

JAMES POTTER
AND THE
CRIMSON THREAD

BY G. NORMAN LIPPERT

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

© G. NORMAN LIPPERT, 2017



13. THE TRIUMVIRATE REVISITED

James slept in late the next morning, missing breakfast, so that by the time he came blearily to the table in search of tea everyone else was already gone for the morning, apparently on a final Christmas Eve shopping trip to Sartori Alley. The glare outside the broad windows was so bright with new snow that it was painful to look at. Cold light filled the dining room and reflected from the glossy wood of the table so that James had to squint as he plopped to a seat. To his embarrassment, he was waited on by Blake, who was once more dressed

in his formal tails and white shirt, his hair combed severely and gleaming black.

“I trust Sir had a restful night,” he commented perfunctorily as he poured hot water into James’ cup.

James couldn’t bring himself to answer or even to make eye contact. Blake, for his part, seemed to enjoy James’ discomfiture.

“Toast, Sir?” he asked brightly.

“Sure,” James answered dully, watching the steam rise from his steeping cup.

“Jam, Sir?”

“No. Thanks.”

“Honey, Sir?”

“No.”

“Butter, Sir?”

“No. Wait. Yes.”

“Straight or diagonal sliced, Sir?”

James finally turned and looked up at Blake where he stood nearby. “Tell the house elf who makes it that she can draw and quarter it for all I care. And while you’re at it, feel free to take it down a notch, why don’t you.”

It was like kicking a statue. Blake didn’t blink, merely smiled his small, insincere smile. “Very good, Sir. I shall have that for you in just a jiffy.”

When the toast came, it was diagonally sliced, perfectly buttered, sitting on a China plate without a single crumb visible, and decorated with a twist of orange and a sprig of parsley.

“I hope this is to Sir’s satisfaction,” Blake said, with just a trace of courteous doubt.

James sighed and gave up, stuffing a slice of toast into his mouth before anything he regretted could come out of it.

Blake went out a minute later, leaving the servant’s door to swing in and out on its hinge. His voice echoed back dully, impatiently, and as the door swung, showing regressively smaller slices of the hall beyond, James caught a glimpse of a female house elf

standing just inside, observing him with her large, strangely somber eyes. She was probably the one from the kitchen, checking to assure that James found his toast acceptable. The expression on her face, however, showed less servile efficiency and more watchful intent. As the door swung one last time, showing only a few inches of dark hall and one large elven eye, James saw her face tilt back in the direction of Blake, her expression sharpening, her brow lowering with undisguised contempt.

James chewed his second slice of toast and thought about his conversation with the Gryffindor house elf, Piggen. Things seemed to be coming true just as he and his fellow elves feared. Humans were taking over house elf duties, all in the name of equality and progress. Aunt Hermione would heartily approve. And yet the house elves themselves were obviously painfully unhappy with this new reality. James wondered briefly what had happened to the former upstairs house elves that had been replaced by Blake and Topham and the rest. Where did house elves go when they were dismissed? Did they all still live in the downstairs warren of rooms, only without any purpose or duties to occupy them? If so, it seemed like an arrangement destined to end badly.

Impulsively, James jumped up, tossed the last bite of his toast onto the plate, and strode to the servant's door. He pushed it open with one hand, certain that he would be too late to speak to the female house elf, to ask her his questions, and he was right. The hallway was empty, dark except for the glaring light from one window at the far end, reflecting on the polished wooden floor, turning it into a blind, imperfect mirror.

James exhaled, slumped, and allowed the door to swing shut again.

He spent the next hour and a half haunting the house by himself, never fully alone (the servants could be sensed just out of sight at most times, slipping furtively from rooms as he entered them, leaving a feeling of half-finished dusting or half-fluffed pillows behind them, so that James felt underfoot at every turn) but surrounded by the

somehow watchful emptiness of the house. The portraits observed him sleepily but James couldn't bring himself to talk to any of them. They were all just a bit too old and imperious for his comfort. In the ticking silence, his thoughts returned repeatedly to last night's confrontation with Judith, probing the memory like a tongue probing a loose tooth.

His first question was the most obvious one of all: had it really happened? Was it possible that he had imagined it somehow? Or, more likely, that it had been a sort of magical vision projected directly into his mind by Judith? Neither Millie nor Blake seemed to have seen her. But then again, they'd been chatting secretly in the shadows beneath the boathouse. The wind and blowing snow would have been enough to conceal Judith's form and drown her voice. The memory of her certainly didn't *feel* like a dream or a vision. He remembered the wasted, blue-black shrivel of her hands and arms. With a hard shiver, he recalled the way the deadness had crept up her neck and over her face, spreading in blossoming veins just beneath her skin.

He decided that it didn't matter whether Judith had physically appeared or merely projected a vision into his mind. By venturing out onto the frozen bay he had stepped into her domain—she was the Lady of the Lake, after all—and she had taken the opportunity to send him a simple, emphatic message: *stay away from Petra*.

