

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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12. MIDNIGHT RENDEZVOUS

The answer to James' early, idle question—would he and Millie, while visiting her family, be more or less supervised than they were at school—was answered over the course of the following hours and days. Every moment was scheduled, it seemed, and there were always people around. It was less like being supervised, exactly, and more like attending a sort of school for aristocrats, where the lessons were tea time, formal receptions, incomprehensibly dull party games, and long-winded introductions to this visiting family or that impressive dignitary or the other guest foreign ambassador whom James had only

ever seen in photographs in the *Daily Prophet* but whose knee Millie remembered sitting on when she was five years old, and whose children she asked after with sincere fondness. It took James awhile to realize that many of the people that appeared in the paintings decking the manor house walls were real, living people, albeit much older, who frequented the home over the holidays.

Every meal was a nearly three-hour affair for which everyone changed into their best clothes and went through a sort of multi-room procession, beginning in the drawing room for aperitifs (expertly presided over by Topham the butler), then moving to the long, regal dining room for the actual courses (with carefully assigned seating that Millie had to coach James through) whereupon more Muggle servants in tailcoats and white ties served the food and poured the drinks, and ending eventually in the parlor (for the ladies) and the library (for the gentlemen).

After dinner on the second night, James joined the men as they gathered around the enormous library hearth, which was large enough to park a car in, drinking a brownish-ruby liquor called cognac (James himself received a glass of warmed butterbeer with a sprig of holly on the rim), and talked loftily of weighty matters of which James had little understanding: upcoming changes of justices at the Wizengamot; revised regulations about magical flight in Muggle places; breaches of international magical secrecy in cities like Tibet and Istanbul. At first James felt awkward and out-of-place, but soon enough he realized that not only was he interested in the topics, he was welcomed into the discussion by Mr. Vandergriff himself, who always stood in his dinner jacket with his back to the fire, swirling his cognac in a round bowl-like glass.

“Your father was on the scene when the wizarding monks of Lijiang City threw open their doors for their Muggle counterparts, if I am not mistaken,” he prodded James with a nod. “I envy the conversations your family must have of an evening!”

“We don’t talk about it much as a family, actually,” James admitted. “But Dad and I did talk about it in his study. He said that

the monks of Lijiang had wished for centuries to combine the methods of their magical lifestyle with their non-magical neighbors. They believe that even the Muggle monks are secretly magical, but that theirs is a magic of the inner-world of the mind. They call it the *in-scape*.”

One of the evening’s dinner guests, a fat Ministry official with huge pork-chop sideburns, grey as iron, and a mottled red nose, now redder from cognac, snorted into his glass. “Everyone knows the wizarding cannot merely *teach* magic to the Muggles. Well-intentioned codswollop.”

“Dad says the wizard monks don’t intend to *teach* magic to the Muggle monks. They want to be *taught* by *them*, about their own more subtle disciplines of inner magic. The only reason they waited until the magical boundaries were weakening was because it felt selfish to them to want to know both.”

The Ministry official harrumphed at this, but Mr. Vandergriff (whose actual title was Lord William of Blackbrier) smiled and raised his glass in a toast. “To the wise wizarding monks of Lijiang, and all the rest of us who will hopefully make the best of this brave new world we find ourselves on the cusp of.”

James raised his own glass, enjoying the grown-up feeling of taking part in such a proper-sounding toast, but the effect was marred shortly by the late arrival of another wing of the family, accompanied by a gaggle of three small children. The children had heard of James Potter (or, more accurately, of his famous father) and were immediately enthralled. The two boys and one girl, all under six years old and immaculately dressed in miniature versions of the adult formal wear, immediately claimed James as their own and circled him like happy butterflies, demanding he play with them, acting out the stories they’d been told and retold about his legendary father.

James played along gamely, reluctantly giving in to their insistent rambunctiousness, until Millie emerged from the parlor and intervened on his behalf.

“You know,” she said, dipping her head secretively, “James is rather famous himself. He once played Treus in ‘the Triumvirate’.”

