“And her young friend,” Mrs. Vandergriff said, turning her twinkling green eyes on James and giving him a secretive smile. She was lithe and athletic, appearing almost ten years younger than her thinning-haired husband. Her own hair was dark, swept up and held in place by an emerald and silver comb that accented her forest green dress.

Mr. Vandergriff clapped James on the shoulder, turning him toward the door. “I’ve met your father on several occasions,” he confided briskly. “Someday I shall succeed in coaxing him and your mother to visit us here at Blackbrier. I do hope your stay here will speak well of us.”

James nodded, not quite sure what he could say to express his response thus far. His first impression was that, with the exception of Millie’s sister Mathilda, Blackbrier Quoit was both the richest and warmest household he’d ever visited.

“Dinner in mere minutes, I’m told,” Mr. Vandergriff exclaimed, turning to address the gathered family. “Isn’t that right, Topham?”

“Indeed so,” Topham answered with a nod. “If the family would like to convene in the drawing room, we may begin with hot cocoa and liquorice toddies, wherever age appropriate.”

“Age appropriate nothing,” Benton jibed, walking backward along the marble-tiled hall, his arms held wide. “It’s Christmas! Toddies for everyone who wishes!”

“Oh Benton,” Mrs. Vandergriff rolled her eyes with the weary affection of the mother of a born rogue.

“The servants,” James whispered to Millie as the family moved into the high bookcases and upholstered couches of a long library-like room, “they’re all... Muggles?”

Millie nodded. “Happened about a year after the Night of the Unveiling,” she answered behind an upraised hand. “All the upstairs house elves were replaced with Muggle staff. Topham’s the butler. Blake’s a valet, along with the other bloke. I always forget their names. There are two ladies’ maids and a footman or three. Of course all of them have to sign secrecy contracts and that sort of thing.” She sighed, glancing back toward the door where Topham stood respectfully at attention. “Mattie and Bent and I all grew up with house elves caring for us. It’s a little hard getting used to having actual humans around. But time marches on, apparently.”

“I guess Piggen was right,” James muttered.

“Who?”

“Piggen. He’s the Gryffindor house elf. He says all the elves are worried that they’ll lose their jobs. I told him it wasn’t that bad a deal, since they were all basically slaves anyway, but they don’t see it that way.”

Millie nodded and shrugged. “Mummy says that hiring Muggles is a way to spread goodwill for when the Vow completely breaks down. She says that keeping unpaid servants around is a relic from a darker age, anyway.”

James considered this, but his reply was drowned by Topham, who suddenly spoke to the room at large, announcing another arrival.

“The Countess Eunice Vandergriff of Blackbrier,” he proclaimed loftily.

James turned to see a woman so ancient and wrinkled that he wondered briefly if she was older than the manor itself. She walked imperiously in a sweeping burgundy dress, her back ramrod straight as she clacked a cane to the marble floor, seemingly more for effect than support.

“Mother,” Mr. Vandergriff said grandly, moving to kiss the old woman on the cheek. Millie and Benton followed suit. The Countess accepted this with stoic patience, eyeing the room severely. Her gaze alit upon James like a set of weights and he had to resist the urge to shrink back from her stare.

“Please introduce me to our guest,” she said, nodding once toward James. Her voice was high and tremulous, painstakingly genteel.

“Of course,” Mrs. Vandergriff said, stepping back and smiling aside at James. “This is Mr. James Sirius Potter, Millicent’s new friend from school.”

The Countess’ eyes crinkled slightly at the corners and she seemed to suppress a small, knowing smile. “Millicent’s new ‘friend’, indeed?”

James stepped forward, his mind racing as he wondered what was expected from him under the circumstances. “Nice to meet you, er, ma’am.”

“In this house, you may call me Lady Blackbrier, which is my less formal title,” the Countess said, extending her gloved hand, palm down. James shook it tentatively by the fingers. She seemed content with this. “And I shall call you James, rather than by *your* more formal title, I think.”

James blinked up at the woman, who regarded him with slightly raised brow.

“*My* more formal title, ma’am—I mean, erm, Lady Blackbrier?”

“Certainly yes,” she answered smoothly. “You are the first-born heir to the master of the Black estate of Grimmauld, are you not?”

“Er...” James frowned, replaying her words in his head. Was it possible that she meant Grimmauld place? “I... guess so?” he answered.

“Then by law that makes you the future Earl of Black Downing, if I’m not mistaken. And I’m quite certain that I am *not*.” She cinched her left eyebrow a notch higher, giving James the impression of a regal wink. A moment later, she turned away and said in a louder voice, “What does a lady need to do to get a toddy to warm her poor bones from the cold?”

Topham bustled, and the conversation in the room gradually resumed.

James stood exactly where the Countess had left him, his eyes wide, completely flummoxed.

“Well,” Millie said brightly, half a smile cocked onto her lips. “Does this mean I must start calling you ‘M’Lord’?”



NEXT CHAPTER:

A JEALOUS RIVAL?

SLUMMING IN LONDON!

AN APPEARANCE BY JUDITH!?