But she had sent another message as well, perhaps unwittingly: over the past few years, Judith had clearly begun to lose her grip on this plane of existence. When Petra broke the connection between herself, Izzy, and Judith during the night of the Morrigan Web, she had apparently revoked Judith's right to occupy human reality. Without Petra's sponsorship, Judith was slowly being reclaimed by the void beyond life and death. It was sapping her, perhaps weakening her, but also making her mad, and desperate, and (James suspected) far more dangerous than ever.

This, he decided, was a good thing. Soon, Judith's grasp on human existence would collapse entirely. She would sift away back into the nothingness from which she had been summoned those several years before, when she had apparently arisen from the small woodland

lake on the fringes of Morganstern farm, paid for by the murder of Petra's stepmother, Phyllis.

But in the meantime, Judith was restless. What had she said before vanishing into the wind and snow? *Sometimes we have to sever the relationships that formed us... sometimes that's the only way to forge new and better relationships...*

Was Judith seeking a new host? A different sponsor that could renew her right to occupy the human world, allowing her to continue her quest for chaos, death, and destruction?

James sat in the cold sunlight of the empty library and shook his head firmly. No one, he told himself, could be so foolish as to accept Judith's poison bargain.

But he knew better, of course. The world was depressingly full of people who would trade chaos for power, if the opportunity arose.

His best hope, he determined, was that Judith would dissolve into the creeping black before she could find any new human sponsor, whoever such a person might be. And surely Petra was watching, guarding against just such a thing, assuring that the process she began when she broke from Judith continued to its final, inevitable end.

The thought of Petra was the one thing that finally took his mind away from the shivery chill of the Lady of the Lake. Despite Judith's intent, her words had had exactly the opposite effect on James. By comparing Millie to Petra, she had shown him just how different his feelings for the two young women really were.

The thought of Millie inspired desire, certainly, but that was a shallow affection, a thin sheen over a puddle of more conflicted feelings and emotions.

By comparison, thinking of Petra was like walking a tightrope across a chasm of unimaginable, dizzying height. He might fall off the tightrope on one side and drop to the most horrible loss imaginable—a loss so heartbreaking and soul-crushing that he could barely conceive it. But he might *jump* off the tightrope on the *other* side and soar into a bliss of fulfillment so deep and wide that it was an ocean of joy.

He knew, on some level, that he was young, and idealistic, and hopelessly love-struck. But knowing that didn't make the feelings go away. He couldn't make himself believe, no matter how hard he tried, that his love for Petra was childish. Or silly. Or merely a passing fancy. He suspected—he *knew*—that even if she vanished away into Morgan's dimension, leaving his world forever, he would still live his entire life thinking of her daily, missing her, pining for her silently and affectionately through the years.

The tragedy, he began to understand, was not in missing her every day for the rest of his life once she was gone. The tragedy was in denying his love for her while she was still, if briefly, walking the same world as him.

He was not, as Judith had assumed, "over" Petra.

He never would be.

He drew a deep, aching sigh, filling his lungs in the frozen stillness of the manor house, and let it out slowly. He knew once again what he had to do. He'd told himself it would be easier at some later date. But of course that later date was likely never to come.

He'd done extremely difficult things in his life. He had faced demons and horrors, confronted monstrous forces and villainous powers. But now he felt that he would gladly face them all over again if only he could avoid the one task that now lay before him: breaking up with Millicent Vandergriff.

"After the holiday," he said to himself with a firm nod, his voice small in the tall, empty library. "No excuses, Potter. Make it happen."

He nodded again, resolved, and fisted his right hand on his knee.

Shortly, fortunately, he heard the sweep of the opening front door, felt a push of cold air that swayed the curtains slightly, as if they were sighing with relief at the family's return. Boots knocked on the hall floor, voices echoed loudly, cheerfully, and James jumped up to join them, sheepish at having missed the shopping trip, but grateful to no longer be alone with his troubled, worrying thoughts.

He and Millie whiled away the midday practicing parts with the younger children, Ariadne, Nigel, and Edmund, for their presentation of *the Triumvirate* the following evening. As it turned out, Nigel was to play Donovan the villain, Edmund took the role of Treus the hero, and Ariadne, after some argument, filled the parts of the Marsh Hag, the Page Boy (“Page *Girl*,” she amended gravely) and various other roles, mostly to avoid having to play a romantic lead alongside her own brother—a conundrum that James, having a sister himself, could well understand. Millie accepted the role of Princess Astra, calling upon every ounce of her Hufflepuppet Pals histrionics to give the part the melodramatics it deserved. And James took on whatever parts were left as each scene demanded, sometimes acting as the King, other times as various soldiers, villagers, sailors, a ship’s captain, and even the raging sea monsters of the dreaded Dagger Peninsula.

“You’re not doing it properly,” Edmund complained, breaking character as James hulked over him, his hands raised into hooked claws. “You’re not scary in the least. You have to be scary or else Treus won’t overcome his fatal flaw.”