The two boys' eyes widened in newfound amazement as they looked up at James. The girl, who was the eldest cocked her head dubiously. "No, he couldn't have," she protested with flinty-eyed certainty. "He's too young."

"It was a production at our school," Millie explained. "Everyone in it was young. Even Donovan, the villain."

"I want to be Donovan the villain!" the youngest boy, Nigel, suddenly shouted. "Edmund can be the king. The king doesn't do anything. He's just a fat old numpty."

And with that, for better or worse, it was apparently decided that the children, with Millie's and James' help, would put on their own version of *the Triumvirate*, acting it out in the drawing room for the benefit of the adults and even the Muggle servants two nights hence, on Christmas Eve.

"What a charming idea," Mrs. Vandergriff announced, giving James a warm, surprised smile. He started to protest that it hadn't at all been his idea, but then he understood her expression: half grateful and half sympathetic. The Lady of the house was secretly relieved that *someone* would be occupying the children, who could, at times, be quite a handful. He glanced at Millie, who merely shrugged and nodded at him. The children cheered this development enthusiastically.

It was nearing eleven o'clock before the family and guests all began to trickle up to the second and third floors where the many bedrooms ranged down long hallways. James met Millie at the bottom of the grand staircase to say goodnight. She pecked him chastely on the cheek in the sight of her parents in the hall below and the painting of a stern-faced Vandergriff patriarch on the wall above.

"Meet me in the dining room in half-an-hour," she whispered into his ear, so close that her breath tickled. A moment later, she turned and ran up the steps, her dress flouncing around her ankles. He watched her go, uncertain what to make of her suggestion. Did she want time alone with him? Somehow he expected that she had more in mind than a brief snog in the dark.

He waited in his room for twenty minutes with the door closed and the fireplace roaring, filling the room with golden light and warmth. The four-poster bed was as high as a table and wide enough for his whole family to sleep on. The curtains bracketing the windows were twelve feet from floor to ceiling, held back by golden cords as thick as his wrist. A clock on the mantel stood square and upright, like a soldier at attention, its brass face gleaming, its soft tick cutting the minutes into precise, paper-thin slices. James waited and watched. When the clock struck eleven, it emitted a faint ratchet and whirr, stood higher on its wooden legs, and raised a pair of articulated brass arms. It struck its own bell with one arm and wound itself with the other, twisting a tiny key in what, for all intents and purposes, now looked like its bellybutton.

Just as it had the previous night, the fire diminished in the hearth as if someone had turned down a dimmer switch, shrinking from a flickering roar to a sleepy bed of red coals which danced with only a few tongues of flame. The cords of the curtains untied themselves and the curtains swept shut over the windows, closing like sleepy eyelids.

The effect made James himself blink with tiredness. Even without house elves (at least upstairs, he reminded himself) the manor was clearly deeply enchanted.

He shook himself before he could drift into a deeper doze, got up, instinctively grabbed his coat from the wardrobe by the door, and slipped silently out into the darkened hall.

The portrait of the stern-faced Vandergriff patriarch presided over the grand staircase, now dim in the glow of a few remaining candles. The figure was much larger than life, seated in a straight-backed wooden chair and wearing a red top-coat resplendent with medals and epaulettes and rows of brass buttons. Its mutton-chop bearded face was wide and somber, with regal eyes that seemed to own everything it gazed upon. A fat hand with hairy knuckles absently patted a huge St. Bernard dog that sat panting next to the chair, its tongue dangling like a carpet in need of rolling up.

“You’re not going to tell on us, are you?” James whispered up at the huge face as he slipped down the landing.

“You’re not up to something that needs telling on, are you?” the portrait replied consideringly, raising a patient, bushy eyebrow at James.

James shrugged and padded onward, down the carpeted stairs. He honestly didn’t know *what* they were up to.

Millie was already waiting for him in the dining room, merely a girl-shaped shadow on the other side of the long, gleaming table. She had changed out of her poofy evening gown into a pair of jeans and a black hooded sweatshirt. Her coat was slung over her shoulder.