James frowned, still hunched in monster form over Treus’ boat (an upholstered ottoman on a huge blue rug). “What’s Treus’ fatal flaw?”

Edmund rolled his eyes, but it was Nigel who spoke up, observing from the backstage of a nearby sofa. “Everyone in a tragedy has a fatal flaw. Treus’ flaw is his naiveté. You should know all this, shouldn’t you?”

James slouched and looked helplessly at Millie, who sat forward on a nearby chair attempting to rework one of her old dresses into a Marsh Hag costume for Ariadne. She glanced aside at him and shrugged. “I don’t know how you missed that, either. It was on our Wiz Lit final last year.”

Ariadne gave James an indulgently patient look and crossed her arms. “Treus has the fatal flaw of being naïve. He *knows* that Donovan, the King’s advisor, has plans to marry Princess Astra so that

he can become viceroy when the king dies. Treus *also* knows that Donovan has already used dark magic to trick the king into decreeing their marriage, against Astra's wishes. And yet, when Donovan sends Treus, his only rival, off on some trumped up sea voyage, it never occurs to him that, hmm, this is probably a ruse to get me alone on the ocean so that Donovan and the Marsh Hag can send a magical storm to sink my ship and kill me." She cocked her head at him and raised her eyebrows. "Naïve."

"I know all *that*," James said, glaring up at the ceiling and raising both hands, palms up.

"Then you know that, by sailing through the horrors of the Dagger Peninsula to cut around the Marsh Hag's magical storm, he is also sailing through his own journey of growth into true manhood," Nigel prompted in his squeaky voice, as if reading from a cue card.

"Of *course*," James said, trying to give the words a patiently weary lilt. "Can we just get on with this? We have to get changed for the *actual* play soon."

"And that's why the Marsh Hag's storm follows Treus all the way back to the castle of Seventide," Ariadne finished, eyeing James critically. "It's a representation of Treus' noble foolishness, a lesson learned too late to save him. *Or* his love, the Princess Astra."

Without looking up from her costume project, Millie said, "So what's Princess Astra's fatal flaw?"

"Oh, that's easy," Edmund said smugly, still looking at James from his perch on the ottoman. "Princess Astra's flaw is that she's impulsive. She falls in love with Treus, who's just some random soldier. Not a bad thing, but an impulsive thing. Then she tries to attack Donovan with her own letter opener when she learns he's arranged to have Treus killed out on the high seas. Donovan nearly cuts her with her own knife as a result. Then, after Treus gets back to the castle and kills Donovan to save her, and the Hag's storm unleashes itself on the castle to kill Treus, she *stays* with him instead of escaping! *Totally* impulsive."

“But that’s what makes it so romantic!” Ariadne interjected, sighing solemnly.

“If you call getting crushed under falling walls during your first kiss *romantic*,” Nigel shook his head dismissively. “I call it daft as a drunken doxy. Escape and find yourself a *new* soldier, if you ask me. One without any stupid ‘fatal flaws’.”

“How did *you* three learn all this?” James asked, plopping to the ottoman next to Edmund.

“Old Mrs. Birtwistle, our tutor,” Ariadne sniffed. “Three hours of lessons every day. Who was your tutor?”

James blinked. “Um. My mum, I guess?”

“I’d sack her, if I was you,” Ariadne shrugged dismissively.

“James is right,” Millie announced, standing and draping the dress in her hands against Ariadne, testing the fit. “This will do until tomorrow. For now, we should all get ready for the real play. We leave in less than an hour.”

The rest of the evening was occupied entirely with the trip to the famed and ancient Theatre D’Extraordinaire in central London, and the play itself, which was nearly three hours long, including a half-hour intermission. James had seen wizarding plays on occasion, though never a fully magical production of *the Triumvirate*, and never in a theatre of the sheer size and grandeur as the one he now entered. Decked with gilded scrollwork, arched pillars, and flying buttresses that lined both side aisles, the theatre appeared capable of seating approximately half the population of London itself. The many balconies overlaid each other like drawers in a baroque dresser, opened into terraces. None were fixed in place, but floated, rising and lowering from the main floor like parade balloons, studded with purple velvet seats and crowded with richly dressed patrons. James watched as they drifted overhead, swapping places for loading and unloading, their undersides decorated with massive frescoes of ancient fictional scenes.

The one thing that detracted from James’ experience was the woefully old-fashioned and hopelessly wrinkled dress robes he wore. Putting them on in his upstairs bedroom, he had briefly mourned their

bedraggled state. Now, sidling into his seat in the grandest of the lower balconies with the Vandergriff family, he understood just how exquisitely ridiculous he looked amongst the coiffed finery that surrounded him. As James passed, a fat man with a monocle flinched back from him, blinking rapidly, as if James had flicked water into his face. The woman next to him, resplendent in a stiff jeweled dress, her grey-pink hair piled into a knotty beehive large enough for storks to nest in, frowned elaborately at him, looking him unabashedly up and down.