“Come on!” she whispered eagerly, and darted toward a rear door. James recognized it as the door Topham and the servants used during mealtimes. She pushed through into a narrow hall, turned toward an equally narrow stairwell, and flitted down, taking the steps two at a time. James followed, trying to match both her speed and her stealth, which was no easy task. She had apparently done this many, many times before, *whatever* this was.

The downstairs was clearly the domain of the house elves. Everything was smaller and far more austere. James spied his first house elf as they passed a diminutive kitchen. The elf was scrubbing the top of a wooden butcher block but paused to look up as he and Millie darted past. James sensed more than saw other elves moving here and there throughout the warren of lower rooms. There was a laundry, a pantry, a sewing room complete with an ancient treadle-powered sewing machine, and a wine cellar decked with racks of dusty bottles.

Finally, Millie pulled open a door at the end of a short hall. Cold air and flecks of snow rushed in with it. She glanced back for the first time, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oh good,” she said in a quick, low voice. “You remembered to bring your coat.”

“What are we—?” he began, but she was already gone, vanished into the darkness beyond the door. James darted to follow, tugging the door closed behind him with an impatient thunk.

Millie ran ahead again along a fieldstone path, neatly cleared of snow, which curved down the slope of the rear yard. He heard her laugh faintly on the cold wind and felt a moment of annoyance at her for not explaining what they were up to or where they were going. It occurred to James, and not for the first time, that Millicent Vandergriff enjoyed teasing and mysteriousness just a bit too much.

Like many of the smaller houses on the boulevard that led to Blackbrier Quoit, the manor's back garden sloped away to a shingle of rocky beach and a boathouse. This one, however, was nestled snug among the boundary of trees, poking through them like a hedgehog through a shrubbery. The building was squat and grey, built of sturdy stone and adorned with deep-set, perfectly square windows. Millie reached the green-painted door and heaved it open onto pearly darkness. James slowed to a trot as she turned her face back to smile at him. Her lips were very red in the darkness, and her cheeks glowed with color.

“Have you ever ridden a snowmobile before?”

James blinked at her as if she'd just spoken in a different language.

“It's OK,” she went on, reading his expression. “I hadn't either until a year ago. Blake showed me how. It's easy, actually.”

She turned away again, nearly bursting with excitement, and her boots knocked on the wood of the boathouse floor.

“Wait!” James called hoarsely, following her with deepening trepidation. “Did you say a... a *snowmobile*?”

The interior of the boathouse was dim with the preternatural glow of the snowy world outside, bathing the old shelves and workbench and hanging anchors and coils of rope with a moony softness. The opposite end of the space was a huge garage door, closed and locked tight. The floor was a wooden frame around a huge rectangular hole. A boat hung over the hole, floating by pure magic so that it bobbed slightly, as if haunted by the ghost of swells past. The hull was gleaming varnished wood, long and sleek, with brass portholes,

its top wrapped in blue tarp and yellow rope, sealed for the winter, hiding its glory.

Millie ignored the boat, stopping at a railing and leaning over to peer into the dimness beneath the boathouse.

“Blake?” she whispered, her voice suddenly tentative.

“Vroom, vroom, M’Lady,” a voice called up.

“Ugh, I told you never to call me that outside of the house. It’s embarrassing.” As she spoke, she turned back to James, reached to take his hand, and led him to a ladder that ran from the ceiling down through the hole in the floor.

“Millie,” James said impatiently, tugging on her hand to get her attention. “What is this? What are we doing? We’re not going to get into loads of barney for this, are we?”

“Oh, don’t be silly, James,” Millie soothed, returning to him and nestling into his arms. She batted her eyes up at him. “You’ve seen what my life looks like here. A girl needs to escape sometimes. She needs to be reminded that life isn’t all white gloves and cucumber sandwiches. Why, you should hear the dickens my mother says *she* got up to when she was my age. A little sneaking out is to be expected. Why, it’s nearly a tradition.”

“So that means if we get caught,” James ventured tentatively, “we *won’t* be in any sort of trouble?”