James sighed and shook his head to himself, feeling the too-short sleeves slap at his wrists, the moth-eaten fringe of lace flopping limply, embarrassingly ratty. The high burgundy collar and broad lapels had likely last been in fashion when Grandmother Weasley had been in school. Even worse than this, however, was the sadly wrinkled state of the entire garment, the result of spending the last several months crushed and damp in the bottom of James' trunk. He emitted an odor of old bananas and mould as he walked, trying as hard as he could to shrink, to become as small as possible, to blend right into the crushed purple velvet of the seat as he sank into it.

"I could have let you borrow one of Bent's old dress robes," Millie whispered aside at him as the huge chandeliers dimmed. "Or at least used an ironing charm to smooth that travesty out a bit."

"A little late for that, now, isn't it," James whispered back, trying to make it sound as if he was merely bemused, rather than completely mortified. He thought back to the look on Countess Blackbrier's face when he'd first come clumping down the stairs, his hair still damp from a severe, desperate combing, without a minute to spare before loading into the vehicles gathered along the front of the house. She hadn't said a thing—she was far too diplomatic for that—but her wrinkled eyes had widened slightly, her brow raised, and her chin dipped a tick. James understood that he had lost several points with her, and regretted it more than he might have expected. The children, however, had been far less discreet, collapsing into nearly hysterical laughter at the sight of James' trailing lace frill and the gown

that stopped a full five inches short, showing his trainers and incongruous argyle socks.

As the lights dimmed over the theatre, James finally relaxed and sighed, sinking low in his seat. The stage shone like an illuminated jewel, surrounded by waves and terraces of shadowed balconies, and the play launched to life with a fanfare of horns, a trill of flutes, and a boom of timpani. The orchestra in the pit below the stage was nearly sixty members strong, according to the program in James' hand, and it sounded like it. Music filled the theatre like warm spring air, with barely any echo to dull its effect. On the stage itself, actors sprang into motion: dozens of peasants moved among a life-sized and perfectly captured medieval square. A line of soldiers marched into view. And there, entering from the right, was the King, and Donovan his royal advisor, and finally the regally beautiful princess Astra.

James remembered the scene well from his second year at Hogwarts, when he himself had been on stage in the guise of Treus, the Captain of the Guard. But this was different in nearly every way. The king was not young Tom Squallus with a pillow stuffed into his tunic. He was an actual large man, more stocky than fat, with a true beard and a stately demeanor and robes and crown that looked as if they'd come directly from a museum. Donovan was a tall, beardless man with sharp, angular features, so cunning in the very lines of his face and squint of his eyes that James had to remind himself that this was an actor, not an actual villain scheming against the jovial king and the young princess that followed them.

Astra, James saw, was barely older than himself. She was ginger-haired and stunningly beautiful, the pale pillar of her neck adorned with a glittering necklace of silver and deep blue gems, flashing in the brilliant stage lights.

Despite having been in a version of the play himself, James had never fully grasped the story of Astra, Treus, and Donovan. He'd been far too preoccupied with the extraneous details of production—the costume shop and props crew, the glowing painted markers on the stage floor, and the constant, droning repetition of rehearsals. Now, as

he watched the full production in all of its theatrical glory, he began to see why it was the ultimate classic story of the golden age of wizard literature.

This was, of course, helped immensely by the grandeur of the deeply enchanted production.

When Donovan manipulated the king into granting Astra as his bride, the villain used an actual spell, conjuring a terrifyingly realistic (if somewhat over-wrought) hex of entrancement that illuminated the entire stage with vicious purple light and left the first few rows of patrons nodding and woozy in their seats. When the villain sent Treus and his crew on the ruse of a completely invented sea mission, the oily coolness of his lies was simultaneously compelling and disturbing. Around the theatre, several voices gasped, or cried out warnings, or angry insults at the oblivious, conniving villain.

When the Marsh Hag welcomed Donovan into her swampy lair and agreed to his paying request for a murderous storm, James momentarily forgot that he was watching from a cushioned velvet seat in a crowded theatre. He seemed to be dreaming the scene, watching from the flickering edge of the Hag's firelight, the stink of her cauldron and rot of fermenting moss filling his nose as she, in all of her extravagant ugliness, proclaimed her famous, cackling warning: "The gale ye conjure hungers great, its appetite is hard to sate. Feed it well and bid it sleep, lest its gaze to *you* retreat!"

"Of course," Millie sniffed during the intermission as they stood in the crowded lobby with glasses of spiced mead in their hands, James' head spinning dully, "every seat in the theatre is enchanted with a disbelief-suspension charm. The longer you sit there, the more real everything on stage seems. If they didn't have an intermission to break things up a bit, some of us would be charging the stage to join Treus on the Ballywynde every time he gives his rallying speech, deady magical storm and raging Wraith river or not."

"Wizards and men, forth draw ye wands and wits!" Edmund cried, stabbing his own toy wand into the air.

“Stop!” Ariadne insisted in her most strident, motherly voice. “You’re embarrassing yourself! Can’t you at least *try* to act like a proper gentleman?”

By the time the fourth act was underway, the aforementioned magical storm was a pall of clouds and thunder boiling in the upper reaches of the theatre from wall to wall, flashing with goutts of bruise-coloured lightning. Treus gave his famous rallying speech, and while no one rushed the stage to accompany his quest, many in the audience did join in the recitation even from the first words— “Foul Donovan! Thou traitorous malcontent!”—some standing in their seats and raising their own wands in the air, pointing them at the magical storm overhead. Somehow, actual ocean waves crested and broke over the ledge of the stage, cascading into the busy orchestra pit, as the *Ballywynde* circumvented the storm via the treacherous Dagger Peninsula. It beached spectacularly on the shore of Seventide within sight of the castle, just in time to prevent Donovan’s and Astra’s cursed wedding. The villain was confronted and defeated by Treus’ sword, yet the castle itself quaked under the onslaught of the merciless storm as it tirelessly hunted its focus, Treus himself.

James gasped as the cyclone tore across the stage, shattering stained-glass windows with its icy mist and stabbing the walls with lightning, setting tapestries afire and cracking the stone floors into heaving, broken canyons. Treus leapt these, drawing Astra along with him, still in her wedding gown and streaming veil, now torn by the battering gale. Distantly, James remembered this scene from his own performance of the Triumvirate. Then, the pedal-powered wind machine had accelerated out of control, causing real and unexpected chaos. The scene playing out now seemed even less staged than that. Walls tilted inward, disintegrating into rains of brick and stone. Fire raced along the ceilings, wrenching rafters loose and heaving them like pick-up-sticks in the hand of a child in tantrum. And Treus wove through it all, sometimes leading Astra, sometimes tugged forward by her, until the doomed lovers were in sight of the castle entrance. A flaming rafter fell upon them, finally breaking the lovers’ grasp on each

other, and crushing Treus under its weight. James simultaneously saw the remainder of the scene as both lines in a playwright's script, and dim, heartbreaking memories of Petra.

ASTRA [*returns to Treus' wounded side despite the onslaught all around, pleads*]: "Advance! We're nearly free! The castle's doom'd, but hope prevails! O Treus, curse it not!"

James heard the line in Petra's voice, untainted with melodrama and hysterics, speaking as if no one was listening but he himself, her expression stricken but stubborn with a thread of hope.

TREUS: "Dear love, I curse not hope. I've brave'd the tempest's watery wrath and fell that sorcerer's might. I've cursed them all to gaze upon your loving face. But hope? What life I've left I live in barricades of hope."

On the stage, Treus struggled to free his arm from beneath the burning rafter, flinging it out to grasp Astra's hand. Blood painted his fingers, stained the side of his face. Astra dropped to her knees as darkness closed slowly in on them, the castle collapsing and crumbling inward, tightening the space, making it tragically more intimate and desperate with each moment.

Treus went on, and James mentally said the words along with him, thinking of Petra. "Though God himself may shake this world to fall upon itself, my love and hope remain. Depart, my dear, and leave me now: I walk to death in peace."

ASTRA [*overcome by futility*]: "Pray *no*, beloved!"

The Astra on-stage flung her free hand against her brow, palm out, and sang the line with shrill hopelessness. But her voice was drowned out in James' mind by Petra, who claimed the words forcefully, not like an elegy, but like a sudden plea, hoarse and breathless, the spoken equivalent of a grasp about the shoulders, a desperate embrace that comes seconds too late. James' mind flashed with green, and in that flash he saw his cousin Lucy tumbling through the air dead, heard his own scream mingling with Petra's.

The scene on-stage blended dizzily with James' memories. Astra was Petra, and Petra was Lucy.

ASTRA: "For months and years I've longed for thee alone: my dreams the home of thy desperate love! I'll not depart my place at body's side, lest unrequited dreams shall *crush my soul!*"

James sat forward in his seat and spoke the final words of the play aloud:

"Then give me a testament to love. A kiss to cure the pains of death, this one... to stand for all."

On-stage, Treus and Astra kissed, even as the castle finally collapsed upon them, buried them, ended them. The lights dropped. The entire theater vanished into perfect blackness. And James was kissed. In the seamless dark, it was Petra's lips on his. Strangely, disconcertingly, it was also Lucy's, chaste and brief and careful as a dove. Heartbreakingly, he smelled his lost adopted cousin, the warmth of her exotic, silky black hair, a hint of lavender soap, a tease of licorice on her breath.

And then the lights came back on, dimly, and it was Millie. Her face was close to his still, smiling faintly, one eyebrow arched.

"Wow," she whispered, "that suspension of disbelief charm *really* worked on you, didn't it? You *were* Treus for a second there." Her eyebrow arched a notch higher. "Was I your Astra?"