Millie’s eyes widened and twinkled with excitement. “Oh, it would be completely *scandalous!* My father would go absolutely through the roof! It would make the newspapers and everything! *That’s* what makes it so much *fun!*”

She tugged him again to the ladder and began to clamber down herself. James could see the dull grey expanse of ice beneath, skirled with tendrils of snow. Three black shapes huddled there, one distinctly man-shaped, the other two long and low, looking like motorbikes cross-bred with thestrals and fitted onto skis. The rear “legs” of the machines knelt on looped treads like miniature tanks. James had heard of snowmobiles and even seen a few photographs, but never imagined encountering one in real life.

Blake was no longer dressed in black tails and a white shirt. He now wore snow-dusted jeans and a hooded sweatshirt beneath a leather jacket. His hair and eyes were hidden beneath a cap and mirrored snow goggles. “It’s easy,” he called up in what James couldn’t help thinking was a nasty lilt. “You accelerate with the right hand, you brake with the left.” He demonstrated with hands encased in thick black gloves, then tilted his head provocatively. “It’ll be a cinch for you, after riding a *broom*.”

“Oh stop, Blake,” Millie said, jumping to the ice beneath the boathouse.

James didn’t want to climb down to the ice. He didn’t want to attempt to ride one of those daft Muggle machines. And mostly he did not want to share the evening with Blake, whose smile, even while serving in the manor house, struck him as disingenuous and even a little mean.

And still he found himself leaning to clamber down the ladder, hopping to the surprisingly solid ice below, and approaching one of the black snowmobiles. He didn’t fully understand why he went along, except that the thought of Millie riding pillion behind the young man, holding onto him as they raced along the frozen bay into whatever heady nocturnal adventure lay ahead, filled him with bristling, angry heat. It was much too similar to what he felt whenever he imagined Professor Odin-Vann and Petra together—a thought that even now poisoned him with jealous bile.

“I *told* you he’d try it,” Millie said smugly, nudging Blake with her elbow.

Blake accepted this with a half shrug. “We’ll see. Helmets, everyone.”

He distributed what appeared to be motorcycle helmets to Millie and James before dropping to straddle the leading snow machine with practiced ease.

James wished he had his Thunderstreak with him, or better yet, his skim. He had a sudden, irresistible urge to show up the Muggle

prat, to blow past him and his stupid snowmobile at top speed, trailing a storm of white powder like a force of nature.

Instead, James felt he had no choice but to clamber awkwardly onto the second snowmobile. Millie fitted herself onto the seat behind him and laced her hands around his belly, holding tight and leaning in eagerly. Her helmet bobbed briefly against his and James heard her giggle.

The handlebars of the machine were black, wide, and complicated with red buttons, throttles, and triggers. James had no idea what to do but refused to ask. He watched as, ahead, Blake twisted to look back.

“Stay close,” he called. “We’re only going a mile or so. I’ll take it slow.”

“Don’t do us any favors,” James answered, sounding much more confident than he felt.

Blake smiled beneath his mirrored goggles, and then turned back. James watched the young man grasp the handlebars of his own machine and thumb a throttle on the right grip. The treads spun, spewing a cloud of ice shavings, and the machine lurched forward, driving out from beneath the boathouse.

James found the throttle on his own machine and thumbed it, just as he had seen Blake do.

It was a fortunate thing indeed that they were on ice. The machine jolted forward so hard and fast that James nearly lost his grip on the yoke. Millie squealed and tugged at his midsection, very nearly pulling them both backwards off the snowmobile as it bucked away. Had they been on soft snow, the grip of the machine would have been much stronger, causing it to leap away beneath them like a bounding cat. On the ice, however, the snowmobile spun its treads, accelerating swiftly but gradually. It slewed toward one of the boathouse’s wooden pilings and James steered frantically away. It was like trying to control a swinging millstone. The rear quarter of the machine struck the piling, juddered against it, and then squirted out into the moonlight of the lake, picking up speed.

Millie laughed again and squeezed James' midsection. "I knew you could do it!"

"I'm not doing anything yet!" James called back, unsure if she could hear him over the whine of the engine and the scrape of the treads on the ice. "Just hold on!"