James couldn't answer. He couldn't think quickly enough to lie. Millie saw this on his face, but merely nodded, still smiling, and dipped her eyes.

James had very little memory of leaving the theater.



James was, in fact, in a distracted, charm-induced daze until dinner that evening in the grand dining room of Blackbrier Quoit. As the formal dinner of Christmas Eve night, the event was the most ceremonious private affair that James had ever attended. Fortunately, Millie's brother Benton rescued James from the embarrassment of his dress robes by raiding the mansion's expansive attic, tracking down one of his own old wardrobes, and providing from it a much better, if moth-ball scented, set of robes. James was glad to make the switch and arrived at the dinner table much improved in both mood and appearance.

“You’ll sit between me and Grandmother Eunice,” Millie whispered to him as they filed into the room, herself changed into a mermaid-shaped emerald green dress and a triple string of pearls. “And you’ll be expected to make conversation with her at certain intervals.”

“What do you mean, ‘at certain intervals?’” he whispered back, a note of urgent worry edging into his voice. “And what am I supposed to talk about?”

Millie gave a bland, brief shrug. “She’ll decide that. Just play along. And answer honestly, whatever you do. Grandma Eunice can smell a lie a mile away.”

“But how will I know when I’m supposed to do what?”

Millie frowned and blinked at him, and James was reminded that, to her, this was just a traditional holiday dinner. “Just watch everyone else. It’s easy.”

“Merry Christmas, one and all!” called the booming, jovial voice of Millie’s father as he reached the head of the table, his own formal robes resplendent with a high white collar and matching bow tie. He raised both arms grandly, gesturing at the lines of tall chairs, the glittering crystal glasses and goblets, glinting ranks of silver laid atop neatly folded napkins, and glowing, moon-like plates, saucers and platters. “Do be seated, and let us be merry!”

James tugged out his chair and sidled onto it, watching as the dozen guests sank into their own seats, descending into easy, polite laughter and murmured conversation. The young cousins, Ariadne, Nigel, and Edmund, flanked their mother and father, Susan and Otto, across from Mrs. Vandergriff. Facing James over the white table and candelabra, Millie’s elder sister Mathilda settled in, measuring him with her overly made-up eyes and thin smile.

Beneath James, the seat cushion was deep, covered in purple velvet, but the back of the chair was very high and mercilessly straight, forcing him to sit upright. He put his elbows on the table, saw that no one else was doing so, and immediately pulled them back again, dropping his hands onto his lap.

Muggle servants in black tuxedos and white ties stood around the perimeter of the room. James counted four of them, including Topham, who stood near the outer door, and Blake, who began to circle the table, discreetly pouring ruby wine for the adults from a large crystal decanter. No house elves were in sight, of course, but James knew that they had to be around somewhere, performing whatever meager roles that were still assigned to them.

Soon enough, as the conversation progressed and the soup course was served (cream of asparagus with gillyweed croutons), James began to understand the protocol of the formal table. Mr. Vandergriff led the discussion, usually with a question directed at someone else at the table—“What think you of Bragdon Wand’s Swivenhodge chances this year, Susan?”, or “Otto, how is your mother faring in Turkey with her trading business?”, or “Have you seen much of Briny and the old crew since leaving University, Benton?”—and the called upon guest would answer for the benefit of the entire table, always in a practiced, articulate voice. Unlike dinners at Marble Arch or the Burrow, no one interrupted anyone, and if there was laughter, it was unflinchingly polite and brief. After the initial answer, the conversation would descend for a time into smaller, related banter around the table. James watched to see which direction to turn when this happened. Just when he thought it was his turn to interact with Millie, Lady Vandergriff spoke up next to him.

“How does your father manage to care for the Black Manor at Grimmauld Place while attending to his prodigious professional duties?” she asked primly, dabbing the corner of her wrinkled mouth with a napkin and ignoring the established table topic.

James turned to look at the old woman, but she merely raised her chin and lowered her eyes to the wine goblet as she raised it in her hand, studying its prism of crimson light.

“Oh, he um...” James began, treading as carefully as possible. The answer, of course, was that Dad *didn’t* actually care for the old place, as such. He sent Kreacher on occasion, just to give it a once over and assure that it was all still secure. Kreacher was always content to

go, of course, since he alone seemed to harbor a sort of stubborn affection for the musty, imposing mansion. “He has help. Our house elf makes sure it’s in good shape, more or less, for whenever we go there.”

“House elf,” the old woman sighed to herself wistfully, ticking her chin a notch higher, still staring into her wine. “And how often do you go there, in fact?”

James shrugged. “A few times a year, I guess. Mum and dad prefer the house in Marble Arch, I think. It feels a little less... you know,” he reached for his own glass, which was filled with sparkling water, “old and dank. Erm. If you know what I mean.” He realized that this was unlikely to be the sort of answer that the Countess preferred, and quickly took a gulp of water to keep from saying any more.