She held on. James twisted the yoke experimentally, threaded the throttle with his right hand, and the machine lunged forward again, following nominally in the direction of the other snowmobile. Blake raced ahead without looking back, cutting across the expanse of flat, grey ice while keeping a discreet distance from the shoreline and the dark houses that presided over it.

James had expected disaster. He had expected to spin the machine into the rocky shore, or somehow crash it through the ice, or otherwise completely endanger and embarrass himself in front of Millie and the smugly smiling Blake. For the moment, at least, that hadn't happened, and he was relieved. He pressed the throttle harder and the machine revved beneath them, leaping forward on the ice even faster. It was heady, even exhilarating, despite being (as he understood on some level, in the voice of his mother) completely daft and reckless.

Ah well, he thought with a mental shrug, *what else is being young for?*

Blake led them past the row of stately homes on the shore, around a promontory of spindly woods, and across a bay surrounded by hulking industrial buildings, smokestacks, and factories. Beyond these, a cluster of docks stretched like fingers out into the ice, now bereft of boats and drifted with snow. Blake angled toward these and slowed, eventually slotting his vehicle between the skeletal shapes of the docks. He ducked as he killed the engine, letting momentum push the snowmobile forward into the shadow of a cement pier, where he seemed to park it.

James followed suit, threading much more slowly around the dock pilings and humping over smooth dunes of snow. As he edged the machine close to its twin, Blake met them, reached across with a

snow-cruled glove, and did something that caused the snowmobile's engine to cut off with a cough and a jerk.

"We *could* take these all the way into London proper right now if we wanted to," he said, showing his teeth in what James thought was the first genuine smile the man had offered. "What with the Thames being frozen over for the first time in a decade. But this should do the trick for tonight, I think. Now, let's have some *Muggle* style fun,"

He led them to a rusty ladder bolted to the side of the concrete pier, then up the pier and into a warren of ramshackle buildings, all clustered and leaning together as if for warmth. Some of the buildings were houses made of weathered grey planks, most with porches sagging under mounds of snow. Others were brick warehouses or wharves, garages with indecipherable graffiti spray-painted onto their doors and walls. Blake led them to a corner beneath a stuttering, buzzing streetlamp, where a tiny pub thumped with a dull bass beat and a rabble of loud voices. Neon signs glowed from its tiny windows, advertising brands and logos James had never heard of.

He gulped but forced himself to follow with no hesitation as Blake led them to the plain wooden door, which was covered in peeling paint the color of dried blood. He heaved it open, and a roar of heat and noise and laughter barreled out over the slushy footpath. The smell of cigarettes and beer was so strong he could nearly taste it.

"Millie here calls this 'slumming'," Blake said, leaning toward James as they edged inside. "But for you and me, it's not slumming if it's the world we come home to every night, eh?"

"I guess not," James nodded, trying to take in every corner of the tiny pub at once. Along the rear was a crowded bar backed by rows of bottles and a cloudy wall-length mirror. A television flashed blue over the bar, presiding over the scene with its bright, blaring eye. Elsewhere, a billiard table clacked and knocked, glowing red beneath its own dedicated stained-glass lamp. A jukebox thumped and pulsed. People danced on a postage-stamp sized dance floor. The crowd was dense but strangely faceless, mere gyrating silhouettes in the pooling, smoky darkness. "I don't live like Millie," James said, raising his voice

carefully so that only Blake would hear him, “but this *isn't* the sort of neighborhood I go home to every night.”

“Thank your lucky stars,” Blake said, nudging James jovially.

The next hour and a half went by in a blur of thumping music, clattering bottles and glasses on a cracked wooden booth table (James tried a beer called Old Speckled Hen, which he nursed throughout the night but never developed much of a taste for) and trying awkwardly to dance amongst the constant bump of elbows and knees on the diminutive dance floor.

Millie seemed to love every minute of it. She smiled showing all of her teeth—something she hadn't done since arriving at her parents' home—and sipped a ridiculous pink cocktail that the bartender had happily provided when she'd requested “the girliest drink in the house”. James had an idea that if they had not been accompanied by Blake, who seemed to be a very familiar face in the neighborhood, he and Millie might not have been served quite so readily, and surely not without any identification to prove their age, at the very least. In Blake's presence, they were dismissed as simply two more affectionate hooligans out for a night of harmless debauchery.

By the time they stepped back out into the blowing cold and dark of the street, James' ears felt like they were packed with cotton batting from the noise inside. Millie was giggling and reeling slightly from her drink, holding onto James as they followed Blake back down the street toward the docks.

“It's a good thing James here is driving,” she said rather too loudly, her voice strained with laughter as she patted him on the shoulder with one hand, gripped his elbow with the other.

James' mood alternated between relief that the night was nearly over, annoyance at Millie for her cavalier attitude about getting into trouble, and cautious satisfaction that he seemed to have held his own against the seemingly far more dashing and mysterious Blake.

Without any more conversation, they shuffled down the pier, climbed to the waiting snowmobiles on the ice below, and started them up again. Within minutes, they were traversing the cold blue numb of

the bay again, Millie once more gripping James tight around the waist, James following the speeding dark shape of Blake ahead.

The moon had come out, sheathing the world in preternatural blue light. It shone off the snow and ice so brightly that it made its own ghostly daylight, surreal beneath the sharp glitter of the stars above. The ice blurred beneath the snowmobile's skids, laced with ribbons of white against deep, cloudy grey.

The peninsula of Blackbrier Quoit hove into view, scratching at the low sky with its impenetrable dome of trees. James marveled at it. From the outside, the peninsula appeared as nothing more than a strip of wilderness, dense with birches and snow-laden pines, allowing no hint of the manor or grounds within. Even the stone boathouse at its tip was so overshadowed by trees that it was virtually invisible unless one knew exactly where to look.

Blake slowed and swung toward the structure, sliding into the shadows beneath. James followed, squeezing the brake lever with a modicum of confidence now, and cut the engine before Blake could come back and do it for him.

Millie clambered off the seat behind him and slipped on the ice, grabbing a nearby wooden piling for support and giggling again. Blake reached to steady her as James dismounted. He pried the helmet from his head, dropped it to the snowmobile seat, and stepped out from beneath the boathouse with a sigh, glad to be shut of the noisy Muggle machine. The expanse of the bay shone like polished stone in the moon glow, like blue-grey marble threaded with white. He breathed in the icy air, listening to Millie's and Blake's whispered words and laughter behind him.

"So, are we still a go for tomorrow night?" Blake asked in a hushed voice. Millie shushed him before he could finish his question.

"What...?" James began to ask, a flicker of jealousy flaring once again in his chest, but something caught his eye far out on the ice, distracting him even as he began to turn around.

It was a figure, but so distant, so fogged by blowing phantoms of snow that James couldn't tell if it was real or a statue. It didn't

appear to be moving, only standing straight, alert, as if watching from the dead centre of the frozen sea.

Behind James, he could still hear Millie and Blake whispering. He glanced back over his shoulder as they made their way deeper into the shadow of the boathouse.

“Do you either of you see—?” he began, turning back to the mysterious shape, but a gasp of shock cut off his words. The figure was standing directly in front of him now, having traversed the vast, icy distance as if it were a mere footstep. James recognized the tall, lithe figure immediately. The strength fell out of his legs and he only remained standing because his knees had locked.

“She’s a very pretty girl, James,” Judith said in a low, confiding voice, a voice that was somehow both warm and brittle with cold. Her words made puffs of vapour from beneath a black cowl. Her face would have been hidden completely if not for the moonlight that reflected up from the ice. “I’m glad you’ve finally gotten over Petra. She was no good for you. For either of us.”

James took a single, halting step backward. He tried to call out to Millie and Blake, but the breath seemed locked in his chest. All he could produce was a sort of huffing exhalation, stifled with sudden shivers.

Judith stepped forward and raised her hands, open and empty, in a sort of conciliatory gesture. The effect was ruined, however, by the blackened, shriveled skin of her arms and fingers. The flesh beneath her skin seemed to have shrunken away so that only bones remained, mere skeletal hands wrapped in dead, mummified leather.