Lady Eunice sighed briskly and set down her own wine glass without taking a sip. “The magical aristocracy is not like the Muggle variety, young master James. I cannot blame your father for not knowing this. He was not given the proper education in the responsibilities of his position, although one expects that he might have done some research in the years since.” She turned an eye on James now, studying him before going on. “The threads of magical nobility are fewer and more tenuous with every passing generation. And yet, that only makes their remaining significance all the greater. The Black Manor is not merely an empty house, ‘old and dank’, as you have observed. Your father’s title—which you shall inherit, unless he wills it to someone else, as his godfather did—is not simply a name and a document. Magical nobility is quite different from the Muggles in that way. Your title is a responsibility, because it is one that comes with a great and secret power.”

James felt momentarily captured by the woman’s penetrating gaze. “Power, Ma’am?”

She nodded, still studying him severely. “Power, indeed. But not the power of property, nor position, nor land. The Black manor itself is a mere symbol. No, when we of magical nobility speak of

power, we mean it in the truest and most primeval sense. We are guardians, Master James. Our entitlement is the charge of certain deeply elemental forces. But they have not all been maintained. Some have been lost entirely, neglected to the point of impotence, and forgotten to history.” She sighed deeply, resignedly.

James was intrigued despite himself. “What sort of forces?”

Lady Eunice relaxed slightly on her chair and allowed her gaze to drift over the table. “Few speak of it. Few, even amongst my peers, respect or remember. But once there was the Marquess of Rose whose endowment was the rapture of love. It was that title which guarded and preserved the tides of eros. Lost now to the ages, love still exists without the title’s noble ministrations, and always shall, but ever more tainted and diluted, random and untethered from its deepest cores.

“And much longer ago there was the Greene Barony, endowed with the boundaries of ambition, moderating the supply and demand of jealousy, rivalry, greed, and envy. Now, without its accountancy, such influences run rampant, unchecked, overrunning human nature like an invasive weed.

“And up until the beginning of this century there was the Dukedom of Goldenrod, guardian of the scales of courage and cowardice...”

James stared at the older woman as she spoke, not quite grasping the magnitude of what she was saying, and yet one detail struck him. He blurted it out, interrupting her in mid-sentence.

“But, they’re all colours...”

Lady Eunice ticked her gaze back toward him, narrowing her eyes. She waited, watching as the significance of this realization settled over him. James’ mind spun. Finally, he looked up at the older woman again, meeting her gaze.

“You’re saying that Grimmauld Place isn’t just an old house,” he said in a hushed voice. “And Black... isn’t just a name. Is it?”

Lady Eunice nodded once, slowly. “Black is the elemental colour of the force that is your family charge.”

James blinked at her, his hair prickling. He furrowed his brow as he asked, "But, what kind of elemental force is black?"

Lady Eunice settled against the back of her own tall chair, as if content that James had merely asked the question.

"*That*, young Master Potter..." she answered, picking up her wine goblet again, "is your duty to discover. Once the day comes and the title passes onto *you*."

James' shoulders slumped, but his mind still whirled, considering everything that the Countess had told him. What did it really mean? Should he tell his dad? Would Kreacher know anything about it? And what elemental force of human nature could possibly be signified by the colour *black*?

Shaking him out of this reverie, an unexpected voice suddenly said, "And what plans do you have, James?" It was Mr. Vandergriff, asking on behalf of the entire table, who turned to listen.

James blinked rapidly, glancing up at the man at the head of the table, who smiled at him expectantly.

"Er... what? Sir?" James stammered.

Millie's older sister, Mathilda, offered him a chilly smile. "Upon graduation from your schooling, of course. Will you perhaps be following in the footsteps of your famous Auror father?"

"Or perhaps those of your grandfather, James the first," Benton suggested, grinning and elbowing Millie next to him. "If I recall, *his* biggest plan upon graduating Hogwarts was to marry his school sweetie and start a family."

"Now don't be gouache," Mrs. Vandergriff chided mildly. "I'm sure that young James has no interest in anyone's romantic predictions."

"Entertaining though they may be," Mathilda suggested, still eyeing James closely.

Millie shook her head and turned pointedly to James. "Don't listen to them. They've been scheming forever to get me married off to some ultra eligible, peered family."

“And apparently you qualify,” Susan, the young cousins’ mother, confirmed with a sympathetic nod.

Benton agreed. “A member of the peerage, *and* not belonging to any pureblood family.”

“Now, Benton,” Mr. Vandergriff reproached, his smile thinning slightly.

James felt his cheeks redden as he glanced helplessly from face to face. Millie was still turned to him, but her eyes were on her mother. “Mummy becomes impatient with pureblood families. She’s very progressive that way.”

“I’m not impatient with anyone, except perhaps the lot of *you* at the moment,” Mrs. Vandergriff commented primly. “I simply do not suffer the hang-ups of some other magical households regarding our heritage, and I harbor no shame about who knows it.”