“I’ve gotten over Petra as well, you see,” she said, looking sadly down at her own hands. “She’s turned on me, poisoned me. She leeches the life right out of me. But perhaps it’s for the best. Sometimes we have to sever the relationships that formed us. Sometimes that’s the only path to forging *new* and *better* relationships.”

She stepped forward again, bringing her face closer to James. He backed up another unsteady, clumsy step, and felt his back thud against one of the boathouse’s support pilings.

The blackness of Judith's hands and arms began to creep up her neck beneath the cowl. It cast veins of deathly purple around her mouth and eyes, sapped the color from her vibrant cheeks. Her eyes dulled, faded, darkened to inky black orbs.

"You're a wise young man to stay away from Petra," she said, and her voice was changing as well. It buzzed in her throat, as if she was full of wasps. "Despite what you may think, I loved her as well. But love can turn on us. It can be the sharpest dagger of all. Love can be either the blade that destroys us..." she raised her hands again, showing the decay in her spindly, ghastly fingers, "or the weapon that empowers us to do... what we *must!*" She was bare inches from him as she spat this last, rasping the words as the blackness claimed her entire face, sinking her cheeks and eyes, pulling her lips back from her teeth and gums in a grimace of deathly hate.

"Stay away from her, James," she rasped, writhing as if the words were like broken glass in her throat. "You cannot stop Petra. You cannot *win* her. If you try, all that you love will die. And still she will prevail! She *must* prevail!"

And then, horribly, a hoarse scream of pain and rage ripped from Judith's throat, forcing her head back, her chin up, so that her cowl fell away, releasing her hair. It was white, as dry as cobweb, flowing like seaweed into the suddenly rushing air.

"James?"

A hand gripped his shoulder and he jerked away from it, batted at the fingers as if from the clutch of death itself. Wind whipped through his hair, icy and flecked with mist, howling beneath the boathouse and shrieking in its drainpipes. He boggled and flailed and nearly collapsed to the hard ice in shock.

But suddenly there was no Judith. The Lady of the Lake was gone—if she had ever really been there at all. Millie stood with her hand still raised, frowning at James in surprised consternation.

He gasped deeply, drawing the cold air into his lungs as if he hadn't breathed in minutes. The noise of the gusting wind rattled the windows above. Millie had to raise her voice to be heard over it.

“Are you all right?” Her eyes were wide and startled in the dimness.

James tried to nod, to collect himself. “I... I just thought I saw... something. Out on the ice.”

Millie considered this, glancing out over the flat expanse of the frozen bay. There was nothing but blowing ghosts of snow and moon-glow to be seen.

“We should go in,” she said, bringing her gaze back to James with some concern. “Feels like a storm is coming in. Blake will take one of the snowmobiles back tonight. He and a friend will collect the other one tomorrow.”

James nodded, as if the parking status of the snowmobiles had been of some nagging concern to him. In truth, he barely heard Millie’s words. In his mind, all he heard was Judith’s hoarse shriek in the howl of the wind. All he saw was the creeping purple-black emaciation of her hands and face.

All that you love will die...!

And suddenly he knew: it was not death or flame that was shriveling Judith’s heretofore perfect skin. It was the scorch of a kind of existential frostbite. Without Petra’s connection to root Judith in reality, she was slowly succumbing to the absolute zero of the waiting, hungry void from which she had come. But if so, why would she wish James to stay away from Petra, to assure that she, Petra, succeeded in her mission to leave this reality forever?

A shiver that had nothing to do with cold shook James from head to toe.

Millie took his hand.

Five minutes later, she kissed him outside of his bedroom on the second floor. He barely felt it. His lips were numb. The air around both of them was still a wreath of cold.

Twenty minutes later, James lay in the enormous bed staring up at the dark ceiling.

Outside, the wind wailed and moaned, hiding the voice of chaos and madness that seemed to surge constantly beneath it. James

tried to tune it out, even pulled a pillow up over his head, but could not seem to drown out that keening, pained howl.

It was a voice that only he, unfortunately, seemed doomed to hear.



NEXT CHAPTER:
THEATRE D'EXTRAORDINAIRE!
WHISPERS OF PETRA!
BALOR'S SECRET?