Lady Eunice sniffed, “Quite the reverse, one might think.”

Mr. Vandergriff turned his attention to Millie. “And what of you, my dear? Still considering a year abroad? America, perhaps?” He dropped a quick wink to James.

“Actually,” Millie said slowly, suddenly lowering her gaze. “I *might* consider going to America. But not for an extended holiday. I was thinking of continuing my schooling there. I’ve been looking into universities. Ilvermorny looks interesting, and Alma Aleron has a marvelous program that I’ve become rather interested in.”

James, while glad that the attention was no longer on him, was surprised at the response Millie’s comment elicited. The smile fell away from Mr. Vandergriff’s face, while his wife looked both startled and puzzled. Mathilda’s gaze sparkled with mean interest as she watched, but Benton merely rolled his eyes and folded his napkin onto the table.

Millie’s mother asked, “More schooling, dearest? Why, whatever for? Do you not feel your schooling at Hogwarts has been sufficient?”

Mr. Vandergriff sighed tersely, “I *told* you she should have gone to Bragdon Wand.”

“No, that’s not it at all,” Millie said, sitting up straight in her chair and looking at both of her parents. “I just... I want to do more than look pretty and say witty things at parties.”

“Well,” Lady Eunice commented mildly, “one can’t know that until they’ve *tried*.”

“Mother,” Mr. Vandergriff said, cocking his head slightly. “You’re not helping.”

“Or,” Millie said, warming to the topic and aiming a pointed glance at her grandmother, “sitting around having fancy dinners while *real* people are serving us and then leaving here to go out and live *real* lives.”

“Oh, now this *is* interesting,” Mathilda said, her eyes avid as she leaned slightly over the table. “What sort of ‘real’ lives are they leading, Millicent?”

Benton shook his head at Mathilda. “Don’t pretend that *you* didn’t go through a phase exactly like this.”

“It’s *not* a phase,” Millie said, firming her jaw, her own cheeks reddening now. “And I’ll *tell* you what they do. They write plays, and make music. They go on daring adventures. And they... well they build things.”

“*Build* things?” Mathilda repeated, barely concealing the mocking glee in her voice.

Lady Eunice recoiled in mild alarm. “Perhaps I am mistaken, but that sounds an awful lot like manual labour.”

“I don’t mean building things with my *hands*,” Millie said, exasperated, “Although I’m not above that. I mean... designing things. Planning, and plotting, and drafting buildings. Things like museums and cathedrals, hotels and terminals. All on paper, where there are no limitations. And then watching it all come to life before your eyes!”

Mathilda blinked owlishly at her sister across the table, a mixture of teasing amazement etched onto her narrow face. “Do you mean *architecture*? Is *that* what you’re on about?”

Their mother sighed. "I seem to recall that it was 'veterinary medicine' in your case, Mathilda," she said, laying a weary hand over her eyes.

"But," Lady Eunice interjected, perplexed, "Architecture is *dwarf* work. I may not know much about common workaday life, but I *do* know that."

"*Not* in the Muggle world," Millie said, steeling herself.

"*Oh*, bloody Nora," her father groaned under his breath.

"More claret, M'Lord," Blake suggested deftly, pouring wine into the man's nearly empty goblet.

Mrs. Vandergriff rallied herself. "Now, Millicent, we like to be as open-minded as any modern wizarding family..."

"A human can be an architect in the Muggle world," Millie insisted stubbornly. "A woman can work, just like a man. Ask our new 'servants!'" She nodded toward Blake and Topham. Blake merely stood at attention, but Topham's gaze fluttered at the suddenly watchful faces. Millie went on, "In their world, anyone can be anything they want."

"And yet, somehow, *they* choose to be servants," Lady Eunice observed archly, apparently to the candelabra.

"I don't care what any of you say," Millie proclaimed, calling on every ounce of her lofty upbringing and melodramatic dignity. "I shall go to America, attend Alma Aleron University, and I shall be an architect if I wish. Even if it means working in the Muggle world."

This statement was met with a sharp gasp from Mrs. Vandergriff and awkward, stunned silence around the table. James could hear the faint clatter of dishes in the kitchen far below. Finally, young cousin Edmund spoke up for the first time, taking advantage of the break in conversation.

"Millie, after we do the Triumvirate, will you do a Hufflepuppet pals show for us tonight?" he asked eagerly, leaning over the table.

No one answered. Mr. Vandergriff coughed lightly and pushed away from the table. Lady Vandergriff dabbed her napkin at the corner

of her mouth and glanced around brightly, diplomatically ignoring the awkward silence.

Edmund looked at James and frowned quizzically. “What? Did she leave the Voldy puppet back at school or something?”



NEXT CHAPTER:

**THE ELF UPRISING BEGINS!
JEALOUSY REARS ITS HEAD!
RALPH PROVES HIS HOUSE!**